



SHORT HISTORY OF THE COLLECTIONS  
FROM **NORTH AND MIDDLE AMERICA** AND FROM  
THE SIBERIA AND LAPLAND IN THE NÁPRSTEK  
MUSEUM, PRAGUE.

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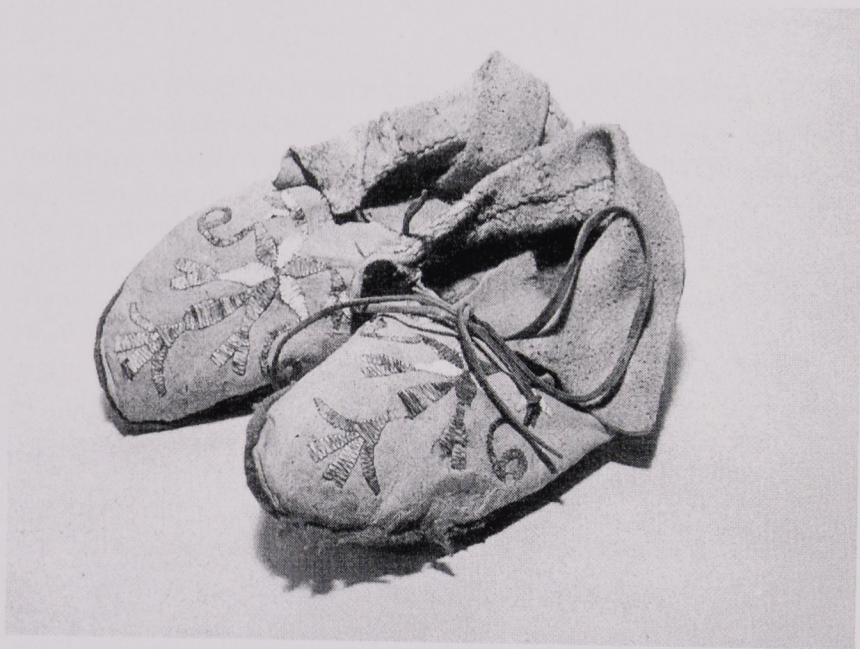
Thanks to the efforts of successive generations of chiefly Czech scholars, explorers, clergymen and collectors, the Náprstek Museum's American collections have evolved to a stage where they provide a comparatively comprehensive view of the cultural history of the Americas' native inhabitants, from prehistory, through antiquity and modern age, to the present day. Even though, naturally, the various historical epochs and culturally-geographic areas are not represented in the collections in equal proportion, on the whole it can be stated that the Náprstek Museum has in its possession both collections of items and individual specimens of prime importance even by strict international standards.

The character of the Náprstek Museum's American collections bears close affinity with the cultural and political history of this nation: Indeed, the guidelines for collecting and methods of selection were invariably determined by individuals who maintained intimate links with the Czech Lands. However, the routes whereby objects that had once been used by the Americas' original, or native, inhabitants, reached the Náprstek Museum, were more often than not rather crooked. From today's perspective these collections can be divided into two principal groups.

The first group consists of individual items and collections which were acquired by the Náprstek Museum through various indirect ways,

torn out of their original context and often lacking any detailed specification. Taken in chronological order, these include so-called curiosities obtained by collectors in the earliest days of interest in the exotic lands, collections of first missionaries, explorers and settlers, as well as objects sent by to the old country by expatriates. Even the present time is still witnessing the continued incoming flow of items acquired through amateur collecting efforts of this country's diplomatic, business, technical and other experts stationed overseas, as well as of objects coming from diverse family estates, where they once landed as souvenirs from exotic voyages.

The second group is constituted by systematically structured collections acquired chiefly through purposeful scholarly, collecting, acquisitive and exchange activities carried out by the museum's curators or members of other specialized institutions. A major share in the making of these collections belongs to collections built by explorers and other nonprofessional enthusiasts, invariably endowed with a sophisticated kind of curiosity coupled with keen interest in native cultures.



1. Moccasins. Hard sole and tanned hide upper embroidered with porcupine quills dyed red, blue, white. Santee Dakota. Minnesota. L.: 26,8 cm. Collected by Vojta Náprstek in 1856. NpM No. 22.245



8. Woolen rug with central motif depicting the masked dancer (yeibichai). This rug with motif from sandpainting was made for the collector especially. Navaho. New Mexico. Collected by František Pospíšil in 1930.

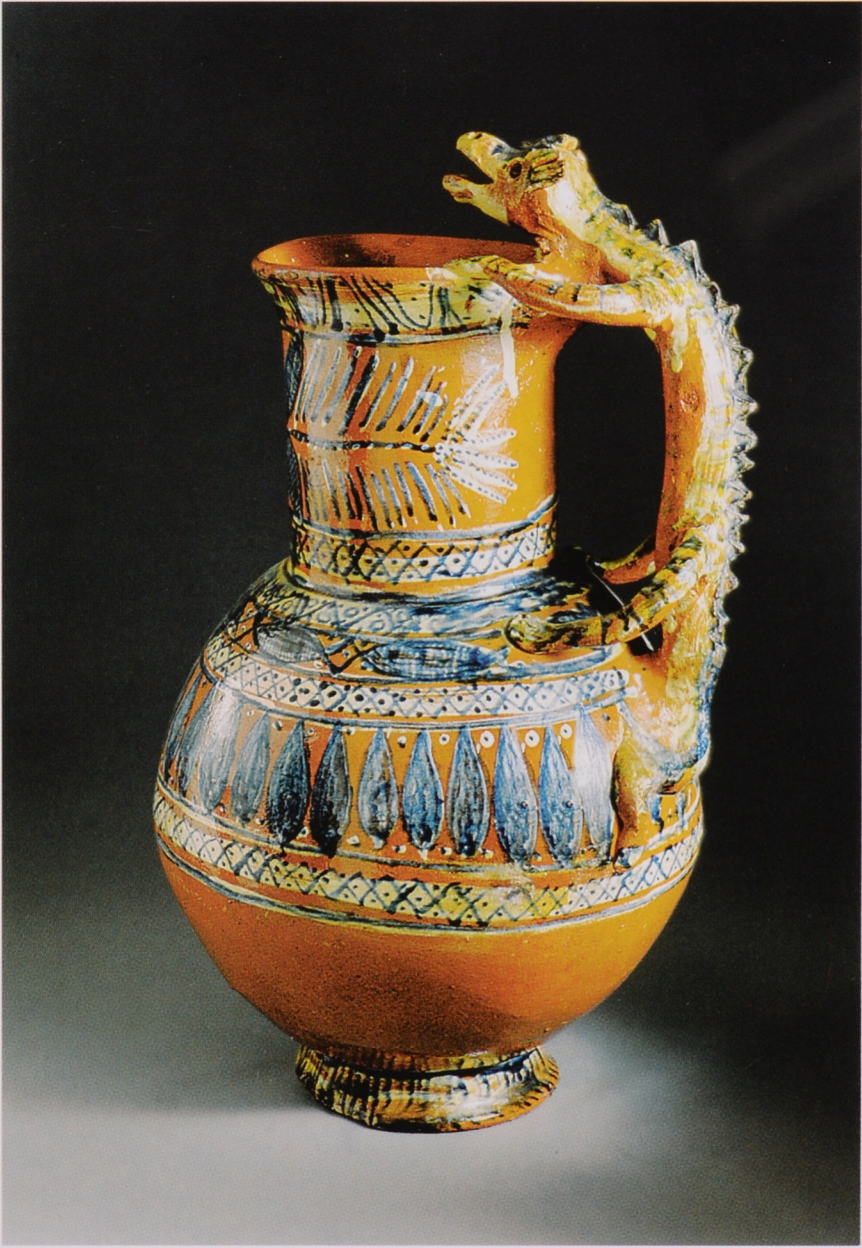
The first ever native American object to have found its way to the Náprstek Museum is a woman's robe made of buffalo hide. It is decorated with a three-colour box-and-border ornament. Museum's founder, **Vojta Náprstek** obtained the robe in the course of his and superintendant Francis Huebschmann's meeting with Santee Dakota chiefs in Minnesota in 1856.<sup>1</sup> Upon his return to Prague Náprstek hung the robe on a wall in his house, *U Halánků* (recent Náprstek Museum), as a prized memento of his American stay. During its course he had accumulated, apart from the robe, a large body of items of daily use, including clothing articles, moccasins, pipes, tools and arms, predominantly of **Santee Dakota** origin.<sup>2</sup> According to record the collection was presented to **Náprstek** among others by the Wahpekute chief **Taogate duta /Taoyateduta/** (His Red people) and the Wahpeton chief **Zitkaja duta/Zitkayaduta/** (Red bird).<sup>3</sup> Exactly Taoyateduta or Little Crow was the Mdewakanton chief. The collection was initially presented by Náprstek as a gift to the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia (today's National Museum). At the same time, however, **Vojta Náprstek** with his wife, **Josefa Náprstková**, carried on with the expansion of their own museum's collections. Apart from their personal acquisitions, they relied a good deal on their contacts with the Czech expatriates in America. There, their principal benefactors included the expatriate association of **Czechs of Omaha** who supplied items from the **Plains and Prairies Peoples**, such as a painted dance shield, a tomahawk, and a pipe. An important single contributor was **Pavel Černoušek** of Minnesota, who presented to the museum a valuable **Dakota** collection. Other expatriates in the USA who enriched the Náprstek Museum's North American Indian collections during the 19<sup>th</sup> century included the **Korbel brothers, The Slavic Lime Association, Detroit Ladies**, and others. Besides that, Vojta and Josefa Náprstek purchased from the **Moravian Brethren of Herrnhut** a large quantity of ethnographic items coming from the **Aleuts**, as well as from the **Inuits** of Labrador. That collection is highlighted by a unique Aleut waterproof parka made of walrus guts, with coloured skin strips and yarn. **Josefa Náprstková** has to her credit among other assets a remarkable leather coat from north-east America, embroidered with dyed moose hair. The Náprstek Museum's North American collections were likewise enlarged by explorer **Enrique Stanko Vráz**, whose 1902 expedition to the US Southwest yielded a batch of **Pueblo** pottery items, rattles and kachina dolls made by **Hopis and Zuni**.<sup>4</sup>



2. Dance shield, painted bison hide. Cheyenne, southern Great Plains, North America. Collected by Czech expatriates from Omaha before 1880. NpM No. 44.603



9. Figures representing a priest and a noble woman. Pottery. Classic Maya culture. Jaina. Campeche. Mexico. A.D. 600 - 900. H.: Collected by Jakub Beer before 1856. NpM No. 21504, 21505.



10. Jug. Polychrome ceramic with glaze. Metepec. Mexico. Collected by Josef Rutta in 1973 - 1977. H.: 44 cm. NpM No. A 8365.



3. Waterproof coat made of walrus intestine bordered with colored gut and skin strips and yarn. Aleut. L.: 107 cm. Bought by Vojta Náprstek before 1894. NpM No.44.632



Starting 1921 the American collections were continuously concentrated on one place. The Náprstek's own American Indian collection had been transferred from the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia (recent



4. Kachina doll representing Shalako Mana. (fragment without headress). Painted wood. Zuni. Arizona - New Mexico. H.: 20,7 cm. Collected by Enrique.St.Vráz in 1902. NpM No. 44.644



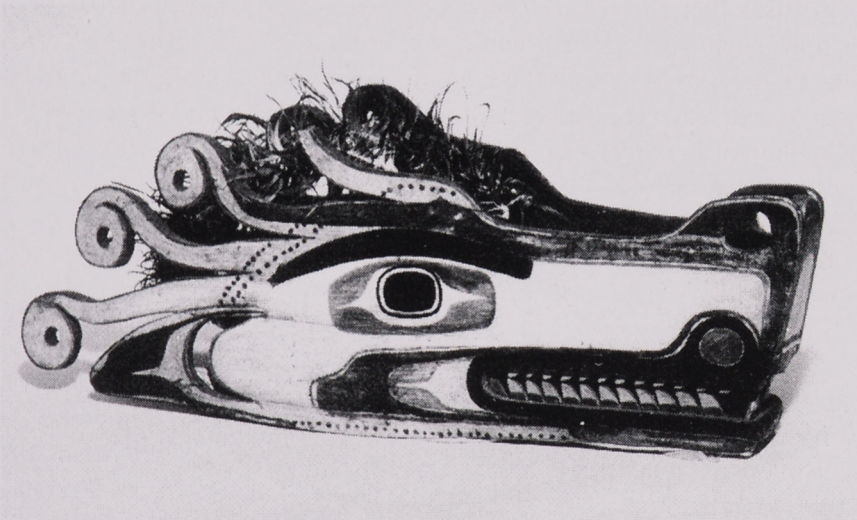
11. Mask for the „Diablo Macho” dance. Painted plastered wood. Nahua. Santa Anita. Guerrero. Mexico. H.: 70 cm. Collected by Milan Calábek in 1985. NpM No. 58 561

National Museum) to the Náprstek Museum in 1921 already. After the Náprstek Museum's incorporation into the National Museum in 1942 - 43 a number of other American collections then came to house of Náprstek Museum on Betlémské square as well. The oldest of them, a corpus of ethnographic items from the American Pacific coast, dates from the late 18th century. It ranks among the world's oldest museum collections of its kind. It was gathered by **Thaddaeus (Tadeo) Haenke (1761 - 1817)**, medical doctor and botanist, native of Chřibská in northern Bohemia who took part in an expedition led by Admiral **Alejandro Malaspina**, exploring areas to the north of the Americas' west coast. Standing out among the wide assortment of utility articles, such as baskets, nutshell bowls or fishing hooks, collected by **Haenke** among the Indian tribes from Central America through California to Alaska in the north, is a fine array of wood-carvings, a painted leather headdress, and a twined hat decorated with a stylized painted image of a beaver, all acquired from Alaska's **Tlingits** in 1791.<sup>5</sup>



5. "Bear's Ears" headdress used by shaman. Painted leather. Tlingit. Alaska. Probably collected by Tadeo Haenke in 1791. NpM No. 21.373

More than a century later, in 1908, adventurer and industrialist from the town of Úpice **Filip Oberländer (1876 - 1911)** set out on a hunting expedition to north-west America. Around Vancouver Island he visited the **Nootkas** and **Kwakiutls** from whose he purchased large quantities of ritual and utility objects, including wooden sculptures, both anthropomorphic and zoomorphic, masks, ritual appareil, and decorative, elaborately twined baskets serving for the carrying, storing and cooking of food.<sup>6</sup> Oberländer also pondered buying a totem pole, but gave up the idea for lack of finances. Eventually he concluded that back home skilled Czech carpenters would make a copy of the totem that would be less expensive, an idea which, however, was not to materialize. The explorer recorded his observations from the voyage and his keen interest in the local native American customs in a book entitled „*Lovecké jízdy v Severní Americe*“ („Hunting Rides in North America“), Prague 1911. Oberländer's collection presented to the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia was officially repositioned to the Náprstek Museum, where it linked up with the collection of Tadeo Haenke.



6. Wolf headdress for Winter Ceremony. Painted cedar wood, bald eagle feathers. Nootka . West Coast of Vancouver Island. Canada. Late 19<sup>th</sup> or early 20<sup>th</sup> century. L.: 61 cm. Collected by Philip Oberländer in 1908. NpM No. 22.258

Likewise dating from the end of the 19th century is a valuable collection of hunting weapons of the **Nunivarmiut** (Eskimos) from Nunivak Island. The maker of this collection, which was handed over to the Náprstek Museum by the Local History Institute in Olomouc, is anonymous. Of particular interest there, apart from elaborately made harpoons, spears and arrows of horn, bone and wood, is an elegantly finished dance spear of walrus-ivory, finely decorated with an engraved stylized image of a sea-otter featuring blue beads in place of the eyes. Related to the cultural context of the native inhabitants of North America's arctic regions are the areas embracing Siberia and Lapland. The Náprstek Museum's Siberian and Laplandic collection is not large in terms of size, but it does contain elements representative of virtually all of the most relevant groups of small Arctic nations. Its oldest items were acquired as early as the 1880s by **Vojta Náprstek**, **Josef Štolba**, a notary from the town of Nechanice, and Count **Leo Thun-Hohenstein (1811 - 1888)**. **Josef Štolba and Leo Thun-Hohenstein** gathered arrays of objects from **Lapland**, which may not be numerous, but are definitely of considerable ethnographic and historical value. A variety of solitary objects were brought in from different parts of the Arctic in the 1890s by explorer **Josef Kořenský**. The Siberian collection has its core in a remarkable body of items supplied by **František Josef Poledna-Vlkovský (1877 - 1951)**, native of Vlkov in Moravia, who took part in a hunting expedition to **Kamchatka** and **Chukchi Peninsulas**. There, in the land of the **Chukchi** people, he put together an extensive collection, part of which he sent to the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia which, regrettably, did not express interest in receiving the rest of the collection as well.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, an array of objects that are thoroughly unique even by international standards, including e.g. rare specimens of shaman's array, reached the Náprstek Museum following the two institutions' merger to exemplify the collection's truncated form, a case of a golden opportunity that was missed.

The American Arctic collections were significantly enriched by physician and anthropologist **Vojtěch Suk (1879 - 1967)**, who served a term in 1926 carrying out voluntary medical practice among the native population in various missionary stations of the Moravian Brethren in **Labrador**. Apart from his surgical duties and field work in physical anthropology, he also focused on the study of his **Inuit** patients' material culture, and engaged in a systematic collection of ethnographic material.<sup>8</sup> Importantly, moreover, he supplemented his collection - consisting of complete sets of clothes of the **Labrador Inuits** and a painted leather tunic obtained from

the **Naskapi** People - with meticulous documentation in the form of descriptions, drawings and documentary photographs from the researched areas. Furthermore, he gave a popular account of his experience in a book entitled „*Lékařem na Labradoru*“ („*Doctoring in Labrador*“), Brno 1975.

A research and lecture tour of the United States was made in 1930 and 1931 by a native of Brno, **František Pospíšil (1885 - 1958)**, anthropologist, ethnologist and archaeologist. Apart from academic lectures delivered at numerous universities in the USA, he also addressed, in a



7. Tunic. Painted elk leather. Naskapi. Hebron mission. Labrador. Collected by Vojtěch Suk in 1926-7. NpM No. 45.671

more popular vein, members of the expatriate community, and concentrated the research part of his programme on the study of native American cultures, both in museums and in the field. The bulk of that research was done in the south-west of the United States, in Arizona and New Mexico, covering the **Pueblo** and **Navaho** tribes, whose culture appeared to him „the most resilient.“ He intended to sum up the results of his study in an extensive monograph which, however, remained unfinished. His „*Etnologické materiálie z jihozápadu USA*“ („Ethnological Materials from the Southwestern USA“), Brno 1932 - 33, the first volume of the planned work, shows an impressive degree of erudition, breadth of scope and detailed approach to the subject of study. Similarly, a mere torso of the ethnographic collection brought by **František Pospíšil** from the US Southwest, has survived in the present-day public collections. The Náprstek Museum's permanent exhibition features an assortment of Pueblo ceramics, baskets and small ritual objects and a series of wood-carved Kachina dolls of the **Hopis** and **Zunis**<sup>9</sup>. Of the 42 **Navaho** and **Pueblo** carpets mentioned in Pospíšil's book, only one, woven by the Navaho craftsman to Pospíšil's order, has been preserved in the museum's collections. Likewise, the current whereabouts of American Indian turquoises, as well as of items of **Navaho** and **Zuni** jewellery also reproduced in the said book, are unknown. All of these objects have most probably ended up in private hands.

Archaeological collections, documenting the Americas' prehistorical and ancient cultures, began to reach the Czech Lands in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. North American prehistoric artifacts were acquired through the efforts of expatriates with no previous archaeological training. Consequently, the prehistorical stone and bone tools and ceramic fragments, which were obtained only sporadically anyway, lack appropriate documentation. A more plentiful, as well as more valuable and plastic picture of pre-Columbian cultures was obtained by collecting endeavours in **Central America**, or more precisely, **Mesoamerica**, i.e. the area which saw the flourishing of the advanced ancient civilizations of the **Olmecs**, **Mayas**, **Zapotecs**, **Aztecs** and others. A prominent collector active in Mesoamerica was **Jakub Beer**, Grandmaster of the Order of the Knights of the Cross with the Red Star, who made a donation to Bohemia of a major Central American collection. It includes various vessels from **Nicaragua**, **Mexican** stone tools and ceramic vessels, and most notably, an assortment of ancient **Maya** ceramic sculpture. Figurines representing probably deities, as well as most likely priests and aristocrats, male and female alike, dating

from the 6<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, come from the locality of **Jaina** in **Campeche, Yucatan**, a site famed for the precision and lifelike portraiture of its finds. Mostly hollow, mould-pressed, with additionally hand-modelled details, they usually functioned as ocarinas or rattles.

The ancient Mesoamerican collection was expanded by another several thousand items during the 1930s thanks to a gift sent from **Mexico** by **August Genin**, whose identity, affinity for this country and motives underlying that particular gift have so far remained shrouded in mystery. The collection's most remarkable elements include an assortment of **Zapotec** figure-shaped ceramic vessels dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> centuries,<sup>10</sup> **Toltec** and **Aztec** ceramics, figure-shaped ceramic wares from **Colima** and **Nayarit** (0 - A.D. 300), stone sculptures from **Veracruz, Guerrero** and **the Mexico Valley**, or an assortment of painted vessels exemplifying the northern Mexican **Casas Grandes** culture (A.D. 1300 - 1450), some of whose characteristic features establish a link between Mesoamerica and south-western USA. Coming from Panama's **Chiriqui** province is a large collection of ceramic vessels, as well as both zoomorphic and anthropomorphic ceramic sculptures produced by the **Diquis** culture (A.D. 600 - 1100). The collection was purchased by **Vojta Náprstek** in 1889, from **Antonín Hübsch**, botanist and a native of Šternberk in Moravia, who worked in Panama between 1884 and 1886.<sup>11</sup>

An entirely unique, even sensational asset to the American collections is represented by the so-called „**Liberec Codex**,“ of **Mayan** origin, so dubbed after the name of the city from whose museum it was transferred to the Náprstek in 1955. In tracing its history further back, one will find out the codex had been moved to the Liberec museum from its sister institution in the neighbouring town of Jablonec, where it was probably thanks to a donation from the local family of **Emil Heinz**, whose wife **Guadalupe Sierra** came from Mexico.<sup>12</sup> The codex has the classic folding-book form, with polychrome stucco painting on a bark paper. While it probably dates from the early colonial period, there are still many questions concerning this specimen which remain unsolved.

Recently, collecting activity covering native North America has become increasingly complicated from the ethnographic point of view, in many cases having virtually reached a terminal point. Still in the early 1920s, however, the Czech Lands received several ethnographically relevant collections of objects documenting the culture of North American Indians, thanks to a number of collectors. Those who deserve to be named here include above all Cardinal **Karel Kašpar**, the Archbishop of

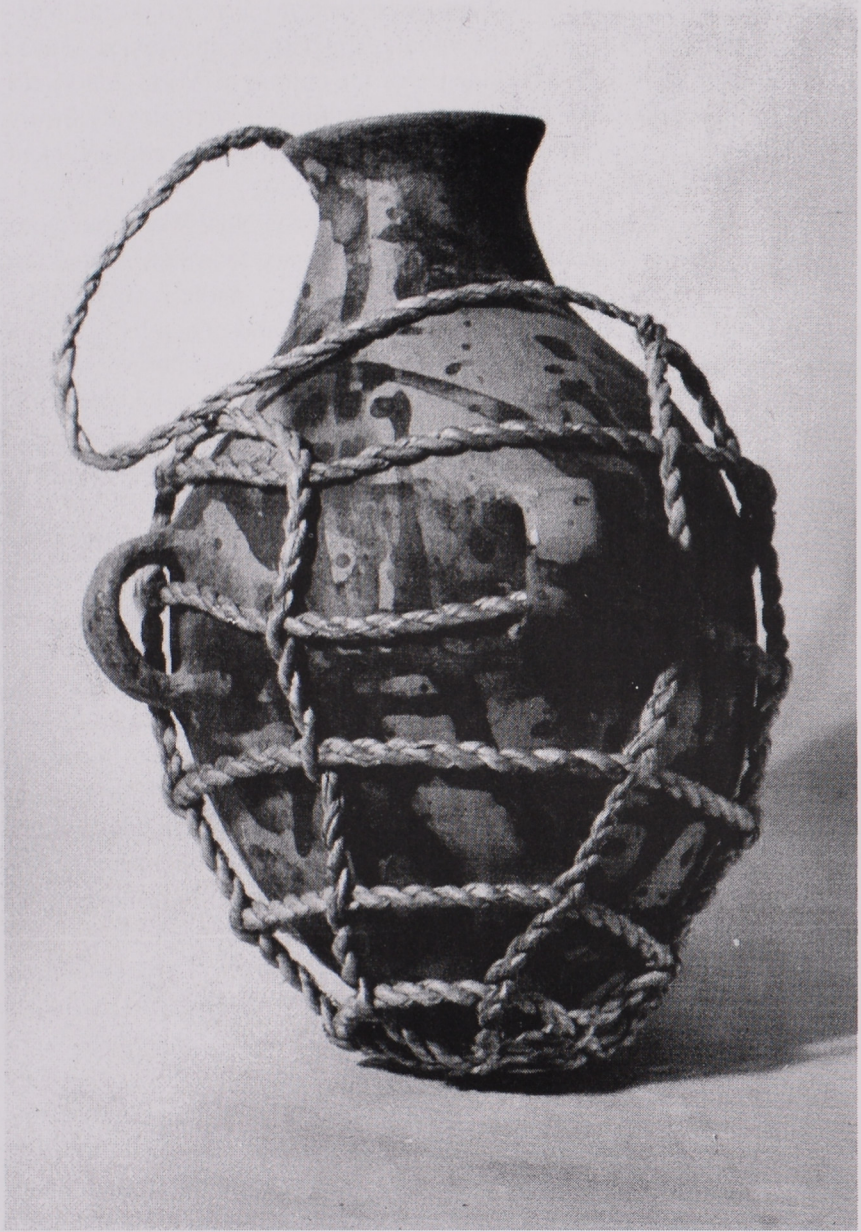


Prague; **Josef Macourek (b. 1867)**, native of Troubky and a priest active in Nebraska<sup>13</sup>; **František Filip**, an expatriate from Iowa; and **Václav Láška (b. 1890)**, Czechoslovakia's Ambassador in Mexico. These collections provide material evidence of the culture of North America's native peoples as it was at a time by when the Indians were already firmly located within the reservations, but still maintained a living tradition linked with specific objects of their own daily use.

In more recent years the native peoples of the New World have undergone a process of acculturation which has only too often shifted the crux of their creativity into the domain of pure art. While it may still be rooted in native tradition, its emphasis is clearly and one-sidedly on the aesthetic aspect, moreover subordinated to commercial criteria. Therefore, any present-day collecting project inevitably requires a heightened caution in setting apart decorative objects made for tourists, from those which are created within a specific native community by its members, to satisfy its own cultural needs.

Modern-day ethnographic collections have been built for example by ethnologist **Nelly Rasmussenová (b. 1947)**, during her expeditions to the **Inuits of Baffinland** in 1985, and to the **Saami (Laps)** of Norway in 1986. Her collection of clothes and small utensils provides comparative material for the study of evolutionary tendencies in native cultures. Attached by way of marginal association to the Náprstek Museum ethnography department's Siberian collections is an assortment of workday objects used by the herders of **Tuva**, an autonomous republic of the former USSR, which was gathered with scholarly zest and meticulous care for documentation by ethnologist **Petr Skalník (b. 1945)**, during an expedition in 1966. The above-listed collections are by no means the sole such groups of items existing in this country. Hopefully, more objects collected by our contemporaries from Bohemia and Moravia who undertake expeditions to the Arctic parts of Canada, Alaska and Siberia, will also eventually find their way to the Náprstek Museum, thereby being made accessible to the general public.

A considerable collecting potential has been, and still continues to be offered by **Middle America**. Dating from 1938 is the Náprstek Museum's collection of small-scale ceramic sculpture, baskets, gourds and toys, which was presented as a gift by Mexican schools, under a project organized by the Czechoslovak Red Cross. In 1946 a small collection of ceramic sculpture from pre-Columbian Mexico was donated to the museum by the Czechoslovak Ambassador in Mexico, **Václav Láška (b. 1890)**.



12. Watter jar. Painted ceramic. Rio Blanco, Oaxaca, Mexico. H.: 38,5 cm Gift from the Mexican Government in 1982. Npm No. 56.559

Another time-tested method of acquisition has involved controlled mediation of collecting activity: thus for example, **Josef Rutta (b.1921)**, Czechoslovakia's Ambassador in Mexico, following instruction by specialized curator and then director of the Náprstek Museum **Václav Šolc (1919 - 1995)**, gathered for the museum's collections an extensive typological series documenting the production of the contemporary **Mexican** ceramic in the 1970s. Also definitely worth noting in that connection are the collecting endeavours of physician **Milan Calábek (b. 1941)**, who combined his tours of **Mexico** and **Guatemala** during the 1970s with the collecting of native costumes and dance masks for the Náprstek Museum. An invaluable contribution was represented by a reciprocal gift from the **Mexican government** which provided, in exchange for Czech ethnographical collections, almost 2,000 items amounting to a cross-section of **Mexico's** contemporary native art production.<sup>14</sup> The current wave of interest in the cultures of Middle America, coupled with the general increase in travel opportunities, clearly augur well for the further expansion of the Náprstek Museum's collections, and its concomitant broadening of the general public's scope of knowledge of overseas cultures.

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Notes:

(NpM - means Náprstek museum)

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3. *Zpráva o Museu království českého (Report on the Museum of the Kingdom of Bohemia)*, Časopis musea království českého. Vol.31 (1857), II., p. 288
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8. Halászová, Věra: *Labradorská cesta Vojtěcha Suka [Labrador journey of Vojtěch Suk.]* Říjen 1988 v Náprstkově muzeu, NpM Praha (NpM Leaflet: Exhibition for October 1988 in NpM).
9. See note 4.
10. Klápšťová, Kateřina: *Figurální nádoby z mexické Oaxacy. [The Figural ceramic vessels from mexican Oaxaca.] /Zapotec urns/* Říjen 1980 v Náprstkově muzeu, NpM Praha (NpM leaflet: Exhibition for October 1980 in NpM)
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The main exhibitions:

- **Permanent Exhibition: *Indiánské kultury Severní a Střední Ameriky ve sbírkách Náprstkova muzea.*** Náprstkovo muzeum Praha. Kateřina Klápšťová. Katalog. [*The Indian cultures of North and Middle America from the Náprstek Museum Collections*]; with catalogue. Náprstek museum.
- 1990 - *Amerika* In: *Šperky z celého světa.* Náprstkovo muzeum. Kateřina Klápšťová, Katalog pp.45-50 [*America In: Jewels from the whole world*]. Náprstek museum. Catalogue pp. 45 - 50
- 1992 - *Setkání dvou světů. 500. Výročí objevení Ameriky.* Náprstkovo muzeum. Kateřina Klápšťová. Katalog. [*The Meeting of two Worlds. 500th anniversary of the discovery of the New World.*] With catalogue.  
- *Amerika země Indiánů.* Moravské zemské muzeum, Brno. Věra Halászová, Kateřina Klápšťová, Olga Kandertová [*America - the Indian Country*], MZM Brno. With catalogue.
- 1995 - *Indiánské hračky.* Náprstkovo muzeum. Monika Baďurová, Kateřina Klápšťová. [*Indian toys*]. Náprstek museum , with catalogue.
- 1996 - *Mexické masky.* Náprstkovo muzeum. Monika Baďurová [*Mexican masks*]. Náprstek museum.
- 1997 - *Zbraně Divokého západu.* Ze sbírek Historického ústavu Armády České republiky a Náprstkova muzea. Historický ústav Armády České republiky. Praha. Vladimír Dolínek, Kateřina Klápšťová [*The weapons of the Wild West. Collections of the Historical Institute of the Army of the Czech Republic*]. With catalogue.
- 1998 - *Všichni jsme lidé.* Výstava o podobnostech a rozdílech lidských kultur. Náprstkovo muzeum. Kateřina Klápšťová [*We all are the members of the family of Man. Exhibition of differences and similarities of human cultures.*] Náprstek museum.
- 1999 - *Mexické umění z českých sbírek.* Náprstkovo muzeum. Kateřina Klápšťová, Pavel Štěpánek. Drobný tisk. [*Mexican art from the Czech collections*]. Náprstek museum; with leaflet.