

## Walrus Skin Boots

Canada's Bata Shoe Museum has brought out a sumptuous edition celebrating the world which remains across Siberia, the nomadic seasonal world where reindeer means footwear.



In the takeoff from millennium moment it's a revelation of sorts to discover a vast world beyond the world which operates on a completely different path from the daily fare of Western assumptions. Whilst it's likely there'll be several different twenty-first centuries, how likely is it that the yawning reaches of northern Siberia will be accommodated into these vistas? And Siberia is vast, stretching a few hundred miles east of Moscow to the most northerly far east of the Bering Straits. 15.5 million square kilometres of tundra and taiga inhabited by sparsely numbered though numerous groupings of people who have lived in their locales for centuries. In the west there are the Nenets, Enets and Khanty; across the middle of the deep north Arctic shores, the Even and Evenki, peoples who have been among those included in the weirdly Western nomenclature of the 'small people of the north'; and at the furthest most easterly points the disappearing Yupik, amongst others, today numbering perhaps 1700. Thousands of miles to the south other peoples are either close to disappearance, or to the disappearance of lifeways which recede way past 2,000 years the other way in the mirror of nativity.

This handsome book focuses on a specific part of the survival ecology of these peoples. These are nomadic hunting and fishing cultures, although for many the centre of their lives is the reindeer herding and seasonal reindeer migration to the sunny south. The men decide where to go and look after the reindeer, the women prepare skins, sew and maintain tents. Part monograph, part accessible overview on the people and life of Siberia, its residing interest is in the clothing, and particularly the diversity of the incredible footwear which has emerged through necessity and skill across the subcontinent.

The skin of a reindeer is both durable and highly insulating. It is water repellent and wind resistant. The reindeer are killed in late summer, the skins, prepared by both men and women, being dried, scraped and softened. They are used for clothing, bedding and tent cover, whilst reindeer sinew is a prized and high quality thread. The antlers and bones become tools and are carved into amulets. Not only reindeer but where available the skins of birds, foxes, squirrels, otter and seal are all prized catches in different parts of the subcontinent. Once ready, the elaborate sewing begins, carried out entirely by women alongside the daily round of looking after children and cooking. Men tend to the reindeer herds and decide the course of the next journey. This strictly gender divided world creates remarkable seamstresses, which the book in the guise of its copious illustrations bears witness to. Garments, boots and other foot clothing are beautifully sewn. The sewer and the sewing protects the wearer, both environmentally and spiritually. There is power in the sewing tools, their spirit protects the seamstress. Spirits pervade these tundra people's psychic landscapes, and ritual, animism and shamanism are cosmological givens. No surprise perhaps that the act of sewing footwear has many symbolic meanings. The unique boot design used by the Ngansan, made without a fitted ankle was given by the master spirit and it carries its own spirit.

