Practical and cool: Sunglasses, and Inuit invention?

Sunglasses had a practical purpose for life in the Arctic before they took on their role as the ultimate fashion accessory

By Hans Lange and Jørgen Chemnitz

During the Thule Culture emigration from Canada to Greenland over 900 years ago, the Inuit brought with them one invention that is now a popular fashion item all over the world - sunglasses.

In fact, the small invention may just very well have been the world’s first sunglasses.

“I am not completely sure that they were the world’s first sunglasses,” Said Hans Lange, an expert in the Thule Culture from Greenland National Museum. “The Dorset people might have also used snow-glasses.”

(The Dorset people were a Paleo-eskimo culture that preceded the Inuit culture in Arctic North America.)

The sunglasses were made out of different materials, such as driftwood, but more commonly were made out of whale bone. The protective glasses were typically made with two small eye holes or one long opening, sometimes with a nose feature carved on revealing perhaps the earliest traces of Inuit humour.

They were an essential tool in the powerful Arctic spring light, when travelling by sled, hunting, or on long trips could bring with it the risk of snow blindness.

Unlike modern sunglasses which utilize dark glass, these worked more in the same way as when one scrunches the eyes together, reducing the amount of light that reaches the eyes.

Former head of the museum, the now deceased Jens Rosing, had his own theory about how the glasses were used.

“Rosing thought that the Thule Culture Inuit, as well as using the snow-glasses, also rubbed soot around their eyes where the opening for the glasses were, but there is no definite proof of that theory,” said Lange.

The Greenland National Museum has a large collection of snow-glasses in its collection from all over Greenland, showing that they were widely used, as well as another Inuit invention for dealing with the sun - a sun visor, much like holding the palm of your hand to cover your eyes.

The sunglasses in the picture come from the area around Tasiilaq and were found during the Gustav Holm women’s boat expedition from the 1880’s.

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