The Umiak: A Mechanism of Survival, a Tradition Worth Preserving

The “unuak” boat model is a miniature replica of the umiak boat, which was a vessel representative of survival for the northern native people stretching from Siberia to East Greenland. Beyond playing a fundamental role in hunting for sustenance, the umiak facilitated trade, provided shelter, and solidified traditional social lines for the peoples of the circumpolar seas. More modern boats that serve a similar function to its user have supplanted the umiak, a now endangered vessel. Therefore, in some localities, the umiak symbolizes the survival of tradition and culture, which means today the umiak becomes an artifact worthy of public attention and celebration.

People of all different backgrounds come to the Natural History Museum to learn more about the artifacts of the world’s past. Those interested in old ship models have access to over a dozen, granted to the Peabody over the past two centuries. The umiak boat model on display is catalogued as a “unuak, or women’s boat,” and was donated in 1903 by a man of the name of Dr. Granville. Though Museums are caverns for knowledge that help to enlighten visitors about the past, they do not always get everything right. After years of being stored away and untouched, the Peabody has opened up the files on the “unuak” model and discovered nuances in the model’s history, ready to share with the curious public.
Although it is unclear why the model was catalogued incorrectly, the revelation that this it is a model of an umiak provided new understanding about this boat’s history and role it played in the survival of circumpolar communities. The umiak was an agent of survival for major groups such as the Inuit of Alaska, the native people of Little Diomede Island, as well as societies along the Hudson Bay and St. Lawrence River. Some of the oldest examples of the umiak boat were found in the Bering Straight and dated 2,000 years old. Umiaks on Little Diomede were utilized well into the 20th century, despite the infiltration of newer designed vessels. The longevity and far range of use of the umiak demonstrates the valued versatility of the vessel. Piecing together the wide range of cultures who utilized the umiak unveils more about its universal purpose: community survival.

The umiak is a skin boat, made from a wooden frame wrapped in hide. Its lightweight structure allowed for large construction, as the average length of a umiak is 30 feet. The umiak is known for its durability, designed to cut through ice-clad water without being punctured. This is in part due to the hide covering of the timber frame. Walrus hide was the common material used to skin the boat—the natural material became flexible against sharp surfaces. The hide was fastened around the wooden backbone by sewing, a necessary task often completed by women. The umiak could be paddled or sailed and was markedly more stable on the water than its cousin vessel, the kayak, which was often used for solitary hunting trips.

For communities who utilized the umiak, hunting was a large endeavor. Umiaks were commonly used for whaling and walrus hunting. These larger animals were towed with ease back to shore as a result of the umiak structure. Once back on shore, the prize of
the hunting trip would be repurposed; beyond providing the community with sustenance, the valuable natural resources of the animals, mainly the baleen of whales and the ivory of walruses, were valuable in trade.

When not on the water, umiaks became shelter. By flipping the vessel upside-down and hoisting up one side with a temporary post, the concave structure functioned as a livable enclosure. As umiaks would sometimes spend months ashore, these semi-permanent living structures served a multitude of purposes, including becoming a bedroom for families and a playground for children. These shelters also became territory markers; umiaks provided borders between different communities. Families that settled among these umiak shelters protected one another and ensured the survival of their community as well as that of generations to come. In some circumpolar societies where umiaks played a role in procreation.

Also known as a “women’s boat,” umiaks were utilized by both men and women. While men predominantly utilized umiaks in larger sea-bound hunting trips, women would row to more local destinations. As rowing became associated with womanhood over time, men began seeking rowing wives and having families who too became ingrained in umiak culture.

Umiaks at times played ceremonial roles in society. One example of this was in the village of Point Hope. After successful whaling trips, the community would honor the men on the shore with sharing of the captured goods. The Captain’s flag would be hung high for months after in remembrance of the successful trip that brought wealth to the community.

The umiak boat is a symbol of survival for circumpolar societies. Providing means of survival in multiple forms, the umiak served as the main vessel for northern native
communities for thousands of years. In the past century, their production has nearly completely diminished. Newer vessels more specialized in design (the aluminum-based whaler, for instance) has permeated into native communities that have become more likely to switch for reasons of their durability. In Wales, Alaska, where the first umiak is believed to have originated, there were no more in use as of 1990.

Now is the time to invest interest and preservation into the umiak. The vessel was a consummate agent of survival for millennia, serving communities that spanned the width of a continent.

Sources:
