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*Spirit World of
the Bering Sea Eskimo*



William W. Fitzhugh and Susan A. Kaplan
Exhibition Curators

From the Edward W. Nelson Collection of
the National Museum of Natural History/National Museum of Man
Smithsonian Institution



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JOHN C. EWERS



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*I*t was the time when there were no people on the earth. For four days the first man lay coiled up in the pod of a beach pea. On the fifth, he burst forth, falling to the ground, and stood up, a full-grown man. Feeling unpleasant, he stooped and drank from a pool of water, then felt better. Looking up, he saw a dark object approaching with a waving motion until it stopped just in front of him. It was a raven. Raven stared intently at man, raised one wing, and pushed up his beak, like a mask, to the top of his head, and changed immediately into a man. Still staring and cocking his head from side to side for a better view, Raven said at last: "What are you? Whence did you come? I have never seen the likes of you." And Raven looked at man, surprised to see that this stranger was so much like himself in shape.

Bering Sea Eskimo creation myth
(Adapted from E.W. Nelson 1899)





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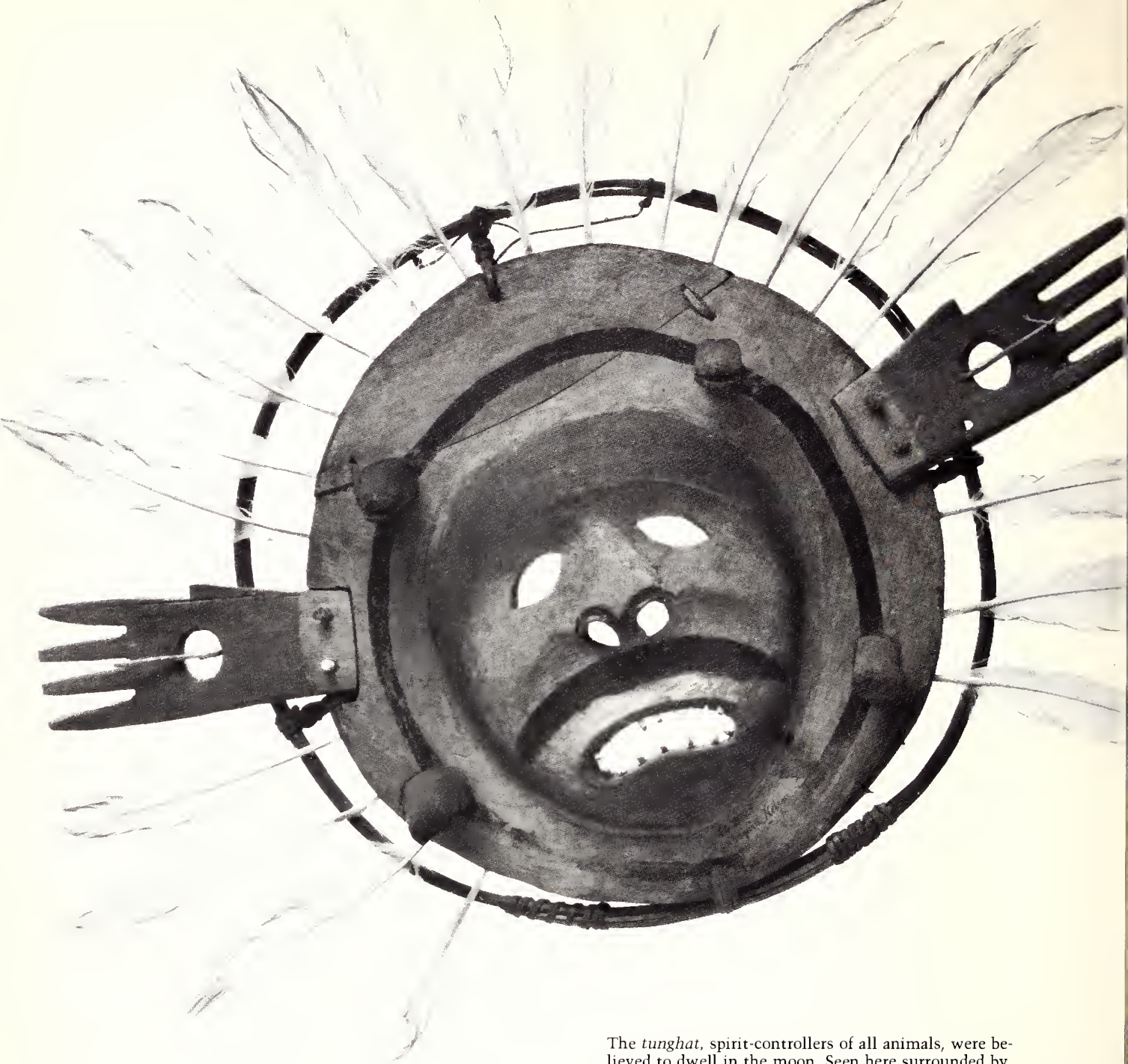
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Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo presents a view of 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo life, its prehistoric roots, and its modern legacy. In a hostile environment the Bering Sea Eskimo has not only survived with ingenuity, but over the centuries created a culture unique in its rich artistic and spiritual traditions.

Most of the finely crafted hunting implements, domestic utensils, and ceremonial objects in this exhibition were collected by Edward W. Nelson, a young naturalist sent to the Alaskan frontier in 1877 to gather weather information for the U.S. Army Signal Service, and to collect specimens and record observations about this unexplored area for the Smithsonian Institution. While stationed at St. Michael, Nelson traveled extensively in the unmapped territory along the Bering Sea coast and in the interior of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region. During his four-year stay he made observations not only on natural history, but on the customs and life of the Eskimos of western Alaska. His collections, photographs, and notes describe Bering Sea Eskimo culture at a time when it had been little affected by contact with American whalers and traders, and prior to the rapid cultural changes brought on by gold rushes and the spread of Christianity in the region at the end of the 19th century.



This photograph shows one of Nelson's field camps, his *bidarka* (three-holed kayak), and his Eskimo companions returning from a successful goose hunt. In addition to his Eskimo research, Nelson collected mammals, birds, fish, and insects, and wrote important scientific works on Alaskan natural history.



The *tunghat*, spirit-controllers of all animals, were believed to dwell in the moon. Seen here surrounded by swan feathers and a hoop representing the stars and heavens, a potentially malevolent *tunghak* is shown with his fearsome toothy mouth and his pierced, thumbless hands. The latter signified the spirit's willingness, if properly entreated, to release animal spirits from the sky world so that they might be available to man on earth.

The Land, the People, the Spirits

The land that Nelson explored was varied and rich in plant and animal resources. Unlike the regions of rugged arctic terrain to the north, the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta on the Bering Sea was a vast, wet lowland tundra dotted with lakes, ponds, and bogs. This expanse was broken by rolling hills, dramatic mountain ranges, and small volcanoes. It was a land of continual change, seasonally and from year to year, with variations in temperature and precipitation, and occasional violent storms. Here, within an area of only 3,000 square miles, lived 7,000 people—nearly a quarter of the Eskimo population of the world.

Today the Bering Sea Eskimo population numbers nearly 20,000. Yet despite their large population and their remarkable technological and artistic achievements, the Bering Sea Eskimos remain, a century after Nelson's pioneering fieldwork, one of the least known Eskimo cultures



The connection between a caribou and its spirit or *inua* is shown in this illustration from the inside of a food bowl. Spiritual links in Bering Sea Eskimo art frequently are made at the throat, the beginning of the animal's "lifeline." In myths and stories spirit connections and movements are described as thin trails of fog.



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in the world. It is the purpose of this exhibition and its accompanying publications to portray Bering Sea Eskimo life and culture as it existed in the latter part of the 19th century through Edward Nelson's collection of artifacts and his ethnography.

The people Nelson encountered differed fundamentally in language, culture, and physical attributes from more familiar Eskimos living in northerly climes. Because of the variety and abundance of resources available to them, Bering Sea Eskimos were able to occupy large, permanent settlements along the coast and rivers and on offshore islands. Land and sea mammals, fish, birds and bird eggs, plants, and assorted marine life sustained them.

The Bering Sea Eskimo world was also alive with spirits and supernatural forces. The Eskimos believed that every living creature possessed a spirit, or *inua*, that could take on a variety of physical forms and could initiate actions independent of its host. Originally, according to mythology, the *inuas* of animals and men had human forms. Through time, however, animals and men found it difficult to interchange physical and *inua* forms at will. This ability was retained by religious leaders, known as shamans, and certain animals with especially powerful spirits. Nevertheless, the *inuas* remained an active force in natural events and in men's lives, and it was not unusual for a hunter to imagine he had had a fleeting impression of an *inua*, seen as a small, semi-human face on the breast of a bird or in the eye or fur of an animal. The concept of *inua* is so central to Bering Sea Eskimo life that it is featured in one version of their creation myth, told to Edward Nelson at St. Michael.



Above: This dance mask represents the *inua* of the bear by a face within a mask.

Opposite: These Bering Strait men, women, and children were photographed by Nelson in 1881. Lip labrets and tusk-shaped patterns on the men's parkas give the men a walrus-like appearance.

Among the Animals



The Bering Sea Eskimo hunter's weapons and techniques reflected his concern with the spirit world. He believed that man lived among the animals, and that his physical and spiritual well-being depended on the respect he showed his prey and their spirits, or *inuas*. The hunter therefore took care not to offend the *inuas* or the powerful *tunghat*, the spirit-keepers of game animals. The hunter's ability to capture animals depended not only on his knowledge of hunting lore but also on the design and craftsmanship of his weapons. The *inuas* were believed to appreciate the beauty of well-made implements and allowed animals to be captured by them. The more beautiful the hunter's weapons were, the more successful he was likely to be. The hunter could also trick animals or subdue them by enlisting spiritual aid. He made his weapons from materials familiar and comforting to his prey, and he called on spirit-helpers by decorating his hunting equipment with images of his



Nunivak Island kayaks were made with a cockpit large enough to hold both the paddler and a passenger, who sat facing the stern. The kayak is equipped with its paddle, float tray, harpoon line and sealskin float. A charm image depicting the mythical alligator-like *palraiyyuk* painted on the side of the boat protects its occupant from attack by this dangerous beast.



Men believed that their use of beautiful tools and weapons pleased the *inuas* and made game more abundant and easier to catch. The spirit of a friendly predator—perhaps a wolf—adorns this harpoon socketpiece, and sealskin float plugs show faces of the short-eared owl, an *inua* or *tunghak* face, and a smiling male-female image displays the conventional “man-in-the-moon.”

quarry's natural predators. This imparted the predator's strength, power, or swiftness to the hunter or his weapons. He could then approach the animal and kill it. Hunters also used amulets to protect themselves from malevolent spirits and dangerous beasts like the *palraiyyuk*, an alligator-like monster known to attack hunters in their boats. To ward off its assault and insure a successful hunt, images of this creature were painted on the sides of one's kayak or umiak and were used as emblems on hunting hat ornaments and harpoons. Other alluring charms and protective amulets, including carved and painted plaques depicting the stylized faces of man and woman, were placed in the boat or on the body of the hunter.

Fish and waterfowl were the primary foods of Eskimos inhabiting the rivers and interior lakes, although they also captured land game such as caribou, grizzly and black bears, wolves, foxes, and other animals with thick fur, which were used for clothing, ornamentation, and trade. Coastal people hunted seals, walrus, and small whales, and caught sea birds and fish. Both groups exchanged resources with each other and





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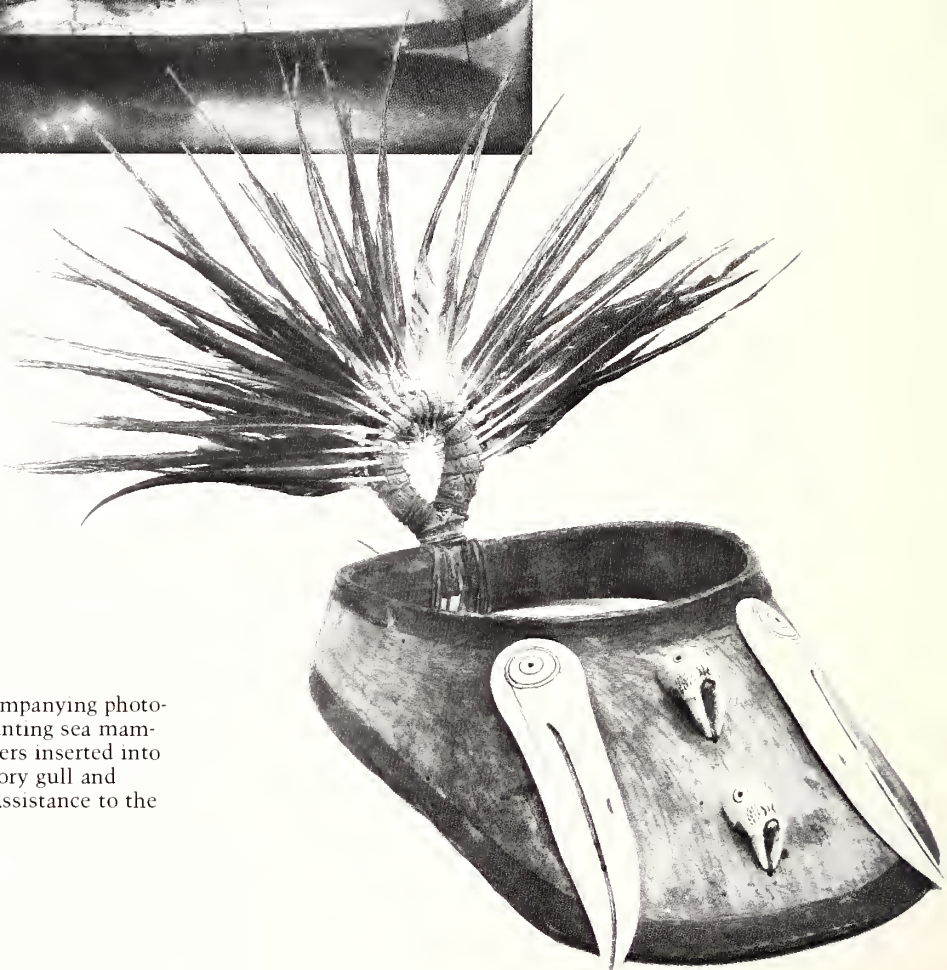
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A visor, worn by the Eskimo in the accompanying photograph, was used to reduce glare while hunting sea mammals in the kayak. Oldsquaw duck feathers inserted into a grass hoop, red-painted grooves, and ivory gull and walrus head carvings provided spiritual assistance to the hunter.

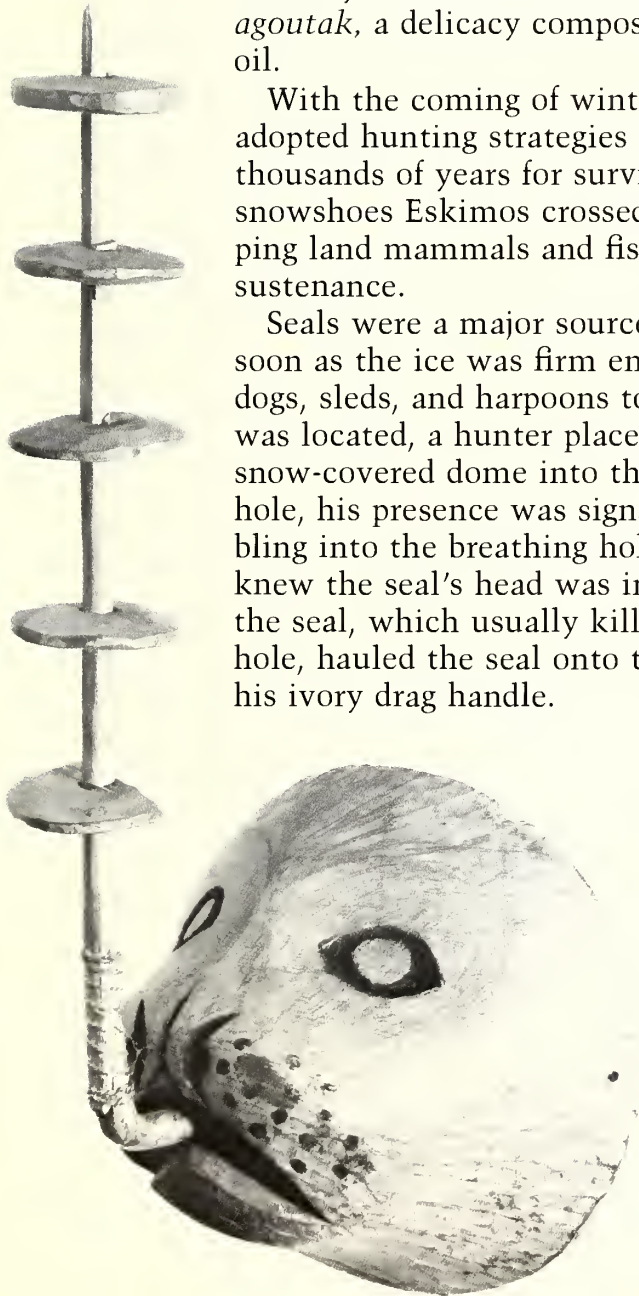
with neighboring Indians, Aleuts, Siberians, and European traders, to obtain materials not available at home.

Bering Sea Eskimo economy and lifestyle were strongly influenced by seasonal changes in both animal populations and the landscape. The welcome arrival of migratory birds and fish in the spring signaled the end of the long winter. During spring and summer coastal Eskimos

tended herring nets while interior people used nets, spears, and traps to capture salmon and whitefish from rivers and lakes. Eskimos hunted with bow and arrows, nets, snares, and spears, and captured moulting birds in large numbers in communal drives involving many boats and hunters. Even the eggs of ducks, geese, swans, and other waterfowl were gathered for food. Much of this food was not eaten immediately but was dried or placed in storage pits in the ground for use during winter months. A wide assortment of edible plants were also gathered, among them the roots of the cotton grass plant, looted from hidden caches made by mice. Fruits of various sorts were used to make treats like *agoutak*, a delicacy composed of berries mashed with fish liver and seal oil.

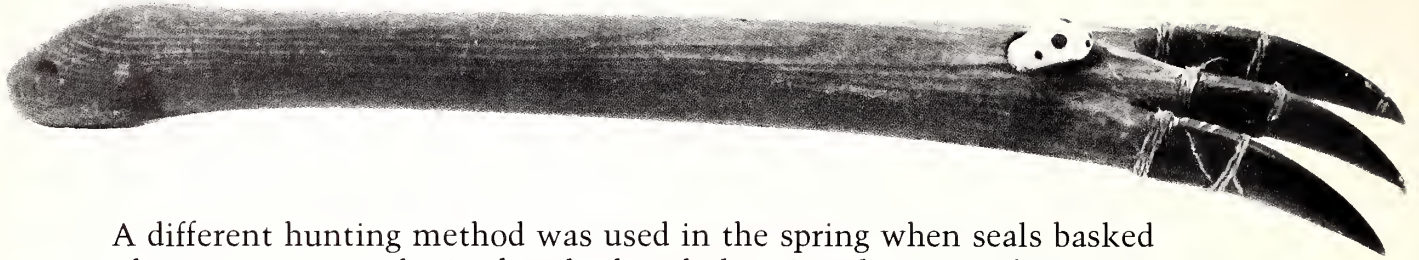
With the coming of winter Eskimos put their kayaks aside and adopted hunting strategies and equipment tailored over the course of thousands of years for survival in a frozen land. Using dog sleds and snowshoes Eskimos crossed the frozen seas, lakes, and marshes, trapping land mammals and fish, and searching for life beneath the ice for sustenance.

Seals were a major source of food during the winter months, and as soon as the ice was firm enough to cross, hunters set forth with their dogs, sleds, and harpoons to search for seal breathing holes. Once a hole was located, a hunter placed a long piece of straw through the hole's snow-covered dome into the cavity below. When a seal approached the hole, his presence was signaled first by the sound of exhaled air bubbling into the breathing hole. When the straw began to rise the hunter knew the seal's head was in position for a harpoon blow. After striking the seal, which usually killed it immediately, the hunter enlarged the hole, hauled the seal onto the ice, and prepared to take it home using his ivory drag handle.



In addition to using beautiful tools, hunters influenced animal spirits by honoring them in dances and ceremonies in which colorful and imaginative masks were worn. This maskette represents a seal rising into its breathing hole, exhaling bubbles as it approaches the surface.

Magic to comfort a watchful seal while the hunter crawled toward it over the ice is seen in this elegant ice scratcher made with real seal claws. An ivory seal in its breathing hole serves as a lug for fastening the lashings.



A different hunting method was used in the spring when seals basked in the warm sun on the ice beside their holes. Crawling over the ice, a hunter would approach a seal while it napped, hiding behind his large white dogskin mittens when the seal woke to look around for signs of danger. At this time the hunter took out his ice scratcher, an implement made in the form of a seal's flipper with real seal claws, and imitated the sound of a seal scratching at his hole. Reassured, the seal continued its nap, allowing the hunter to approach within striking range with his harpoon. Seals were also captured by hunters in large-mesh nets set below the surface of the ice or in open water.

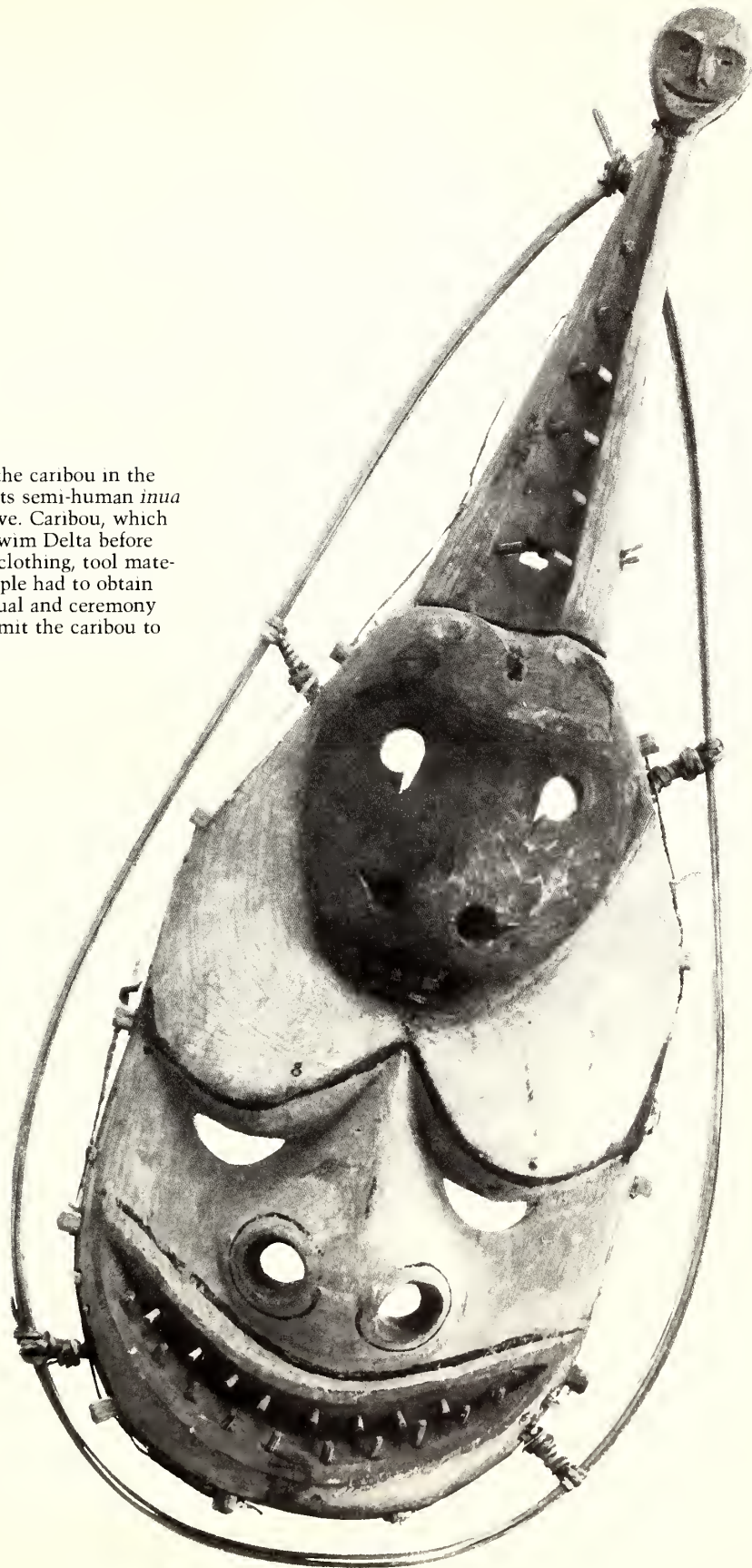
Although winter was not a very productive hunting season, sled transportation and the availability of food stored from the summer made early winter a time of socializing and festivity. A number of major religious festivals were held during this season. Neighboring villages were invited to these week-long events which included storytelling, religious ceremonies, and sports competitions. Such festivals often led to competition between villages and served to stimulate artistic and ceremonial development.

Later, winter was frequently a time of hardship, for stored foods were often depleted and people were forced to survive by catching small fish and small game. But as the ice began to soften in spring, whitefish moved up the rivers, and seals and walrus were hunted by kayak at the edge of the ice. People began to prepare for harvesting the northward rush of animals moving into the arctic by repairing tools and clothing.



This fossil mammoth tusk wrench is used to take the bends out of arrowshafts by inserting them through the hole in the center of the implement and bending. The use of caribou imagery pleased the *inuas* and imparted special powers to the caribou hunter's weapons.

This dance mask shows the *inua* of the caribou in the center (its antlers are missing) with its semi-human *inua* below and a smiling human face above. Caribou, which disappeared from the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta before Nelson's arrival, were important for clothing, tool materials, sinew, and food. Bering Sea people had to obtain these products by trade, and with ritual and ceremony tried to convince the *tunghak* to permit the caribou to return.



Village Life: Around the Hearth

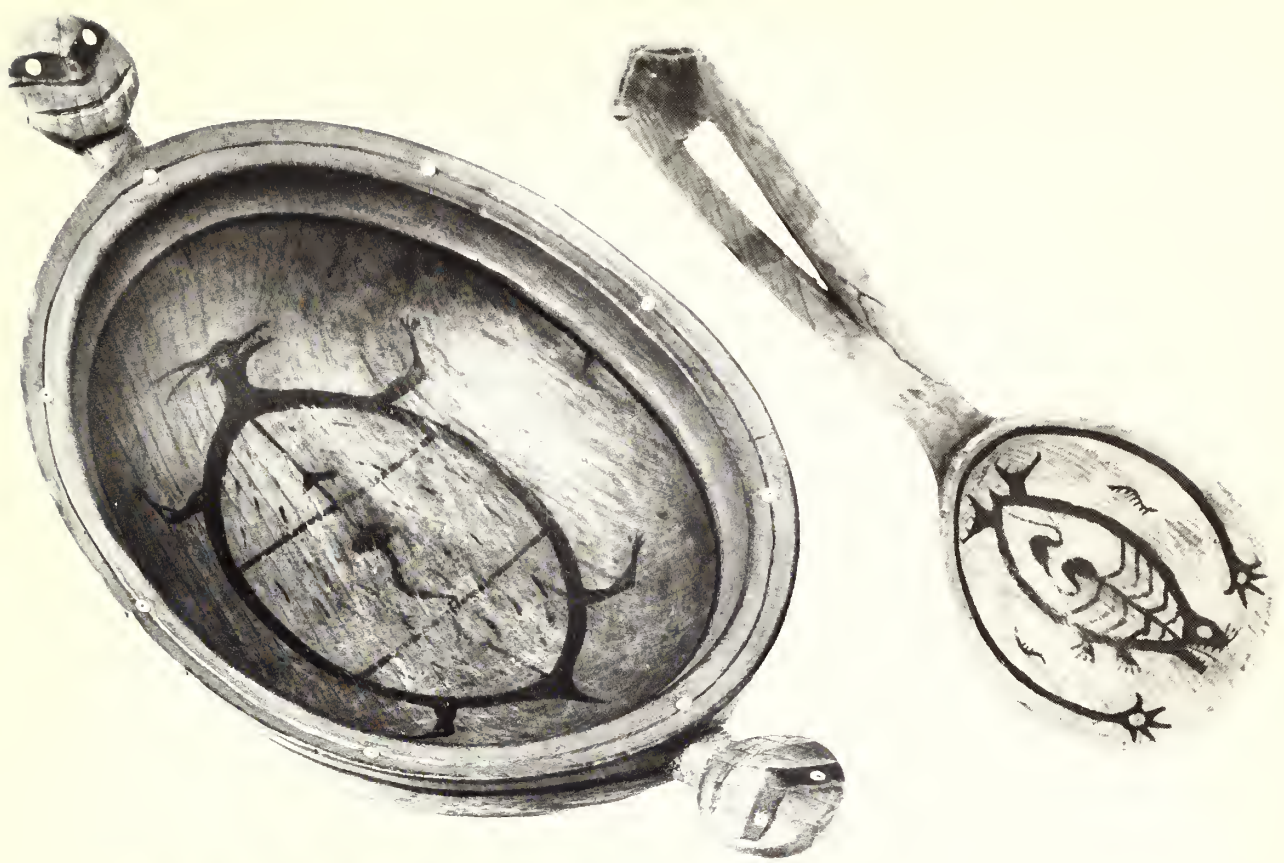
One hundred fifty Eskimos lived nearly year-round in the village of Rasboinsky, a salmon-fishing location on the banks of the lower Yukon River one hundred miles from the Bering Sea coast. During Nelson's visit its people were living in snow-covered earthen houses seen in the foreground. Storage sheds, sleds, and above-ground summer houses made of planks from driftwood are seen in the rear.



Bering Sea Eskimo villages consisted of semi-subterranean sod and wood houses; *qasgiq*, or men's houses; storage sheds; and a cemetery. Family life centered around the hearths of individual households where women tended to domestic activities—cooking, sewing, and caring for children.

Women spent many hours each day preparing animal materials for food and clothing. Cooking utensils such as bowls, ladles, and knives were made by men and were decorated with artistic designs representing hunting scenes, spiritual or mythological creatures, totemic images, and abstract designs. An extension of hunting magic and religious expression, these pictures constantly reminded people of the powers of spirits and the need to be respectful in one's thoughts of and actions toward the *inuas* and the traditions of one's culture. In a literal sense these ideas were "ingested" on a daily basis, reinforcing the link between men and the spiritual world in which they lived.

One of a woman's most important roles was that of seamstress, since well-made, tailored garments were essential for survival. Clothing had to be light and durable, warm enough to withstand winter gales, yet not so warm that a hunter's exertions resulted in condensation which could cause him to freeze. To make appropriate clothing for a given season or activity, women had to know the properties of different kinds of animal



Eskimo craftsmen turned driftwood into elegant food containers. This serving bowl is decorated with masked human effigy handles and is illustrated with a mythological creature on its interior. Meals were served with decorated spoons and ladles in such containers, which were similar to vessels used by Northwest Coast Indians. In constant use, such utensils reminded people of their stories and traditions as they went about their daily lives.



Even fish skin had a practical use. In addition to being light, waterproof, and tough, it was easily made into mittens, parkas, boots, and elegant clothing bags.



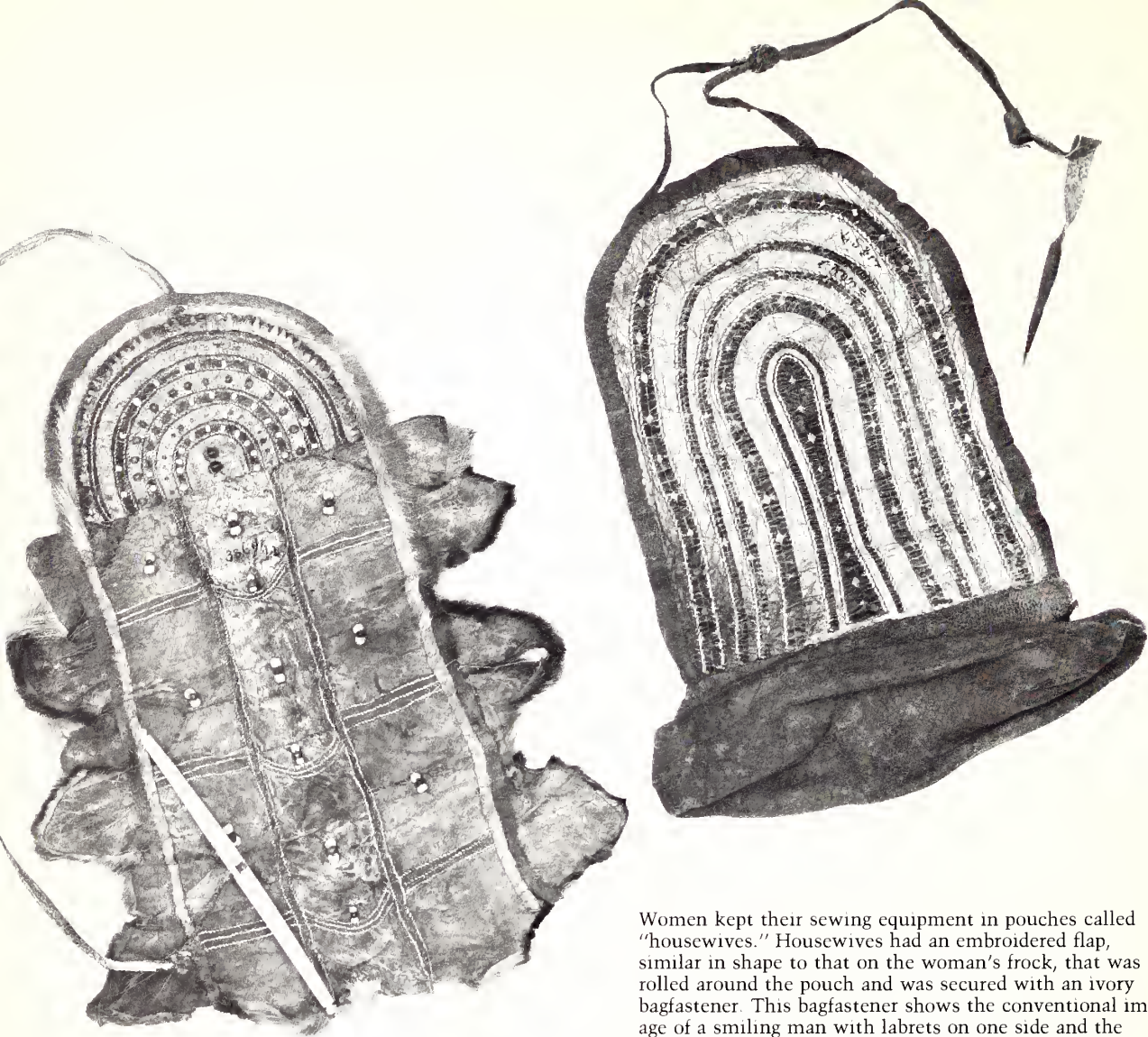
Great care was taken in the making of this fancy woman's frock or parka. Perhaps made by a mother on the occasion of her daughter's wedding, it includes wolf, wolverine, ground squirrel, and imported white Siberian reindeer furs stitched with detailed embroidery and incorporates the U-shaped skirt indicative of female dress.

skins and how to prepare them, just as men had to understand the habits of the animals to be successful hunters. Women also had to know how to clean and tan the skins, and how to size, cut, and sew all kinds of garments with special seams and features, from boots to fur caps.

Women living on the sea coast specialized in making light waterproof summer rain gear from the intestines of seals. These they slit lengthwise and sewed into strips with an interlocking seam through which no needle penetrated fully, adorning the seams with bits of cormorant feather and red wool. Inland women made waterproof garments from salmon or whitefish skins, which were quite serviceable although coastal people considered this attire boorish. Winter parkas were made by stitching duck or goose skins together, feather side out, making their owners appear as giant birds. More common were muskrat, ground squirrel, and caribou fur parkas, which were embellished with stripes of multi-colored fur and often bore an appliqué of bleached skin and caribou hair embroidery. Collars and hoods were fitted with wolverine or wolf fur borders whose long slender hairs resisted the frost created by breathing. The white fur of the domestic Siberian reindeer was preferred for contrasting trim work. This material was greatly desired by Bering Sea Eskimo traders whose wives fitted it into wedge-shaped gores descending from the shoulders, giving the wearer a walrus-like appearance. Men did not contribute directly to making garments, although they procured and sometimes assisted in curing the skins and made most of the women's sewing implements. These tools, which included bird bone needles, ivory boot creasers, awls, spools for caribou sinew thread, and thimbles, were among a woman's most prized possessions and often lasted her entire life. They were used daily, and became highly polished through the years. Before presenting them to their wives, the Bering Sea Eskimo men decorated the implements with geometric designs; Eskimos from Bering Strait and North Alaska carved their needlecases into abstract designs of whales, polar bears, and seals. Mythological characters and symbolic religious designs were also used.

A woman's sewing tools were stored together with sinew thread, bits of feathers, and colorful auk bills or bits of colored trade wool, in a bag called a "housewife" which was her constant companion. Embroidered with caribou hair, dyed seal parchment, and trade beads, the bag had a tongue-shaped flap which was cut in a female motif also seen on women's parka skirts, hair combs, and dance gloves, and on women's parkas in the Eastern Arctic.

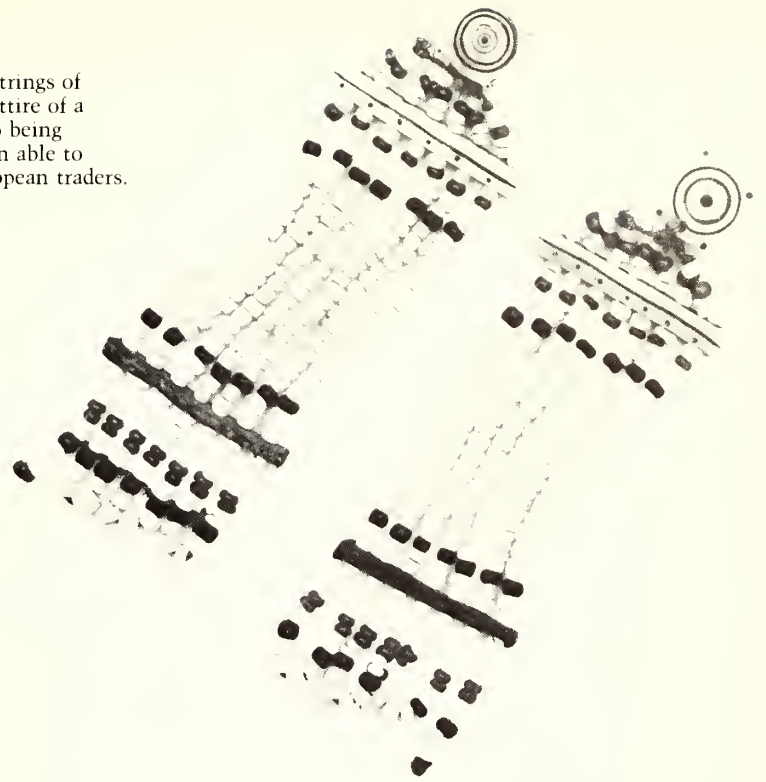
Men fashioned most of the articles of personal adornment worn by themselves and their wives. These included fancy wear such as polished stone or ivory labrets which men wore through slits under the corners of their lower lip. Men's labrets were plug-shaped while women's were



Women kept their sewing equipment in pouches called "housewives." Housewives had an embroidered flap, similar in shape to that on the woman's frock, that was rolled around the pouch and was secured with an ivory bagfastener. This bagfastener shows the conventional image of a smiling man with labrets on one side and the frowning face of a tattooed woman, perhaps his wife, on the reverse, accompanied by stylized parka ruffs, hoops, nets, collared seals, and hands.



These engraved ivory earrings festooned with strings of glass trade beads were part of the fashionable attire of a properly dressed Eskimo woman. In addition to being decorative, they indicated her status as a person able to own beads and ornaments purchased from European traders.

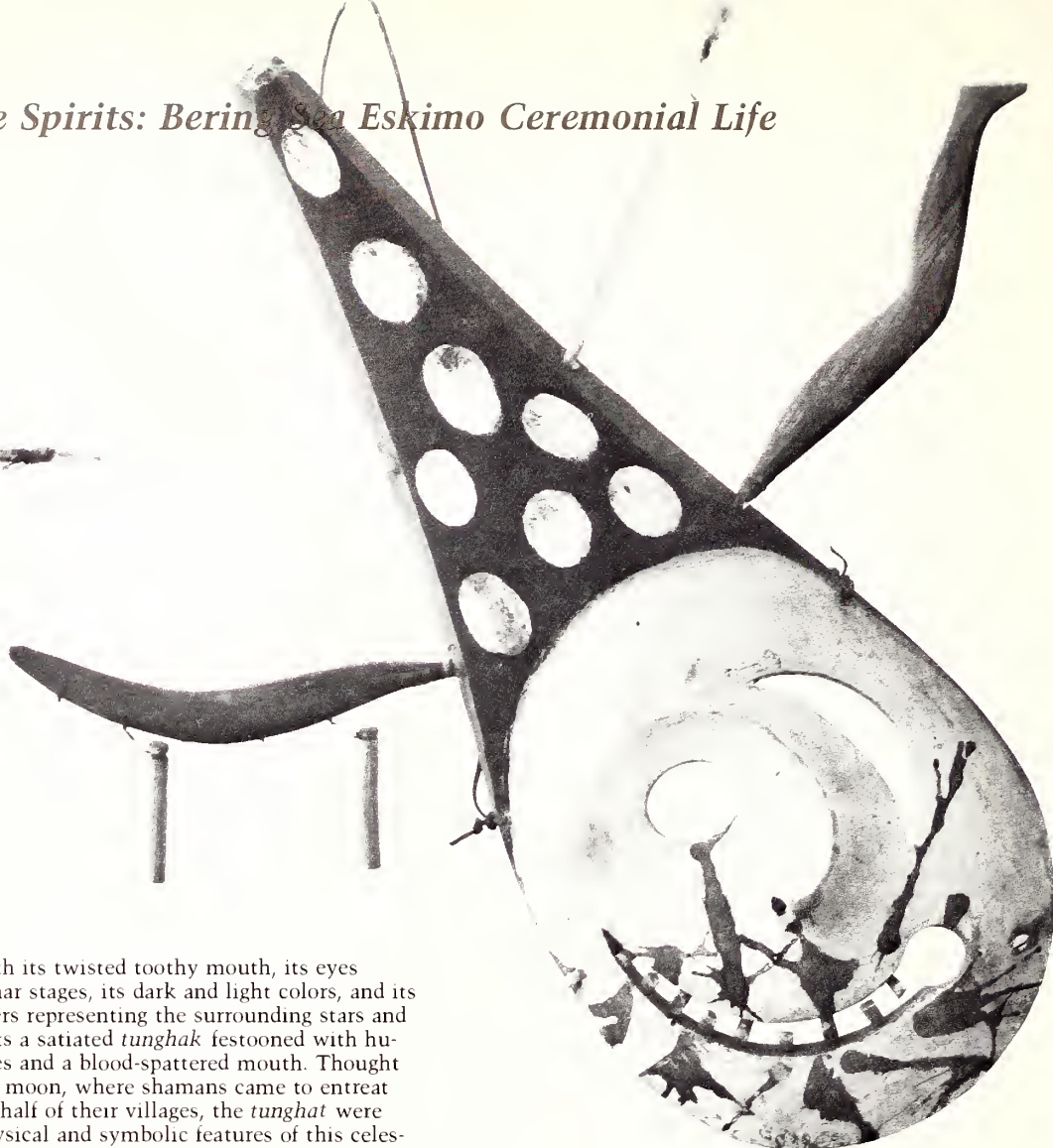


delicate sickle-shaped ornaments to which strands of glass trade beads were attached. Fashionable people also wore ivory hat ornaments shaped like seals, belt buckles in the form of seal *inuas* and beasts, medicinal belts made from the incisors of caribou or crab claws, and earrings bearing the features of birds, seals, or mythological characters.

In addition to skinwork women fashioned baskets, bedding, and even socks made from dried rye grass, an ever-present commodity in the marshy Yukon-Kuskokwim region. Twined baskets were strong and flexible and could hold as much as one hundred pounds of fish, yet they could be rolled into an inconspicuous bundle when not in use. Coiled baskets functioned as rigid, safe containers for personal effects, and were made from grass, willow, or alder root. Feathers, bits of fur and wool, and even bird toes were woven into baskets to enhance their appearance.

These household activities were the focus of an Eskimo child's education. Using miniature versions of adult implements, children imitated their parents' activities acquiring the skills and knowledge they would need as adults. For both education and amusement, adults and children played games, sang songs, and listened to stories. Fathers often carved clever wooden toys for their children, and carved decorated ivory dolls and storyknives for their daughters. The storyknife was a girl's special possession. Often she saved it through adolescence and eventually gave it to her own daughter. Girls illustrated tales by drawing in the mud or snow with their knives.

With the Spirits: Bering Sea Eskimo Ceremonial Life



This mask, with its twisted toothy mouth, its eyes shaped like lunar stages, its dark and light colors, and its dots and feathers representing the surrounding stars and heavens, depicts a satiated *tunghak* festooned with human appendages and a blood-spattered mouth. Thought to dwell in the moon, where shamans came to entreat the deity on behalf of their villages, the *tunghat* were often given physical and symbolic features of this celestial body which was important in Bering Sea Eskimo cosmology.

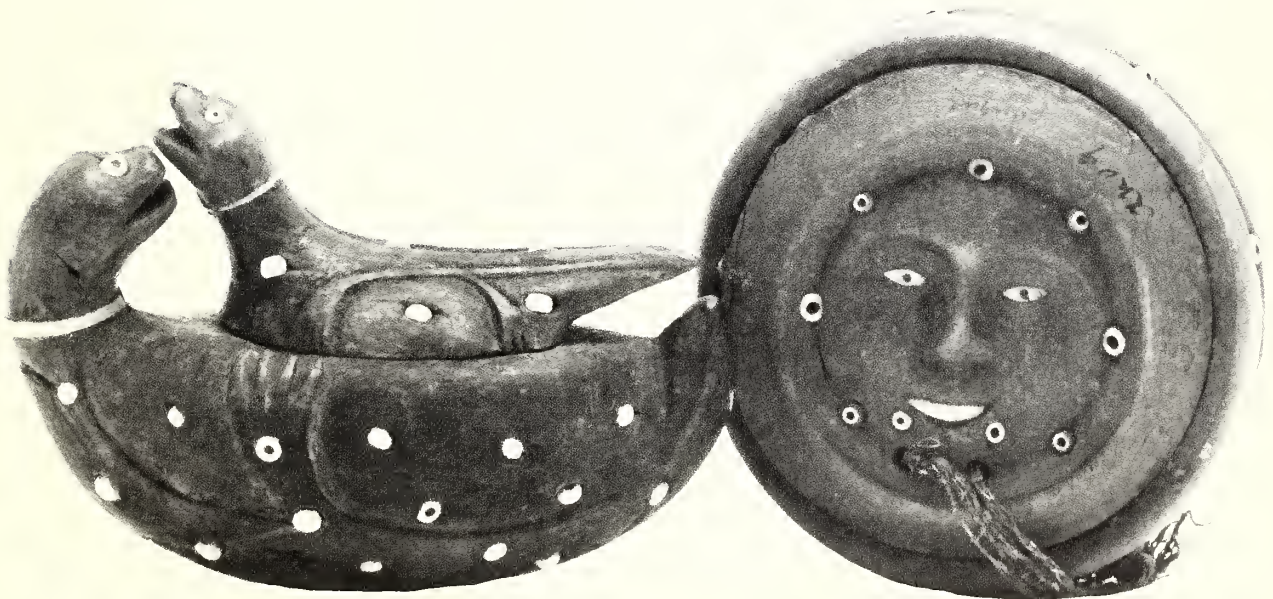
The most prominent structure in the village was the *qasgiq*, or men's house. Larger than the surrounding houses, this rectangular, earth-covered log structure with its high, pyramidal roof, was the center of Bering Sea Eskimo social, religious, and ceremonial life. This served as the principal dwelling and workplace for the village men, who congregated here to make weapons, tools, utensils, containers, and children's toys. Experts in woodworking and ivory carving, the men also instructed youths in these crafts and in hunting lore, religious beliefs, and mythology.

The *qasgiq* featured recreational as well as educational and work-related activities. Men gathered to smoke their pipes, share stories, take sweat baths, and make plans for trade and war. The *qasgiq* also served as the site of festivals and social gatherings conducted for the commu-

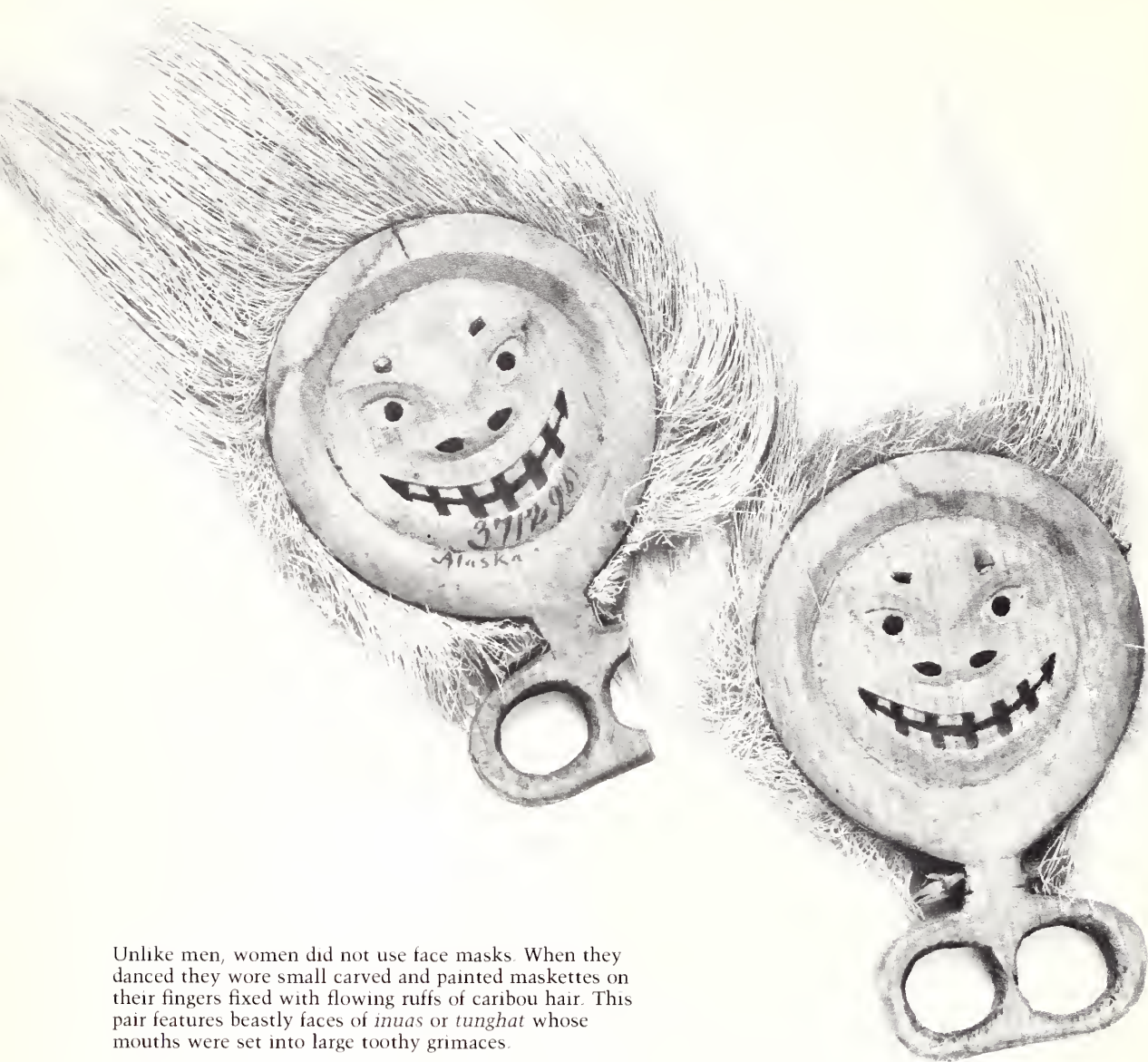
nity and guests from other villages. In preparation for these occasions, men met in secret to carve masks, compose songs, and plan theatrical events.

Festivals were colorful events of rich social and religious significance, that featured dramatic and symbolic art and performances. Dancing to the resonant beat of the drums and the singing of the men's chorus, men performed dances to honor the *inuas* and recounted epic tales about the exploits of Raven and other religious or mythological beings. These stories were supported by props and elaborate masks in which religious symbols, such as pierced hands, hoops, goggles, and lunar images conveyed the artist's meaning to the public. *Inuas* and the *tunghat*, or animal controlling spirits, were the most common subjects of these performances. At other times, humorous stories about animals and hunting incidents were portrayed in skits and dance songs by actors wearing animal masks. In these performances the men danced vigorously, prancing about and gesticulating. Women's dances were more reserved. Women did not wear masks but swayed their bodies and waved their hands, which were adorned with dance fans or finger masks.

Important festivals were held in the *qasgiq* throughout the year, but especially in the fall and early winter when food stores could support the lavish feasting which accompanied such ceremonies. The shaman,



Snuff, consisting of finely powdered tobacco taken by inhalation through snuff tubes inserted into the nostrils, was stored in decorated boxes. One is made in the form of two seals, perhaps a mother with her baby resting on its breast. Bird quill collars, glass and ivory beads, incised lifelines, and a hidden image of Raven added spiritual elements to its elegant design and craftsmanship.



Unlike men, women did not use face masks. When they danced they wore small carved and painted maskettes on their fingers fixed with flowing ruffs of caribou hair. This pair features beastly faces of *inuas* or *tunghat* whose mouths were set into large toothy grimaces.

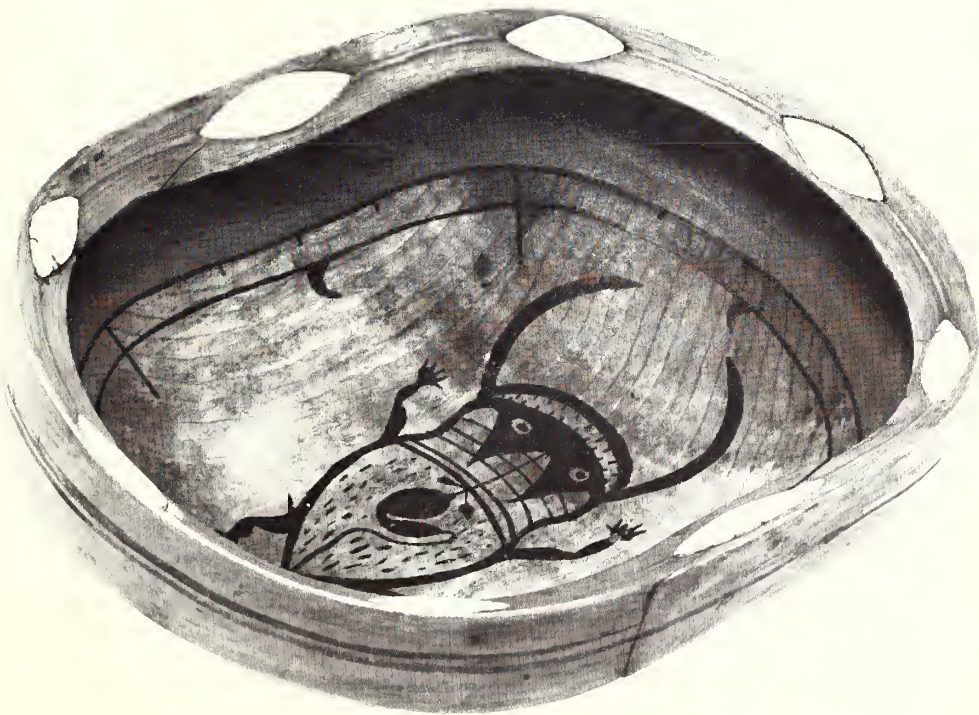
the intermediary between the people and the many spirits that populated the Bering Sea Eskimo world, planned and prepared for these festivals.

The annual, week-long celebration of the Bladder Festival honored the *inuas* of sea mammals killed during the previous year. The bladders of these animals, which held their *inuas*, were inflated and hung from the *qasgiq* roof and walls. At the end of the festival, the bladders were ritually removed, punctured, and returned to the sea through a hole in the ice. The *inuas* thus freed entered the bodies of unborn seals and other sea mammals, replenishing the supply of animals available to man.

Mythology

Symbolism extended beyond religious activities into the realm of artifacts used in everyday life. Men's tool boxes were frequently illustrated with scenes featuring hunting magic, sled and kayak travel, contacts with Europeans, and a man's private family life. Found underneath the lids of these tool boxes, where they were to be seen only by a man or his male associates, these paintings appear to represent his private fantasies and inner feelings.

This type of depiction can be contrasted with the more formal, public art seen on serving bowls, ladles, and other artifacts. The image of the *kogukhpuk* on a serving bowl recalls the belief in a huge mammoth-like creature that once roamed the earth threatening man. These creatures were reputedly driven underground by a powerful shaman, but return to



Myth was an active force in shaping beliefs and traditions. This food bowl displays the *kogukhpuk*, a creature whose features resemble the prehistoric mammoths that once roamed the Bering Sea region. The bowl has a two-piece bent-wood rim with stone insets and encircling grooves. Its interior bands are similar to the hoops and feathers on masks and provide a cosmological framework for the mammoth's spirit which resides in the animal's lifeline and skeleton.

the surface one night each year to wander and feed. Underground, they burrow about from place to place, and should they accidentally break through to the surface and breathe air, they instantly die. The tusks and bones found by Eskimos eroding out of frozen river banks and coastlines are taken as evidence of the truth of the tale.

In addition to their strong mythology, Bering Sea Eskimos, acute in their own observations of nature as demonstrated in the foregoing story, had their own scientific explanations for events and phenomena. Sometimes, these "secular" stories conflicted with religious versions like the Raven myths, as shown in the following account of the origins of land and people.

Origins of Land and People

In the beginning there was water over all the earth, and it was very cold; the water was covered with ice, and there were no people. Then the ice ground together, making long ridges and hummocks. At this time came a man from the far side of the great water and stopped on the ice hills near where Píkmíktalik now is, taking for his wife a she-wolf. By and by he had many children, which were always born in pairs—a boy and a girl. Each pair spoke a tongue of their own, different from that of their parents and different from any spoken by their brothers and sisters.

As soon as they were large enough each pair was sent out in a different direction from the others, and thus the family spread far and near from the ice hills, which now became snow-covered mountains. As the snow melted it ran down the hillsides, scooping out ravines and river beds, and so making the earth with its streams.

The twins peopled the earth with their children, and as each pair with their children spoke a language different from the others, the various tongues found on the earth were established and continue until this day.

(Nelson 1899:482)



While Nelson was visiting a *qasgiq* on Sledge Island two little girls approached, set their dolls up in a semicircle facing him, and then took positions behind the dolls where all could get a good look at the stranger. The dolls shown here—men on the left and women on the right—are made without projecting arms so their suits of clothing could be slipped on and off easily. The Kuskokwim couple shown wear the traditional garb of their region except for the man's hat, which is a Russian introduction.

Another myth which is frequently told and which is often found illustrated on artifacts, is an epic tale of heroism, here paraphrased from Nelson's recorded version:

The Last of the Thunderbirds

A myth from the lower Yukon River region

Long ago, there were many giant eagles, or Thunderbirds, but all of them had disappeared except for one pair that nested in a volcano high above a Yukon River village. From there they preyed upon caribou and people, carrying them off to feed to their young.

One day while a brave young hunter was away tending his fishnets, a Thunderbird carried off his wife as she fetched water from the river. Returning home, the hunter learned of her fate. Fearful but with grim resolve, he gathered his hunting arrows and climbed to the Thunderbirds' nest. There he was met by the shrill cries and fiery, shining eyes of the pair's young. With vengeance in his heart, he loosed arrow after arrow into the nest until all the young birds lay dead.

He did not have to wait long for the adult Thunderbirds to return. Upon seeing her young dead, the mother bird uttered cries of rage and swooped down upon the hunter, her wings beating like a gale in a forest. As she dived toward him, the hunter fitted an arrow to his bow and sent it deep into her throat. Giving a hoarse cry, she turned and flew off to the north, far beyond the hills.

Then the father bird circled and came roaring down. At the last instant, the hunter crouched behind a large stone, and the eagle's claws struck only rock. As the giant bird rose to strike again, the hunter sprang from his shelter and, with all of his strength, drove two heavy war arrows deep under the bird's great wing. Crying with rage and spreading his wings, the father bird floated away like a cloud in the sky into the northland, and the Thunderbirds were never seen again.



This man's tool box in the form of a black seal with a red encircling groove, skeletal line, and a ferocious mouth, has a complex narrative painted on the inside of its lid. The figures tell the story of the mythical thunderbird, which is seen carrying off a man and his kayak, a white whale, and a caribou, while other caribou flee. Other scenes portray magical subjects. One man pursues a harpooned whale; another is connected to a "spirited" wolf; and a third, wearing European dress, carries a kettle and a bag (gold?). The fourth figure is a pregnant woman.

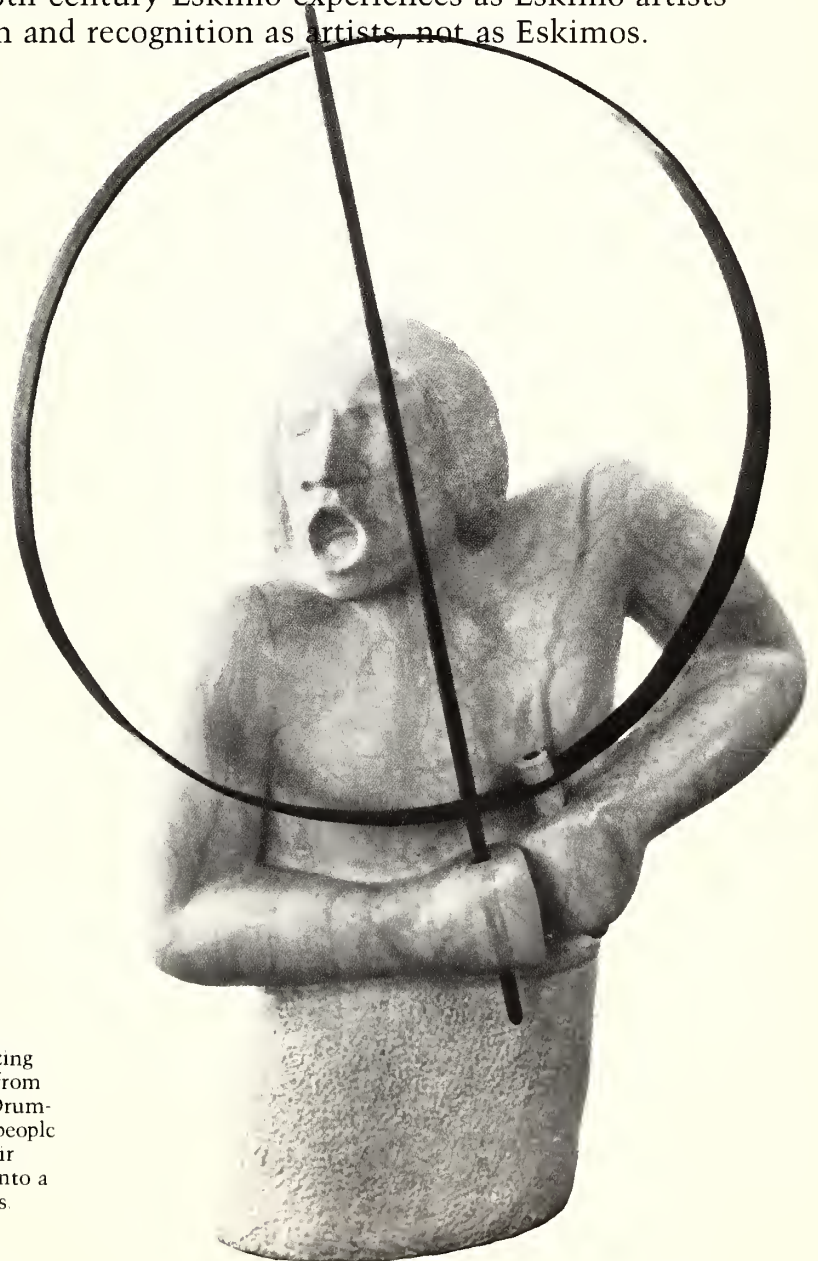
Past and Present

This print by Eskimo artist Joe Senungetuk is titled "Emergence of Resource." In the work the artist contrasts the presence of new technology in the form of an oil derrick and its drill with a small image of the old way of life.



Nineteenth century Bering Sea Eskimos were part of a cultural continuum dating back thousands of years. Although this ancestry cannot be demonstrated into remote antiquity, a quiver stiffener decorated with a *palraiyyuk*-like beast collected by Nelson from the lower Kuskokwim River region suggests that Eskimos using animal imagery and hunting magic have lived continuously in this area for at least 2,000 years. Similarities in the styles of 19th century Bering Sea carvings with those of the ancient Old Bering Sea cultures in Bering Strait are also evident. However, until more work is done along the Bering Sea coast, which is poorly known archeologically, the roots of the Bering Sea Eskimos and their relationships with other prehistoric peoples of western Alaska and Siberia will remain uncertain.

Today's Eskimo artists reflect both the deeply-rooted traditions of their native culture and of Western civilization. Contemporary artists work in both traditional and new mediums, sometimes blending traditional styles, materials, and ideas with concepts derived from modern international art and political events. Their art includes reinterpretation of age-old styles stimulated by 19th century artifacts and religious concepts such as those recorded by Nelson, which have long since disappeared from living tradition. Their work also includes commentary on social and political events and conflicts between traditional native and modern industrial life, as well as a continuing concern for abstraction, form, and materials. Bridging the two worlds, their work reflects the wide range of 20th century Eskimo experiences as Eskimo artists search for expression and recognition as artists, not as Eskimos.



Today social and economic changes crowd the vast spaces of the Eskimo's ancient homeland. Symbolizing social and spiritual solidarity of all Eskimo people from Siberia to Greenland, Lawrence Ahvakana's "The Drummer" evokes the traditional values of his far-flung people together with their continuing struggle to carry their cultural, social, and increasingly political identity into a future full of uncertainty and conflicting aspirations.

Postscript

Completing his fieldwork for the Smithsonian in 1881, Edward Nelson, aware that change was soon to come to the isolated people of the Bering Sea coast, commented:

I trust . . . that my present notes, with the explanations and descriptions . . . may serve as a foundation for more successful study of these subjects in the future; the field is now open, but in a few years the customs of this people will be so modified that it will be difficult to obtain reliable data.

No doubt Nelson would have been disappointed at the slow progress made in anthropological studies of the Bering Sea Eskimos following his fieldwork. To date few other studies of this important culture have been made. However, because of its relative isolation and the large population of Eskimos living here, most of whom still speak their own language and retain their oral history and traditional life, it is still possible to advance the goals set by Edward Nelson one hundred years ago. Nelson's detailed accounts, together with his collection of artifacts, linguistic data, myths, and photographs preserved for study at the Smithsonian's Museum of Natural History/Museum of Man, serves as a firm foundation for these studies. Edward Nelson's private diary from his Alaskan fieldwork is not among his papers at the Smithsonian. As this important document contains information amplifying his published accounts, the authors would appreciate information leading to its discovery.

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This exhibition and publication project, originally stimulated by the Honorable Senator Ted Stevens and his late wife Anne, represents a small step along the trail blazed by Edward Nelson. It is hoped that this work will kindle a new awareness of the past and present cultural resources of a spiritually and artistically rich people and that new studies will add substantially to existing documentation. In this way, using both old and new materials, we may hope to appreciate and understand more about Bering Sea Eskimo culture and in so doing help insure the preservation and continuation of its rich heritage.

Additional Reading

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Upik Lore: Oral Traditions of an Eskimo People edited by Edward Tennant and Joseph Bitar. Bethel, Alaska: Lower Kuskokwim School District, 1981.

A draft of this essay text was prepared by Meredith Anne Weber, a graduate student in art education at Pennsylvania State University, while conducting an internship with the Office of Research and Professional Training, the National Museum of American Art. Wendy Bruneau assisted in planning the SITES exhibition while serving as an intern from The George Washington University.

Ethnographic photographs were taken by Edward Nelson. All other photographs are by Joel Breger except for those on pages 1 and 32 by Henry Collins, on pages 28 and 29 by Sam Kimura. The map is by Molly Ryan. All materials illustrated are from the collections of the National Museum of Natural History/Museum of Man, Smithsonian Institution except for "Emergence of Resource" (Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum) and "The Drummer" (Atlantic Richfield Company).

SITES is a program activity of the Smithsonian Institution that organizes and circulates exhibitions on art, history, and science to institutions in the United States and abroad.

SITES Exhibition Coordinator, Martha M. Cappelletti, Publications Officer, Andrea P. Stevens.

In conjunction with the exhibition *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, the Smithsonian Institution Press has issued two publications. The first is a reprint of the original Nelson monograph, Bureau of American Ethnology Annual Report 18 (1899), entitled *The Eskimo About Bering Strait*. The second is a fully illustrated book, *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo* compiled by William W. Fitzhugh and Susan A. Kaplan. These two publications focus on this unique culture, recording the ingenuity of a people in utilizing resources and fine craftsmanship to insure survival in a difficult environment.





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