

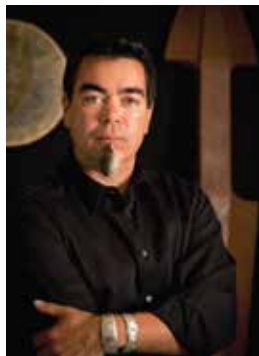


CREATIVE TRADITION

THE ENDURING ARTISTRY OF ALASKA NATIVE CULTURES
BY ERIC LUCAS

JOEL ISAAK FIRST BECAME FASCINATED BY SALMON SKIN WHEN HE WAS A YOUNG BOY AT HIS TOWN'S TRADITIONAL FISHING CAMP ON ALASKA'S KENAI RIVER. HIS FAMILY CAUGHT HUNDREDS OF SALMON EACH YEAR ALONG A SANDY BEACH NEAR SOLDOTNA, AND WHILE HELPING PROCESS THE CATCH, THE 8-YEAR-OLD BEGAN TO MULL THE CHARACTERISTICS OF SOCKEYE SKIN.

"IT SEEMS SO LIGHT AND THIN AND FLIMSY, BUT HAVE YOU EVER TRIED TO USE A SLIGHTLY DULL KNIFE ON IT? NO GO. YOU CAN CUT YOUR FINGER, BUT NOT THE FISH SKIN," ISAAK SAYS. "CONSIDER SHARK SKIN—IT'S ONE OF THE WORLD'S STRONGEST LEATHERS. SALMON ARE NOT SHARKS, BUT THEIR SKIN IS A LOT MORE DURABLE THAN YOU'D THINK."



Left: *Da-ka-xeen, the Tlingit Artist*, 2007. This digital photograph by Da-ka-xeen Mehner depicts the artist, seated on the left (and pictured above), juxtaposed with an archive image of an early 20th century elder. This work, along with the artwork at right, can be seen at the Alaska Native Arts Foundation Gallery in Anchorage.

Isaak has turned that boyhood wonderment into a series of signature artworks that are bringing the now 24-year-old artist acclaim—and that perfectly epitomize 21st century Alaska Native art. The term “Alaska Native art” brings to mind towering cedar totems with colorful natural icons carved in swirling geometric shapes; elegant bentwood boxes delicately painted in similar designs; fine hand-carved jewelry in silver or stone; and luminous robes decorated with vivid natural designs or buttons. Pieces such as these represent a cultural heritage that dates back millennia, and that stretches from the Iñupiaq villages in the far north to Yup’ik communities along the Bering Sea to Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian settlements in Southeast Alaska. These artworks and cultural artifacts have been collected for centuries, are prominently featured in major museums around the world, and are still being made by

wall panels; parka silhouettes may be shadowed onto paper canvases; historic photographs may be altered to position modern Alaska Natives next to 19th century elders. These works are art and craft, traditional and innovative, provocative and appealing—and, taken as a whole, they provide one of the Great Land’s most dynamic cultural forces.

Isaak typifies the movement. For the past three years he has been making what he calls “family self-portraits,” masks made of tanned salmon skin on which he embosses his facial features and those of his relatives. Introduced to the wider world at an opening last winter at Anchorage’s Alaska Native Arts Foundation Gallery, the masks present an evocative blend of thoroughly modern artistic concept and traditional materials and techniques. I examine the pieces closely; almost translucent, the masks have an evanescent quality that heightens



hundreds of Native artists today.

But art does not stand still, and from the Arctic to Southeast Alaska, from Inuit to Haida, artists with Native heritages are expanding the styles, materials and concepts of their people’s traditions into new territory that is intriguingly different, yet recognizably indigenous. Today’s artists are moving beyond old debates and divisions between “art” and “craft,” and are developing unique creative forms inspired by the past but invigorated by the present. Totems may be divided into pieces and turned into

Above: *Tiq’u vava* (Dried Salmon Mask), a work by Joel Isaak (right), features the facial features of Isaak’s family members embossed on the skin of sockeye salmon.



ANCHORAGE'S ORIGINAL RESIDENTS

FOR MORE THAN A THOUSAND YEARS, the Dena'ina people have inhabited Alaska's Cook Inlet region—but not until now has a major museum devoted significant space to their culture and traditions. The Anchorage Museum's new exhibit "Dena'inaq' Huch'ulyeshi: The Dena'ina Way of Living" is expressly designed to change public awareness and perception of the people who greeted the first European settlers in the Anchorage area.

"Too many people thought of Cook Inlet as a cultural vacuum with no people there," says Aaron Leggett, special exhibits curator at the museum and a Dena'ina who has spent the past few years putting together this show. "I could even say 'I am Dena'ina' to other Alaska Native people and they'd know nothing about us."

The Dena'ina were Alaska's most numerous Athabaskan people, before introduced diseases and other post-contact challenges reduced their numbers. They were also Alaska's only coastal Athabascans, melding interior and Pacific lifestyles into a unique blend. Though the Dena'ina were largely unknown in modern times, their history has not vanished, as Leggett discovered as he sought Dena'ina art and artifacts for the exhibit.

More than 200 ethnological items will be on display, gathered from museums around the world and supplemented by artifacts from local sources. Caribou-skin garments, arrows fletched with hawk feathers, interior-style beadwork and gut rain-coats are among the treasures on display; dioramas depict subsistence activities such as drying salmon; and archival photos document traditional lifestyles.

"We're in a cultural vacuum no more, we hope," Leggett says. The exhibit opens September 15 and runs through January 12, 2014; for more information, visit anchagemuseum.org. —E.L.



Right: *Gold Kupak II*, a work in acrylic polymer, ink and walrus stomach, by Sonya Kelliher-Combs (above). Below: *Breaching Killer Whale*, 2008, a glass sculpture by Preston Singletary, at the Anchorage Museum.

COURTESY: ALASKA NATIVE ARTS FOUNDATION (2)



their abstraction—but the facial features are distinctly figurative, and they are made from a natural material that's long been central to North Pacific indigenous life.

Historically, salmon skin was fashioned by Native women into utilitarian objects such as waterproof bags and containers. "By itself, it's water-resistant; if you oil it, it's pretty much waterproof, so you might use a five-gallon bag for, well, a laundry bucket," Isaak explains.

"The fact that I'm male using this material means I'm blending traditional roles as well as traditional and modern artistic philosophies."

Isaak takes great delight in the fact that he is pushing boundaries in several directions—which is another common feature among many of today's Alaskan artists. The common impulse to categorize things is unnecessary, argue Alaska art experts who happily welcome



COURTESY: ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

innovations such as Isaak's, innovations that typically prompt a number of questions that invite categorization: Art or craft? Male or female? Indigenous or not? Traditional or modern or even postmodern?

"We shouldn't have to pick, should we?" responds Anchorage Museum curator Julie

Decker, who advises the museum's acquisitions committee on the purchase of about 30 pieces of Alaska art each year, and who created a museum exhibit illustrating the dynamic world of contemporary Native art, "Re/Marks" (through April 13, 2014). The three dozen pieces in the exhibit cover several decades of contemporary Native art and run the gamut from comfortably representational (the art-world term that means "looks recognizably like what it is") to abstract but familiar, such as James Schoppert's deconstructed, nonlinear totems. These totems not

BUYING NATIVE ART

Though there are many galleries and shops throughout Alaska that offer visitors authentic Native art for sale, some other, usually cheaper, items are manufactured overseas. Alaska Native advocates urge that visitors who wish to support indigenous Alaskan artisans be mindful of their purchases while in the Great Land.

"Our members out there in rural communities have homes to sustain, bills to pay, families to support," says Trina Landlord, executive director at the Alaska Native Arts Foundation. "Our mission is to help them find a way to be full-time artists, and low-priced competition from non-authentic foreign manufacturers is a real issue."

Buying an item with the Silver Hand label ensures that the item was made in Alaska by an Alaska Native, but not all Native artists are enrolled in the state program. Landlord says the key for visitors who wish to be sure they are supporting Native artists is to ask about any piece they are interested in and seek a certificate of authenticity—which is exactly what thoughtful institutional buyers in Alaska do now, whether they represent state museums or businesses such as the Native-owned Seward Windsong Lodge and Talkeetna Alaskan Lodge, owned by Cook Inlet Region, Incorporated (CIRI), a Native corporation.

"Inquire about the artist's cultural affiliation, see if the shop has a biography of the artist, ask for a detailed description of the piece—that is, the material, when it was crafted and where, and so on," Landlord urges.

Federal law requires that

any foreign-made item imported into the United States for sale here must bear a conspicuous label identifying the item's country of manufacture, and that any item purporting to be Native-made be so in fact.

But enforcement is difficult, and it's easy to find souvenir items that do not comply with this rule (and this is true throughout the country, not just in Alaska). If you have any doubt about the origin of an item, just ask.

Notable purveyors of authentic, verified Alaskan art include:

● **THE ALASKA NATIVE ARTS FOUNDATION GALLERY**, 500 W. Sixth Avenue in downtown Anchorage. The gallery participates in the city's very popular year-round First Friday art walks, which encompass two dozen shops and restaurants.
● **GIFT SHOPS AT THE ANCHORAGE MUSEUM** (alaskanative.net); **ALASKA NATIVE MEDICAL CENTER** (anmc.org); **MUSEUM OF THE NORTH** (uaf.edu/museum); **ALASKA STATE MUSEUM AND SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM** (museums.alaska.gov).

Numerous private stores and art galleries throughout Alaska also make sure their Native art is authentic and correctly labeled. Again, just ask for additional information.

For more information about buying Native art, visit the Federal Trade Commission page devoted to the topic at ftc.gov. Additional information is also available from the U.S. Department of the Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board, at doi.gov/iacb, and from the Office of the Alaska Attorney General's Consumer Protection Unit, at law.state.ak.us/consumer. —E.L.

PATRICIA FISHER / FISHER PHOTOGRAPHY



only approached this classic indigenous form from a modern perspective, but also, Decker says, brought the artist critical feedback within his Tlingit community because of concerns he had abandoned traditional precepts.

"We cannot return to the old ways, but we must retain the old ways and reflect them in our attitudes and in our art. This will be our contribution," explained Schoppert, who died in 1992.

Some modern Native artists have encountered challenging experiences in the outside world, as well. Artist Sonya Kelliher-Combs, now a revered veteran of the Alaska art world, laughs today about an experience she had years ago as a budding artist. She was determined to gain a review in a major art magazine for a solo show of her work at the Anchorage Museum, and contacted one of the magazine's correspondents and offered to pay for him to come to Alaska to view the show.

"I didn't care what he wrote—I just wanted a major critic to see it," Kelliher-Combs told a gathering of artists and art fans at the museum last spring. "He refused. He told me, 'If you really want to be an artist, you have to move out of Alaska.' I didn't want to do that." Today, her pieces—which incorporate paper and indigenous fibers and feature silhouettes along with traditional symbols and patterns—hang in museums across North America and command high prices from collectors.

Younger artists no longer face the same level of skepticism about working in Alaska. Anna Hoover, an Aleut-Norwegian multimedia artist and videographer, has shown her work in Russia and New Zealand as well as in many U.S. locales; has received grants from arts foundations in Alaska and the Lower 48; and has shown her films documenting Native cultures and art to audiences across the United States. Now, Hoover is establishing a foundation to provide a residency retreat center in Anchorage for Native artists to gather and work.

"To the outside world, Alaska's not just a big place with gold and oil any more," says Hoover, who also commercially fishes in

The Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery at Museum of the North in Fairbanks.

Bristol Bay each summer. “There are quite a few young Native artists doing worthwhile, appealing and thought-provoking work, and the world is taking notice of what’s happening here.”

On the other hand, some Native artists have benefited by journeying far from Alaska. Many have studied at the seminal Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, and some have sidestepped art-world obstacles by delving into classic anthropology. Delores Churchill, a revered elder widely credited with reviving Haida basketry as an art form, found early in her career that if she wanted to rediscover the exact techniques her ancestors had used, she’d need to travel to London. There, in the British Museum, was the best collection of historic Haida baskets; she obtained a grant from the Alaska State Council on the Arts to spend several months studying the baskets, which enabled her to better understand the weaving techniques her forebears had used.

The novelty of needing to cross the

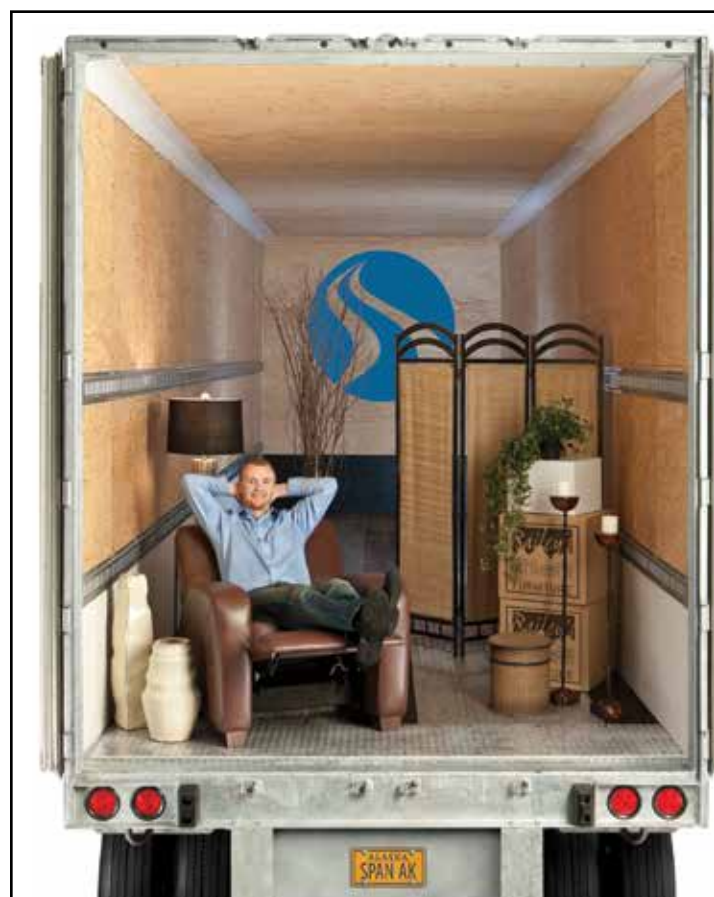


Performers during the 2013 Fairbanks Festival of Native Arts, an annual celebration at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

ocean to find historic Native art—that had originally been collected as anthropological craftwork—illustrates the way that old tensions between “art” and “craft” have evolved from conflict into catalyst for today’s Native artists. Historic precedent is the reason, for instance, that the storage archives at Fairbanks’ Museum of the North have separate sections devoted to “art” and “craft,” but it’s clear that the distinction is often unnecessary.

Guided by collections manager Angela

Linn, I’m standing between two rows of storage cabinets beneath the museum’s main floor: on one side, the ethnographic collection, on the other, the art collection. On one side, I peruse a modern work of non-Native concept art in which a gold pan is holding a high-heel-clad mannequin leg; on the other, I bend down to look at an exquisite sealskin *bidarka* (kayak) model, 18 inches long, holding a 4-inch doll figure. The entire model is made of delicate skin or gut, features marvelously intricate hand



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stitching and is outright gorgeous.

The bidarka is in the ethnographic collection—craftwork of undetermined Aleutian origin, added to the collection in 1944. The gold-pan-mannequin is in the art collection.

I mention the interesting choice of categorization to Linn; she nods.

"We debate this all the time. Is it art? Craft? It doesn't make much difference here in the basement of the museum, I suppose, but it is of huge significance out in the real world of artists trying to make a living—'art' consistently commands higher prices than 'craft,'" she says. "And museum buyers set the tone for the world of private art collection," she says, explaining that if a piece is called "ethnographic," the unintended result may be to arbitrarily categorize the work and diminish its value.

Museum of the North, an adjunct of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, holds an upstairs gallery that discards all these labels and categories. The Rose Berry Alaska Art Gallery has sealskin parkas—the ultimate ethnographic "craft"—side by side with Sydney Laurence paintings of Denali, an excellent example of European-style representational art. Ancient is next to new; Native beside Western; and sculpture, textile, painting, beadwork and jewelry are all exhibited as one. Museum director Aldona Jonaitis deliberately created the gallery to bypass traditional organizational categories; to her, a work is art if people want to see it—and its significance is carried within the artwork and the viewer's reaction to it.

But Jonaitis (author of *Understanding Totems*, a recent guide from the University of Washington Press) fervently advocates one level of categorization: Art should not be called "Native" or indigenous unless it is crafted by a Native person, and art buyers ought to honor the distinction. "If you care about indigenous people, then you care about empowering them to thrive—and one key way to do that is to make sure that when you buy something purportedly Native, it is actually made by a Native person," Jonaitis says.

Such an objective might seem easy to achieve in Alaska; around 15 percent of the



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state's population is Alaska Native or American Indian—close to 100,000 people, according to census figures. Many Alaska Natives practice a subsistence lifestyle that includes, during the dark winter months, crafting objects ranging from dolls to bracelets to paintings to totems that are offered for sale at Native outlets, mainstream galleries or gift shops.

Many such artists enroll in the state's Silver Hand program—administered by the Alaska State Council on the Arts—which allows them to attach a label identifying their work as Native-made; Silver Hand participants must be enrolled members of one of the state's more than 200 Native villages or federally recognized tribes.

Sounds simple, but by no means do all Native artists enroll in Silver Hand, and not even all the 1,250 members of the Alaska Native Arts Foundation are Silver Hand enrollees. "Some of our members just say, 'Well, I'm Native, and I produce art, I don't need the government to tell me what kind of artist I am,'" says Trina Landlord, ANAF director. The organization's mission is to provide a forum and broaden exposure—and thus improve livelihoods—for Native artists. ANAF's chief arena for that is its downtown Anchorage gallery at 500 W. Sixth Avenue; though fairly small, the gallery has an active schedule of shows and exhibits, and has been the launchpad for many young Native artists, such as Joel Isaak, whose salmon skin-mask show opening drew 500 art fans. In addition, pieces by many well-known Native artists (whether the subject of current shows or not) are available for sale.

That's where I first spied two marvelously engaging pieces by Da-ka-keen Mehner, a Tlingit-German artist who's now a professor at UAF (and was one of Isaak's mentors). Mehner produces such a wide range of art that one cannot categorize him as painter, carver, sculptor or photographer—he does all that, and more—but his two possibly best-known pieces both feature him as a performance artist in a piece of conceptual photo art. My favorite shows Mehner, dressed in ancestral regalia, posed in a chair across



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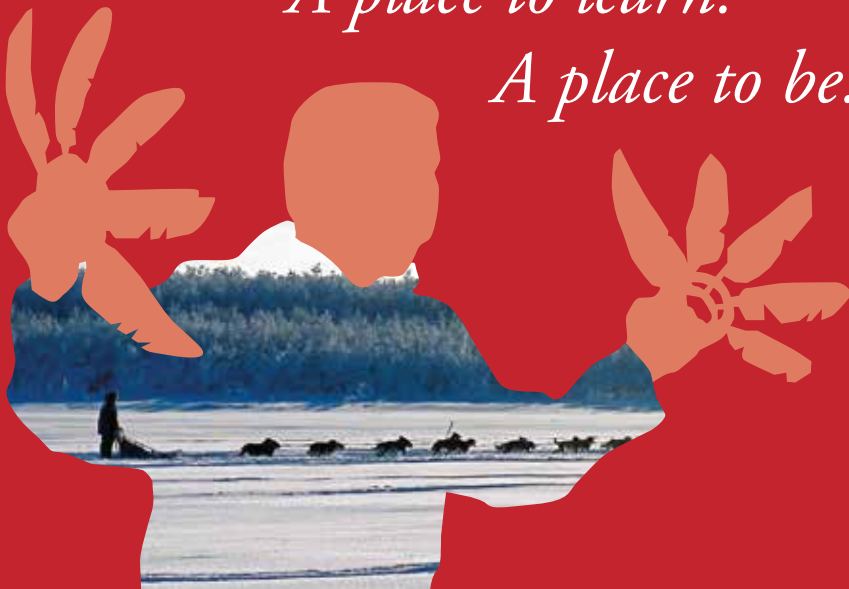
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from a heritage photo of an early 20th century Tlingit elder, taken in a Ketchikan photo studio. The headdress-clad elder looks vaguely disconcerted; Mehner, for his part, looks puzzled, and if you inspect the image closely, he has a camera in his hand.

“One day I was looking through old photo archives, and I stumbled on this picture,” recalls Mehner, a Tlingit member of the Killer Whale Clan. “Then I noticed that the model was named Da-yuc-hene,” which sounded similar to Da-ka-xeen’s name. “I thought, ‘Hmmm. ...’ You see the result.” He laughs, which he does a lot. As serious as the Native art ethos and universe may seem, humor is an integral part of the Native world, and humorous stories consume vast amounts of time whenever artists gather.

For instance, I’m meeting Fairbanks elder Dixie Alexander for lunch to learn about her lifetime of Athabascan beadwork and garment artistry—a true national treasure—and somehow the subject of the Navajo comes up. The Arizona tribe is Athabascan in origin; northern Alaskan Athabascans and the Navajo are cousins, and anthropologists believe the latter arrived in the American Southwest only a century or two prior to the Spanish conquistadors.

“Yeah, we sent them down there for buffalo, and they never came back,” jokes Alexander. “No buffalo for us.” But she turns serious when discussing her art and her mission—and how recognition will help it survive and grow.

“I started when I was 9, and I fell in love with it,” says Alexander, now 56 and still plying her art every day. “It’s very important to Native people like me to teach my craft and pass it on into the future.”

And low-key as he may be, Mehner, too, urges that all art fans interested in Native Alaskan works be sure they are looking at—and buying—real Native art (see “Buying Native Art,” page 39).

“When I was in school I didn’t like that label, ‘Native art,’” says Mehner, a graduate of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe. “But I’ve come to embrace it. My

CONTINUED ON PAGE 160

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FROM PAGE 46 cultural heritage influences everything I do.”

This blend of heritage and modernity is what makes contemporary Alaska Native art so engaging. A Native artwork today may be a canvas-based painting, but one that also incorporates porcupine quills. It may be a totem but range into modern color palettes never dreamed of by carvers a century ago. It may be made of salmon skin but have an ethereal, abstract air that makes you pause to ponder the importance of life cycles and generations.

Or it may be a simple placemat-size print in vivid Arctic colors that catches my eye at a table at the Fairbanks Festival of Native Arts, the annual February celebration of all things Native at UAF. Ken Lisbourne's painting *Cape Thompson* depicts an Inuit village, Point Hope—Lisbourne's village, I discover when I stop to chat with the artist, who is also his own sales rep and marketing manager.

“I just tell the stories of my Eskimo people,” Lisbourne says, disarmingly, about his paintings that depict whale hunting, blanket tossing and other aspects of Arctic life. “You should buy a print. I might be famous some day.”

I do buy, not because of any potential fame, but because of the heady combination of personal contact, visual appeal, meaningfulness and history that this one piece of paper conveys from maker to buyer, from yesterday to tomorrow.

“We hear a lot about the ‘Native art renaissance,’” says Joel Isaak. “But using that term implies that something died and was reborn. Nothing died—we are carrying our art from past to future, and the lens of public attention has turned our way again.” ▲

Eric Lucas lives in Seattle.

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