

**The map of the earth's northern hemisphere**, left, shows the extent, in red, of the parts of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia where Sámi are part of the population. The distribution of the many variations of the Sámi language are indicated on the map above.

# Let's Get Sámi Savvy

REIBO / TROMSØ UNIVERSITY MUSEUM

*Santa and his eight storied reindeer allegedly dwell somewhere in the wilds of arctic Europe, but the real-life denizens of the continent's far north are the Sámi, with untold herds of reindeer and a cultural heritage far richer.*

By Richard J. Litell



**The Swedish Sámi Rose-Marie Huuva created this 2006 work entitled *Grandmother's 448 Treasures*.** It depicts the artist's own grandmother standing behind a wooden treasure box and surrounded by rows of small objects wrapped in colorful material—hidden treasures like those contained in her wedding box. This was the only time Huuva's grandmother ever consented to be photographed.

**An enlarged view**, above, of some of the little bundles—not part of the artist's work—provide a closer view of individual packages.

**F**OR GENERATIONS WE CALLED THEM LAPPS AND REFERRED to the territory they inhabited along the northwestern fringe of the European continent as Lapland. Now we know better—or ought to—and call them what they want to be called, the Sámi people or Sámi (pronounced SAH-mee, not Sammy), and the amorphous region they occupy, Sápmi. As can be seen in red on the map of the northern hemisphere on the previous page Sápmi covers large parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland as well as the greater part of Russia's Kola Peninsula. Sources vary greatly about the total Sámi population; anywhere from 70,000 to 100,000 are cited. If we take the conservative figure it leaves the relative national distribution at about 42,000 in Norway, 20,000 in Sweden, 6,000 in Finland and 2,000 in Russia.

Although the designation “Lapp” is pejorative—just as Eskimo is for

Inuit and Gypsy for Roma—the name lingers, partly because it has been the accepted designation for so many centuries, its use in cherished literature of the past and, not least, because of general Nordic reference to the northern reaches as Lapland. Sweden's and Finland's northernmost provinces are actually called Lapland.

The Sámi are the indigenous people of Europe's far north, going back at least 2,000 years. They precede the Vikings, who were among the many Scandinavians who abused them, robbing them of their furs and skins to use as trade goods on their extended foreign forays. It is generally agreed that the Sámi originated in the east, perhaps in Siberia, and gradually worked their way west until they reached the coasts of the Norwegian and Barents Seas. Their appearance and language bear no resemblance to latter-day Scandinavian.

**John Savio** (1902–38) was the first Norwegian Sámi to be formally educated as an artist. He is particularly well-known for his woodcuts, often portraying Sámi communities and activities. This one, entitled *Man With Reindeer* is a 11.3 by 9.6-inch woodcut on paper and is from the Tromsø Museum.



Another of Savio's woodcuts on paper is *Chasing the Wolves*. It measures 8 by 10.5 inches and belongs to the Northern Norway Art Museum. Savio is appreciated for having made the Sámi more dear and less alien than ever before.



The famous Sámi author Johan Thuri (1854–1936) photographed in what is described as winter garb in a photographer's studio in Kiruna, Sweden, c. 1919. See the book review on page 66.

A common Sámi language really does not exist. Instead there are many separate languages (see the map on page 7). These can be divided into three main areas—the eastern, spoken in Russia and to some extent in Finland; the central/northern, spoken in northern parts of Norway, Sweden and Finland; and the southern, spoken in central parts of Norway and Sweden. Each is divided into different dialects. It is difficult for people speaking one of the three main languages to understand the other two. Perhaps as many as 85 percent of all Sámi speakers speak the central/northern language. Many observers feel that all these languages will not survive this century. Fortunately, most Sámi also speak the native language of the country they reside in.

A significant figure in the early modern history of the Sámi was Lars Levi Laestadius (1800–61), a Swedish Sámi Lutheran pastor who, seeing how

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rampant alcoholism was plaguing the Sámi, initiated a puritanical pietistic movement emphasizing abstinence from alcohol. Earlier, widespread shamanism prevailed throughout Sápmi. Now, the Sámi by and large profess the Lutheranism of their respective state churches, although it is believed that there remains some occasional clandestine slippage into shamanistic practices.

Traditionally, Sámi have pursued a variety of livelihoods, including fishing, trapping and sheep herding. But the popular image of a Sámi is one of a colorfully dressed, tent-living nomad migrating with a large herd of reindeer. Actually, while reindeer herding is legally reserved exclusively for the Sámi in Scandinavia for environmental and political reasons, herders have never made up more than 10 percent of the Sámi population. Herding originated in the 16th century when it was done collectively, eventually leading to reindeer becoming the property of individual owners. Most modern Sámi now live in towns or cities with many means of gainful employment.

**T**HE AMERICAN-SCANDINAVIAN FOUNDATION IS CURRENTLY presenting a major exhibition (May 10 through August 23) entitled “Sámi Stories: Art and Identity of an Arctic People,” providing an overview of Sámi history and visual culture from the 17th century to the present. The exhibition, made possible by a number of public and private funders, was organized by the Northern Norway Art Museum, the Tromsø University Museum and the ASF in commemoration of the 25th anniversary of the Norwegian Sámi Parliament and the 200th anniversary of the Norwegian Constitution. The exhibition is accompanied by an illustrated, two-volume, boxed-set catalogue with 11 essays on a variety of Sámi topics by informed authors. The show has been supplemented throughout the spring by a series of lectures and films at Scandinavia House on Sámi topics by leading experts. The illustrations in this article are from the exhibition.

It is estimated that some 30,000 people in North America are either Sámi or Sámi descendants. They have settled in areas with appreciable Scandinavian presence, such as the upper Midwest and western Canada. These Sámi are said to know little of their heritage, probably because their ancestors purposely hid their indigenous culture to avoid discrimination from the dominating Scandinavian or Nordic culture. Interestingly, some of these are Sámi families brought to North America with herds of reindeer by the U.S. and Canadian governments as part of “Project Reindeer” designed to teach Inuits about reindeer herding.

**The detail at right is from a work on linen** measuring only 15.4 inches in height but an incredible 78 feet in length. It is by the Swedish Sámi textile artist and painter Britta Marakatt-Labba. It is entitled *History* and done in embroidery, prints and appliqué.



■ *Britta Marakatt-Labba's narrative tapestry,*

*History, covers five full gallery walls*



BRITTA MARAKATT-LABBA - 2004-07

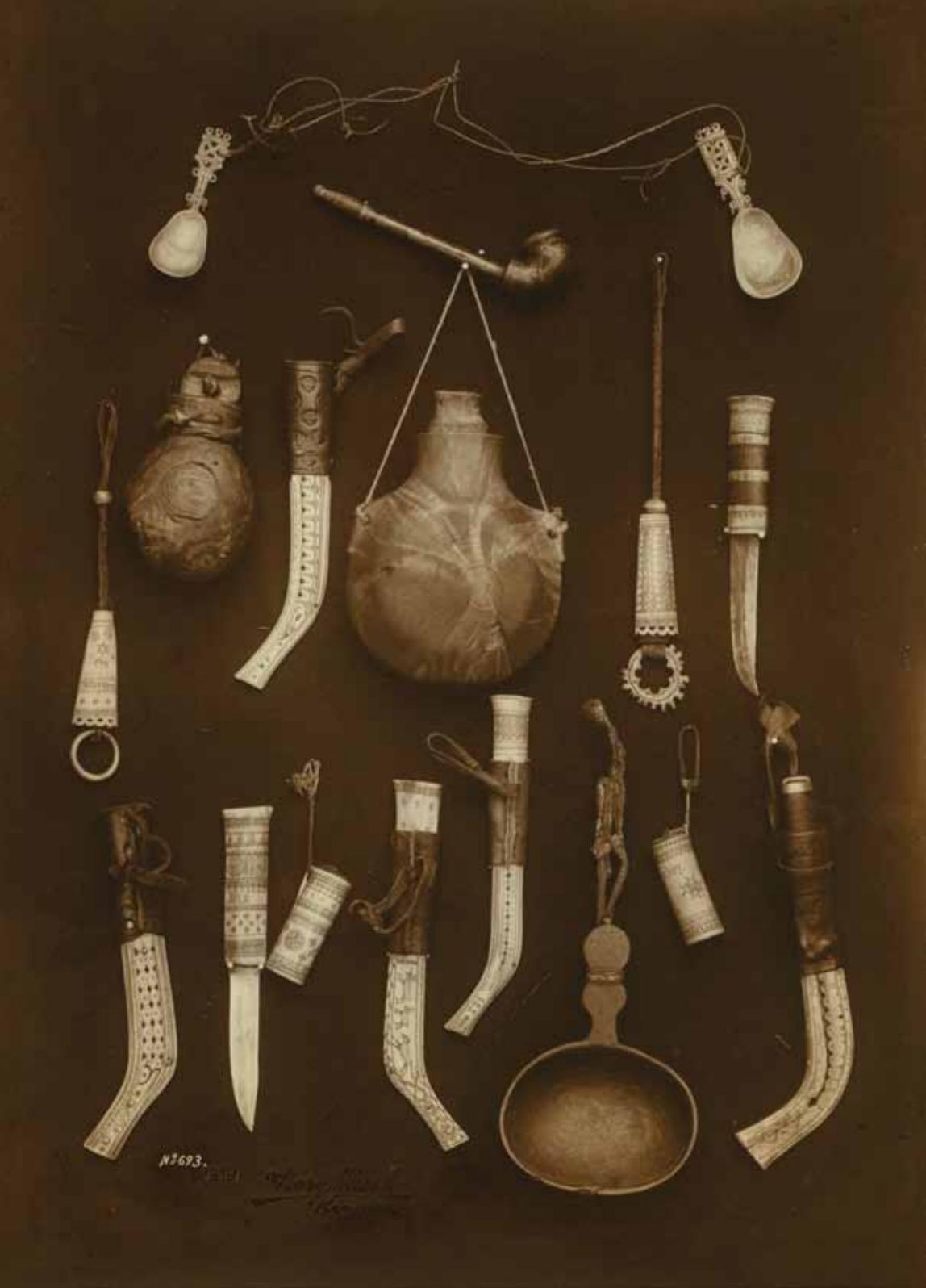
Enlarged above



**Marakatt-Labba's *History*** is read from right to left, starting here and proceeding to the left of page 14. It continues on pages 16 and 17 with each row starting on the right. Above is an enlargement of the start of her partly historic and partly imagined narrative.

Note: Each row starts on the right.





Handicraft objects by Sámi artist Jan Pålsson Fanki photographed in Kiruna, 1919.

**The Sámi have struggled for formal, legal recognition of their status and rights.**



This undated photograph from the early 20th century shows Sámi in temporary quarters on their annual migration from northern Sweden to coastal Norway.

Ever since the establishment of national boundaries by the Scandinavian countries, the Sámi have struggled for formal, legal recognition of their status and rights as an indigenous people but were largely ignored until the 20th century. Then came a landmark development. In 1998, the Norwegian Government passed Article 101a of the Norwegian Constitution, which asserted that: “It is the responsibility of the authorities of the State to create conditions enabling the Sámi people to preserve and develop its language, culture and way of life.”

Since 1991, the Norwegian valley of Mandal, about 50 miles east of Tromsø, has been the site of an annual (every July) gathering called the Riddu Riđđu Festival. (The name translates as “little storm on the coast.”) This get-together with artists and audiences from all over the world focuses on indigenous peoples’ art and culture with a diverse program for children and young people as well as adults, and features music, films, seminars, workshops and live performances. If you are visiting Norway in any July and want to dig deeper into Sámi culture, you are welcome to stop by.

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Richard J. Litell is the editor of the Scandinavian Review.