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Main content

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Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People is an impressive and beautiful book, rich in elaborate illustrations of Ainu artifacts. It also includes drawings and photographic images of the Ainu by early visitors such as Japanese artists (including those who produced the Ainu-e), merchants, traders, explorers, exploiters, curators, and ethnographers. The book is a catalog published in association with an exhibition of the same title organized by the Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. It contains an extensive list of Ainu illustrations, a detailed index, a thorough bibliography, and essays on artifacts and plates of famous and notable Ainu collections that can be found in museums and exhibition halls around the world. Bringing together the works of prominent scholars in the Ainu field as well as incorporating works written by the Ainu, Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People is a treasure for non-Japanese and non-Russian speaking researchers with an interest in the material, written and gathered, on the Ainu.

Starting with an essay entitled "Ainu Ethnicity: A History," the organizing principle behind the book, as well as the exhibition, is clearly presented. The organization of the book and exhibition relates the concept of ethnicity to "Ainu-ness" at different periods in history and from different thematic perspectives, emphasizing the fact that the Ainu people are not a monolithic group. The Ainu of Hokkaido, Sakhalin, and the Kuriles have inhabited different ecological zones and have had different social, material, and spiritual cultures.

The main body of Ainu: Spirit of a Northern People (Parts I through V) consists to a considerable extent of accounts and analyses of the former ways of the Ainu, focusing on their history and origins, language and material culture, as well as on...