Francesca Violich
ANTHRO 1218: Maritime Archaeology

An Introduction to the Culture, Traditions, and History Surrounding the Umiak

Of all the ship models in the Peabody collection, the Umiak is among the most mysterious. Preserved in a thin coating of arsenic, the model cannot even be touched; its associated documentation consists of a single sheet of paper, with shaky typewritten letters spelling out the following three pieces of information: “MODEL Oomiak (Umiak). Women’s Skin Boat. Northern Labrador Eskimo [sic; preferred term ‘Inuit’].” The Peabody logbook lists that the model was collected by a certain Doctor Granville in 1903 and received into the museum’s collection a year later. What was this unusual ship model, crafted out of thin wood and animal skin? Who was Granville—and more importantly, who were the people and the ‘women’ that would have used such a vessel? Student maritime archaeologists Violich, Skenderian, and Bach set to uncover much-needed information about the cultural and traditional history of the umiak.

The indigenous people of Labrador, the most northerly region of Atlantic Canada, call themselves Inuit, meaning ‘the people’ in the Inuktitut, one of the principle languages of the Canadian Inuit population. They trace their cultural, biological, and linguistic ancestry back to the Thule peoples, a proto-Inuit group that expanded eastward from original settlements in Alaska (c. 1000 AD) and were occupying the territory that the Inuit now inhabit by 1350 AD. It is likely that early umiaks were being used in this period in order to facilitate such a large migration across the northern Canadian continent. The Inuit’s cultural history is largely attached to the land they occupied: up until the twentieth century, they were a nomadic people. Completely adapted to a sub-Arctic climate where winters were bitter and vegetation was scarce even in the summer months, the Inuit followed the migration of their primary food sources—walrus, seal, and whale—that were rich in nutrients and large enough to sustain a number of
people. Because smaller prey and the few plant species that grow in northern Canada were not enough to provide necessary nutrients for growth and development, the absolute necessity of having to hunt these animals in an efficient manner led to the creation of boats like the umiak.

Kayaks and umiaks are both considered ‘skin-boats’, a type of construction characterized by a skeletal wooden frame over which an oiled animal skin was stretched, but there are some important differences between the two boats. The kayak is a small decked skin-boat, traditionally accommodating a single passenger; the umiak is a much larger open boat, nine or ten meters in length, that could hold up to thirty people yet was so light that it could be carried over land by just a few. Scholars are divided about the exact relation between the kayak and the umiak; an oral history from the early nineteenth century suggests that the smaller, faster, and more male-associated kayak evolved from the open-decked umiak after family ocean-going became more dangerous due to tribe wars caused by an increase in Inuit population along the eastern Canadian coasts. Although the model is listed as a “women’s boat”, because of the gendered division of labor in Inuit society—men were responsible for hunting, while women mostly participated in domestic tasks—the umiak was actually used by both men and women alike, but for different purposes. Inuit men used it for whaling—the kayak was too small of a vessel for such a massive task—while women used it to transport children, the elderly, and supplies when the clan moved from camp to camp during the shifting seasons. In eastern Canada, the umiak was mostly used for migratory transport rather than hunting: singing women rowed the umiak, laden with provisions, while a male elder would steer the boat; men would follow in kayaks. The umiak was also overturned and used as temporary shelter and story-telling arena during the summer months, or between landings; it formed a crucial aspect of Inuit culture. Since the multi-purpose umiak was much larger than a kayak, and has no modern sporting equivalent, interest in it waned over
the twentieth century, and not many full-sized umiaks remain: most explorers and collectors like Doctor Granville were content to obtain a model of the umiak, like the one displayed here, rather than the boat itself.

Doctor ‘Granville’ was in fact Sir Wilfred Thomason Grenfell (28 February 1865 – 9 October 1940), an Englishman sent to Labrador as a “medical missionary” by the Royal National Mission to Deep Sea Fishermen. By the time Grenfell arrived, the Labrador Inuit had already had contact with European settlers for a little over a century. These early missionaries discouraged the nomadic lifestyle that the Labrador Inuit had practiced for thousands of years, and their arrival marked the start of the slow decline in Inuit tradition that accelerated when non-native people were permanently settled in the region beginning in the 1940s and when the outboard motor was introduced. The tradition of building umiaks was remarkably consistent up to that point, making it difficult to date exactly when the style of umiak portrayed in the model originated. However, given that Grenfell arrived in 1982, the model was donated to the Peabody collection in 1904, and the fairly advanced rudder construction that originated after European contact, it is likely that the umiak model represents an umiak at the turn of the twentieth century. Now, more than a hundred years later, few traditional umiaks are constructed, making this model a unique and fascinating glimpse into the maritime culture of a resilient and remarkable people.

Works Cited


Umiak model. Photo courtesy of Alona Bach. Note the sail, used for long-distance travel, and the advanced wooden rudder. The nearly identical stem-stern structure is classic umiak construction. The animal skin used in the model was treated with arsenic to preserve from pests.
Advanced rudder structure of the model umiak, suggesting its likely origins in approximately 1890-1900.
Umiaks line a beach in Teller, Alaska circa 1902-1903. Smithsonian Museum, National Anthropological Archives, Neg. #44, 826 - A. An observant viewer will note the difference in stem and stern construction between the Peabody model and the ship pictured here: the Eastern Canadian and Alaskan umiak tended to be more streamlined as it was used more for hunting. However, this photograph provides a good look into how the umiak could be used to serve both hunting, traveling, and sheltering purposes.