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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Interview: Richard Rees, a professional furrier with over 30 years of experience

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We are talking to Richard Rees, a professional furrier with over 30 years of experience in the profession. He has undertaken an unprecedented project - creating the fifth Qingailisaq parka. The parka is famous for being so difficult to make.

Kateřina: Could you describe to our readers what a furrier does?

> How difficult was it to make the parka? It is rightly considered one of the most difficult and demanding parkas in Inuit history.

Richard: A furrier is someone who works with hides—tanning, preparing, and sewing them into garments or other functional pieces. It's a craft that combines tradition, patience, and skill to bring out the best qualities of each hide.

Kateřina: You are specialising in sewing caribou hides. How did it start? What brought you to it?

Richard:I began as a falconer in Wales, hunting with birds of prey. The game I caught fed my dogs and ferrets, and I started experimenting with tanning the hides. That curiosity grew, and over time I worked my way up to larger hides, eventually caribou and moose calf skins. Now I live in northern Sweden, where I continue this work alongside my 60 sled dogs.

Kateřina: You work with Inuit communities in Sisimiut, Greenland. How long have you been working with them? How did it start and what is the aim of the cooperation?

Richard: I was invited to Greenland to help Inuit communities reconnect with caribou. While sealskin is widely used, caribou hides are often overlooked—modern hunters tend to only value the meat, leaving the hides behind. My role has been to share knowledge about tanning and sewing caribou hides. This also led to my invitation to the Reindeer Sustainability Conference, as well as running sewing workshops in Sisimiut. The aim is to keep traditional skills alive and to bring more value and respect to caribou within the community.

Kateřina: After working as a furrier for 30 years you have decided to make the Qingailisaq Shaman Parka. Could you tell us about this unique garment?

Richard: The original coat was owned by Qingailisaq, a powerful Igloolik shaman (angakkuq) in about 1900. According to story told by his son Awa, the decoration of the coat was inspired by and depict Qingailisaq's encounter with dangerous mountain spirits called Ijirait. The parka was acquired in 1902 by Captain George Comer, an American whaler and collector, for the American Museum of Natural History.

I was aware of this legendary parka for many years. After three decades of experience I finally felt ready to attempt it. It's an extraordinary garment, deeply rooted in Inuit history and shamanic tradition. Making it pushed me to my absolute limits as a furrier—I nearly gave up many times. But I wanted to honour the legacy of this parka, so I persevered.
Today, only four known Qingailisaq parkas exist, all preserved in museum collections. The last ones were made by highly skilled Inuit women, commissioned by the Danish government.

Sadly, those artisans have since passed away, leaving only their relatives to remember their knowledge and craftsmanship

Kateřina: How difficult was it to make the parka? What were the biggest obstacles you had to overcome?

Richard: It is rightly considered one of the most difficult and demanding parkas in Inuit history. Seven different animal hides are used in its construction, and the challenge lies in making them appear as though they come from a single animal—matching the hairs in length, texture, and colour. That painstaking process tested every skill I had. Finally completing the fifth Qingailisaq Shaman Parka has been an incredible honour, and I'm humbled to have added to its legacy.

Kateřina: What is going to happen to the finished parka now?

Richard: The parka will be gifted to the Inuit people of Igloolik. It carries far too much cultural significance to remain with me—it belongs with them, to be shared and appreciated by the community. I've been working with Inuit heritage organisations, and I'm in contact with one of Qingailisaq's descendants, Clifford Inooya. To be able to return this garment to its rightful place, and to have that connection with the family, is a great honour for me.

Kateřina: Thank you for talking to us.

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. THE FINISHED FIFTH QINGAILISAQ SHAMAN PARKA. PHOTO BY RICHARD REES.

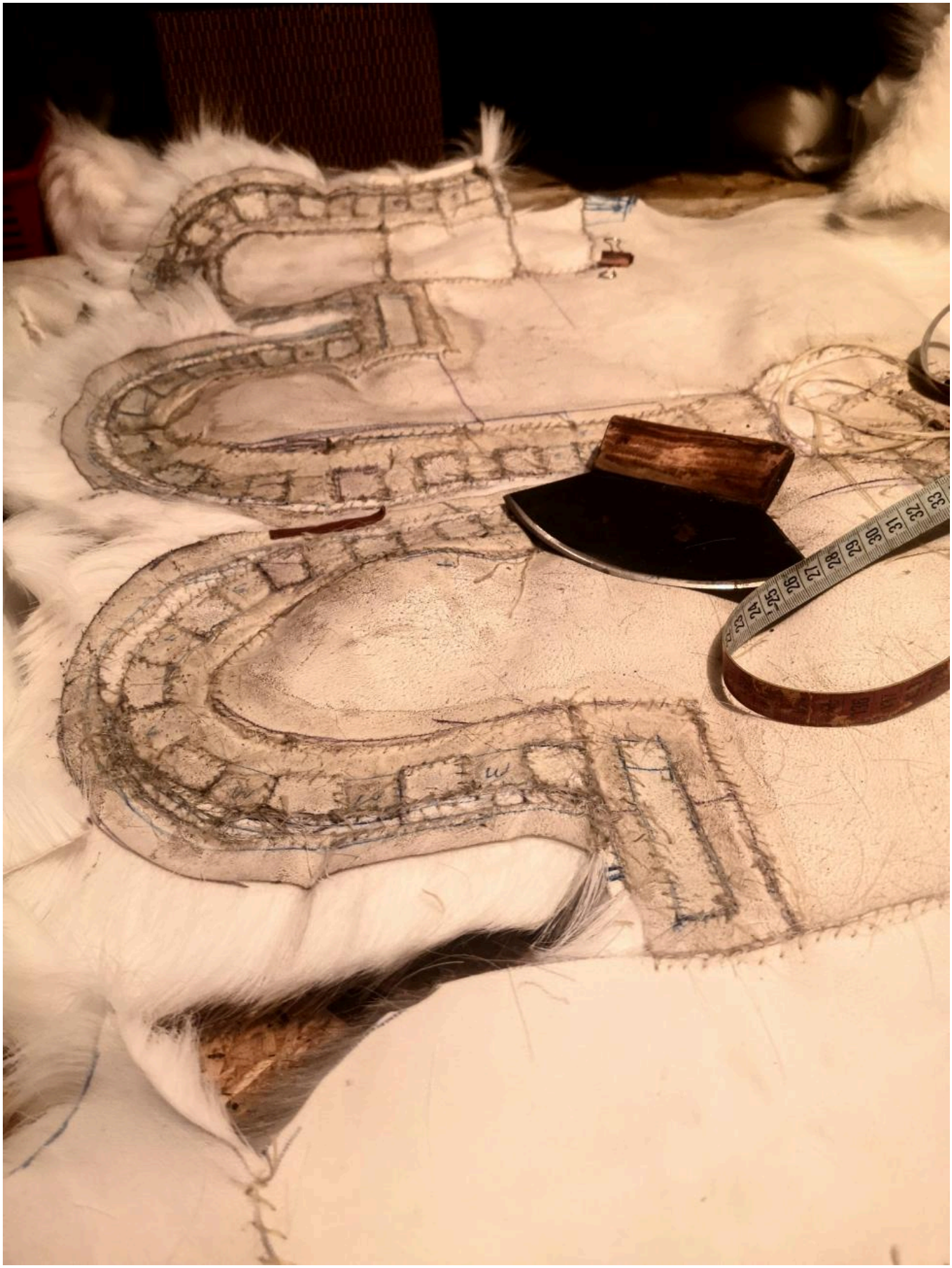

FIG 2. DETAIL OF THE PARKA'S FRONT CONSTRUCTION. PHOTO BY RICHARD REES.

FIG 3. SEWING PROCESS - RICHARD RESS WORKING ON THE PARKA. PHOTO BY RICHARD REES.

FIG 4. SEWING PROCESS - RICHARD RESS WORKING ON THE PARKA. PHOTO BY RICHARD REES.

FIG 5. THE MOST DIFFICULT PART HAS BEEN ACHIEVING A NATURAL FLOW OF THE HAIR AND ENSURING THE HAIR LENGTH IS CONSISTENT - GIVING THE APPEARANCE OF A SINGLE, UNIFIED REINDEER HIDE. PHOTO BY RICHARD REES.