Aglegmiut shaman in costume, with boy, Kispiox, c.1911

The Steven Michaan Collection
of North American Tribal Arts

The Art *of the* Spirit World

ARCTIC

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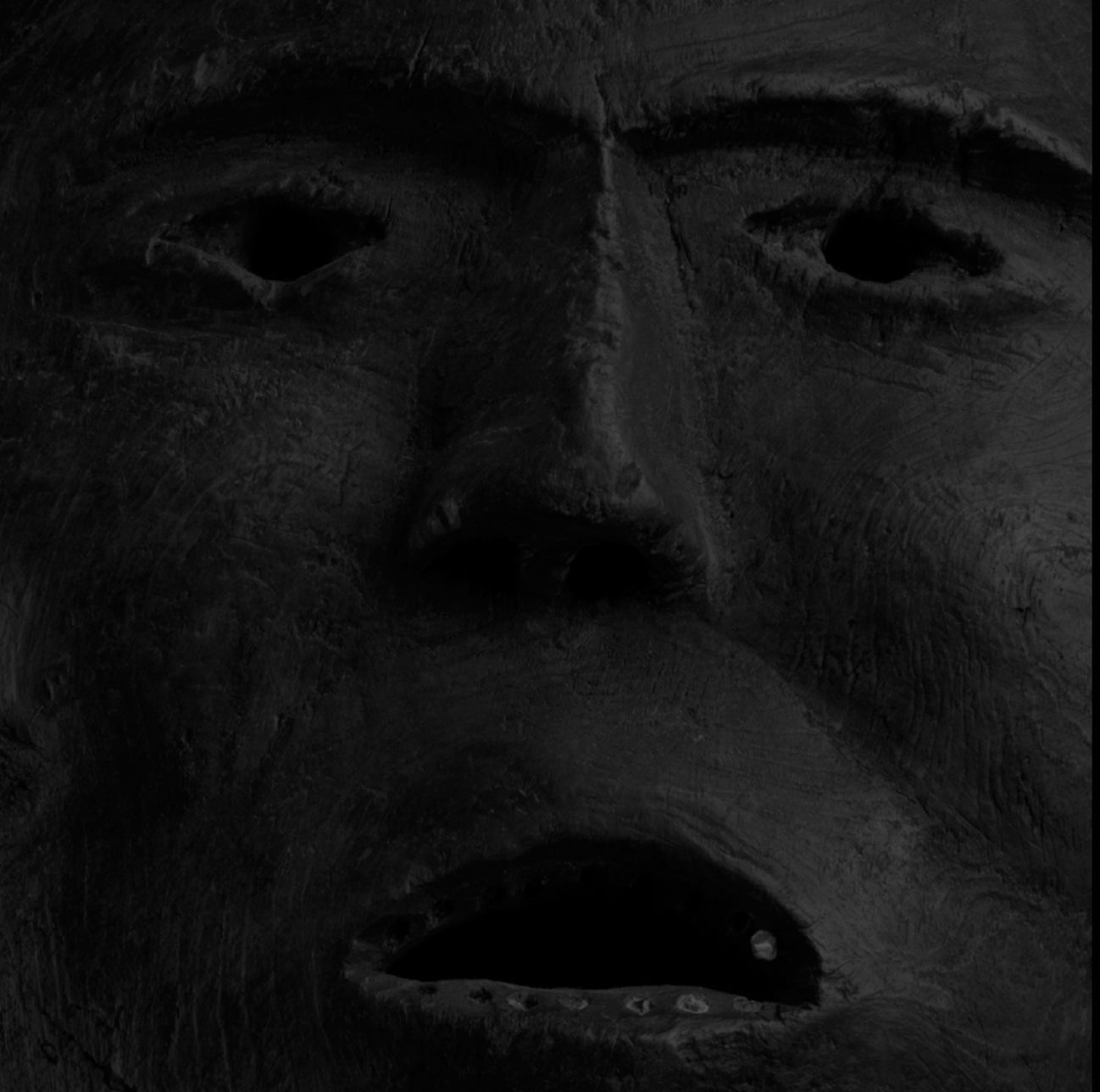


Grandmother could fly...

Sean Mooney

I take a small propeller plane from Nome, Alaska to the native village of Elim, which appears along the coastline from among the trees and rocky cliffs. There are no roads connecting it to any other place, and my once-daily plane is anticipated on each occasion by a small gathering at the end of the gravel landing strip carved out from a level stretch of ground uphill from the village. It is raining but no one seems to notice, or to mind it. Besides myself, three others get off the little plane, after the pilot, who opens the rear hatches where the locals eagerly help offload a variety of packages, boxes, bags, rifle cases, supermarket shopping bags.

A middle-aged woman with an open 4x4 vehicle and a flat trailer attached to the back of it grabs much of the cargo and two of the passengers and they zip downhill towards the village, overstuffed and precarious. I'm the last person left with the plane, except for the pilot, who is chatting with an elderly man with a jeep that is already full with cardboard boxes, occupying the passenger seat, roof rack and rear compartment. He has met the plane to receive the mail. I start walking down the pathway towards the village in the misty rain, having nothing to carry and knowing nobody, but the old man stops me to offer a ride. It seems impossible that he could fit me in amongst the boxes, but he manages to find space on the seat, strapping a few more boxes onto the roof, and I hold a few on my lap.

We coast down the hill into town, to the only official building, other than the school, which houses the post office, village administration office, a small store and a community center. I am going there to meet someone, and we depart as a couple of younger people help him take boxes inside. The reception of the mail is a community event, and I am a stranger, thus my involvement in such an intimate act ends here. At this point, the village remains itself, as it always has been, a small collection of about a hundred people, each related to one another in some measure, and existing as a family. Except for two or three schoolteachers and a research scientist studying the local ecology and something to do with salmon, everyone is Inupiat.

Despite the gentle rain, standing outside the door to the community center are three young villagers, one of whom is missing an arm and is smoking with the other. He introduces himself as Michael and says that we should go up the hill to the school. He wants to show me something. I hop onto the fender of his 4x4, clinging for dear life as he barrels up the hill with a smile on his face. I think he knows this is not something I do every day, and he relishes the entertainment, perhaps going a little faster than he normally does. But I never ask about his arm.

The Elim High School is indeed high, at the top of a hill overlooking the village, the coastal cliffs and the sea beyond. Basketball is the local passion among every village I have ever visited, and in front of the school is a drab concrete court with two nets, as one might find in any other American town where there is a playground. I tell Michael that I am from Brooklyn, where kids play basketball everywhere, but this is the most beautiful court I have ever seen. He laughs and says that they played a team from Brooklyn once.

We go inside the school to look at the display cases. There are some windows with paintings and crafts done by the students, and some more serious-looking displays by adults. There is a large bronze eagle in a case by itself, looking very official and generic, as if supplied by the state government. And there is a case full to the gills with basketball trophies, medals, photos, newspaper clippings and other paraphernalia of team spirit. Surrounding the inside of the doorway there is a series of square portraits of village elders, the guiding spirits of the place, looking down.

Michael leads me to another glass case, which is full of a variety of artifacts. There is everything from an elaborate woman's parka, with fur trimming, carved buttons, and matching boots, to various fishing tools, decorative objects carved from ivory, antler and wood, dolls, bowls and sundry old photos. There are some relics from the native village store, like a package from some canned food labeled 50 cents, and some postcards. These all seem to have equal importance and nothing has a label of any kind. Michael explains to me what each item is, knows who found it or made it, is full of stories. And he is only 24 years old. I can only imagine how much his elders must have in their memories. Michael is particularly proud of a blackened wooden toolbox, which looks to be from the 19th century or so, with hide strips and ivory buttons to clasp it shut, and a lovely handle. A few carved harpoon points and fishing lures are laid next to it, as examples of what else may be inside it. It belonged to Michael's grandfather, he says.

I meet next an older woman, perhaps in her 50's, who works in the school. It is August, and so nobody else is around, and she has some time to tell me about the language archive she has been working on. Someone before me, some years ago, came to make recordings. She tells me with urgency how important it is to collect the elders' stories before they all die, as they are disappearing so quickly, and their culture is already almost lost. Her particular concern is the native language, which everyone understands but few speak, and so she is trying to establish this into the regular school curriculum. She has endless stacks of folders full of lesson plans, articles, notes, photos, which she pulls out to show me. She speaks rapidly while she reads through them all. We turn to talking about the village and the artifacts in the display cases, and she speaks of her grandparents. I make some remark about the remoteness of the place, but she dismisses this, stating very matter-of-factly that there was never any problem of communications between the villages, "because my grandmother

Gitksan man, Kispiox, British Columbia, 1909

could fly. Everyone could fly in the old days, before the missionaries came and told us we couldn't, and so we didn't anymore. But my grandmother could fly." She said this without smiling or with any emphasis or drama, because it was perfectly true. I didn't doubt her at all. It was true because she believed it was, and the idea confirmed for me the thread of connectedness to shamanism one still feels in the native Inupiat and Yup'ik villages of Alaska.

In the indigenous art from the Bering Straits and adjacent villages, there is often seen hybrid figures, those of animals and humans and birds and sea creatures, all cohabiting the same corpus. One might see a seal with a human face, or a caribou turning into a salmon. In particularly spectacular examples, these are so skillfully executed that three or four different animals can be seen, only by turning the object around, upside down, side to side. One figure appears out of another. There is movement and morphing. This is all possibly understood through shamanism.

There are many stories in which a shaman must travel to another plane of reality, in order to plead with a particular spirit for the release, or health, of another. One must travel down to the place where the seal spirits live, or up to where reside the birds, in order to make the appropriate offerings. It is all a matter of communications, a form of prayer, but is conceived of as a physical experience of traveling. And in order for it to work, the shaman must have the capacity to change him or her self into whatever animal is naturally capable to execute the conveyance. The human becomes bird, or walrus, or tree, depending upon where he needs to go.

In art, then, there is often an expression of this process of becoming, of going. Figures are often shown in motion, usually flying, almost never running. In other cases, this is expressed in masks, which were used ritually by villagers, sometimes aiding the shaman on his journey, and at other times during potlatches, village gatherings where dances were performed, over a series of days of feasting and drumming. The masks are particularly interesting from this point of view as well, since they are, by definition, transformative. We become someone else when we wear a mask, covering the specificity of our own identities. For the shaman, or a native villager in general, the wearing of a mask is a universalizing gesture. The individual becomes all people, or becomes a spirit, connecting with the other spirits, upon which life depends.

So, that fact that Grandmother could fly made perfect sense. It also made perfect sense that the missionaries told them they could not, and therefore they stopped flying. For if one believes in a separate, fixed-entity deity, whole and intact, living in a Heaven that is attainable only after death, then one has no need to go anywhere in the current time and place. Life and death have inviolable boundaries to the Christian, and shamanism violates these laws, certain aspects of physics and other natural sciences. When the native villages were converted to Christianity, a process that is still being undertaken, Inupiat and Yup'ik people either stopped practicing shamanism, or were forbidden to do so, to the point where even dancing was not allowed, for its native power. Some villages have strongly returned to dancing practices in an effort to restore native traditions, but these are mostly performances, putting indigenous culture on display, an expression of techniques rather than attempts to travel across spirit-planes.

Still, my visit to Elim confirmed that the spirit worlds exist for them, and that there is no way to remain alive in the delicate balance with nature in such a climate and a remote, small community, without some deep respect and understanding of the environment which has always fostered human existence there. As such, there is little separation between what is considered a tool versus a decorative or fetishistic object. Functional objects, like hunting or fishing implements, are imbued with spiritual significance, because they need to be. When one is hunting, one might encounter an ancestor, inhabiting the body of a seal or walrus or caribou, and be thankful that they have come back to you, to help the family survive. Perhaps this was partly why Michael was so proud of his grandfather's toolbox. It is a sign of continuity and wholeness, in a present so rife with scattering and disjunction.

Migration

In the popular imagination of remote southerners like myself (that is, those inhabitants of the Lower 48 American States), indigenous Alaskans such as the Yup'ik, Inuit and Inupiat are thought of as nomadic, seasonally hunting game, fowl, fish and sea mammals, and establishing temporary shelters throughout their journeys across vast stretches of terrain. While this is true, in part, what is not commonly understood is the strong identification with villages among traditional hunters.

Nomadism is a misnomer when describing those who venture forth in search of game. There is no wandering involved. All travel, especially during seasons when conditions are harsh, is purposeful and skillfully considered, following the accrued knowledge passed down through hundreds of generations. And, it is all centered on the common purpose of sustaining the extended family of the village. Nomadism would imply extended one-way movement.

In Alaska, travel is equally about the return, and has no other true purpose. Nonetheless, vast distances are traversed in order to meet the demands of hunting, and native villagers have developed sophisticated tools and techniques, refined by trade and the introduction of different materials, but well established since earliest times. One can say that these are cultures defined and revealed by their tools, in the purest sense. A villager's toolbox will house

every aspect of his identity, that of his village, and of his ancestors. All practical and spiritual matters are fused within it. With the highest degree of visual economy, an animal may be depicted on the very tool which is designed to hunt it, using its cousin's bones. There is a startling level of distillation among such objects. But before discussing the visual and artistic qualities of such things, suffice it to say that hunting is the dominant activity that defines the life of Alaskan natives, to this day. In hunting, there is ancestral continuity, in the carrying out of essential practices passed down through families across centuries, and as a result, there is life, in every sense. In order to succeed, there must be travel and migration. So, naturally, migration plays a huge role in understanding native Alaskan cultures, back into Paleolithic times.

The objects in the Steven Michaan Collection are drawn from several Alaskan native cultures across many centuries. One can roughly divide them into two distinct cultural periods: that which is referred to as the Old Bering Sea, the earliest known ancestral period (c. 250 BCE – 500 AD), centered on Saint Lawrence Island and coastal Siberia (Chukotka), and to the Yup'ik and Inupiat cultures of mainland Alaska that were established slightly later.

These modern mainland artifacts date, for the most part, from the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, in both pre-and post-contact periods, but the forms of these objects predate any influence of southerners or missionaries. What distinguishes the qualities of these two groups of artifacts, aside from their dates, is their materials. Old Bering Sea artifacts are almost exclusively carved from walrus ivory, an abundant material on St. Lawrence Island, a place largely devoid of trees. By contrast, many of the Inupiat and Yup'ik masks, dolls and tools are fashioned from wood, and decorated with ivory, shells, jet, earth pigments, animal fur and plant fibers, all materials more readily available on the mainland.

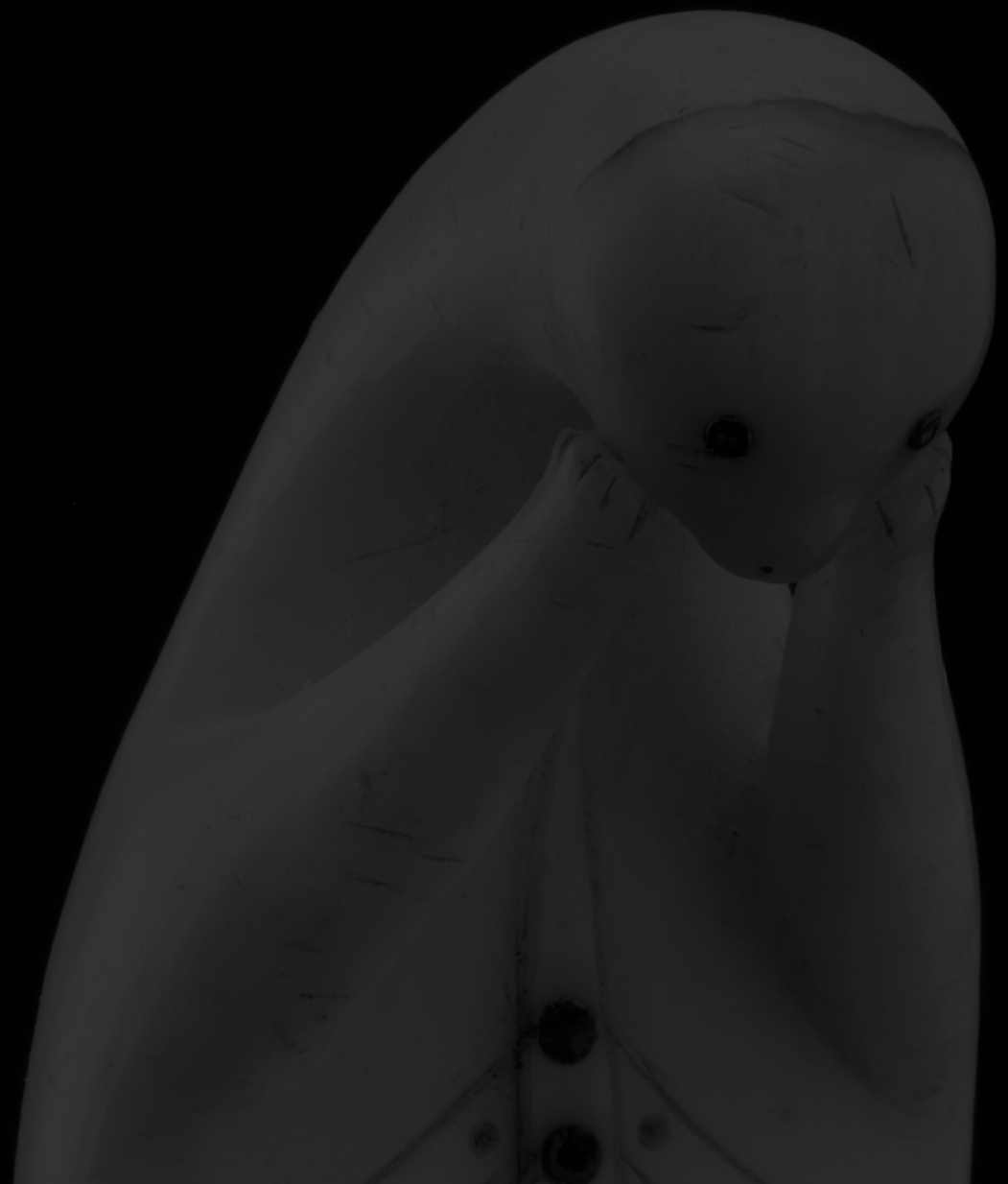
Where mainland villages are very far north, and along the coast, these materials were scarce, and in places like Point Hope, just as on Saint Lawrence, any wood utilized is usually some sort of driftwood washed up from distant southern locations. In any case, the utility of artifacts in the variety of locations is often the same, but expressed with slight differences relative to its choice of materials. This suggests a high degree of cultural continuity though people living across very wide expanses, and it can be argued that all native Alaskans descend from common ancestry dating back to Old Bering Sea times. And herein lies the source of the common mythology regarding nomadic practices among the Inuit of Canada: the fascinating act of the great migration of Old Bering Sea peoples across a stretch of land more than 3000 miles wide, within a three hundred year span.

There are many speculations on why this happened (warming trends in the 13th-15th centuries, the chase for game during famine periods, the introduction of new trade sources in the east, etc.), but the fact that it did helps us to realize that the Inuit of Canada and the Kalaallit of Greenland have common roots in Siberia. This fact alone is a remarkable reality when trying to understand a culture that survived into modern times using, basically, stone-age technologies and hunter-gatherer ways of life.

We southerners used to define these far-flung people collectively as Eskimo. The term has its roots in Canada, where the indigenous population in the far north is largely Inuit, and there the term is considered taboo today. However, there is no such taboo in Alaska, where in fact the term is preferred to Inuit, among villagers who might be Inupiat, Yup'ik, Siberian Yup'ik (those of St. Lawrence Island) or Chukchi (more specifically, Anqallit, those indigenous to the maritime coasts of the Chukchi Peninsula, that land mass reaching out to nearly touch the Bering Peninsula across from it, which together formed the ancient land bridge of which so much legend is supposed).

All of the major indigenous groups of the far north have common language roots and can be loosely understood amongst each other, albeit with some significant structural differences and local dialects that vary between villages and regions. To generalize, then, west to east, those we came to call Eskimo or Esquimaux in the 18th century can be broadly understood under the classifications of Chukchi (Anqallit) in coastal Siberia, Siberian Yup'ik on St. Lawrence Island (there may be no ethnic difference, in fact, between these two groups), Inupiat and Yup'ik in large regions of coastal Alaska, Inuit in Canada, and Kalaallit in Greenland.

Interestingly, and unsurprisingly, each of these groups' names mean, in translation from their respective languages, "the People," or "the Real People." And, as noted above, broadly speaking these groups can all claim common ancestry from those Paleo-Eskimo villagers who inhabited the Bering Straits in earliest times, who flourished on St. Lawrence Island in the center of it, and who around 250 BCE began creating some of the finest artifacts of artistic accomplishment anywhere in the world. That they did so under arctic conditions makes their achievement all the more compelling.



The Plates

Inupiat
Human Face Mask
Wood & Human Teeth
8" Height
c.1830 - 1880

Inupiat
Human Face Mask
Wood & Human Teeth
8½" Height
c.1830–1880

Yup'ik
Anthropomorphic Face
Wood & Pigment
8 ½" Height
c.1870-1880

Inuit
Anthropomorphic Face Mask
Wood
8 ½" Height
c.1880-1900

Inuit
Maskette
Wood
4" Diameter
c.1880-1900

Inuit *or* Inupiat
Anthropomorphic Face Mask
Wood & Pigment
12" Height
c.1870-1880

Inuit
Fragmentary Anthropomorphic Face Mask
Wood
8¼" Height
c.1600's

Inupiat
Tobacco Container in the form of a Wolf
Wood, Pigment, Ivory Inlays & Animal Teeth
4" Length
c.1850-1895

Inuit
Harpoon Flint Container
Wood, Brass, Cord & Trade Bead
8½" Length
c.1900

Old Bering Sea
Puppet Head
Wood, Ivory, Bone & Pigment
5⅝" Height
c.1600's

Yup'ik
Doll
Wood & Fabric
18" Height
c.1870-1910

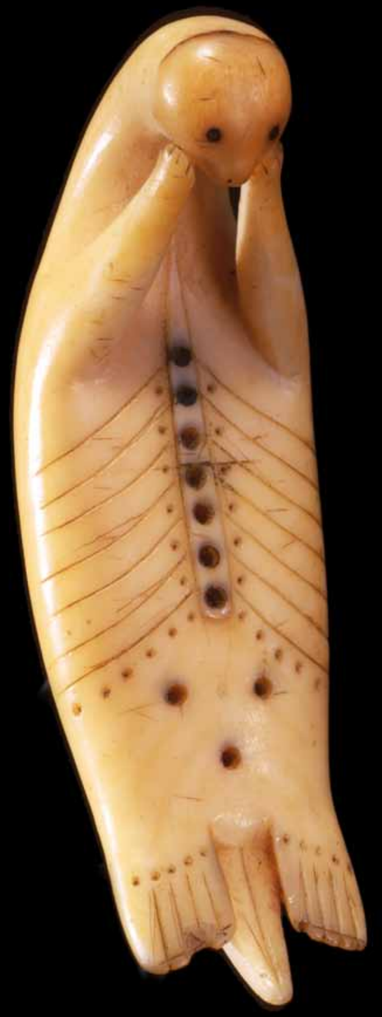
Old Bering Sea
Fish Talisman
Ivory
1¼" Length
c.500-800

Punuk *or* Thule
Anthropomorphic Doll's Head
Ivory
2½" Height
c.*1000-1400*

Punuk *or* Thule
Anthropomorphic Doll's Head
Ivory
2" Height
c.*1000–1400*

Inupiat
Doll
Wood, Ivory & Block-Printed Cloth
10" Height
18th Century

Inuit
Otter Amulet
Engraved & Pigmented Ivory
3½" Length
c.1870-1880



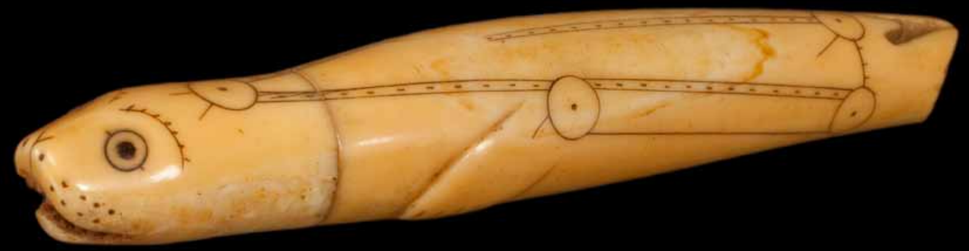
Old Bering Sea
Bag Fastener
Ivory
3¾" Length
c.500-800

Inuit *or* Thule
Arrow Straightener in the form of a Caribou
Ivory
6" Length
c.1700–1860

Old Bering Sea
Bear Amulet
Walrus Ivory
3" Length
c.200

Inuit
Harpoon Handle
Engraved & Pigmented Ivory, Inset Brass & Glass Bead Eyes
10" Length
c.1830–1880

Inuit
Needle Case in the form of a Seal
Engraved & Pigmented Ivory
6" Length
c.1860-1880



Thule
Handle depicting two Caribou
Ivory
4" Length
c.1600-1800

Old Bering Sea
Caribou Amulet
Walrus Ivory
3" Length
c.200

Old Bering Sea
Socket Handle
Ivory
2½" Long
c.600–800

Western Thule
Netting Spacer
Bone
8" Length
c.1600-1750

Old Bering Sea
Harpoon Point
Walrus Ivory
3" Length
c.500

Nunivak Island
Fishing Lure
Ivory, Baleen, Iron & Fabric
10½" Length
c.*1860-1880*

Western Thule
Fishing Hook
Ivory & Iron
2" Length
c.1700-1800

Inupiat
Net Float with Anthropomorphic Face
Hardwood & Trade Bead
5½" Diameter
c.1850-1880

Inupiat
Net Float in the form of a Seal's Head
Wood & Ivory
4" Length
c.1880-1900

Inupiat
Net Float in the form of a Seal
Wood & Ivory
5" Height
c.1880–1900

Inupiat
Net Float in the form of a Seal
Wood & Ivory
4" Length
c.1880–1900

Inupiat
Net Float in the form of a Seal's Head
Wood & Ivory
5" Length
c.1880-1900

Inupiat
Net Float in the form of a Sea Bird
Wood
5" Length
c.1880-1900

Inupiat
Float Plug in the form of a Short Eared Owl
Wood
4" Length
c.1850-1880

Inupiat
Float Plug in the form of a Puffin
Wood
5" Length
c.1850-1880

Description *of* Plates

Inupiat

Human Face Masks

Wood & Human Teeth, *8 ½" & 8"* Height, *c.1830-1880*

While the Inupiat and Yup'ik villagers are culturally and ethnically related, separated only by language differences and, often, hundreds of miles of territory, they have developed distinct versions of similar traditional mask forms.

In the case of the Inuipat, masks are typically less elaborate than those made by their Yup'ik neighbors to the south-east, and usually smaller, covering only the face. This may be a result of more limited supplies of wood, given that Inupiat villages are found mostly north of the Arctic Circle, well above the tree line. These masks also display infrequent use of coloring, coming from places where earth pigments are rare or inaccessible.

As shown in these examples, however, they are often inlaid with teeth (either taken from animals or from carved bone or ivory fragments), as well as evidence of fur or hair attachments.

Remarkable, but unsurprising, is the proximity of form to more ancient Old Bering Sea sculptural traditions, as the Inupiat share both the same land and, probably, an intact lineage from their ancestral forebears. One can easily note stylistic similarities between Punuk and OBS-style doll heads carved from walrus ivory and these distinctive wooden versions. Wooden artifacts dating thousands of years old have indeed been discovered in archaeolgocal sites on the Siberian side of the Bering Strait, corresponding to Inupiat village sites on the eastern coast. This suggests that, while there is little physical evidence of it, the tradition of mask-making may date back well into ancient times, in a relatively unbroken traditional form.

That both modern Inupiat masks and ancient Old Bering Sea dolls share traits suggesting shamanistic practice is clear, and intriguing. Could there, then, be a connection between the performative use of modern Inupiat masks and the significance of earlier, more mysterious, ivory carvings of dolls? In a culture in which the personal is also communal, this is very likely.

Yup'ik

Anthropomorphic Face

Wood & Pigment, *8 ½"* Height, *c.1870-1880*

Much can be said about the famous ceremonial masks of the Yup'ik, particularly the elaborate composite pieces which were collected in Bethel, Alaska by A. H. Twitchell in the early 20th century, and later discovered by the Surrealist artists in New York in the 1940's. This intimate mask bears little resemblance to those flamboyant examples, with their magical choreography of various animals, birds, humans and spirits, all inhabiting the same mask, as if acting out whole narratives of stories in four dimensions (which indeed, they do). Instead, this simple mask seems more inclined to speak with its Inupiat cousins, albeit under the guise of classically formal stylizations known from the Yup'ik carver's vocabulary.

Its perfect forehead, arched eyebrows and seamlessly convex cheeks and chin seem abstractions borrowed from Brancusi (more correctly, it would have been the other way around, of course). The cavities of the mask's eyes, comma-shaped nostrils, and mouth are textbook cutouts known to every Yup'ik artist. Yet, here we see a mask that is personal, like a portrait, and of a date somewhat older than those enormous Kuskokwim pieces that so enchanted Europeans. In this, it shares the specific nature of the Inupiat masks, which too could be taken from individual faces, naturalistic and human. It is a beautiful example of how human and spirit can be seen as inseparable in the arctic universe.

While Inupiat masks are presumed to have had a performative function in shamanic practice, and likely a very specific one, Yup'ik masks have been well documented as belonging to a complex troupe of characters, utilized in wide varieties of storytelling dances. Often masks were composed for the sole purpose of a single story, acting out a narrative invented for one occasion, then discarded afterwards, like theater costumes. While they must have followed deep traditions, within them there was infinite freedom and invention. In seeing Yup'ik masks from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, we witness a historic cusp, where a native village expresses itself through an ancient practice, but one which was about to be obliterated. The masks collected by Twitchell and others were made for perhaps some of the last native dance festivals in their original contexts.

Inuit

Anthropomorphic Face Mask

Wood, *8 ½"* Height, *c.1880-1900*

This full-face mask shows no evidence of decoration or pigment, but it is likely to have been fully painted and ornamented when first designed.

Drill-holes trace across the eyebrows and upper lip, where human hair might have been inserted, a technique common to masks and dolls alike. Its eyeholes and mouth opening indicate they were functionally utilized, and the carved expression is naturalistic and undramatic.

While its use is unknown, it is possible that this mask would have been a shaman's communication mask, rather than a dance mask, which are more specific in their design and purpose. Shaman's masks often were used to perform incantations during healing practices, thus the mouth opening is large and in the correct position.

This mask was probably modeled on the face of the particular user, perhaps even carved by the shaman himself.

Inuit

Maskette

Wood, *4"* Diameter, *c.1880-1900*

This small form at first appears, in size and design, to be a seal net float plug, yet it is hollowed completely like a tiny mask, with "eye holes" and tying punctures in the typical locations. It is smaller, however, than might have been used by a small child, with an indistinct form, vaguely zoomorphic. Could the "eyes" in fact have been guide holes for rope lines, allowing it to be lashed to another piece, now lost, or forming a lid onto some unknown receptacle or net hole?

It is also possible that this piece is fragmentary, having one or more component parts whose absence prevents a clear understanding of the utility of the group. This piece might also simply be ornamental, although such an interpretation is unsupported by comparison to typical pieces. Delightfully frustrated by attempts to understand how such works may have functioned, we often find ourselves guessing, only to realize that is most likely that all of these interpretations are equally wrong and correct, in that most objects of utility are decoratively carved, and vice versa.

Little in the arctic universe can be said to have only one meaning, or to embody a single purpose or form.

Inuit *or* Inupiat

Anthropomorphic Face Mask

Wood & Pigment, *12"* Height, *c.1870-1880*

This adult-sized mask belies several hallmarks of imitative naturalism, including the delicately painted pigment lines emanating from mouth to chin. These lines closely resemble the patterns of typical facial tattoos worn by Inu elders, particularly women, from ancient times all the way up to the 20th century.

Evidence of such facial tattooing among Paleo-Eskimo and their modern Inu relatives has been consistently found in burial sites throughout the arctic world, from Siberia to Greenland, and the practice has been assumed common throughout ancient Europe from archaeological evidence in several Paleolithic and Neolithic sites. With the practice of facial tattooing resurgent in contemporary life, presumably divorced from the context of ancient ritual and meaning, one can suppose that body decoration and patterning must have irrepressibly deep roots in the human psyche. Nonetheless, in village life, and in the form of a mask, facial tattoos become specific and hierarchical.

Given that mask-wearing in the Arctic villages was typically performative, as it is in most of the world, we can imagine that this mask may have represented a specific female village elder, probably an important ancestor remembered through generations. This mask might have been worn during events in which the spirit of that ancestor was being called upon for guidance. It is notable that the tattoo pattern depicted has been reduced to simple lines emerging from the mouth, and that this mouth is pursed as if in mid-speech. Perhaps, then, the tattoo lines represent both the ancestor and the words of wisdom being spoken. Once more, decoration and purpose may be merged many times, through simple gestures and forms, resonant with transformation.

While it is impossible to know, it is imaginable that this mask could have been worn during a traditional Inuit naming ceremony, performed during childbirth, where the names of ancestors are repeatedly spoken aloud by a female elder acting as midwife, until one name coincides with the emergence of the child.

Inuit

Fragmentary Anthropomorphic Face Mask

Wood, *8 ½"* Height, *c.1600*

This curious mask fragment is enigmatic within a collection of objects centered around functional pursuits such as hunting and fishing. Without the lower jaw and mouth, we are left with a pair of empty, searching eyes, a curious round hole at the top of the forehead, a prominent nose and subtly expressive eyebrows. The incisions and scratches of abuse have littered this face into a beaten patina of evidence; it seems to have emerged from a centuries-old feud, or excavated from permafrost (a more likely explanation).

The mask is modeled with the naturalism suggestive of western classical sculpture, and if this had been carved from marble rather than wood, it might find itself prominently displayed in the Roman galleries of the Louvre, Metropolitan or British Museums. But this was never designed as a precious object, hung on a bronze mount. Most likely, the hole in the center of its forehead suggests it had been nailed to a tree. Southern traders and gold miners discovered this practice upon encountering native Alaskans in the Kuskokwim Valley, noting that at the completion of long potlatches and dance ceremonies, the shaman's masks were often to be found hung from trees, left out to the elements. They had been used for their purpose and afterwards, drained of their spiritual power, discarded and inert.

Could this be why this particular mask has received the abuse it exhibits? Perhaps the loss of its mouth tells us enough.

Inupiat

Tobacco Container in the form of a Wolf

Wood, Pigment, Ivory Inlays & Animal Teeth, *4"* Length, *c.1850-1895*

This fine example of a native Alaskan tobacco box was originally collected by Harry A. Parshall, a gold miner from Pennsylvania, who lived in St. Michael, Alaska during 1895-98. Parshall collected this and other pieces directly from the village population during his time there, returning with it to Pennsylvania at the beginning of the 20th century. St. Michael is located on the north-facing coastline of Norton Sound, opposite Seward Peninsula, tucked along a protected area very near the neighboring village of Stebbins. This beautiful inlet cove forms the southernmost point of a sweeping curve of coastline formed by Norton Sound, and all the villages along this coast were well-positioned for centuries of accessible trading throughout the Bering Straits, as well as with eastward inland villages. St. Michael is largely Inupiat, but falls on a close border to Yup'ik territory, and its coastal position allowed for frequent interaction with Siberian Yupik, and later Russian, traders. It is thought that the tradition of smoking or chewing tobacco was imported into Inupiat villages through the trading and influence of Siberian-based people.

This particular tobacco box shows the artistic influence of southern Yup'ik sources, with its stylized animal form,which is probably representative of a wolf, but might also be interpreted as Bear or Caribou. Given the mixed composition of the village of St. Michael itself, its original carver might have been either Inupiat or Yup'ik, or perhaps might have been traded from another village, of Yup'ik population. In any case, the carver and original user of this container would probably have been a prominent village male, since smoking was predominantly a male activity and the rare and precious nature of imported tobacco lent to its storage in prized carved containers. For a foreigner like Parshall to have been given such a box shows that he paid handsomely for it, and was also respected by the local community, since the owner would not have easily relinquished such a status symbol. It is imaginable too that after living in the village for three years, he must have established friendships among the men, and it is tempting to view this container as a parting gift. The contacts between natives and foreigners in the 19th century provided rich narratives in human diplomacy, very rarely with happy endings. Perhaps this explains why there are so few examples of tobacco boxes to be found in foreign collections, like this one, rife as they are with connotations of peace offerings and camaraderie.

Inuit

Harpoon Flint Container

Wood, Brass, Cord & Trade Bead, *8 ½"* Length, *c.1900*

A masterpiece of form and function, this wood and copper box represents an almost watertight, airtight construction that both holds the materials used to catch a fish while simultaneously praising and evoking the fish itself.

The face of the fish is expertly worked in thin copper sheets that serve to create an almost abstract, but instantly recognizable likeness. The two eyes on the top of the head are anatomically correct for a Halibut and speak volumes to the observational powers of the artist who created the piece.

Exhibited: **Jackson Pollock et le Chamanisme**
Pinacothèque de Paris, 2008

Old Bering Sea

Puppet Head

Wood, Ivory, Bone & Pigment, *5 ⅝"* Height, *c.1600's*

Carved of wood with inset ivory and bone features, this puppet head is one of the best examples of its type and is an unforgettable folk sculpture.

This head exhibits a deeply incised channel carved around its vertical circumference, where the clothing would have been fitted to keep it held in place. This carving is incorporated into the overall design of the face, neatly outlining the face, carved naturalistically and adorned with ivory inserts of eyes and a delicately-toothed mouth.

As often seen in native dolls, the mouth is depicted as open, which commonly represents the necessary symbolic feeding offered to protective spirits. One might also see this in reverse, where the mouth is open as if speaking to the audience.

Yup'ik

Doll

Wood & Fabric, *18"* Height, *c.1870-1910*

Clues suggesting the usage, form and meaning of ancient artifacts are often found in the modern examples of similar objects, such as this turn-of-the-century doll. Modern dolls with cloth bodies allow easy costume changes. Might this doll have been given different suits, and therefore, personalities?

While the comparison might seem far-fetched, in practice it may have been the case. Yup'ik dolls reflect their cultural traditions and emulate aspects of human endeavors within that culture. This doll may have simply been a child's toy, but one can't help but seek suggestions of cultural values reflected in other forms of Yup'ik art.

One such clue is the stylized face, with its frowning aspect, ubiquitous in Arctic faces and according to custom, representative of women, as men are traditionally portrayed smiling. Further identification of gender can be determined by the position of the labrets, women's being in the center of their lower lip and men under the corners of the mouth.

Dolls were also an important part of a young girl's childhood as children were often given toys or miniature "tools" that they would be begin using to help develop skills they would use in their adult life whether it be for child rearing, sewing, or hunting. While listening to stories and playing games, children would spend hours role playing with toys similar to their parents' tools.

It is safe to presume that this doll is Yup'ik from or near the Kuskokwim River Valley area, in light of its hardwood head, a material readily available here as opposed to further north where driftwood would be scarce and precious.

This doll also seems to show the influence of missionaries, and is likely to have been made in those areas of Alaska where such an intervention occurred earliest, and where traditions ran askew most quickly. That this doll appears so similar in form to a western child's doll is probably not coincidental. Missionaries well understood that miniature human representations were powerful symbols, and influencing a native culture required reducing its central protectors to the realm of child's play.

Old Bering Sea

Fish Talisman

Ivory, *1¼"* Length, *c.500-800 AD*

Hybrid animal-human forms are commonly seen throughout paleo-Eskimo art, and this miniature pendant is a prime example.

With greatest economy of means, the carver has modeled a human head emerging from a fish's body, equally weighted so that it is ambiguous whether one manifestation or the other is prominent.

Note how the markings around the face suggest a hooded parka, a feature seen on human doll figures. One form borrows from the other, just as the life cycle itself does: fish becomes man as man eats fish. A visitor to a native village once remarked, upon having his first taste of seal meat: "It tastes like a cross between venison and fish."

His native host replied: "You are what you eat."

Punuk *or* Thule

Anthropomorphic Doll's Heads

Ivory, *2-2 ½"* Height, *c.1000-1400 AD*

Among the most beautiful, iconic and mysterious works of art from the Arctic, are small dolls carved from walrus ivory, especially the very earliest ones from the Okvik period (c. 250 BCE - 250 AD). Okvik dolls are simultaneously graceful and formidable, with stylized heads and bodies reduced to their most essential elements, typically without arms, never with feet, their torsos commonly a simple trunk. Yet, as works of art, they are reminiscent of the monumental Easter Island figures, stoic and stern, belying their intimate scale. They are also engraved with matrices of patterns, suggestive of tattoo marks, ancestral trees, skeletal tracings, and various other decorations symbolic of shamanic meaning. It is from Okvik dolls that we come to understand the very first expressions of a well-established society, whose stability and resources allowed for the development of organized religious practices, with a human as a central deity.

A good deal of speculation has been made about the function of these dolls. It is possible that they were utilized by shamans for a funerary purpose, and there is some evidence that the heads might have been ritualistically broken off when buried with someone. Many of the dolls have opened mouths, suggestive of singing or blowing, a gesture indicative of shamanic performance. However, the most likely explanation comes from a ritual practice that was carried on into modern times among Arctic people throughout the region, that these dolls were domestic protectors and guardian spirits, similar in purpose to the Bes figures from ancient Egypt. Contemporary accounts by Inu elders claim that house dolls were ritualistically "fed" to keep them happy, especially after a successful hunt, and this too may account for the opened mouth so commonly seen. Too, quite a few of these dolls are female, with explicitly sexual features, suggestive of fertility figures. Their apotropaeic nature as domestic amulets, then, probably was holistic, and this may also explain their abundance as well as diminutive scale.

Whatever their function, they remain elusively compelling and expressive.

Inupiat

Doll

Wood, Ivory & Block-Printed Cloth, *10"* Height, *c.18th Century*

This curious, and wonderfully preserved, Inu doll sits at a number of cultural crossroads. It is evidence of shifting values and influences, in that the application of printed fabric can only be supposed to have been obtained through trade, and the doll itself appears distinctively Russian in character. It is possible that the doll itself comes from the Chuckchi peninsula, and was traded to a native Alaskan, or that the fabric was traded, but in either case, the doll has a strange aspect. Whether it was used as a toy or for some other ceremonial purpose cannot be known, but the fact that she represents a respected grandmother, perhaps a portrait of a specific individual, is hinted at. She sports specific facial tattoos, a sign of elderly status and wisdom, and the patterning of her outfit, with its wide red band across the skirt, is likely an identifier, and to this day the sewn patterning of parka, boots and other clothing is usually specific to a native village. These patterns often identify not only the place of birth, location of residence, but also clan and community status.

With its stick hand-hold beneath the skirt, this doll shows evidence of being used as a puppet, and thereby must have had a performative function. Grandmothers in native villages had many important roles, and among the most primary was the midwifing and naming ceremony undertaken by elders during childbirth. Names of ancestors were repeatedly spoken aloud during the course of a woman's labor, and the name spoken by the grandmother as the new baby emerged was given to the child, a sign that the ancestor being named was in fact emerging along with the child, completing its spiritual transmutation, coming back to fulfuill its journey and reembark upon its duty to protect the family. One can imagine that a particularly powerful grandmother might be needed for future generations, after her own death, and have been represented as a doll, and through another form of ventriloquism, be called upon to partake in the naming ceremony.

Perhaps, then, this traditional doll may have had more than simply a toy's purpose, but also played a key role in the health, continuity and survival of a family. Perhaps, like so many other attributes of cultural artifacts, she is an embodiment of spiritual regeneration, a blend of people, places and hope.

Inuit

Otter Amulet

Engraved & Pigmented Ivory, *3 ½"* Length, *c.1870-1880*

There are rare occasions when a carved object has no other function but to represent a hunted animal, as a sculpture. This is one such example, of a charm figure, which would have been placed in a Kayak when seeking otters. It should be noted, however, that even though this charm does not appear to double as a practical tool, its significance is powerful.

This is a communicating figure, shown swimming on its back, with front paws delicately touching its face, as if eating or calling out. Arctic native hunters have described using amulets like this precisely to assist them in guiding animals to them, which this otter seems to be doing.

Notable here are the finely engraved rib markings, and the repeating dots and drill holes along the spine, tail, and joints of the rear flippers. Like the circular joint markings depicted in many other animal representations, these express the mortal and spiritual transformation of the animal. Skeletal markings often metaphorically express life cycles, in that we, as animals, are composed of bones, which hold us together while alive as well as remain as evidence of us once we die.

The circular marks and dots represent passages through transformational states, and in the shamanic universe of native Alaskans, animals, people, fish and birds may be seen traveling through concentric circles much like the stacked planes that the Buddhist universe is conceived to be. As one passes through one circle, he becomes another creature, in order to navigate the particularities of the next sphere.

The fact that there are seven drilled dots along the spinal decoration of this otter, and three triangulating dots encumbering his belly, is additionally significant, perhaps in the expression of the hunter, that his success depends upon the continual support of his charm, repeatedly, throughout his life.

Old Bering Sea

Bag Fastener

Ivory, *3¾"* Length, *c.500-800*

These bag fasteners were used as a closure on women's bags, which were known to the peoples of the Bering Sea as "housewives."

Women's housewives were finely decorated bags made of seal throat or caribou skins, and designed to carry tools for their daily "chores." Needles, awls, creasers, and scrapers were widely used and these sewing implements were placed in a pouch - attached to the base of the housewife - which was then rolled up and wrapped with a cord around the bag and fastened with an ivory crosspiece or "fastener." These simple, but elegant ivory carvings were often made by men and given to wives or girlfriends as gifts, objects of both beauty and utility.

This delicate piece also exhibits the use of the "lifeline" running from the head to the tail of the fish. This stylized representation of the skeletal backbone is common on ivory bag fasteners. The "lifeline" represents the central spiritual and biological channel of the animal and is a motif frequently displayed in pre-contact objects.

Inuit *or* Thule

Arrow Straightener in the form of a Caribou

Ivory, *6"* Length, *c.1700-1860*

Once again, a fine example of a utilitarian object whose form and decoration belies not only its function but also its meaning.

This ivory caribou is formed to perfectly fit into the hand, where it might be held for the purpose of pulling wooden arrow shafts and fletches through the squared hole in the animal's side, in order to train the shafts into a perfectly straight stalk.

This action is akin to sharpening a steel blade with a stone, training the molecular particles in the blade into alignment with each stroke. In taking the repetitive and meditative turns at pushing and pulling the arrow shafts through the straightening tool, the hunter focuses attention upon his subsequent duties, perhaps even using the caribou model to commune with the real animal in a sort of telepathic prayer.

This tool is simultaneously amulet, doll and training device. Its squared hole is located through the center of the animal's belly, where the hunter will eventually aim. The hole is also suggestive of the joint markings seen on many other animal representations, which themselves represent the spiritual significance of the animal, and is considered a conduit through which life spirits pass.

In this case, the hunter literally pushes his arrow through the caribou's joint, and metaphorically communes with and practices killing the creature, upon which his village's lives depend.

Old Bering Sea

Bear Amulet

Walrus Ivory, *3"* Length, *c.200*

As with other representations of animals throughout all stages of ancient and historic Arctic cultures, this small stylized bear probably had numerous functions, with its primary purpose to express respect for the hunted animal, to ensure its proximity and willingness to be hunted.

Dating such artifacts can sometimes be a matter of analyzing its form and engraved patterning, such as in this Okvik example. But it can also be a simple matter of noting which animals the carver chose to represent. For example, we associate the advent of whale hunting to be concurrent with the later Punuk and early Thule periods, and it is rare to see representations of whales before then.

Similarly, the innovation of hunting with bow and arrow coincide with the representation of caribou in Old Bering Sea art. Bears, though, figure prominently in the very earliest stages of Old Bering Sea culture, having been hunted since early times, and being seen as a close neighbor and partner in the lives of arctic ancestors.

An amulet of a bear would, however, have had a dual purpose. A bear was both predator and prey, a potentially dangerous animal that demanded respect, but from which one needed protection. Given that house guardian dolls were regularly kept during Okvik times as a comprehensive protectorate of a family, it is possible that an amulet of a bear might also been kept at home to provide equilibrium with a family's wild neighbors.

One may not have always wished to summon the presence of an animal in order to live successfully. In other words, amulets may have offered a two-way means of communicating with the spirits of those animals; sometimes teasing them out to give of themselves, other times asking them to wait until another time.

Inuit
Harpoon Handle
Ivory, *10"* Length, *c.1830-1880*

This unusually long ivory tool is delicately and precisely engraved, with fine lines tracing along the animal's face and stylized body. The design of the engraving exhibits motifs repeatedly seen throughout Arctic culture: there are skeletal lines and concentric-circular joint marks, rendered in the simple and abstract circle patterns symbolic of spiritual transformation.

The lines tracing the body denote the continuity of the skeleton, that part of an animal which transcends life itself, and the concentric circles represent the spiritual planes of existence conceived in the shamanic universe. The carver has allowed for the simple drawing of four flippers to indicate the animal's skeletal identity, with nothing more than two parallel lines connecting them to each other, and to the head. Everything else about the seal has been reduced to abstraction, but the animal's head, with delicate whiskers, eyebrows and triangular ears, and distinctively smiling mouth, all provide character and presence to it.

The seal appears aware, conscious, alive. It has been carefully inlaid with blue trade beads for its eyes, which exaggerates the effect. There is also, at the very center of the seal's mouth, another inlay, which is larger and probably held in place a pointed spike of iron, now missing. Judging from this inlay, by the large size of the seal, and that the opposite, "tail" end of the animal is carved with a large notched groove, it is likely that this piece was attached to another socket or handle, in a similar manner as a hunting harpoon.

However, the piece does not conform to the typical design of harpoons, or any other fishing implement, and if it was ever used as such it did not see very much action, since it has remained unmarred by the sort of wear such tools typically exhibit. Rather, it may be the case that this pristine seal may have been used as a sort of auditory device, to scrape the ice near a breathing hole, its metal mouthpiece used to chip away at the perimeter ice, and to attract the submerged seals to the surface. As with other hunting tools, the representation of the animal is indicative of the prey, and too, the spiritual transformation represented on the carving is consistent with the life-death cycle that will manifest itself in the eventuality of a successful hunt. We see an implement that is used to summon forth its progeny, an ancestor carved in ivory, calling to a family member to fulfill its duty.

Inuit
Needle Case in the form of a Seal
Engraved & Pigmented Ivory, *6"* Length, *c.1860-1880*

There is a wonderful story that was collected in 1899 by Nelson that tells of a Inuit headman from the North who had no wife, searched and found one, and was very happy. A tribesman from the south was so jealous of his happiness he went to kidnap the woman to make her his wife. As she was being abducted in the night, her husband awoke and pulled away from her kidnapper by her feet. The woman split in two and both men had parts of the wife, one a top and the other a bottom. Both men built replacements for the missing parts, one a set of legs and feet and the other a head and hands, which they magically imbued with life.

Alas, there were some shortcomings to the men's work that were impossible to overcome. The woman who had wooden hands couldn't do needlework very expertly, but could dance beautifully and the woman with wooden feet couldn't dance at all well, but did wonderful needlework. To this day, these characteristics are considered true, which, of course proves the truth of the tale.

This folktale is perfectly expressed in this finely modeled and cleverly designed variation on a needle case. The head pulls off, acting as a lid for the container, and is perfectly carved to fit almost seamlessly onto the body, which is hollowed out to fit the needles in its cavity (a number of its original ivory needles are still inside). The smiling seal head shows off exactingly carved teeth, and the animal is shown in the typical swimming / flying position seen in many other representative examples.

When combined with the addition of engraved decorations and circle symbols, it is safe to presume this needle case would have carried with it the similar spiritual charms and meanings of other amulets, in addition to its keeping needles safe. As with many other tools, this seal neatly expresses the practical and shamanistic principles in a logical and compact form.

Ivory needles like the ones inside had many practical functions, but up to the present day native women, both north and south, use them for sewing together many sorts of garments and containers, as well as skin coverings on Umiaks and Kayaks, all of which are constructed from seal skins.

Thule
Handle Depicting Two Caribou
Ivory, *4"* Length, *c.1600-1800*

This delicately carved and modeled handle may have functioned to clasp a lidded basket or pouch, with its perforations through the ends and the wide space outlined by the necks and heads of the outstretching animals. Holding this object, which fits comfortably in the hand, one perceives that a flat leather strap might have been tucked through the center of the handle, held in place by the caribous' chins. Likely, the leather came from the hides of caribou themselves.

Each caribou is seen with its legs alternately flexed or bent, suggesting that we are looking at the same animal, in a running motion. If this is the case (and there are many other examples where two states of the same creature are represented separately like this, within the same carving), perhaps then we are looking at a handle utilized on a container for hunting implements, specifically one holding tools used for hunting caribou.

Often, toolboxes and bags used for fishing tools are decorated with images of fish, just as bird blunts and other bird-catching implements express images of various fowl. These animal forms, when seen on utilitarian objects, act like labels, just as we might caption our modern containers with words to indicate what is inside.

In this fine example, though, we may also read a complete life cycle. We may additionally be seeing two caribou, a male and female, and their slightly varied positions may be seen sexually: one crouching, the other prepared to mount. This too would resonate for the hunter, in understanding that in order for his life-sustaining hunt to succeed, the animals must also reproduce, and that the killing upon which his own survival depends includes within it the beginnings of another, earlier cycle.

Old Bering Sea, Okvik period
Caribou Amulet
Walrus Ivory, *3"* Length, *c.200*

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Old Bering Sea
Socket Handle
Ivory, *2 ½"* Length, *c.600–800*

Among the essential components of the sea-hunting harpoon is the heavy socket piece, located two sections away from the point and lending it force. The hunter places his hand upon it, or just behind it, for balance and thrust. As such, it is the first manual point of contact between hunter and living animal, literally and symbolically connecting them like a bridge between life and death.

Given the animism of Old Bering Sea beliefs, it is conceivable to draw parallels between the imagery carved on these forms and the transformational concepts central to shamanic practices. Often, harpoon socket pieces represent fantastical animals, the so-called "mythical beasts" described by eariler authors such as Rainey and Larsen, and the carver packs as many of them onto the piece as possible. Animals are depicted interlocked, one swallowing another, semi-obscured by rolling around the perimeter of the ivory, as if diving and resurfacing from the water. Carvings on a socket handle might be a tour-de-force of formal abstraction and hunting drama. No area of its surface is left without marking. The practical aspect of this, naturally, is that the overall carved handle provides an excellent grip.

This particular example is an unusual variant, in that it is a miniature version. Many examples exist of small model forms, tiny harpoon parts which may have functioned as toys for children, or as practice models for a carver. It has been speculated too that miniature harpoons, and other essential tools, were amulets for shamans, or for hunters themselves, assisting them in summoning animal spirits, to ensure successful hunting. It is likely that all of these suppositions are true. In a society which was both spiritually organized and dependent upon animal resources, all aspects of hunting would have been so regulated: the training and play of its children, the mystical aspirations of its leaders, and the skill and attitude of its hunters, all acting in unity.

Western Thule
Netting Spacer
Bone, *8"* Length, *c.1600–1750*

The hide cord nets used for trapping seals were precisely engineered for maximum effectiveness, designed with the animal's proportions carefully considered.

A net should be large enough for the seal to enter, but with spaces small enough to trap it. With each use and reuse, and a pattern of wetting, stretching, freezing, drying and contracting, the nets would have to be carefully maintained and recalibrated. This netting spacer is a simple device for establishing the correct spacing of the netting grid, allowing the hunter to quickly and easily pull his net into shape.

The two notched ends of the spacer would be fitted into the openings of each net section, and the subsequent cords pulled tight around them. In keeping with the traditional habit of decorating hunting tools with an image of the animal being hunted, this humble, otherwise undecorated device shows a small seal's head carved into one of the branching ends.

Old Bering Sea
Harpoon Point
Walrus Ivory, *3"* Length, *c.500*

The invention of the pivoting harpoon point by ancient hunters from the Old Bering Sea period was their single most important technical advancement. It allowed the development of organized, predictable hunting for large sea mammals, such as seal, walrus and whales, establishing the foundation for a stable and flourishing culture.

The pivot harpoon is an impressive piece of engineering, and its basic form and purpose is still in use today. It has a central hole and line guide, through which would have been strung a sturdy sinew cord, lashing the point to a series of composite elements, made of ivory and wood: socket handle, connecting pin, lance, and counterweight. With the exception of the wooden lance, all the elements would have been engraved, in a manner not unlike the example here, an expression of their perpetual re-use and high value. The leading, pointed edge of the harpoon pivot would typically be, as here, slotted, to receive a stone blade, which would be replaceable over time. In fact, some harpoon points have been found fitted with iron blades, expressing that they continued to be used over numerous generations, well across time periods of technical advancements and the advent of new materials.

Once struck into an animal's hide, the harpoon point would lodge itself under the skin, and the tension of the cord connecting the harpoon components together would force the point to pivot 90 degrees, thus locking it in place sideways. The animal's movements in attempting to free itself would drive the point more deeply into the skin, and ensure capture. The opposite end of the pivot point was also carved into a pointed, barbed pattern, sufficient to maximize its hold. It is a brilliantly unforgiving and thoroughly effective killing device. By connecting all the composite elements of the harpoon together with a cord, the hunter rarely lost any of the pieces, furthering the idea that each part was tantamount to longevity and therefore, sacred.

One harpoon might survive for generations, supporting the life of a whole village many times over. With this in mind, it is no wonder that they were so highly decorated and prized.

Nunivak Island
Fishing Lure
Ivory, Baleen, Iron & Fabric, *10½"* Length, c.*1860–1880*

Although the metamorphosis of animal and human forms is typical a theme among native arctic artforms, and depictions of several animals in the same carving is relatively common, the compositional choices usually bear a clear relationship to the object being crafted. Seal net floats are often carved into representations of seals, bird blunts may have beak-like shapes, fishing lures look like fish, etc. But here we have an unusual case of a device decorated with animals that would themselves not be the object of the tool.

A fox and a walrus rest casually upon the body of this large fishing lure, heads facing each other as if meeting socially for discussion, seated upon a parlor sofa or Tête-a Tête. Rather than a utilitarian fishing lure, this carefully composed and modeled ivory appears as sculpture, with animals at rest rather than in natural movement, as if posing for the artist in a formal portrait. The carving is exquisite and fine, with baleen inlays for eyes an colored recesses to indicate paws and fur.

At the same time, though, the lure clearly could function, with its strongly-mounted iron barb, remnant of hide cord line and lashings, and the distinctive red fabric tie attached at the joint of the iron hook and ivory lure, a tell-tale indication of clever visual technique for attracting the attention of fish (one often sees red fabric attendants to workaday fishing lures, as the hunter attempts to convince his prey that the bait is already wounded and bloody).

One can surmise, then, that these particular animals, the fox and the walrus, are like cousins to the fisherman, all three of them being fish-eating hunters. Perhaps this carver wished to summon the skills and experience of these two natural fish catchers, summoning their guidance and expertise. Given the animistic beliefs and tendencies of the ancestors of native arctic hunters, one might see this lure in the same light as other fishing and hunting charms, and in a rare but conceptually consistent example, see in the fox and walrus one more generation of continuity and the promise of survival.

Western Thule

Fishing Hook

Ivory & Iron, *2"* Length, *c.1700-1800*

Since time immemorial, Inuit peoples have consumed a diet of foods that are fished, hunted, and gathered locally.

This diet may include walrus, Ringed Seal, Bearded Seal, beluga whale, caribou, polar bear, muskoxen, birds (including their eggs) and fish.

While it is not possible to cultivate native plants for food in the Arctic, the Inuit have traditionally gathered those that are naturally available. Grasses, tubers, roots, stems, berries, fireweed and seaweed (kuanniq or edible seaweed) were collected and preserved depending on the season and the location.

According to Edmund Searles in his article *"Food and the Making of Modern Inuit Identities,"* they consume this type of diet because it is believed that a mostly meat diet is "effective in keeping the body warm, making the body strong, keeping the body fit and even making that body healthy."

Fish are a major component of the diet and Inuit consume both salt water and freshwater fish including sculpin, Arctic cod, Arctic char and lake trout. They capture these types of fish by jigging. The hunter cuts a square hole in the ice on the lake and fishes using a fish lure and spear. Instead of using a hook on a line, Inuit use a fake fish attached to the line. They lower it into the water and move it around as if it is real.

When the live fish approach it, they spear the fish before it has a chance to eat the fake fish.

This very old piece is a wonderful, whimsical example of a fishing implement designed to tease and delight its prey, as well as to ensnare it. The delicately carved ivory body of the hook is formed to imitate a tadpole, but is armed with four deadly iron barbs, which would have been invisible to a fish underwater.

Inupiat

Net Float with Anthropomorphic Face

Hardwood, Trade Bead & Ivory, *5½"* Diameter, *c.1850-1880*

Float plugs are used in seal hunting, similarly functioning as do net floats. They differ, however, in that they only come into play once the animal has been caught. A float plug is used to stop a hole in a balloon-like float, made from seal gut or intestine, and is usually tied to a net, or sometimes to the line at the tail-end of a harpoon.

Once the animal is ensnared, or struck, the large float is dragged along with it, to deter its force in attempted escape, and to indicate its location once it has stopped moving.

Given the purpose of the float plug, it is interesting that they are most commonly adorned with human figures, rather than in animal form. Perhaps this reflects the notion that trapping an animal is an exclusively human pursuit, and thus no animal could rightly be substituted.

In the example shown here, the effigy is smiling. The smile might be understood as belonging to a hybrid animal, a human in transformation to a seal-like manifestation.

Could this human be pleased with his transition, as it represents a harmonic embodiment of animal-human duality?

Inupiat

Net Floats

Wood & Ivory, *4½"-6¾"* Diameter, *c.1850-1880*

Throughout coastal Alaska, nets made from hide sinews were used to trap seal and other sea animals, especially during months when sea ice prevented hunting with other methods (harpoons, typically). These are five fine examples of the wooden floats used to keep hide-sinew nets buoyant and were utilized in seal trapping.

Nets would usually be attached these floats and weighted with ivory weights to help the net maintain a useful shape for capturing the seal. These five examples represent the range of refinement and sensitivity to the specific conditions under which they were used.

During the long winter darkness, the nets were practically invisible, positioned just below the sea ice adjacent to small holes seals used for breathing. The hunters made scratching noises near the ice hole with scrapers to attract the seal, guiding them towards the holes and the nets. The wooden floats did much the same thing automatically, using the ocean waves and wind to create sounds.

Positioned at the top of the net they were often carved hollow in order to make them more buoyant, and also to allow for the insertion of small pieces of ivory or stone. Small pieces of ivory were sometimes hung from their exterior, clacking against their hollow interiors with the action of the waves to attract seal when the hunters were absent.

The shapes of the floats were highly varied, but all tended to represent naturalistic *innua* forms, either of the game animal itself or seabirds that the prey might mistake for a natural denizen of the area.

Most importantly, the images of the seals and seabirds provide spiritual communion with the hunted animal, and all of the natural world, encouraging the seal's approach and suggesting a harmonic animal-human life cycle.

Inupiat

Float Plugs, Avian Form

Carved Wood, *4"- 5½"* Diameter, *c.1850-1880*

The seal hunt was an event of cardinal importance to the tribal groups on the Bering Sea, as the seal provided food, hides, and bone for implements and tools in a completely treeless environment.

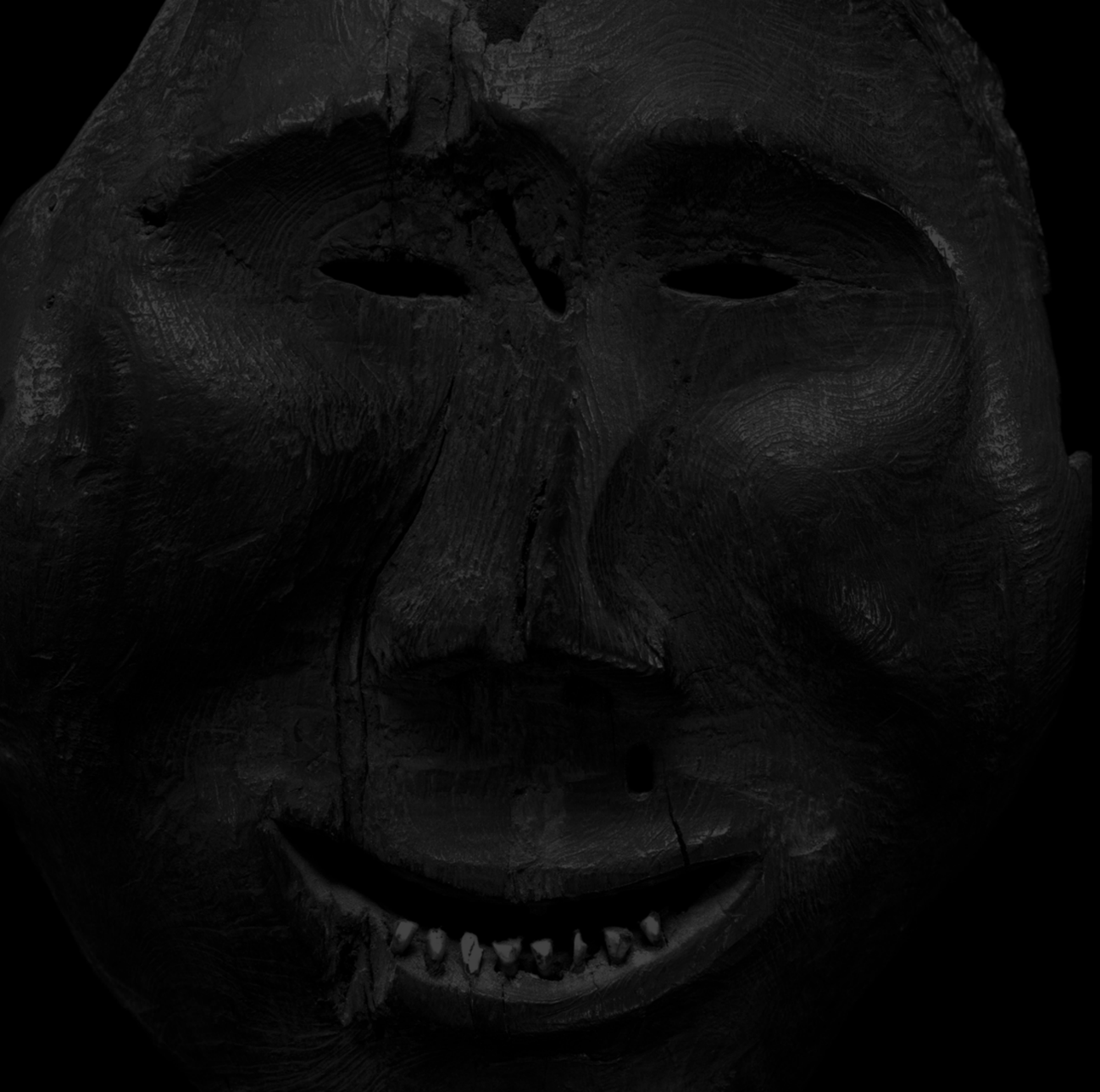
Subsequently, much ingenuity and invention went into objects that made seal hunting a successful endeavor for hunters.

These floats exemplify that sense of invention and ingenuity.

A spring hunt would only begin on such an auspicious day chosen by the shaman and the hunters who had been making preparations for the event. After a successful capture, animals were stored in nets or large seal-skin floats. Float Plugs were inserted in the holes in the seal-skin floats where walruses' or seals' limbs and heads had been removed.

Later, after the hunt, the butchered animal would be distributed according predetermined sharing protocols to the hunters.

Typically, the hunter who rendered the first strike received half of the animal's intestines - used in making waterproof garments, the hide and the upper half of the body; the second hunter received the lower half of the body; and the third received tusks or the remaining intestines and stomach. The short-eared owl was a common representation found in float plugs.

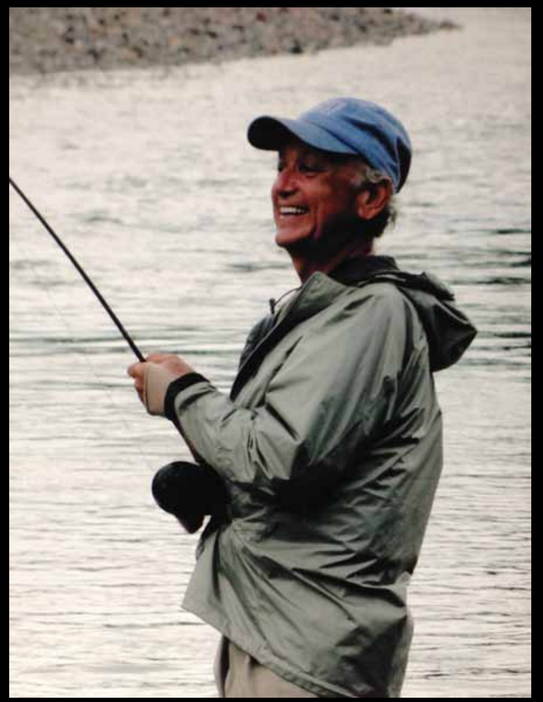


Biographical Information

Steven Michaan

Steven Michaan is a collector's collector. In his youth, he began collecting stamps, coins, swords and antique firearms.

As a university student at U.C. Berkeley, Michaan assembled a collection of M.C. Escher prints that he bought from the artist himself, and Edward S. Curtis photographs. Michaan spent the next decade collecting Arts & Crafts and specializing in Louis Comfort Tiffany stained glass windows.



The author Atlantic Salmon fishing on the Cascapedia River in Quebec.

Always an avid fisherman, Michaan began collecting the best examples of fish decoys. His collection was the basis for major museum exhibits, notably, "Beneath the Ice: The Art of the Fish Decoy" featured at the Museum of American Folk Art in New York in 1990-1991.

His interest in fishing and fish decoys and his passion for collecting expanded to include Northwest Coast and Eskimo halibut hooks and other fishing implements. From there, Michaan launched into a new field: tribal arts. Michaan specialized in collecting shaman artwork from the Northwest Coast and Arctic regions.

Michaan's Northwest Coast tribal arts collection evolved and received international recognition and praise when it became the basis for the exhibit "Jackson Pollock et le Chamanisme" held at the Pinocatheque de Paris in 2007-2008. "Jackson Pollock et le Chamanisme" was a ground-breaking show that tied Jackson Pollock's early abstract expressionistic works directly to Northwest Coast shamanic art. Over 25 pieces from Michaan's collection were represented in this exhibit.

In this collection, Michaan showcases North America's tribal arts as a unique contribution to the world of art, perception, and the spirit world.

Michaan has previously authored the book on his fish decoy collection, "American Fish Decoys," published in 2003, and co-authored "Beneath the Ice," published in 1990. He has three children and lives with his wife in Westchester County, New York.

Credits

Sean Mooney

Sean Mooney has worked as an educator, designer, curator, and artist. He is formerly Exhibition Design Manager at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, where he acted as the central liaison between guest designers, architects, curators and the technical departments of the museum. Prior to the Guggenheim, he was Assistant Chairman of the MFA program at the School of Visual Arts in New York and Assistant Gallery Manager at the M.I.T. List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Massachusetts. He has designed, managed or consulted on over 200 exhibitions internationally.

Sean has taught art history and studio courses at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and performed regularly as a vocalist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. He has lectured on exhibition design and production at New York University, City College New York and Fundación PROA, Buenos Aires, Argentina.

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John E. Thwaites Photograph Collection
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George Thornton Emmons Collection
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