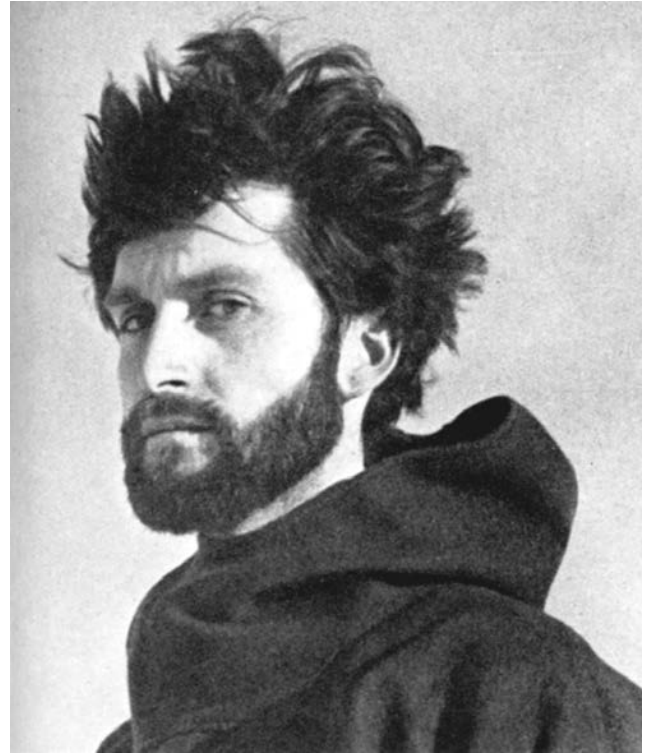


Robert Gessain



Michel Pérez, Fred Matter, Paul-Emile Victor and Robert Gessain on the *Pourquoi Pas?*, July 1934

Robert Gessain, 1936 (Pérez photo)

Robert Gessain (1907-1986) had a longstanding interest in the art of the Ammassalik Eskimos, especially with regard to what it revealed of their beliefs. This interest is reflected in his numerous publications on the subject (for references, see Gessain, 2007, and 1984), including on “tupilaks” (1950), androgynous figurines used as rifle supports on the kayak (1954), composite Eskimo statuettes containing three human figures (1955), the skeletal art of the Eskimo (1959), and dance masks of Ammassalik (1984). It is also apparent from the significant representation of art among the 3,500 objects brought back from Greenland to the Musée de l’Homme.

The beginning of Gessain’s career in Arctic anthropology has been described by Paul-Émile Victor (1907-1995), who was to become his close friend and colleague (Victor, 1988). It took place in 1934 in the amphitheater of the Institute of Geography on rue Saint-Jacques, that was used for classes of the new Institute of Ethnology of the University of Paris, “During a lecture in linguistics, made even more boring by a professor who, behind his glasses, lost behind the lectern, his head buried in his stooped shoulders, read an inaudible text. ...

A young man seated in front of me turned and asked: ‘Is it true that you are going to be leaving for Greenland? ... You are lucky.’

When the class ended we got up together.

‘Would you happen to need a doc?’ ...

‘Yes!’

‘Then take me!’ he said laughing.

'I'm speaking seriously, you know'.

'Me also', he replied eagerly."

In this way Robert Gessain, a 27 year-old recent medical school graduate who had just completed his military service in Morocco and was beginning to launch himself into the adventure of anthropology, met Paul-Émile Victor, and the long handshake that sealed the agreement between these two apprentice ethnologists preparing for their first fieldwork in Greenland would also determine careers that were definitively tied to the population of the East Coast of Greenland, and to one another.

To obtain the support of Paul Rivet, who was Professor of Anthropology at the Muséum National d'Histoire Naturelle since 1927 and founded the Musée de l'Homme (which on the occasion of the Exposition Universelle in 1937 replaced the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro), Paul-Émile Victor had to revise the composition of his team and incorporate an anthropometric dimension into the project. This was provided by Robert Gessain, who was to carry out surveys on the physical characteristics and demography of the Inuit. Rivet, a major figure in French anthropology of the 1930s, took it upon himself to shake from its lethargy the old Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, and with the aid of his friends Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl founded in 1930 the Institute of Ethnology that was soon to awaken the interests of many of the most important future French anthropologists, including Alfred Métraux, Marcel Griaule, Michel Leiris, Jacques Soustelle, Paul-Émile Victor and Robert Gessain.

With Paul-Émile Victor (ethnologist and Head of Mission), Michel Pérez (geologist), Fred Matter (cinematographer) and Robert Gessain (doctor and physical anthropologist), the French Scientific Expedition to the East Coast of Greenland sailed from Saint-Servan on July 11, 1934 on Commander Jean-Baptiste Charcot's polar ship, the *Pourquoi Pas?*. (Charcot, like his father, the famous French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot, trained as a physician, but when his father died in 1893 when Charcot was 26 years old, he left him an inheritance that was sufficient to allow him to leave medicine and instead pursue the life he preferred in scientific investigation and expeditions to the Arctic and Antarctic.) Without Charcot's encouragement of Victor in his planned expedition, and especially his willingness to transport the expedition members and their supplies to Ammassalik, where he had never gone before and that was not part of his original program, the expedition may never have left (Victor, 1988).

The team spent a year near the settlement of Ammassalik (population of ~800 in the entire Ammassalik district), from July, 1934 to August, 1935. Robert Gessain collected an impressive amount of data in the areas of demography, genealogy, physical anthropology, physiology and pathology, learned the East Greenlandic dialect and brought back linguistic documents, collected numerous drawings, and took about 800 photographs that remain an irreplaceable document of the East Greenland way of life at that relatively early contact period. Being the only physician in the settlement of Ammassalik, he was able to collect much linguistic and other information concerning the lives and beliefs of the local population. From this first mission Gessain also understood the importance of demography and genealogies for the study of small endogamous groups. He admired the exceptional pioneering work of Captain Gustav Holm, who (as a naval officer and not a demographer) made a list of the inhabitants of Ammassalik as of 1884/85 that served as the starting point for all future demographic studies concerning the inhabitants of the East Coast of Greenland. Using information in church registers as of December 31, 1935, Gessain began the first of his lists of personal names that were to be one of the principal tools that he used in long duration, multidisciplinary ethnologic, demographic and biological studies that he carried out not only in Greenland but also in France (Stoetzel, 1988) and Senegal (in collaboration with his wife, Monique de LeStrange, also an anthropologist; Ferry, 1986).

After their return to Rouen on the *Pourquoi Pas?* they donated to the Musée de l'Homme the almost 4,000 objects that made its collections among the richest in the world with respect to the Eskimos, and that had been purchased with the personal funds of Gessain and his expedition teammates, or traded by them (literally "down to their last shirt"). Although in recognition of this gift they received many warm greetings, cordial handshakes, and official letters of thanks, they could not between them put together enough money to buy a sandwich. Matter, who had some money of his own, rejoined "someone", and Pérez returned to Geneva to live with his mother, but it was only thanks to the assistance of George-Henri Rivière, then Deputy Director of the Musée de l'Homme and who had many connections in Paris, that Gessain and Victor were able to survive on their return. Rivière arranged for the loan of a studio apartment in Paris where they lived for a number of weeks, sleeping initially in their arctic sleeping bags and heating their meals on the expedition Primus (Victor, 1988).

Robert Gessain and Michel Pérez wanted to spend two full summer months of 1936 in Ammassalik to complete their studies, and Paul-Émile Victor was also planning to return to live for a year with an Eskimo family as an Eskimo among the Eskimos. Thus even having just been picked up by the *Pourquoi Pas?* at the end of August and still in sight of Ammassalik, they were already beginning to plan their return the next year (Pérez, 1988). Therefore partly as an adventure, partly with scientific aims, and perhaps most importantly as a way to reach East Greenland a month early (before the summer breakup of the pack ice allowed the annual Danish supply ship to approach the coast), Gessain, Paul-Émile Victor, Michel Pérez, and the Danish sculptor and future Arctic archaeologist Eigil Knuth crossed the Greenland icecap from West to East by ski and dog sled in the Spring of 1936 (Knuth, 1937). Their aim of exploring the geology of the mountainous area behind Ammassalik had to be abandoned due to bad weather on the inland ice. This necessitated a change of route so that they could reach Ammassalik as directly as possible, but Paul-Émile Victor was able to explore much of this area around Mount Forel after his overwintering in 1936/37. Robert Gessain and Michel Pérez returned to Europe on the Danish supply ship *Gertrud Rask* in September 1936, while Charcot's *Pourquoi Pas?* sank in a storm off of the northern coast of Iceland on September 16th with the loss of all onboard.

Returning to the Musée de l'Homme, Gessain planned to begin working up the material he had collected in Greenland. However Paul Rivet sent him to Mexico to study the Tepehua. He departed from Le Havre on October 27, 1937 with his young first wife Simone, whom he had married after his return from Greenland. They bought an automobile in New York with which they rapidly crossed the United States, although stopping at Tulane University in New Orleans, and arrived in Mexico on November 11th. However, they had to wait almost two months for their baggage that had been sent by ship to Veracruz and was held there by innumerable customs formalities. This long delay was nonetheless put to good use by their getting in touch with the most important Mexican anthropologists and making more detailed plans for their fieldwork.

In 1937 the Tepehua numbered scarcely 5,000 spread out over a dozen widely separated villages, of which Huehuetla was apparently the largest and was chosen by Gessain for his ethnologic and physical anthropologic studies. It had the advantage of being a small, isolated population that had managed to maintain its identity and particularity as a result of natural and social barriers, and was in this respect similar to the Ammassalimiut whom he had studied in Greenland. Gessain's work in Mexico is described in detail by BG (1938) and Stresser-Pean (1988), but was cut short by illness. At the beginning of March, 1938, everything seemed to be going well and Gessain expected to soon be able to begin his physical anthropological studies. However, at just that moment he and then his wife were sickened by a gastrointestinal illness whose cause was never determined but that weakened them rapidly and that no drug was able to treat. After a couple of weeks a slight improvement enabled them to return to Mexico City under particularly difficult conditions, having each

lost over 25 pounds. After being treated initially at the French hospital and later in a rest home, they remained very weak but after some two months of convalescence they left for France. Gessain later often expressed regret about undertaking this Mexican mission: “if instead of going to Mexico I had returned to Ammassalik ...” (Gessain, 1989). The Second World War was to soon prevent any further work in Ammassalik, and marked an important date in the history of the Ammassalimiut as a result of their being abruptly transported into the 20th century by contact with the numerous American troops stationed in their midst.

From 1941 to 1946 Gessain worked as a demographer, first at the Fondation Française pour l’Etude des Problèmes Humains, created in 1941 by decree of the Vichy regime under the impetus and through the political connections of the eugenicist Alexis Carrel (1873-1944) who served as “regent”, and after the liberation of France from German occupation and the “purging” of the Fondation, at its successor, the Institut National d’Etudes Démographiques. Some have taken the view that his association with Carrel was not entirely discontinuous with the work of the *nagorsak* (doctor) Robert Gessain sent by Paul Rivet to study the “Eskimos” in the racist context of the 1930s (Grognet, 2009). Yet in later years he was a strong advocate for preserving the local identity of the Ammassalimiut against the upheavals, if not actual sociocultural “damage”, inflicted by Danish management, however well intentioned. This was the theme of his nostalgic book evoking the transformation of Eskimo seal hunters into administrative employees (“Northern Danes”), brought about by Danish intervention that engaged the East Greenlanders in a process of “obligatory civilization” synonymous with the “death” of the local culture (Gessain, 1969).

Gessain was a practicing psychoanalyst from 1948 to 1957, during which time he also gradually obtained from the Danish archives the original names of the Ammassalimiut (before they were required to adopt Danish names), and that allowed him to complete the genealogies that then represented his major work. Having defended a second doctoral dissertation on the East Greenland Eskimos in 1957, he was appointed Deputy Director of the Musée de l’Homme in 1958, and Director in 1968. In 1960 he created the Centre de Recherches Anthropologiques (CRA) devoted to the study of small endogamous groups, and that became an Affiliated Laboratory of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in 1966.

In 1965, for the first time in 30 years, Gessain returned to East Greenland and began a new phase in the history of French research in Greenland, devoted to a meticulous reconstitution of Ammassalimiut society in the pre-contact period. He and his group (that included Joëlle Robert-Lamblin, Pierre and Bernadette Robbe, Michel Perrot, André Langaney, Albert Ducros, and others) published over 50 articles in the period from 1970 to 1980, subtitled “Biological and social anthropology of the Ammassalimiut - Studies directed by Robert Gessain”. Many of these were published in the Museum journal, *Objets et Mondes*, including a large special issue in 1975 devoted to Greenland, where he explained why he began his long-term study of the Ammassalimiut after his return to Ammassalik in 1965.

After 1972 Robert Gessain did not return to Ammassalik, where his co-workers continued the studies he had initiated there, but turned his attention increasingly to Alaska that he first visited in 1967 (and to which he returned in 1974, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983 and 1985). He retired from his administrative duties at the Musée de l’Homme in 1979.

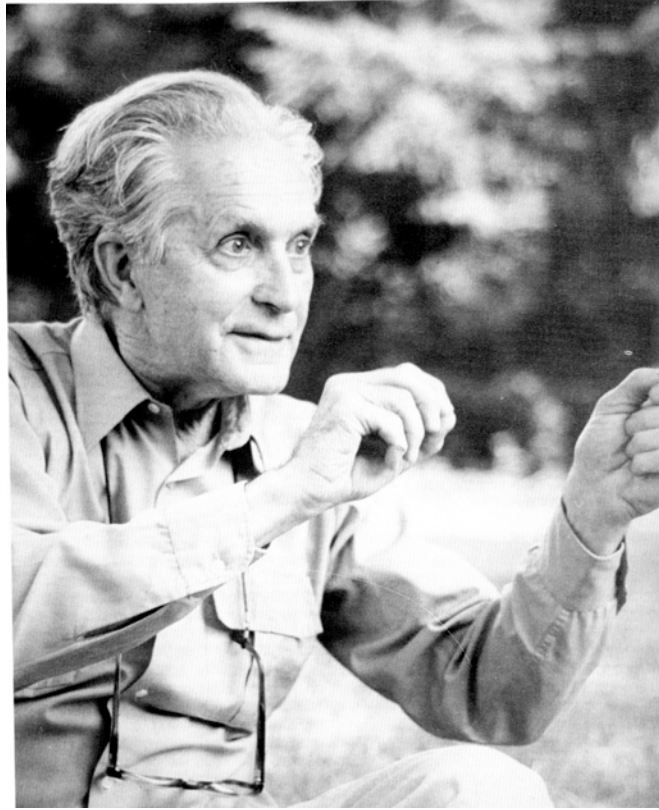


Photo: Stéphane de Bourgles

Robert Gessain on July 14, 1982. "He knew, like no one else, how to accompany his stories with evocative gestures, particularly by the expressive movement of his hands" (J.J. Gillon)

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