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Valeriy Aleksandrovich Vykvyragtyrgyrgyn (1955–2019)ⁱ

Valeriy Aleksandrovich Vykvyragtyrgyrgyn was born 25 September 1955 as the fourth child in a family with a long legacy of reindeer herding in the tundra, in a place called El'otkonvyn ('Place of the Drum Festival')¹ in the tundra around Ryrkaipii, Schmidt District, Magadan Region. He passed away on 14 September 2019, at the age of 64.

At age seven, Valeriy broke his leg while riding with his father on a reindeer sled. His leg was dangling off the sled when it hit a bump at full speed. He was taken to western Russia, where he spent seven years while his leg healed. By the time he returned to Chukotka, he had completely forgotten his native language and didn't even remember his own parents. It took a lot of effort for him, but he regained command of the Chukchi language. He usually always attained his intended goals and achieved results.

From 1964 to 1974, Valeriy studied in the middle schools of Ryrkaipii and Schmidt. Then he underwent professional training and obtained a diploma in artistic design in the theatrical and decorative arts department of the Vladivostok School of Art of the Ministry of Culture of the Russian Soviet



Figure 1. Valeriy Vykvyragtyrgyrgyn.
Photo by Il'ia Malyi.

i. Translation from Russian by Patty Gray.

1. This place was later named Golden Valley (*zolotaia dolina*).

Federative Socialist Republic. During his younger years, he worked as a general labourer and hunter-fisherman in the state farm “Pioneer” in the village of Ryrkaipii. After that, while working as a methodologist in the propaganda and culture brigade of the Chukotka Department of Culture in the city of Anadyr, he had the opportunity to travel among the towns and villages of Chukotka and Schmidt District, where he drew portraits of reindeer herders and sea mammal hunters, as well as landscapes.

In the 1980s, as a graphic designer, he illustrated author Valentina Vequet’s book *Tanoigaikot’at (People Sleeping on Seal Skins)*.² In the early 1990s, Valeriy mastered the art of Chukchi ivory carving. As he recalled about that period:

I first tried my hand as an ivory carving artist in 1990. Once, when I was working at the enterprise Chukotka District Agricultural Engineering (officially as a worker in the warehouse, but de facto as a graphic designer), my colleague asked me to do some carving on a walrus tusk. After that, I started getting orders from acquaintances and friends of acquaintances... Due to the growing volume of orders, I realized it was necessary for me to study the experience of other artists working in the field of traditional ivory carving. With that goal, in 1994 I used my own funds to get myself to the village of Uelen so I could visit the creative workshops of eminent engravers and carvers of walrus ivory: Ivan Ivanovich Seigutegin, Yuriy Reno, Sergei Nikolaevich Nikitin, Tatiana Aleksandrovna Pechetgina, and Sergei Kaliach.

Interacting with these colleagues helped me to determine the thematic direction of my art, which was to illustrate the everyday lives of Chukchi reindeer herders that I remembered from childhood, filled with a special colour, the spirit of ancient traditions and customs. I understood that each of these artists had a particular style and creative direction, that no one duplicated any other, that their artwork was original. Their drawings and drawing techniques strongly differed from one another. On the whole, Chukotkan traditional ivory carving is impossible to confuse with any other art in the world, and at the same time, it is so clear and understandable and is accepted by anyone who is interested in rare art forms. My interactions with the eminent artists so impressed me, so inspired me, that I decided I would certainly take up this work, not only to supplement the family budget (although that was not unimportant), but also with the goal of obtaining the secrets of the mastery of my predecessors.

2. The novel was translated from Chukchi into French by Charles Weinstein, 1999, Vequet, *Peaux de phoque*, Paris: Autrement.

The main thematic direction in the creative work of the artist Valeriy Aleksandrovich Vykvyragyrgyn was illustrations from the everyday life of Chukchi reindeer herders. In the 1990s and 2000s, he took part in solo exhibits in several cities: Geneva, Switzerland in 1996; Ottawa, Canada in 1999; Anchorage, Alaska in 2001; and Elne, France in 2001. From 2004 to 2008, he participated in several exhibits: Harbin, China in 2004; Dudinka, Dolgan-Nenets Autonomous Okrug in 2005; Yakutsk, Republic of Sakha (Yakutia) in 2006 and again in 2008. And since 2008, he continuously took part in local exhibits in Anadyr.

From 2005 to 2018, as he participated in professional competitive exhibitions in various arenas on the regional and federal levels, Valeriy Vykvyragyrgyn represented the traditional art of Chukotka. His creative work earned diplomas, certificates of honour, and commendations. In 2013, he was awarded the title “Master of Folk-Art Crafts of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug,” by an Order of the Department of Education, Culture, and Youth Policy of the Chukotka Autonomous Okrug, No. 01-21/165 of 22 March 2013.

In 2015, the artist Valeriy Vykvyragyrgyn became a member of the Russian national creative arts organization “Union of Artists of Russia.” The works of this master carver, made from walrus tusk, ancient mammoth tusk, and the antlers of reindeer and moose, are preserved in the private collections of friends and Northerners, as well as guests to Chukotka: tourists, anthropologists, and cinematographers from France, Switzerland, Germany, Canada, the United States, Australia, China, Denmark, Norway, Finland, Mexico, Turkey, Israel, and other countries.

Valeriy loved and treasured his family very much. Two years after he finished art school, he returned to Chukotka and married a girl named Rysk'yntoŋav, with whom he had grown up in the tundra (her Russian name is Larisa). Together they raised two sons—Vladimir and Aleksandr. Aleksandr is married and has given them three granddaughters: Tilmyŋe (“Eagle”) who is three years old, Linlyŋe (“Blueberry”) who is one year and eight months, and Aiaŋa, who was born in April 2022.

As far back as Valeriy could remember, he always wanted to draw and catch fish. These are the two things he indulged in with all his passion. This is also how his family, and his friends remember him: sitting at his worktable or heading towards the Gulf of Anadyr to go fishing.

Larissa Vykvyragyrgyna

Note of the editors: Valeriy Vykvyragyrgyn is the artist who carved the ivory represented on the cover of this issue. These artefacts are made from walrus teeth, a material that the artist often used in the 1990s.