

Hokkaido University of Education Hakodate Campus: Exchange Student Report Ainu Culture in Hakodate:



Hi everyone! We are Hannah Lim, George Montague-Masson, Joshua Gladwin, Kristin Andersen, Yeh Yi Hsuan, and Seo YeahChang, exchange students at Hokkaido University of Education. We just came back from our excursion to Hakodate City Museum of Northern Peoples and the Ainu Art Shop. Shall we take a look around?

The Ainu are the indigenous people of Hokkaido and its surrounding islands, and lived there long before the Japanese started to colonise the island in the 18th century. The Ainu, much like the Native Americans which they are said to be distantly related, live in co-existence with the nature and land that surrounds them. Living in hunter-gather communities, they were able to provide for every need by using materials found in their bountiful surroundings, from meat and fur from bears, to ship-building materials from seals. The Ainu respect and revere nature, and many of their customs and rituals are born from this reverence. As in Japan, the Ainu believe that much of the natural world contains spirits, or 'kamuy'. Many animals, such as the bear, fox, and owl, are said to contain such spirits. The village was a powerful structure in Ainu communities, as the centre of social, political and religious activities. During religious festivities, particular homage was given to the owl, the spirit of the village, and the bear, the spirit of the mountain. The importance of these two animal-spirits can be observed throughout Ainu culture and custom, where they are seen to play a central role in rituals. The customs are quite unique and unlike any of those seen in Japan. For example, as a rite of passage, women undergo lip tattooing, producing an effect not entirely unlike lipstick.



The Curator explaining how to carve the mukkur

Our first activity at the museum was the making of a traditional AINU instrument called 'mukkur', a type of mouth harp. We had to carve out the 'mukkur' from a small piece of bamboo and attaching strings to it.

It was a very therapeutic activity, and it was a great experience to learn about such different styles of music of another culture!!



Carving out the 'mukkur' was simple, but it certainly was quite tiring!

Once we'd managed to carve out the 'mukkur', we were shown how to play it. It looked simple enough, however, when we tried to do it, we quickly realised just how difficult to play it really is.

We were so lucky to be able to have this type of experience while in Hakodate. We would never be able to experience such cultural activities in our own countries, or probably anywhere else in Japan!



Here we are with our finished designs!

For our second activity, we were creating AINU patterns by cutting them out of colourful paper. Some of the designs were quite intricate and complicated, so they were rather difficult to cut out.



A great range of AINU jewelry!

We were lucky enough to have a personal tour with one of the curators at the museum. He took us around all the exhibits and explaining each one in an engaging matter. He was clearly very passionate about the subject.

We couldn't believe the type of jewellery and tools that the AINU used. They were all made of very natural resources.



This display shows what they wore during winter

We saw the ways in which the AINU people lived and survived in each of the seasons. This display shows what they wore during winter. We couldn't even begin to imagine ourselves enduring such hardships in the harsh winters that the AINU had lived with. We couldn't even fathom wearing such clothing, or going out in the cold to find food and fend for our families.



Once we'd finished our designs, we started a tour of the exhibits in the museum. There were a variety of displays, showing a wide array of cultural artifacts.

Throughout the tour, our understanding of the world was broadened, and we were able to reflect on the way that technology had advanced.

There are some examples of traditional design on display in the museum.



Outside the museum with the Curator

Thank you for providing such a rich experience! We had a very fun time at the museum!



Outside the AINU Art Shop

After visiting the museum, we went to the nearby AINU Art Shop. The shop sells a variety of different traditional AINU crafts. If it wasn't for this excursion, we would probably have never crossed paths with such an interesting, antique and educational location such as this!



The shopkeeper showing us how to play the mukkuri

The shop owner made us feel at home and welcomed. He answered any of the questions we had about the AINU, or any general questions about Japan, and he even played the 'mukkuri' for us. He made it look incredibly easy to play, but it's anything but!



Handmade artifacts at the Ainu Art Shop

One of the great attractions of the shop is the handmade woodcraft. Many of them feature depictions of Ainu 'kamuy' such as owls and bears. The handicrafts show a tremendous amount of skill and expertise.

We had a lot of fun observing all the small details of the handcraft.



Traditional Ainu dolls



At the end of our trip, we took a photo with the shop owner.

He was a really interesting person to talk to, not just about the Ainu culture, but just about anything in general. If you ever want to take a break from a long day of sightseeing, we recommend that you stop by this shop and have a lovely chat with the Art Shopkeeper. He'll really appreciate your company.

Overall, we had a really great time learning about the Ainu, and we hope that you do too!

Hannah Lim from Australia, Joshua Gladwin and George Montague-Masson from the UK, Kristin Andersen from Norway, Yeh Yi Hsuan from Taiwan and Seo YeahChang from South Korea.