

Duodji – art to use or to exhibit?

by Svein Lund, originally appeared in *Klassekampen*.

Randi and Thomas Marainen are duojaras. They make things like guksi, nahppi, risku and liidni. We don't dare continue, for now most of our readers may leave us. Why can't you write those words in our language, you ask. But that is easier said than done. What is this mystical duodji? The word is not translatable, but we can try with arts and crafts,



handicrafts, folk art – made in Sami tradition and with materials from nature. How much is included in the concept of duodji can vary in different parts of Sápmi, but broadly speaking it includes everything from sewing Sami boats and knitting mittens to building river boats and making knives, from woven shawls and skin bags with pewter thread embroidery to silver jewelry. The word is used both as the work and the finished product. The word can also be used more abstractly, as in the expression *bassi vuoiŋŋa duodji* – the work of the holy spirit – but that falls outside the boundary of this article, and is difficult to get a handle on. A duojar is someone who makes duodji. Just as language needs a few foreign words to be precise in various subject areas, Sami words are needed in Scandinavian to explain duodji. A guksi is true enough a wooden cup, but not every wooden cup is a guksi.

Randi and Thomas are duojaras in the broadest sense of the word. In their workshop we find a loom, a woodworking shop and a silver smithy. On the wall in the entry we find Randi's paintings and fantastic pictures made from wood and antler.

Thomas is raised in an unbroken duodji tradition. "In the 50s I used to travel with my father to the tourist station in Abisko (in Sweden on the border to Narvik in Norway) and sell duodji to the tourists. Every other week the "dollar train" would come, and then there was money to be made.

On the Norwegian side, on the other hand, much of the tradition has been broken by industrialization and Norwegianization.

"My grandfather made knives, guksis, sleds and reindeer sleds," says Randi. "But then the war came, with scorched earth and evacuations and most of the old disappeared. After the war came Norwegian and plastic. I had almost never seen old things before I came here to the Swedish side, but here there are old things in every house."

"Even though there have been buyers (antique dealers) traveling around and buying up a lot, often for little or nothing," adds Thomas.

Duodji is handiwork and there are many hours behind an authentic product, not just in the crafting, but in finding the right materials, like birch burls, and in the scraping and tanning of hides. The result is that a duodji product can seem expensive to us who are used to purchasing mass produced goods made with cheap labor in Hong Kong or Thailand. Therefore many have fallen for the temptation of making half good things which are sold more cheaply. To combat this there is a product mark for Sami duodji which is used in

Norway, Sweden and Finland, and the duodji organizations decide who can use it. It gives a guarantee both that it is a Sami product and that it has been properly made. "The worst for us is not Sami who make things of poor quality and sell them on the side of the road," says Randi. "It is when non-Sami mass produce 'Sami' products. This is a misuse of Sami culture. Tourists get the wrong impression when they think they buy authentic Sami items, but they just get fakes. And we who make authentic handicrafts are out competed and the prices are pressed down. We have such a factory in Gárasavvon. It is called Formel



and is a sheltered workshop owned by the Swedish state. They make knives, jewelry and guksis which are Sami inspired, but don't have anything to do with real handicraft. They employ between 40 and 50, plus some who work at home for them. Clearly we need jobs in Gárasavvon, but do not believe this is the right way to do it." Randi does both "soft" duodji (hide and textile) and "hard" duodji (wood and antler). But there is a big difference between the two in income.

“Traditional women’s work does not pay at all. I can get maybe \$120 for a shawl that has taken me a week to make. When I deduct the cost of materials, tax and sales tax, the hourly wage is so small that you can’t think about it. It is easier to get \$120 for a guksi that can be made in two to three days and with



much lower cost for the materials. That is why soft duodji is mostly for family use; I have to do hard duodji to make a living.”

The Marainen family does some sales out of their workshop, but they sell through craft and tourist stores. But in any case they do not get rich from duodji, so it’s good if one of them gets wage work once in a while, even if they have to travel and be gone for awhile. Last spring, for example, Thomas taught a duodji class in Unjarga (Nesseby) in Finnmark.

Thomas and Randi are determined that duodji products be used. That is the tradition: to make useful items and not primarily decorations. Today



there is a tendency that products be made for their own sake and for artistic value, so the prices can be high, much higher than regular people are in a position to pay. “Instead of usable art, we get production for rich collectors, museums and art

exhibitions. We are absolutely not against artistic development of traditional products,” says Thomas. “But it must not be so that it becomes so fine and expensive that it cannot be used.”

“People say that Thomas sells his knives too cheaply,” says Randi. “Because he makes knives that are meant to be used. Mostly we made traditional functional items, and we leave them mainly how they were from times gone by. At the same time it is clear that it can be fun and exciting to develop new products, to make decorative things and pictorial art. But the most important thing with duodji will always be to carry forward a tradition of using nature to make beautiful and appropriate objects of use.”



Randi has been a member of SDS (Sámi Dáiddačehpiid Searvi) the Sami artist association, since its inception in 1979. She has had many national and international exhibitions, and is presently working with silver jewelry inspired by Sami mythology, and also modern designs. Recently she has combined silver with wood and antler, in sculpture and other duodji media. Randi has also had several official design projects, illustrated children’s books and paints in watercolor.

Randi and Thomas started their own business in 1980, “HB Marainen’s Sameslöjd & Silver.” Thomas does mostly traditional duodji, but has worked recently with new expressions of duodji. He also has had many national and international exhibitions. For many years since 1985 he has taught hard duodji at the Sami College in Johkamohkki, except for two years working in Unjarga and Guovdageaidnu. He is a member of SDS and the Sami author’s association, and has published two children’s books and a collection of poetry illustrated with his and Randi’s duodji, *Duddojun Sanit* (I duodji words), also published in Swedish as *Slöjdade Ord* (see next page). His poetry has featured in a number of anthologies, including the recent *Viidat* (last poem next page). He has also written over 70 lyrics which have been put to music by Sami artists, composed yoiks which have been performed in concert and other official events. An accomplished yoiker himself, he has appeared in the Sami Grand Prix music competition in 2001 and 2003 – the 2003 CD is reviewed in this issue and can be purchased. Thomas has also been awarded the prestigious Biret Elle Balto Memorial Prize awarded every four years to a Sami artist who most exemplifies the traditional Sami spirit. He has also been an alternate member of the Sámiráđđi/International Sami Council.

I duodji words

Heard a voice
recognized in my ear
nature's
own language



Words
do not say everything
silence
can reach out a hand



Wind
finds its happiness
by
blowing snow



Mosquito may like
to leave life
with a full stomach



Where are our riches
in nature
where is our nature
with the rich
where are the rich
in the south
what do these truths
mean for Sápmi?

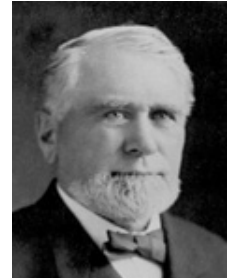


You are the sun
who awakens the green
you are the yoik
which powers the stream
strengthens the wind
gives and takes
your thunder rolls
nature awakens

your thought sends waves
towards beachless beaches
when nature again
hides itself in autumn's dark
waiting for a warm cover
a dream arises of a new life
into a sleepless rest

Fighting words

In April, 1900, he (Knut Nelson, Republican senator from Minnesota) locked horns with Republican senator Henry Clay Hansbrough over the North Dakotan's amendment to a bill setting up civil government in Alaska. At the instigation of North Dakota Republican boss (and Alaska speculator) Alexander MacKenzie, Hansbrough sought to deny mining claims to Scandinavian immigrants at Cape Nome. Arguing that non-citizens should not own mining claims, MacKenzie and friends laid claim to them and received the title "claim-jumper" for their efforts. Outraged that Scandinavians encouraged to settle in Alaska were being robbed of their mining claims, Nelson helped to defeat Hansbrough's amendment. MacKenzie then persuaded President McKinley to appoint pro-MacKenzie men to the new judicial posts. They appointed the boss "receiver" of the mining claims with orders to "extract the gold therefrom." Nelson fumed and the issue spilled over into the 1900 campaign.



Knute

With Nelson aboard, Roosevelt's special train, including his "private coach *Minnesota*," then sped through the night to South Dakota, to "Teddy"'s cowboy West. Here he received a more colorful reception than in staid Wisconsin. In four days, Roosevelt's party made over twenty campaign stops in South Dakota and two in Iowa—speaking in halls, opera houses, outdoors, or from the train. Torchlight processions, brass bands, a "mounted escort" of (Native American) Dakotas, fireworks, Rough Riders, excursion trains from nearby towns, "broncho busters," and Dakota women "with papooses on their backs"—all greeted the party.

From Aberdeen, the train headed into North Dakota, but Nelson refused the state party's requests that he speak there to appeal to the many Scandinavian-Americans voters. A month later, when he campaigned in East Grand Forks (MN), they asked him to cross over to Grand Forks (ND). He delivered a stinging rebuff. "Knute Is Hot," ran one headline. He would not help out in Hansbrough and Mackenzie's home state. They had tried to "deprive of their just rights in Alaska some of my countrymen who are citizens of this country," he explained. "Hansbrough called them Lapps."

from *Norwegian Yankee, Knute Nelson and the Failure of American Politics, 1860-1923*, by Millard L. Gieske & Steven J. Keillor, published by the Norwegian-American Historical Association 1995.

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