

# Grandmotherly Knowledge, Grandfatherly Knowledge: Alaska's Traditional Native Arts

by Suzi Jones

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"Native art is important. If there was no more Native art and potlatches and dances, life would not be good."

Julius Isaac  
Tanacross, Alaska, 1981

Among Native people of Alaska, the old ways, the indigenous arts, reflect tens of thousands of years of experience in a place. They are what poet Gary Snyder has called "grandmotherly knowledge, grandfatherly knowledge." Inseparable from Native values — especially a sense of the relatedness of all things — closely tied to the use of local materials, and dependent upon the seasonal rounds of subsistence activities, Alaska's traditional Native arts are tremendously varied and rich with meaning.

When looking at Alaska Native art, one must take into account the cultural geography of a state which is five times the size of Ohio and covers four time zones from east to west. Alaska is home to three separate ethnic and linguistic groups: Indians, Aleuts and Eskimos. The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian Indians live on the islands and mainland of south-



Baleen basket with ivory knob, made by Andrew Oenga of Barrow, Alaska, in the collection of the Alaska Contemporary Art Bank. Photo by Chris Arend, courtesy of the Alaska State Council on the Arts



Belle Deacon, an Athabaskan woman from Grayling, Alaska, is well known for her birch-bark baskets. In 1983 she was commissioned by the State Arts Council to make baskets for the Governor's Awards for the Arts.

Photo by Sam Kimura, courtesy of the Alaska State Council on the Arts

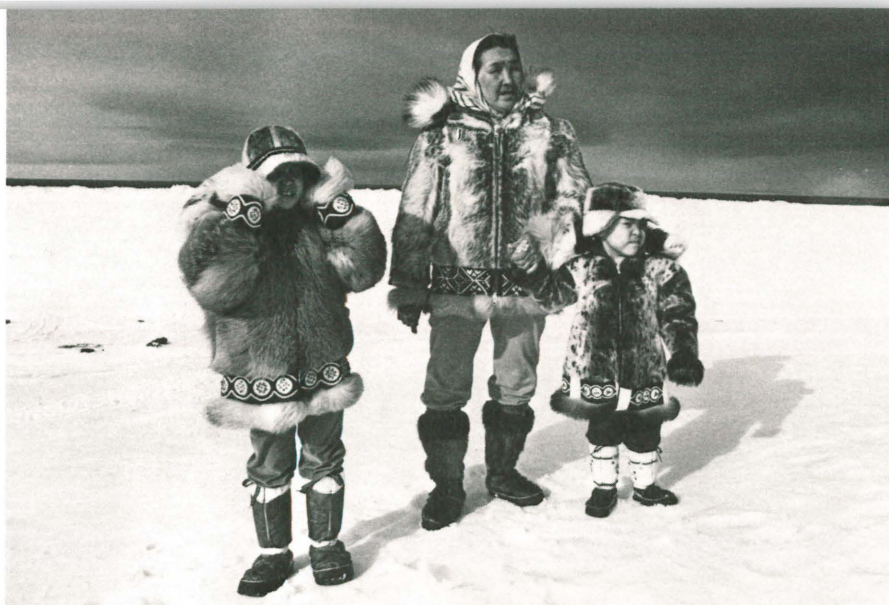
east Alaska. The Athabaskan Indians, speaking some eleven different languages, live in the Interior. Eskimos reside in the coastal areas, with the Inupiaq along the northwest coast, the Central Yupik along the southwest, speakers of St. Lawrence Island Yupik on the small island two hundred miles off the coast of Nome, and the Koniag, Chugach and Eyak along the gulf coast. The Aleuts are on the western-most chain of islands which extends for hundreds of miles out into the Bering Sea. The arts of each of these peoples are distinct.

All of Alaska's indigenous peoples have been hunter-gatherers, and this is reflected in their art, both of the past and present. Dolls are often dressed in hunter's clothing; sea mammal motifs — whales, walruses and seals — as well as various kinds of ducks and sea birds, predominate in Eskimo ivory carvings and in Eskimo masks; flower and animal designs are skillfully worked into Athabaskan and Tlingit beadwork.

A sense of place, often explicit in design and subject matter, is also evident in the materials and techniques used by the artists. In most cases, artists do not purchase their supplies from the local store or from a craft supply house. Eskimo wood carvings are made from driftwood gathered from beaches and riverbanks in spring and summer. Ivory is from the tusks of walrus hunted by Eskimo men in Norton Sound and further north, while old whale bone is scavenged from beaches and turned into sculptures and masks and reindeer horn is shaped into dolls and other carvings. Some Inupiaq make baskets of baleen, the cartilage-like fringes that come from the mouth of the bowhead whale. Yupik and Aleut baskets are coiled or twined from a type of rye grass, gathered each fall along the beaches and cured during the winter. These baskets may be decorated



Annie Alowa, a skin sewer and dollmaker from the village of Savoonga on St. Lawrence Island, with two of her grandchildren, all wearing parkas, hats and *mukluks* made by her.  
Photo by Rob Stapleton, courtesy of the Alaska State Council on the Arts



with small pieces of seal intestine which has been dried and dyed bright colors. In southeast Alaska, Indian masks, bentwood boxes and totem poles are carved of cedar, while bowls are made from local alder. Hats and baskets are woven of cedar bark or twined from spruce roots. Snowshoes are made of spruce and laced with caribou *babiche* (rawhide).

A wide variety of skins are converted into clothing by Native Alaskans. Native-tanned moosehide is the most prized backing material for Athabaskan beadwork. *Mukluks* (boots), according to the season of use and the style, may be made of reindeer, caribou, or seal, perhaps decorated with beaver or calfskin and probably soled with durable *oogruk* (bearded seal) hide. Wolverine, fox and wolf skins are commonly used for parka ruffs. "Fancy parkas" are usually made from Arctic ground squirrel skins, while everyday calico parkas are lined with rabbit.

While traditional materials, processes, and designs are strikingly evident in much of the material culture of Alaska's Native people, change is also evident. Power tools and sewing machines shorten and ease tasks. New materials replace old, sometimes by choice, sometimes by economic necessity (beadwork is now often done on felt because a single tanned moosehide may cost four or five hundred dollars), and sometimes because new and complex regulations make access to some materials, such as birchbark, difficult. In addition, side by side with the traditional artists, a generation of contemporary artists are creating new idioms for Alaskan Native art, catching the attention of the international art world.

Among Eskimos, Indians and Aleuts, the skills of the artist have been those acquired as one grew to maturity — a man learning carving, a woman sewing. And all were considered artists, for art has not been seen as a separate category of life or as an inventory of certain objects, but rather as a part of life. It expresses the relatedness of everything in the natural world, the social world and the spiritual world.

Ideas about art were the subject of a recent conversation with Esther Littlefield, a Tlingit woman from Sitka, Alaska, well known for her sewing, beadwork and knowledge of Tlingit history and culture. Mrs. Littlefield's words convey well the sense of art as attitude, as knowledge, and as a way of holding people together:

An artist is something some people never understand.  
It's an inner feeling of how you feel about things.  
It's beauty that you see.  
Not everybody sees beauty in everything.



Esther Littlefield, a Tlingit Indian from Sitka, Alaska, with a ceremonial hat she wove of cedar bark.  
Photo by Suzi Jones, courtesy of the Alaska State Council on the Arts

Sure it's true,  
 there's beauty in everything in daily life,  
 in the leaves and living close to nature.  
 People can just look out and see beauty even if it's raining.  
 That's what we were taught.  
 And then, a long time ago Mama saw beauty in the leaves;  
 from season to season  
 she'd sit somewhere and sew or weave —  
 even weaving a basket or doing something,  
 she'd look around her surroundings and see all the  
     beautiful things  
 So she creates that. . . .  
 Art should be respected.  
 And it should be handled with care.  
 . . . people come and want to buy this;  
 they want to buy this;  
 and they want information.  
 They want to pay me.  
 No. It's not worth all the money in the world.  
 I don't want their money  
 because this is my dignity.  
 . . . it represents my family.  
 Today my name is Littlefield  
 but in the olden time  
 when people get together. . .  
 certain occasions  
 they wear the costumes, and when they do wear them,  
 they're identifying themselves. . . .  
 If I'm wearing a Raven or a Frog —  
 — that's our emblem also, a Frog —  
 and I see somebody else  
 maybe from way down —  
 Hydaburg, Ketchikan, or someplace around there —  
 that I haven't met,  
 I'll walk up to them and introduce myself  
 and that I am Kiksadi.  
 And what clan are you?  
 The same emblem I have.  
 Then before long we're related.  
 Living here in southeast Alaska,  
 people are related,  
 through our clan  
 through intermarriage,  
 clear down the coast and up further north,  
 we are related.  
 So  
 by the time we're through,  
 we're related.  
 And what a joy it is  
 to have people know each other.



Hawk mask of painted and stained wood made  
 by Nick Charles, Sr., of Bethel, Alaska.  
 Photo by Suzi Jones, courtesy of the Alaska State  
 Council on the Arts

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