The Amur, or “great river,” is one of the longest in the world with its source deep in the interior of Asia. It empties into the Pacific Ocean in southeastern Siberia at the Sea of Okhotsk, which is north of the Japanese island of Hokkaido (home of the Ainu) and Sakhalin Island. A major ethnological collection of 305 objects, from various groups who inhabit the Amur River delta, was accessioned by the Penn Museum’s American Section in 2003. This material came from Philadelphia’s Commercial Museum after it closed in 1994. Acquisition of this collection put the Penn Museum in possession of one of three major collections in the western hemisphere from this region; Chicago’s Field Museum and New York’s American Museum of Natural History hold the other two. The stories of these three collections are intertwined from their very beginnings in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Chinese term “Yupi Dazi” (Fish-Skin Tartars) was generically applied to the groups who lived in the Amur River delta. This area had been contested territory between Russia and China for over 200 years and finally came under Russian control in the 19th century. Yupi Dazi is a reference to the use of fish skin to create articles of clothing, a tradition shared by the Amur delta people with other Siberian and circumpolar peoples. The Amur River collection is curated by the American Section because of the many close connections in world-view, cosmology, technology, and material culture shared by the indigenous people inhabiting both sides of the Bering Sea, connections beautifully delineated in a major Smithsonian (and Soviet Academy of Sciences) exhibition in 1988 titled Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska.

Penn’s Amur River collection was originally exhibited at the 1900 Exposition Universelle in Paris, where it formed part of the larger imperial Russian presence at the Fair; it was displayed in the Trans-Siberian Pavilion, a monumental structure that William Heinemann suggested recalled the Kremlin. The pavilion was located in the park that surrounded the Trocadero Palace; this was where the pavilions of major European powers showcased their colonial holdings. As its name suggests, the Trans-Siberian Pavilion featured raw materials and manufactured products (including those of the indigenous peoples) of Russia, Siberia, and other parts of Asia. The exhibits of Siberian manufacture were arranged in crowded rooms to suggest an oriental market atmosphere. According to Harper’s magazine, the main attraction was a moving painted panorama (four separate layers of canvas moving at different speeds) that simulated the Trans-Siberian Railway
journey from Moscow to Beijing. Visitors watched the moving canvases as they sat in stationary railroad cars. The panorama was later exhibited at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, and is now in the collection of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg.

This collection of objects was sent to Paris by the Khabarovsk Regional Museum. The city of Khabarovsk was located on the Amur River as a stop on the Trans-Siberian Railway. It was also the home of the local branch of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society, which had been collecting in the Amur River delta throughout the last half of the 19th century (it was from these collections that the Khabarovsk Museum was formed in 1894). After the close of the Paris Exposition, William Wilson, Director of the Commercial Museum, had this collection, along with many other ethnographic collections exhibited at the Fair that he purchased, shipped to Philadelphia to augment the museum he founded in 1893.

In 1898, the Commercial Museum sent a mission to China and Siberia with the express intent to collect commercial intelligence, samples of raw materials, and the products of native industry. This resulted in the publication Siberia: A Coming Market (1899). Undoubtedly, the “products of native industry” collected by this mission included the 305 objects that comprise the Amur River collection now in the Penn Museum. Original accession
cards for each piece bear the accession number 1899.1 (1899 being the year, 1 being the number assigned to the lot). The 305 objects have the further sequential number 1 through 305, which gives each piece its own unique, identifying number (e.g. 1899.1.26 is a birch bark hat). This group of objects may have already been earmarked to be exhibited in Paris in 1900. Wilson probably purchased the lot with the express intent to have it shipped back to Philadelphia after it was exhibited in the Trans-Siberian Pavilion at the close of the exposition. Collections that Wilson actually purchased after the exposition closed bear accession numbers beginning with 1900 (see articles by Katz and Latimer, this issue). Undoubtedly, Wilson’s experiences five years earlier at the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago prompted this mission. As more than simply a casual visitor, he would have seen the Amur River material collected by Baron A. Korf (former governor-general of the Amur River region) that was exhibited in the Russian Pavilion in the Department of Women’s Work. When the Fair ended, Franz Boas, who had been part of the team of anthropologists that had organized the ethnographic exhibits in Chicago, was instrumental in securing the Pogosky collection of 142 objects from Sakhalin Island for the nascent Field
Columbian Museum (now the Field Museum). According to James Van Stone of the Field Museum, Alexandra Pogosky was probably the agent for the actual owner of the collection, Princess Shakhovskoy, who was a Delegate to the Ladies Committee in Chicago.

Soon after the close of the Chicago Fair, Boas left for New York to work at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) where, in 1897, he was named director of the Jessup North Pacific Expedition. The stated purpose of the expedition was to investigate the relationship between the peoples of northeastern Asia and northwestern North America. Boas hired Bernard Laufer to lead the section of the expedition to the Amur River delta, to investigate the ethnic groups of that region, and to make an ethnological collection for the AMNH. Laufer collected and carefully documented over 800 ritual objects, amulets, and examples of embroidery and appliqué work.

For millennia, the 2,763-mile long Amur River has been a major highway over which materials and ideas moved, linking the interior of Asia with the Pacific. The Amur River basin, which may have been one of the staging points from which populations spread to the American continent, was peopled by the Nivkhi (Gilyak), Nanai (Gold), Ulcha, Orok, Orochi, Udege, and Negidal. They interacted closely with one another—and also with the Chinese, Japanese, Manchus, and Koreans—and shared many cultural traits including subsistence patterns based on hunting and fishing, the use of fish skin and birch bark as important technological materials, and belief systems involving a combination of animism, shamanism, and ancestor veneration.

The Penn Museum’s collection includes many garments, which are a combination of cloth and/or fish skin, some with pattern and appliqué designs based on Chinese models. Similarly, many utilitarian objects in the collection are made of birch bark with decoration done in birch bark appliqué. Both the Siberian tiger and especially the bear, as “Master of the Mountain/Forest” and giver of all land animals, hold a prominent place in the belief system of these cultural groups. The extent of shamanic practice is underscored by the number of amulets and wooden figures that are part of the collection. The bulk of the Museum’s collection, however, is devoted to undecorated utilitarian and household objects: hunting and fishing gear, and housing and transportation models. Taken together with the Field Museum’s collection, which it mirrors in many ways, and that of the AMNH, which is heavily focused on aesthetic quality, a fairly complete picture is available of the material culture of the Amur River delta at the end of the 19th century.

WILLIAM WIERZBOWSKI is a Keeper in the American Section.

FOR FURTHER READING: