

Wooden box in the shape of a whale for harpoon blades. There is an opening on the underside. Length 31 cm.



Nineteenth Century Alaskan Eskimo Art

By James W. VanStone

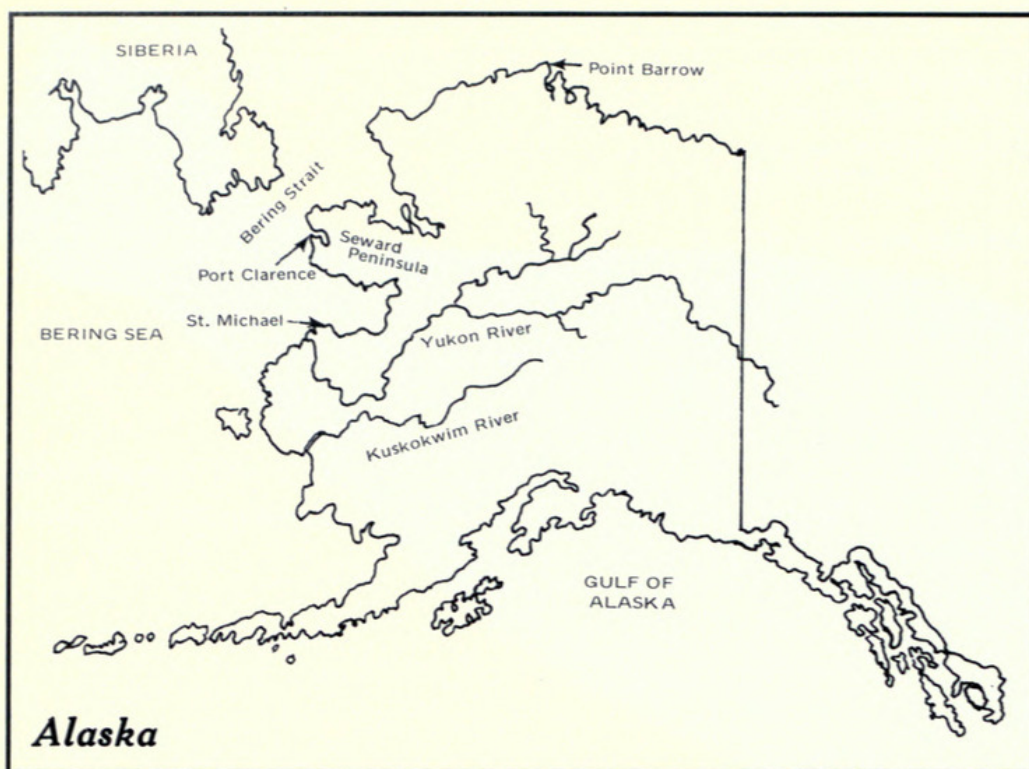
Eskimos for decades have excited curiosity and stimulated the imagination, primarily because of their adaptation to a rigorous and, to residents of southern temperate zones, inhospitable northern environment. Their traditional lands extend for 5,000 miles, from eastern Siberia across Alaska and Canada to Greenland. The total population of less than 50,000 is thinly distributed and generally concentrated along the coasts, for most Eskimos are primarily hunters of sea mammals. The resources of the land, without the bounty of the sea, could support only one-tenth of the total Eskimo population.

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Indications are that Eskimo culture may be as much as 5,000 years old, and our knowledge of prehistoric Eskimo art derives from extensive archaeological excavations carried out in recent years throughout the circumpolar regions. Although all Eskimos, according to archaeological evidence, created distinctive art throughout prehistoric times and into the period when they first came in contact with Europeans, the most active artists—those who made the finest sculptures and conceived the most intriguing forms—lived in the western Eskimo area, particularly along the coast of Alaska from the Gulf of Alaska to Point Barrow.

A high point in Eskimo art was achieved by the peoples of the Bering Sea area in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Western civilization came late to the inhabitants of this

region and they were thus able to maintain their original way of life up to the last quarter of the nineteenth century, longer than any other Eskimos in Alaska. It is to this area and time period that the exhibition "Nineteenth Century Alaskan Eskimo Art," opening December 11, is devoted — a time when some of the first extensive collections of Eskimo material culture were obtained by the world's museums. The early collectors, often among the first Euro-Americans to visit the Bering Sea Eskimos, frequently did not record the provenience of each specimen collected. Most of the examples of Bering Sea Eskimo art featured in this exhibition were acquired by Field Museum in the 1890s, during the first decade of the institution's existence. All were made by Eskimos living along the vast stretch of coast between Port Clarence and Point Barrow.



Although the nature of Eskimo art has been determined to some extent by the materials available to the artists and craftsmen, it is probably accurate to say that the Eskimo artist worked more within the limitations of his tools and the uses of his objects than within the limitations of his materials. Seldom anywhere in the world has art been so intimately related to technology as it was in the Bering Sea area among both prehistoric and historic Eskimos.

The most abundant raw materials available to the Eskimo artist in his environment were caribou antler, driftwood, walrus ivory, and baleen (whalebone). The latter is a pliable, plasticlike substance which hangs in long strips in the mouths of rorquals and right whales. Through these strips, the great animals strain the tiny sea creatures on which they feed. Ivory, in particular, has always been closely associated with Eskimo art, and the majority of objects displayed in the exhibit are fashioned from this material. It is a durable substance but difficult to work even using modern tools. Ivory becomes a lustrous, deep brown color when buried in the ground, and nineteenth century carvers frequently used old walrus tusks recovered from archaeological sites. Since Eskimo

carvers and engravers were invariably men, the content of this exhibition is a distinctly male art. Women, however, were expert weavers and skin-sewers, making, in addition to clothing, finely woven grass mats and superbly crafted skin workbags with embroidered decoration.

Metal tools were available to Alaskan Eskimos from the twelfth or thirteenth centuries through trade with Siberian peoples. There is almost certainly a relationship between the eastward spread of metal from Asia to America and the fact that the Eskimos of northwest Alaska have an art style that is technically more refined and complex than that in other Eskimo areas. Much later, beginning in the early 1700s, metal knives and other tools were systematically traded from Russian trading posts in eastern Siberia across Bering Strait to the peoples of northwest Alaska. Metal tools, particularly saws, adzes, knives, and bow drills, were used by the artists who fashioned the objects in this exhibition.

There is no word for art in the Eskimo language; the reason for this is that the manufacture of aesthetically beautiful objects was closely related to all aspects of Eskimo life, particularly

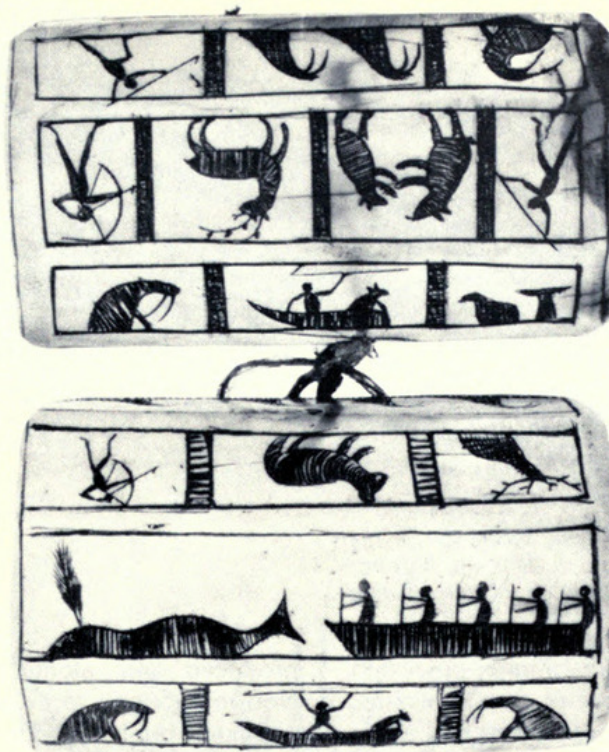
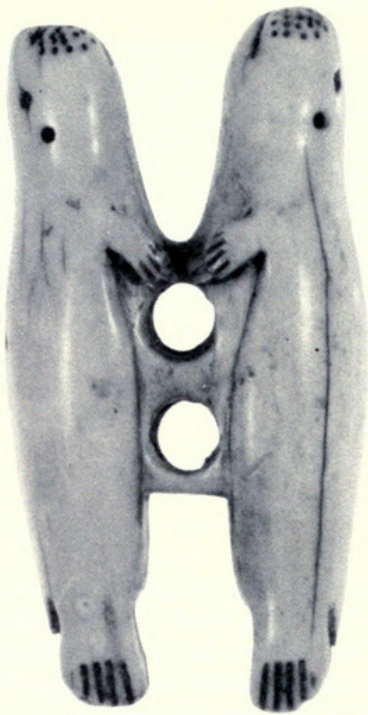
religion, ceremonialism, and magic. Most traditional art was religious, and objects which we are likely to consider aesthetically pleasing were made for the very practical purpose of honoring or personifying spirits and deities. This was done in an effort to lessen anxiety toward the unknown universe and to ensure personal and community well-being and safety in a demanding and unpredictable environment.

In aboriginal times, the religious and ceremonial life of the Eskimos of northwestern Alaska centered around the significant supernatural relationship between men and animals. Eskimos considered it important to honor the spirits of game animals that were vital to the economy. People realized that supernatural forces were at work manipulating the basic needs of subsistence as well as life itself, and these supernatural forces needed to be placated and made aware of the wants and needs of human beings. The carvings on hunting implements and other utilitarian objects in this exhibition were fashioned to influence specific animal spirits. Thus, one of the most important aspects of religious art was the necessity of creating an object that was as aesthetically pleasing as possible.

Certainly the Bering Sea Eskimos displayed skill in naturalistic, representational carving unequalled in the arctic and equaled by few other people anywhere in the world at any time.

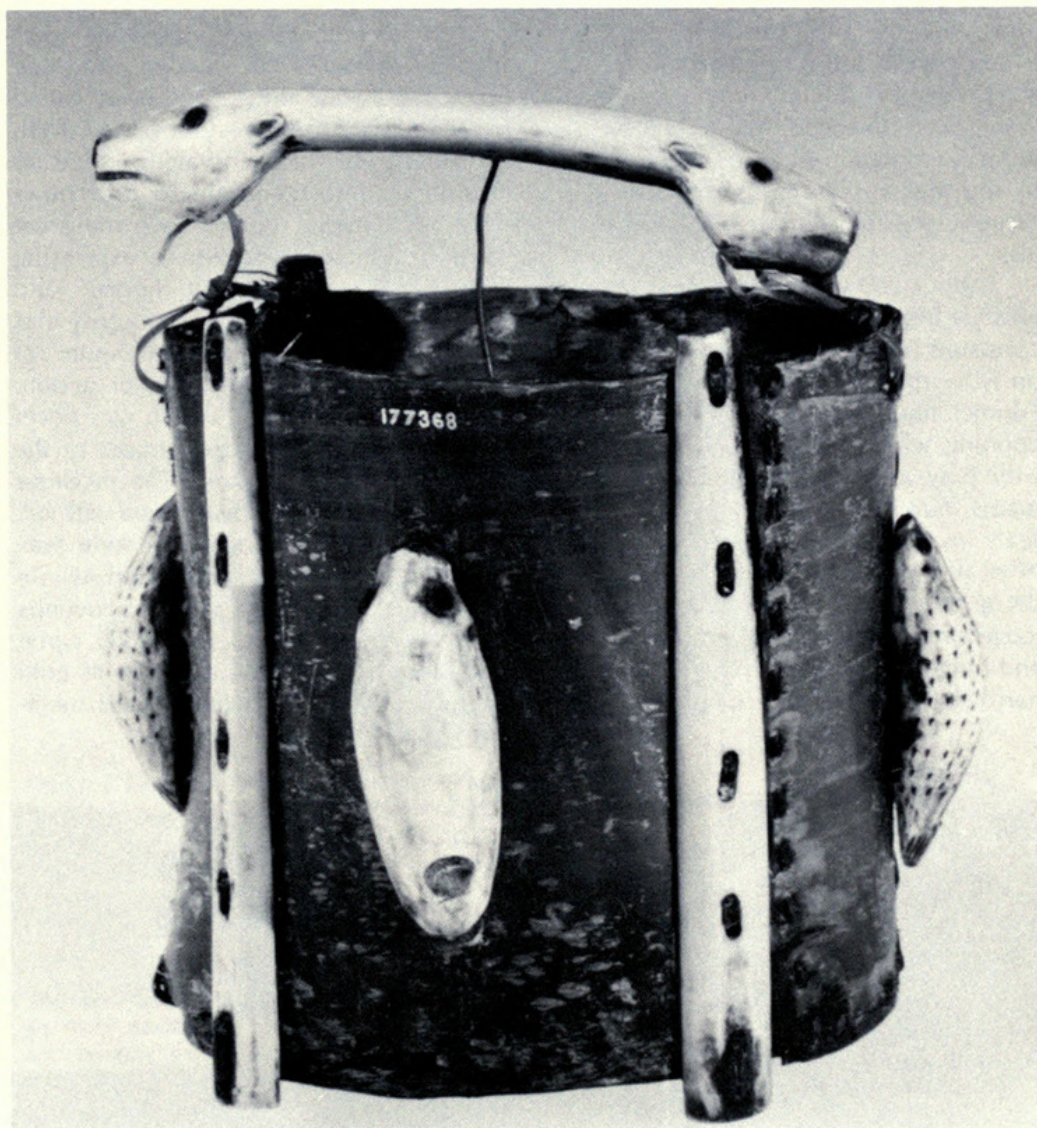
Although most Eskimo art was religious, some of the animal and bird sculptures in this exhibition were probably carved for no other purpose than to give pleasure to the carver, his friends, and relatives. Other sculptures, however, may have belonged to shamans, the traditional medical and religious practitioners, and thus possessed religious significance as charms or amulets. These forms were usually differentiated by their use. A charm was used to influence hunted animals or to direct destiny in a way provided by the power of the charm. An amulet was a more personal object. It was worn as protection against bad spirits or to bring a certain kind of luck such as good health or love.

Elaborately carved and painted masks were one of the outstanding achievements of Alaskan Eskimo art. The most elaborate ones were made by Eskimos in the area south of St. Michael, particularly along the lower Yukon and



Kuskokwim rivers. Even north of this area, however, fine masks were also made. Those from Seward Peninsula and other areas close to St. Michael have attached appendages in the form of feathers or fur and are likely to be painted. Those further north were unpainted and simpler, but the effect of the representation and the skilled carving is nevertheless impressive.

Eskimo masks not only display technical virtuosity, but give significant insights into religious beliefs and conceptions of the universe. They were used principally in religious ceremonies that honored and propitiated the spirits of game animals and of personal helping spirits to ensure success in hunting; they were also used to ward off evil spirits threatening the individual or community. Masks were usually made by shamans or carvers working under their direction. They were, therefore, the embodiment of a shaman's vision and each mask was different because of the almost infinite variety of visions that a shaman could have. In Eskimo cosmology almost every



Top left: Ivory seal drag handle. The handle is attached to one end of a sealskin line and the other is fastened to the dead animal. The seal can thus be easily dragged back over the ice to the hunter's camp or village. Length: 9 cm. Top right: Ivory box with decoration in the modified engraving style. Length 9 cm. Lower right: Baleen bucket with handle and attachments of ivory. Height 11.4 cm.



Top: Ivory bow drill with decoration in the old engraving style. Length 40.6 cm. Bottom: Walrus tusk with decoration in the western pictorial style. Length 40 cm.

object, animate or inanimate, possessed a spirit. Thus, a blade of grass, a walrus, or a rock could be the subject of all or part of a mask. Also, according to the Eskimo belief system, all animals had the ability to turn into human beings at will. Thus, representation of the human form is common in art, particularly in masks. Also common are animal-human faces which serve to emphasize a duality that is deeply rooted in tradition and folklore. In the making of masks, the range of creative possibilities was virtually limitless.

About 200 years ago a new Eskimo art style began in the Bering Strait area. It consisted of small silhouette engravings on ivory that illustrated every aspect of Eskimo life: men in skin boats harpooning whales, caribou being hunted with bow and arrow, men driving dog teams, hunters creeping up on basking seals, masked men dancing, and many other subjects. With rare economy of line the graphic artist interpreted his knowledge of the human body and the animals and birds around him. This pictorial art, narrowly restricted in its range, was

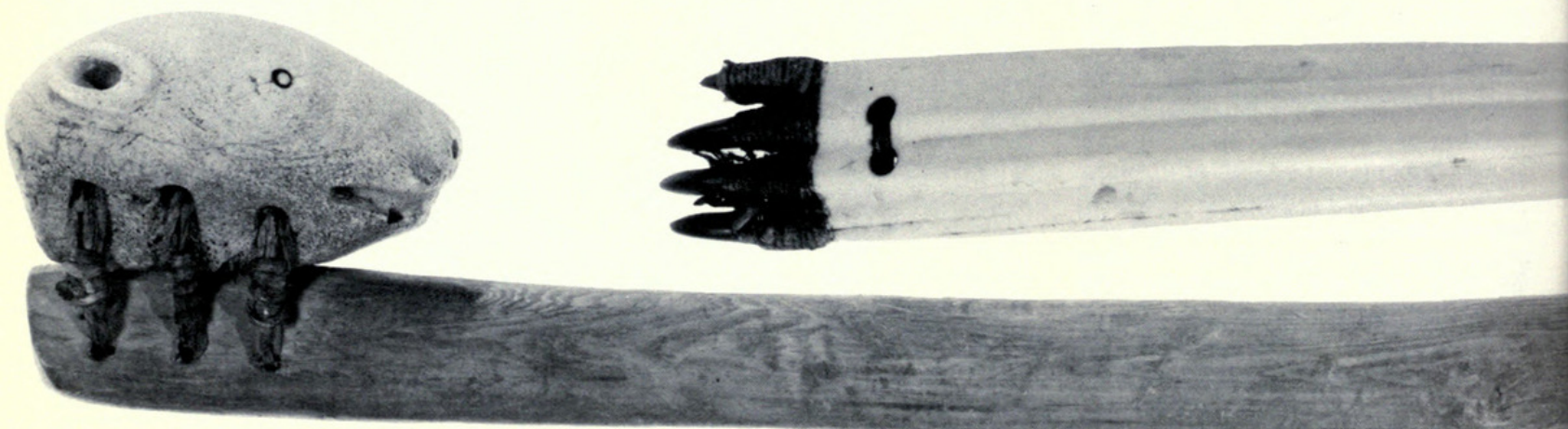
produced only along the coast from Norton Sound to Kotzebue Sound. Although originating in late prehistoric times, it reached its highest development in the second half of the nineteenth century.

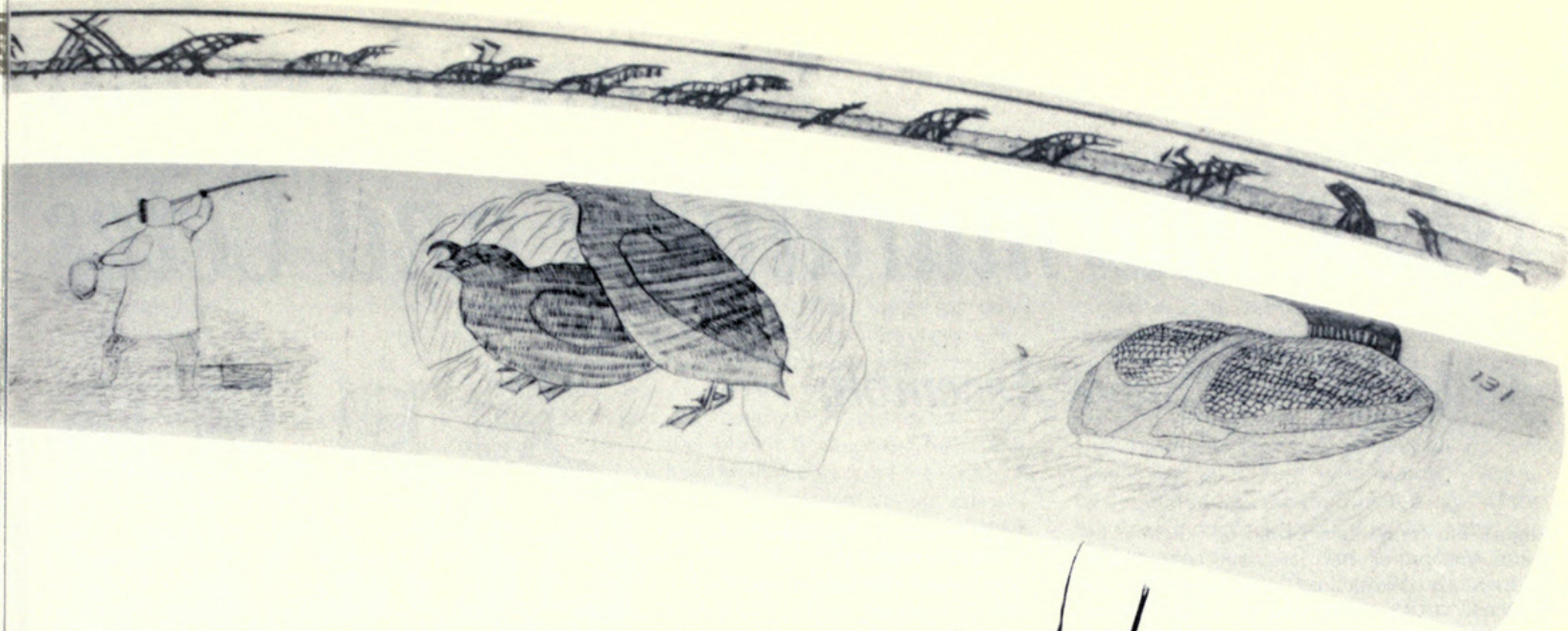
Nineteenth and early twentieth century engraving can be divided into three principal styles; these have been called old, modified, and western pictorial engraving. The old engraving style is confined almost entirely to drill bows and bag handles. In this style the artist drew heavily on suggestion for expressing the many variations of human and animal attitudes. As one authority has noted, the artist used a minimum of detail to create a maximum of action. The ivory background, which was never painted, offered a sharp contrast to the black silhouetted figures. The incisions were filled with black ash mixed with oil.

The modified engraving style was used on large ivory pipes and whole walrus tusks that were sold as souvenirs to Euro-Americans who, after 1850, came to Alaska in increasing numbers as gold miners, commercial whalers, and mem-

bers of exploring and scientific expeditions. Engravers applied essentially the same techniques and subject matter of the smaller surfaces to the larger ones but the human figures were less sticklike, larger, and more rounded out representations of three-masted schooners and Euro-Americans with firearms were added to the subject matter.

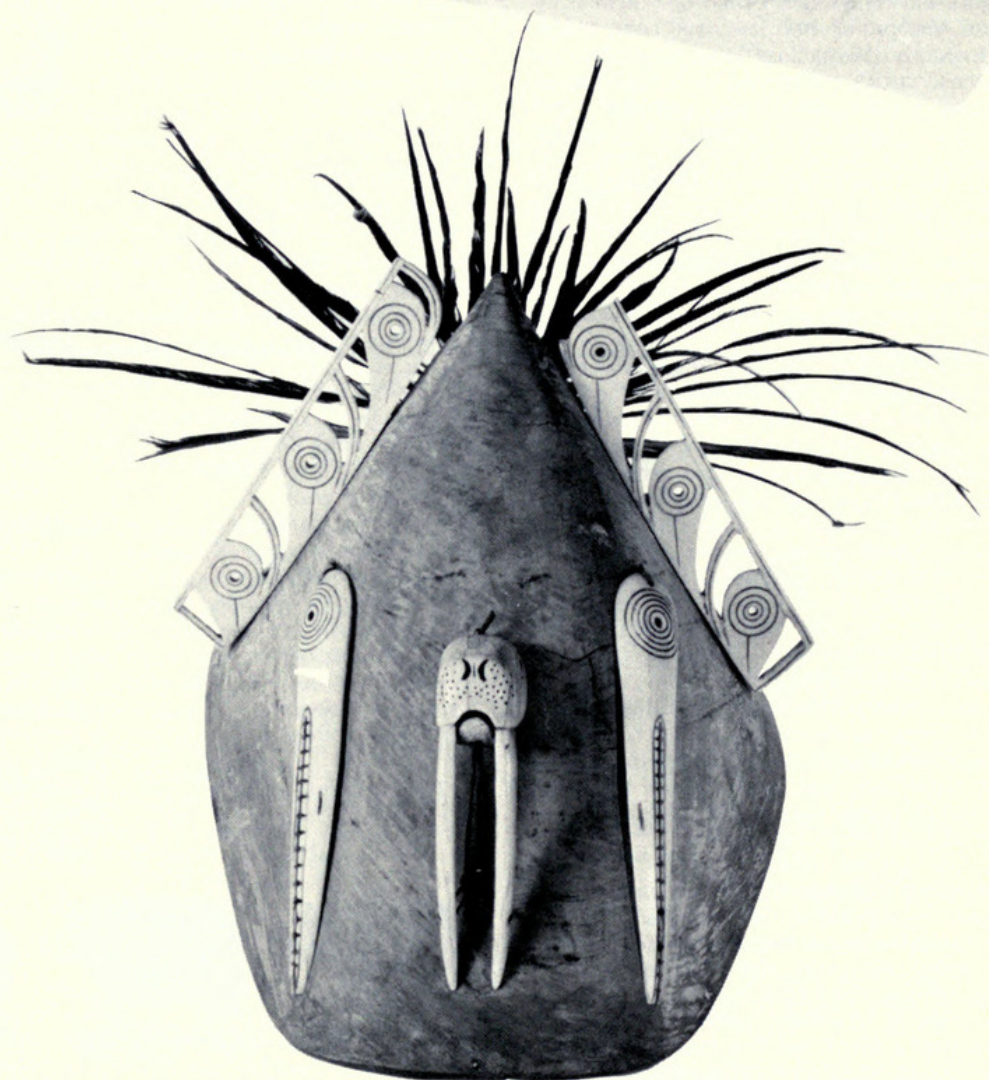
In the 1890s the art underwent a more profound change. The western pictorial style was used first on whole walrus tusks and cribbage boards, a form of souvenir that was especially popular from the days of the Yukon and Nome gold rushes in 1898 and 1902 until about 1925. Human and animal figures became fine-line, realistic etchings; sea ice and landscapes were shown in accurate perspective. The western pictorial style, although a legitimate outgrowth of the earlier indigenous styles, was heavily influenced by the whalers' scrimshaw carvings. Some Eskimo artists created real tours de force, utilizing copies of photographs and magazine illustrations along with original subject matter. For the first time, individual artists signed



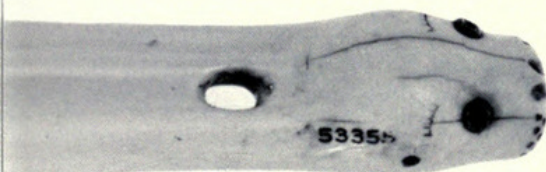


their names to their works. As interest in cribbage boards declined, the western pictorial engraving style was used on a variety of other souvenirs such as napkin rings, letter openers, knife handles, and ivory jewelry.

The first Euro-Americans who came to northwestern Alaska in the nineteenth century purchased, as souvenirs, items of material culture which the Eskimos had made for their own use. As demand increased, the Eskimo carvers went to work to carve items specifically for trade, but their work, for the most part, was devoted to traditionally based sculptures and engravings in ivory. Later, the carvers and engravers were asked to imitate foreign knickknacks; when they made cribbage boards, toothpick holders, gun stock decorations, and fancy handles for canes they were, more often than not, carving things which they had never actually seen. Thus, traditional Eskimo sculptures and engravings are today no longer made within a magical or religious framework. The artists do, however, continue to produce a new art for a wholly commercial market.



Wooden hat with ivory and feather attachments. Worn by a hunter in his kayak. Height 21 cm. ▲



◀ Top: Seal scratcher. A seal's claw is attached to an ivory handle. As the hunter approaches a seal basking on the ice, he scratches the ice with the tool, creating a sound which reassures the wary animal. Length 26.7 cm. Below: Club for killing wounded seals. The head is of bone. Length 40 cm.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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Vanstone, James W. 1975. "Nineteenth Century Alaskan Eskimo Art." *Field Museum of Natural History bulletin* 46(11), 3-7.

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