

On view at Scandinavia House in the spring and summer of 2014, the exhibition “Sámi Stories: Art and Identity of an Arctic People,” offered a landmark view of the history, identity, and visual culture of the indigenous Sámi people from the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the present.

Curated by Charis Gullickson and Marit Anne Hauan, and featuring eight contemporary artists working across a wide range of media alongside historic cultural objects, the works illustrate the issues, ideas, and narratives that have shaped and continue to shape the Sámi people and culture.

The exhibition was organized in commemoration of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament and 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Constitution of Norway, and organized by Northern Norway Art Museum, Tromsø University Museum, and The American-Scandinavian Foundation, the exhibition drew from major Norwegian.

The Sámi are indigenous to Sápmi, a territory comprising Northern Finland, Norway, Sweden, and Russia’s Kola Peninsula. After national borders were first established in Fenno-Scandinavia, the Sámi struggled for recognition of their status and right as an indigenous people, but were largely ignored until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1989, the Norwegian government passed Constitutional Article 110a, which, for the first time, formally recognized the Sámi as a separate people under Norwegian law, and established the Sámi Parliament of Norway, a representative body for people of Sámi heritage.

Historically, Sámi art has been the most important means of expression for the Sámi—a way to communicate Sámi identity, ideas, and values to the world outside Sápmi—and Sámi artists have been deeply involved in Sámi cultural and political movements.

The exhibition featured a range of traditional duodji [<https://forvo.com/word/duodji/>], or handicraft, such as a cradle and a selection of hats and dolls, as well as Iver Jåks’ contemporary sculptures, which reference traditional Sámi handicraft techniques.

Several objects also address Sámi religious practice, an ancient form of shamanism centered on painted skin drums, such as this rare 17<sup>th</sup>-century shaman’s drum and mallet.

Though Sámi shamanism was forced underground in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, many people continued to make offerings at the same sacred places. Contemporary Norwegian photographer Arvid Sveen has captured a number of those sacred locations in his series Mythical Landscape.

Swedish Sámi poet and artist Rose-Marie Huuva also addresses her Sámi-Laestadian [<https://forvo.com/word/laestadianism/>] religious background in works such as her collage “Grandmother’s 448 Treasures,” a collage, textile, and canvas work from 2006.

Sámi identity has long been bound up with reindeer, historically a crucial resource of the Sámi, the foundation of their livelihood and cultural identity, and an icon of “Sáminess” outside of Sápmi. This is highlighted in many of the older objects on view in the exhibition, including a 19th-century reindeer harness, a horn knife, and a birch reindeer milk scoop.

It is also present in the contemporary works. Norwegian-Sámi printmaker John Savio’s works also depict the prominence of reindeer in Sámi communities and activities, as in this woodcut on paper of reindeer calves.

Textile artist Aslaug Juliussen has been actively involved with reindeer herding for many years, and incorporates reindeer remains into her fiber and textile works, such as in this 2006 mixed-media work “Antler Spin.”

Finnish-Sámi artist Marja Helander’s “Modern Nomads” is a playful series of photographs exploring the contrasts characteristic of modern Sámi life.

Swedish Sámi textile artist and painter Britta Marakatt-Labba often addresses Sámi history and politics, as well as everyday life and mythology, in her extensive, scrolling embroideries.

Her works have illustrating major Sámi events such as the 1852 Kautokeino Rebellion [<https://forvo.com/word/kautokeino/>] and the 1970s Alta Case, in which many Sámi protesters tried to prevent the building of a hydroplant in the Alta River of Finnmark in Northern Norway, depicted in her 1981 work “The Crows.”

Norwegian Sámi printmaker Arnold Johansen also focuses on the history and landscape of the Sámi territory of Finnmark in large scale, abstract woodcuts on paper, like the 2000 work featured here.

The exhibition was also accompanied by an illustrated, two-volume boxed set catalogue with eleven essays discussing a variety of topics including Sámi cultural expression, art, language, politics, and history, among others,

Together, the works highlighted the historical and contemporary cultural vitality of the Sámi people, and gave New York audiences the opportunity to experience, and learn about, this important community of the far North.