Ainu Crafts

Ainu crafts reflect a worldview deeply intertwined with nature. Each stitch, motif, and pattern expresses reverence for the natural world and the *kamuy* (spirit-deities) believed to inhabit it.

Traditionally, women were responsible for weaving and sewing, while men carved tools and made utensils. Some garments were made from cotton obtained through trade, but customarily they were woven from thread spun from the inner bark fibers of trees like the Manchurian elm into a durable fabric called *attus*. Garments were often decorated with intricate applique and embroidery. As the women sewed and embellished the garments, they prayed to the *kamuy* to protect the wearers. Patterns were inspired by nature and varied from family to family. Passed down from mother to daughter, the patterns evolved through marriage as brides incorporated motifs representing their new family.

Ainu men were practiced at woodcarving, fashioning items such as knife sheaths, arrow shafts, and tobacco cases, and ritual items such as prayer sticks (*inaw*) and offering sticks (*ikupasuy*). Skill at craftwork was one of the requirements of a village leader, and it was believed that using beautiful tools led to successful hunts.

In the late nineteenth century, prohibitions on hunting and fishing made it difficult to continue the traditional Ainu way of life. People began to make daily items such as tools, containers, and chopsticks as a way to earn an income. Ainu in Asahikawa gradually shifted their focus to carving wooden dolls and figures of bears which enjoyed high demand from the tourist industry that developed soon after World War II.