A Model Skin Boat from Northern Labrador: Dr. Grenfell’s Umiak?

Though the Peabody’s display title for ship model number 04-9-10/62821 identifies the object as a “model of unuak or woman's boat,” the accession card reads otherwise. According to the documentation, the ship model is an “Oomiak (Umiak) / Woman’s Skin Boat” associated with “Northern Labrador Eskimo.” Indeed, the umiak (also spelled “oomiak” or “umiaq,” rather than “unuak”) was a type of skin boat used often by Inuit people in North America. I will give a brief overview of umiak use and its cultural salience in Newfoundland and Labrador, before suggesting that the object’s provenance is written erroneously in the Peabody catalogue. I also suggest that attention to its correct provenance may reveal more information about Inuit life at the turn of the twentieth century in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Umiaks have a long history which spans the globe. Susan W. Fair, a scholar of northern native art and folklore, sets the earliest use of skin boats near St. Lawrence Island in “Old Bering Sea culture, about two thousand years ago” (Fair, 2005: 235). She notes that the skin boat probably originated in Asia during the first millennium BCE, and subsequently made its way to Europe and North America (Fair, 2005: 235). Arctic researcher Fred Bruemmer examines how umiak construction and use began to decline in the nineteenth century in response to the introduction of other boats (including dories, whaleboats, and large canoes), culminating in the umiak’s complete disappearance from the area in 1916 (Bruemmer, 1992).

Umiaks averaged 25 feet long, and were made up of a strong driftwood frame over which skin would be stretched and coated with blubber for waterproofing (Fair, 2005: 236, 238). Skins would be replaced approximately every three years (Bruemmer, 1992). Unlike kayaks, which were built for one person to use at a time, the umiak was “open rather than decked,” able and
frequently used to carry heavy gear or cargo, and needed “a relatively large crew to paddle or haul it” (Chapelle, 1964: 174-211; Fair, 2005: 233). The umiak was light and flexible, qualities which made them well-suited to navigating the ice-filled northern waters (Bruemmer, 1992; Fair, 2005: 235).

In the spring, umiaks were used for fishing and hunting larger sea mammals, such as walruses and whales (Fair, 2005: 237). Yet while the umiak was well-equipped for men to use while hunting, it was also often used to transport goods or families, and would then be rowed by women – hence the reference to the umiak as a “woman’s boat” in the Peabody’s display title. David A. Morrison of the Canadian Museum of Civilization describes traveling by umiak: “the family boat, the ‘women's boat,’ in which long summer journeys were made, [was] loaded with weapons and provisions, children, dogs, tents, and clothing. An elder sat in the stern controlling the rudder, while the women rowed, keeping time with songs” (Morrison, 1995).

The umiak, though, was used not only as a boat but also as an architectural structure on land. Due to the fragility and scarcity of available building materials in arctic and subarctic landscapes, umiaks were used instead of permanent house structures (Fair, 2005: 234). Turned on their side and propped up, the umiak could also serve as a carving studio, site for ceremonial and religious performance, or space for games (Fair, 2005: 233). Because of the umiak’s role as shelter, it became a “linguistic and applied metaphor for home, tent, or qazgrí;” damage to an umiak, therefore, was considered a “public insult” (Fair, 2005: 234, 239). Umiaks also had mythical resonances: in whale-hunting, the cleanliness of an umiak’s skin was associated with honesty, and it was believed that whales would allow themselves to be caught only by a worthy, clean vessel (Fair, 2005: 237).

The umiak model in the Peabody collection came from a larger donation which included
several ivory and bone carvings of people, sleds, and animals, as well as a vegetable fiber basket with a cover.\(^1\) All items were accessioned by the Peabody in 1904 after being collected by a Dr. Granville from the Northern Labrador area in 1903. The Museum System collections management software, however, includes a note from William W. Fitzhugh (Curator of Archaeology and Director of the Arctic Studies Center at the Smithsonian), which suggests that “Dr. Granville” was an incorrect transcription of Dr. Wilfred Grenfell (later knighted as Sir Wilfred Grenfell). Dr. Grenfell was a British medical missionary who worked in Newfoundland and Labrador from 1892 until his retirement in 1932 (Britannica). He worked for the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen, and built hospitals, orphanages, and schools in addition to his medical work. The year 1903, when the objects in the Peabody’s collection were gathered, falls squarely within his period of intense missionary and medical activity in the region. The donation of the objects to the Peabody can be explained by Grenfell’s relationship with Harvard: he received an honorary degree in 1909, and when he visited Harvard in 1911 to deliver an illustrated lecture on Labrador, *The Harvard Crimson* reported that he had already “visited the University a number of times” (The Crimson, 1911). Based on Dr. Grenfell’s activity in Newfoundland and Labrador during the period of the donation, his relationship with Harvard, and the absence of a Dr. Granville from the historical record, is therefore likely that the ship model came from Dr. Grenfell. Therefore, Dr. Grenfell’s numerous published accounts of his interactions with local Inuit people, as well as his papers held by Yale University Library, may serve as valuable sources for further investigation into the object’s provenance and cultural context.

\(^1\) See the following items: “Ivory or bone carving representing fox with duck” (Peabody Number: 04-9-10/62818), “Ivory carving representing sledge and six dogs” (Peabody Number: 04-9-10/62817), “Bone carving representing woman and girl with hand sled” (Peabody Number: 04-9-10/62820), “Bone carving representing spinster” (Peabody Number: 04-9-10/62819), and “Basket with cover” (Peabody Number: 04-9-10/62850).
Bibliography


