Alyona Movko-Mägi

From Disappearance to Reimagination: Crafting Heritage in a Vanishing World

The theme of cultural identity has always been at the heart of my artistic work. A deep craving for belonging and a need to clarify my roots propelled me into the study of cultural geography, the movement of peoples, and the biopolitics of contemporary Baltic regions. Personal history played a key role in shaping this exploration—one of my grandmothers came from a small Lithuanian village in Belarus, a community that maintained its language, Catholic traditions, and identity despite being geographically distant from Lithuania. Another grandmother was from a small village in Russia, near the Estonian border, and it was always quietly acknowledged in my family that she was Finno-Ugric.

When I first encountered the term "Finno-Ugric," it seemed to give a name to her identity, but it wasn't until ten years ago that I began to truly understand the gravity of what that identity entailed. The suppression and suffering endured by small peoples like the Izhorians during the 20th century were horrifying. Whole traditions, languages, and ways of life were wiped from the face of the earth. As Clare Hunter illustrates in *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle*, textile traditions often serve as archives of marginalized cultures, preserving stories that may otherwise vanish. The Izhorians—distinguished from Ingrian Finns in Russia and the Soviet Union but often conflated with them in Finland—faced deportation, displacement, and cultural erasure. Yet, against all odds, fragments of their culture survived.

Inspired by Izhorian embroidery, I discovered motifs that resonated deeply with me. Among these was the symbol depicted on the Izhorian flag—a figure interpreted by some as a sky maiden. This motif became the foundation for my work, Sky Maiden, reimagined not only as a reflection of a nearly vanished culture but also as a bridge between past and future. As Rozsika Parker discusses in *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, embroidery carries layered meanings, often blending personal identity with collective heritage. The Sky Maiden motif embodies both the resilience of tradition and the speculative hope of what could endure in a post-apocalyptic world.

The choice of material in Sky Maiden—a discharge print on red cotton fabric—is both intentional and symbolic. Cotton, a ubiquitous and overused resource in today's world, carries a layered meaning in the context of this work. Its widespread availability often masks the complex, resource-intensive processes behind its production. Speculatively, in a future shaped by overconsumption and ecological collapse, natural fibers like cotton may vanish, transforming from everyday staples into rare, luxurious remnants of a lost world.

Just a century ago, communities like the Izhorians and Estonians produced most of their clothing by hand, managing every step from growing raw materials to dyeing and crafting textiles. This self-sufficient cycle tied individuals to the land and its rhythms, embedding

materiality with a sense of place and identity. Today, such a connection feels almost unimaginable. Modern clothing production is globalized to the extent that it is nearly impossible to trace a single piece of clothing back to its raw material origins.

This disconnect mirrors the tragic loss of cultures like the Izhorians, whose population declined by 97% in just 30 years. Their traditions, once woven into everyday life, now exist as fragments, their survival dependent on preservation efforts. This parallel raises unsettling questions: Is the future of our material world destined to follow the same trajectory? As dystopian literature often speculates, will humanity's overconsumption lead to the disappearance of natural materials, leaving us with synthetic substitutes or nothing at all?

There are terms for tangible and intangible heritage—embroidery would be classified as tangible, while language, tales, and songs fall under the intangible. But then, in Estonian archives, we have beeswax cylinder recordings that preserve old runic songs. This makes me wonder—do we really need to keep such sharp boundaries? Of course, recording a disappearing language will not save it as a living practice, but at least it is an act of care, an attempt to preserve something before it vanishes entirely.

And yet, it feels like the world is more comfortable with the loss of some cultures than it is with the loss of materials. But materials are also deeply connected to cultures. As Tim Ingold discusses in *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, the materials we use are not just resources but carriers of cultural relationships, embedded with histories, techniques, and localized knowledge. The crisis, then, is not just about losing traditions but about how materials—once deeply embedded in ways of life—have been stripped of meaning and reduced to mere commodities (*Ingold, 2013*).

The term heritage itself is also quite loose and widely used these days (UNESCO definitions on tangible and intangible heritage, Laurajane Smith's Uses of Heritage for critical heritage discourse). I wouldn't say that it needs to be strictly defined, but overuse has made it a less valuable argument. Fred Jüssi once said, *"Loodus ei ümbritse meid, loodus sisaldab meid"* ("Nature does not surround us; nature contains us"). I think this is also crucial for understanding natural materials—not just as resources to be used but as something that inherently holds us within them.

But what is "natural"? Yesterday, during a conversation with the head of the EKA Leather Lab, I kept referring to chrome-tanned leather as *"naftaleather"*—a term that felt more accurate considering its industrial processing. But chrome itself is a naturally occurring element—so does that mean chrome-tanned leather is also natural? This raises the broader question of how we define material authenticity. As Susan Freinkel points out in *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*, synthetic materials often imitate natural ones so convincingly that the line between "real" and "fake" is blurred. If "natural" means coming from the earth, then even petroleum-based plastics and chemical processes could be argued as natural (*Freinkel, 2011*). But if "natural" means processed in a way that aligns with ecological balance, then the ethics of production matter just as much as the raw material itself.

Going back to *Sky Maiden*, the material I used—cotton—is of course not grown and processed as it was even 80 years ago. It has become an untraceable, undervalued piece of material culture. The way we treat materials today has detached them from their origins, and

the knowledge of how they are made is increasingly lost. This makes me wonder: will the disappearance of cotton on a large scale force us to recognize the value of natural resources again? Will we be pushed toward a renewed relationship with materials, one that demands care and responsibility rather than mindless consumption? Or will we simply replace it with lab-grown fibers, repeating the same cycle of detachment?

Sometimes I find myself jumping in my thoughts from past to future and back again. But where is the present? I feel comfortable standing on the shoulders of preserved facts and artifacts, just as I do speculating about future scenarios. Yet, as artists and designers, the decisions we make today are the artifacts of tomorrow. What we create now is what will be left for the future to interpret.

Would it be a better choice to tell my story in glass or metal—to work with materials that have a higher chance of survival, ensuring Sky Maiden remains physically present in the future? Perhaps. But that is not the kind of permanence I seek. I do enjoy imagining a future where vanished elements of the past reappear as speculative relics, yet maybe the more pressing question is whether we should be trying harder to preserve the present. What is more important—creating an object that lasts, or a narrative that remains alive?

The concept of retro-futurism often plays with this idea, blending past aesthetics with imagined futures, creating artifacts that feel both ancient and prophetic. As Smith argues, heritage is not simply about the past but about how we choose to engage with it in the present (Smith, 2006). By placing Sky Maiden in a speculative timeline, she becomes an entity that oscillates between remembering and foreseeing. But in doing so, does she risk becoming a relic—an artifact of a world that no longer exists?

This question is central to the idea of cultural survival. Hunter emphasizes that textiles are more than just materials—they carry stories, memories, and identities that are constantly reshaped by those who work with them (Hunter, 2021). In that sense, I would see Sky Maiden not as a passive artifact but a dynamic agent of preservation, the one that reinterprets tradition rather than simply displaying it.

Materiality also plays a role in this conversation. If cotton disappears, if the material world changes beyond recognition, will future viewers see Sky Maiden as a fragment of lost knowledge, or will they recognize her as a key to something still evolving? As Ingold suggests, materials are never static—they are in a constant process of becoming, shaped by human interaction and environmental change (Ingold, 2013). The act of making is never just about creating something static—it is about shaping what comes next.

I see the disappearance of cultures and the disappearance of materials are interconnected losses. If culture exists within the materials it uses, then the vanishing of one signals the erasure of the other. Sky Maiden does not seek to preserve the past as a relic but to bring it into a future where heritage is an active force, adapting rather than fading. If vanishing cultures are to be more than archives of what once was, they must be reimagined, not just remembered. Perhaps the act of making is not just about sustaining a material, but about resisting cultural disappearance itself.

Works Cited

Freinkel, Susan. *Plastic: A Toxic Love Story*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011.
Hunter, Clare. *Threads of Life: A History of the World Through the Eye of a Needle*. Tantor Media, Incorporated, 2021.
Ingold, Tim. *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. Routledge, 2013.
Parker, Rozsika. *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2010.
Quinn, Bradley. *Textile Futures: Fashion, Design and Technology*. Berg Publishers, 2010.
Smith, Laurajane. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge, 2006.

https://ich.unesco.org/en/tangible-and-intangible-heritage-00097