

# The North

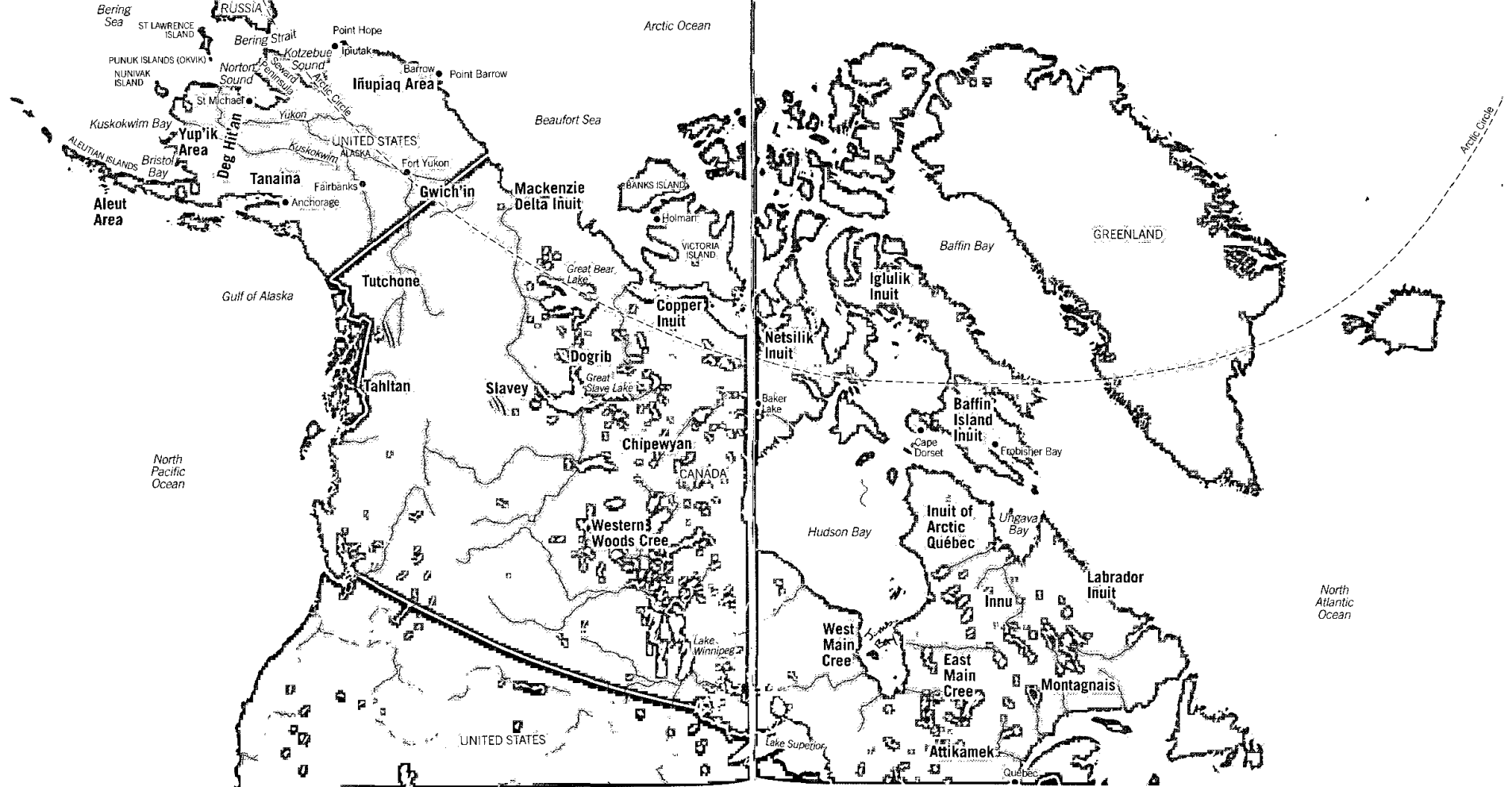
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A horned shaman, clad in fur garments, crouches in a dance position, hands on his hips. Perched on his legs, lap, torso, and shoulders are small birds and mammals. Astride his head stands a small spirit-helper in human form [111]. Inuit artist Jessie Oonark has captured the essential bond that links the human world with that of spirits and animals. According to stories told among Eskimo peoples, powerful earth-dwelling or sea-dwelling spirits have miniature animals that live on their bodies. These animals travel to the human world and allow themselves to be captured in the hunt, to sustain human life. Human beings have for thousands of years sought the co-operation of the animal spirits and honoured them by wearing small amulets carved in their images.

Such ritual and artistic traditions reflect beliefs, common throughout the Arctic and Sub-arctic regions of the North, in relationships of reciprocity and respect that bind animal and human populations to each other, and both to the land that nourishes them. Among the Dene, as a late nineteenth-century missionary pointed out, 'a hunter returning home empty-handed would not say, "I had no luck with bear or beaver," but rather "Bear or beaver did not *want* me".<sup>11</sup> Such attitudes, fundamental to Northern ways of life, help to explain the purposes for which much visual art is made. Among both Arctic and Sub-arctic peoples the highest level of artistry has been committed to the ornamentation of clothing and equipment in order to please the animal spirits so that they will give themselves to the hunter and so that their protective powers can be transferred to humans [92]. Northern artists have drawn upon a wealth of animal materials in fashioning visually appealing clothing and utensils—including bark, wood, roots, salmon skin, walrus intestine, musk ox and moose hair, bird pelts, bone, antler, and ivory, as well as the more widely used hides of deer, caribou, and hare. Northern clothing arts demonstrate the remarkable patience, dexterity, and imagination of women in transforming a caribou hide, fifty yards of walrus intestine, or a hundred bird pelts into a garment of lasting use and beauty. Although these arts never died out in many places, they are practised by few people today. The late twentieth century has, however seen a renewal of many exacting techniques

Detail of 111

Peoples of the North as discussed in this chapter



for preparing materials and sewing that had for some years been in decline.

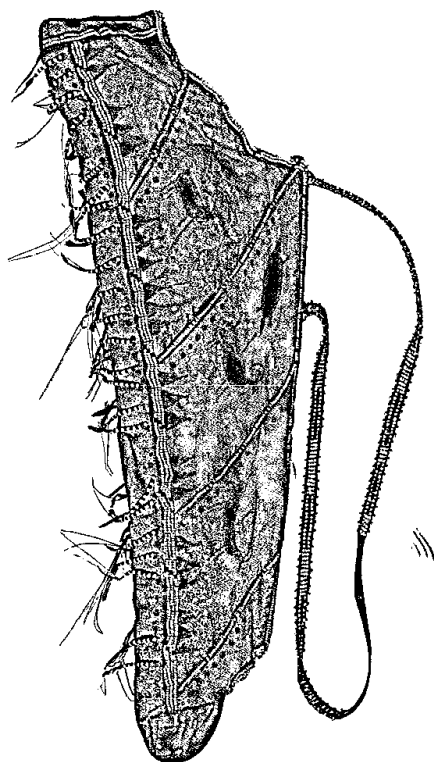
The importance of hunting also helps to explain the centrality of shamanistic practices to Northern ritual-artistic expression. Specialist shamans engaged their powerful helper spirits in order to communicate with beings that control the animals—for example, Sedna, the undersea mistress of the Arctic sea mammals, or the Eastern Sub-arctic Master of Caribou who controls game animals on the land.

Across the North, shamans wore carved amulets and distinctive clothing for public performances that testified to their powers and visionary experiences. Yup'ik artists depicted the mystical journeys of shamans in carved and painted masks that have been greatly admired by many Western art lovers, especially during the 1930s and '40s (105). (See also Chapter 1.) Alaskan Eskimos built large houses that could accommodate the entire populations of one or two villages to house the dances, singing contests and story-telling that occupied long Arctic winter

**92 Tanaina (Dene) artist**

Quiver (beads, unsmoked skin, red ochre, feathers), before 1841

This is one of several extant Dene quivers dated to the first half of the nineteenth century that display animals painted in red ochre. The ornamentation of hunting equipment with animal representations may have been a means of honouring the animal spirits. The use of symbolic abstract patterns for such purposes is, however, more typical of Dene art.



nights. Today, visual arts continue to play important roles in the community festivals that have replaced these performances. In the Arctic, commercial fine arts have become a source of economic subsistence as well as a means for recording traditional beliefs and historical memories.

**Geography, environment, and language in the North**

The Sub-arctic zone of the North stretches from Cook Inlet in the west, east around the southern shores of Hudson and James Bays to the Labrador Coast. It is a zone of boreal forest and taiga whose growing season is too short for crop cultivation, but which is covered in forests and lakes rich with animals, fish and plant life. North of the treeline is the Arctic, the largest and the least populated region on the continent. It extends from the Aleutian Islands and the Bering Strait, across Alaska and Canada to Greenland, a span of more than 10,000 kilometres. On Ellesmere Island and in the far north of Greenland are the closest human habitations to the North Pole. Parts of the Arctic tundra are home to musk oxen and migratory herds of caribou, but far fewer

plant and animal species can live there than elsewhere in North America. The most important sources of food, shelter, and clothing for Arctic peoples are fish and sea mammals, particularly seals, walrus and whales. Most Arctic communities are therefore orientated towards the coastal waters.

According to archaeological and anthropological evidence, the ancestors of the Sub-arctic and Arctic peoples arrived in North America at different times. The Sub-arctic was one of the last regions to be populated by Indian peoples before the ice cover cut off communication across the Bering Straits about 12,000 years ago. The ancestors of the Eskimo arrived more recently, about 4,000 years ago, after the receding glaciers again permitted people to cross from Northeastern Siberia into what is now Alaska and Canada. The migration of these Arctic hunters into a previously unoccupied area was made possible by their development of sophisticated fishing and hunting technologies that allowed them to harvest the Arctic sea mammals. Close cultural and linguistic ties link the Eskimo to the Chukchi and Evenk of Northeastern Siberia; the long history of regular contact among these peoples was interrupted during the Cold War but is now being resumed.

All the Arctic peoples speak languages belonging to the Eskimo-Aleut group. Within this family, Aleut, spoken by the peoples of the Aleutian Islands, is a distinct branch, as is Yup'ik, which is spoken by the Eskimos of Southwestern Alaska and also by Siberian peoples living on the Chukchi Peninsula. The languages of the Iñupiaq living along the Northern Bering Strait and Beaufort Sea, and those of the Canadian Inuit, belong to the same branch. Within each large division are diverse cultural groups, such as the Netsilik, Copper, Caribou, and eastern groups in Canada. In Alaska the term 'Eskimo' is generally used by all the Arctic peoples while in Canada and Greenland the name 'Inuit' ('the people' in the Inuktitut language) is preferred.<sup>2</sup>

The Cree peoples of the Eastern Sub-arctic, living in what is today Northern Labrador, Quebec and Ontario, speak closely related languages belonging to the Algonkian family.<sup>3</sup> They include the Innu (Naskapi), Montagnais, James Bay (or East Main) Cree, Attikamek (Tete de Boule), and Swampy (or West Main) Cree. The peoples of the Western Sub-arctic speak languages belonging to the Athapaskan family. There are about twenty-six distinct groups of Northern Athapaskan speakers, among them the Tanaina, Deg Hit'an (Ingalik), Tahltan, Gwich'in (Kuchin), Slavey, and Chipewyan. Although all these peoples refer to themselves in their own languages as *dene* or *dena* ('the people'), the collective name 'Dene' has become standard only in the Canadian Northwest Territories. In the United States, Athapaskan is more common.<sup>4</sup>

The time of first contact with Europeans varied greatly in different

parts of the Arctic and Sub-arctic. For two centuries following English explorer Sir Martin Frobisher's (1535–94) first contact with the Inuit of the Eastern Arctic in 1576, a series of other English explorers made sea and land journeys through the Arctic, motivated by the search for the Northwest Passage and the desire to stake territorial claims, but their journeys had little immediate impact on the indigenous people. The establishment of Russian settlements in 1741 in Southwestern Alaska brought fur traders and missionaries into the Western Arctic; the Danes and Norwegians established settlements in Greenland in the eighteenth century. Elsewhere in the Arctic regular contacts did not begin until a century later, when missionaries and whalers (who wintered over in the Arctic) established a more permanent white presence.

The Jesuits initiated missions to groups of eastern Cree in the Eastern Sub-arctic during the first half of the seventeenth century, and fur trading posts were established around Hudson's Bay later in that century. It was not until the late eighteenth century that the fur trade was extended into the Western Sub-arctic and parts of Alaska. The fur trade expanded during the nineteenth century, and whaling brought Europeans and Americans into the Arctic. Throughout the North, however, the greatest changes have come in the twentieth century. Discoveries of gold, other minerals, and oil brought foreigners to Alaska and the Canadian Yukon and Northwest Territories, and they eventually came to outnumber the indigenous peoples in some places. After World War II, the Canadian Government established permanent settlements and residential schools for the Inuit, changing their traditional nomadic life and (unintentionally) introducing tuberculosis and other diseases as well as new and detrimental forms of dependency.

#### Sub-arctic clothing: art to honour and protect

In the Sub-arctic, as in the Arctic, survival depended on the ability to make clothing that protected against the extreme climate, as well as on the hunter's ability to kill the animals that supplied the necessary hides. The Western tendency to separate utilitarian from artistic concerns, and acts of aesthetic self-expression from those of ritual observance, hinders an understanding of the inextricable interconnectedness of these factors in the creation and visual elaboration of Sub-arctic clothing. Scholars who study the Western Sub-arctic have stressed the protective function of clothing, not just against weather or mosquitoes, but also as a strategy for enhancing an individual's confidence and communicative power in relation to the game he sought. For some Sub-arctic peoples, too, the proper ritual-artistic treatment of a hide ensured its retention of some of the animal's own abilities. As an extension of this principle, there is evidence from the Dene that, over time, the wearer's powers came to permeate his or her clothing and could be transferred with the garment to another wearer.



93 Innu (Naskapi) artist

Hunter's summer coat  
(caribou skin, sinew,  
fish-egg paint), c.1805

One of the most splendid of the 150 extant painted caribou-hide coats collected in Northern Quebec, this coat illustrates the skills in painting and quillwork that Innu women put into making clothing that would please the spirits of animals who gave themselves to humans.

Sub-arctic clothing for the coldest weather consisted of double layers of furred caribou hide clothing—the inner layer with the fur side against the body to trap heat and the outer layer with the fur outside to shed water and snow. The de-haired caribou skin clothing worn in warmer weather until the twentieth century by both Eastern Cree and Dene was often elaborately decorated. Autumn is also the time of the caribou hunt when, as we will see, ornamented clothing had ritual importance. Until the nineteenth century, the primary technique for decorating clothing among the Cree was painting using mineral pigments to produce a palette of red, black, and white.<sup>5</sup>

The distinctive painting style used by the Labrador Innu in the

early contact period features dense bands of parallel lines and the graceful, bilaterally symmetrical scroll motifs that anthropologist Frank Speck termed 'double curves' [93 and 15]. Artists used tools made of bone or antler, some of which had multiple prongs that allowed the artist to produce sets of evenly spaced parallel lines.<sup>6</sup> In a famous study carried out during the 1930s Speck reported Innu hunters' belief that, 'animals prefer to be killed by hunters whose clothing is decorated with designs' and that decoration also pleased the hunter's own inner 'soul-spirit'. In singing to game animals the hunter would say, 'you and I wear the same covering and have the same mind and spiritual strength'.<sup>7</sup> An Innu woman's painstaking painting of a caribou-skin summer coat was thus a ritual gesture of respect to the animal spirits and helped to ensure their continued co-operation. A similar general principle, articulated particularly clearly in Speck's ethnography, probably lies behind traditions of decorated clothing across the North.

The fitted cut and flared skirt of the Innu hunters' coats that were made until the beginning of the twentieth century is distinctive, and differs considerably from other Sub-arctic clothing. Dorothy Burnham has recently confirmed the theory that this cut was influenced by gifts of French clothing made to Native people early in the contact period, and that changes in cut between about 1700 and the early 1900s continued to reflect changes in European men's fashions. Most importantly, however, her analysis reveals the probable symbolic significance of the triangular gusset inserted into the back of the skirt, a feature which serves no functional purpose but was retained throughout the

#### 94 James Bay Cree artist

Dolls (dolls of European manufacture, hide, porcupine quills, paint, cloth, red ochre, beads), c.1800

The dolls in this unique set are of European manufacture and can be dated to 1770–90. Their miniature garments were made by Cree women, probably as a commission for a European curiosity cabinet. They are the only known examples of the clothing worn at that time by James Bay Cree women and exactly match the written descriptions of mid-eighteenth-century fur traders.



two centuries of documentable development despite the many changes in cut that occurred. 'This gusset,' Burnham argues, 'which is shaped like a mountain peak, was the symbolic centre of the coat's power and ... represents the Magical Mountain where the Lord of the Caribou lived and from the fastnesses of which the caribou were released to give themselves to the hunter.'<sup>8</sup> Her interpretation complements Ted Brassier's reading of the painted designs on an Innu shaman's hide robe as a conceptual map of the seasons and cosmic zones that order the cycle of plant, animal, and human life [15].

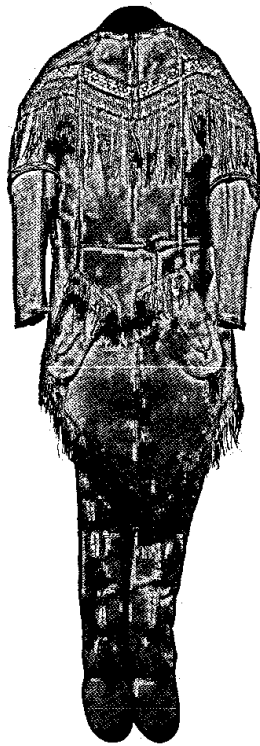
Although we have less information about painted clothing made by neighbouring Cree living around James Bay, it is reasonable to assume that similar beliefs and purposes informed its decoration. Nineteenth-century moosehide painted coats made by the James Bay Cree display a less fitted cut that Burnham believes was once also used by the Innu, and resemble the coats worn by the neighbouring Great Lakes Anishnabe. Ornaments and attached panels of netted, woven, and embroidered quill- and beadwork further enriched James Bay Cree clothing [7]. A unique pair of dolls dating to around 1800 displays both the way these ornaments were combined with clothing and the garments worn by women about 1800 [94]. All are painted with stripes and rectilinear patterns incorporating bands of repeated triangles and circles. Towards the middle of the nineteenth century, painted floral designs were added to this repertoire.

The Dene peoples of the Western Sub-arctic made caribou-hide clothing of markedly different cut and decorative approach. The two principal garments worn by both men and women were a long-sleeved tunic and one-piece moccasin-trousers. Mitts and hoods completed the outfit [95]. Dene women ornamented these carefully tailored garments with porcupine quills—dyed with plant and berry juices and woven or sewn to form geometric designs—and with fine, dense fringing, often threaded with silver willow seeds and wrapped with porcupine quills. Judy Thompson points out that the delicate ochre lines painted around the neck, wrists, seams, and hemline of many garments had practical uses as waterproofing and as tailoring marks, and that, because they also seem to mark 'vulnerable points' of the body, these ochre borders may also have afforded spiritual protection.<sup>9</sup> Like Cree women, Dene artists made a variety of ornaments using porcupine and bird quills, animal bones, antlers, teeth, and feathers to complement clothing ensembles. There is considerable evidence that such ornaments played an important role as ritual offerings and gift exchanges. Individuals were buried with their finest ornaments: one early source suggests that Dene people offered quilled ornaments to the spirits of those that they had killed in war; and young Dene women wore distinctive ornamental hoods at the onset of puberty to mark their ritual segregation.

95 Gwich'in (Kuchin) artist

Man's suit of clothes (tanned caribou or moose hide, trade beads, quills), late nineteenth century

When this man's suit was made, the traditional clothing ensemble it exemplifies had already gone out of style in many places. The finely tanned caribou hide garments are enriched by vegetable-dyed quill embroidery, quilled leg garters, and incised antler arm-bands. Subtle striped patterns are formed by the additions of beads and quill wrapping to the dense fringes.



The customs that surrounded Dene women's puberty and menstrual seclusion offer further insight into the high value placed on women's capacity to make rich ornaments for ritual and personal adornment. In traditional belief systems, the great power that manifests itself in women during menstruation (and especially at its first occurrence) can interfere with a hunter's success. Women therefore segregated themselves from their communities at such times and for a prolonged period at puberty. Puberty seclusion was also the time for perfecting the sewing skills a girl had started to acquire during her childhood. In 1983 Mary Wilson recalled her own experience many decades earlier.

Then you are introduced to sewing—crafts like embroidering, sewing with porcupine quills, and beading ... a very talented woman is chosen to start the first stitching. It seems like how you did during that time was the formation of your life as an adult ... Nothing was written or read, everything was oral, but even today I still remember all that was told to me when I, too, had to go through that phase of life, when I stepped into womanhood.<sup>10</sup>

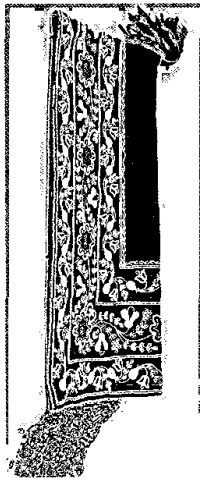
Here, as in other regions of North America where menstrual seclusion was practised, the monthly periods of withdrawal provided opportunities for women to think creatively about ornamentation and to work uninterruptedly at sewing projects.

The cumulative effect of women's artistry in making clothing and the elaborate body decoration devised by wearers is vividly evoked in the inventory of the dress worn by young Slavey men as recorded in 1807 by a German fur trader named Wentzel:

[They] tie their hair, wear ornaments, such as feathers, beads in their ears, and paint or tattoo their faces ... Around their head, they wear a piece of beaver, otter or marten skin decorated with a bunch of feathers before and behind ... Their robes and capotes are ornamented with several bunches of leather strings garnished with porcupine quills of different colours, the ends of which are hung with beaver claws. About their neck they have a well-polished piece of caribou horn, which is white and bent around the neck; on their arms and wrists they tie bracelets and armbands made also of porcupine quills; around their waist they have also a porcupine quill belt curiously wrought and variegated with quills of different colours.<sup>11</sup>

Wentzel's presence in the North in the early nineteenth century heralded, however, the great changes that were soon to occur in the Western Sub-arctic (and that had already begun among the Eastern Cree) as a result of the arrival of fur traders and missionaries. As elsewhere, Sub-arctic artists immediately saw the potential of the glass beads, metals, and trade cloth the traders offered. They proved to be extremely demanding customers who would trade only for certain qualities and colours. Traders actively encouraged the new taste for imported goods in order to ensure their own access to furs, adopting such strategies as presenting the most important hunters with full suits of clothes and 'chief's coats'.

Depictions of the tattooing mentioned by Wentzel, as well as extant weapons, ladles, antler arm-bands, amulets and other early contact-period objects made by Dene men, display engraved abstract patterns of spurred lines, triangles, and hatching [96]. Scattered but highly suggestive evidence links some of these designs with representations of animal spirits. One late nineteenth-century observer, for example, affirmed the 'symbolical' meanings of certain stylized bone carvings, and provided a drawing of one 'intended to represent a beaver'. 'It will be remarked', he commented, 'that the design is highly conventionalized. Yet, even a child (of Dene parentage, of course) will recognize at once its significance.'<sup>12</sup> Missionaries and other whites regarded tattooing and traditional body decoration as uncouth and 'pagan', in part, perhaps, because they understood these sacred significations, and they actively tried to discourage or suppress them. By the end of the nineteenth century they had largely succeeded.



98 James Bay Cree artist  
Hood, 1840-65

James Bay Cree floral beadwork displays a delicacy and a continuous, flowing line that contrasts with the bolder beadwork styles that developed later in the Western Sub-arctic. The characteristic separation of the floral motifs into three distinct zones may reflect in a general way the spatial (and possibly cosmological) mapping found in earlier painted hide robes from the region.

travel across the Western Sub-arctic, came across a young Indian woman living on her own in the bush. Having escaped a Cree attack, she had lived for seven months through the long Sub-arctic winter, feeding, sheltering, and clothing herself. Hearne was most impressed, however, that, living all alone, she had exerted herself to make her clothing beautiful. 'It is scarcely possible to conceive that a person in her forlorn situation could be so composed as to contrive or execute anything not absolutely essential to her existence. Nevertheless, all her clothing, besides being calculated for real service, showed great taste, and no little variety of ornament.'<sup>16</sup> Few incidents reveal so dramatically the differences between European and Native world-views, or the importance of clothing as a vehicle of ritual-aesthetic expression in the lives of Sub-arctic people. The young Dene woman created beauty for herself and for a world animated by other non-human presences. She would also have been accustomed to taking advantage of solitude as an opportunity for artistic creativity. Though much has changed for Sub-arctic peoples since Hearne's journey, the importance of making beautiful clothing continues. With their needlework, women pay tribute to husbands and family members and to the land and its gifts to humans [99].

### The Arctic

For centuries, until the establishment of permanent settlements by the US and Canadian Governments, most Arctic people lived in small nomadic bands that moved over the land in a seasonal rhythm following the migrations of animals. Many Arctic communities are orientated toward the coasts of the northern seas which people traversed in their skin-covered kayaks and larger umiaks. The materials provided by the environment differed from those available to the south. Walrus ivory, antler, bone, and small quantities of stone and wood provided artists with materials for carving. Both the size of the raw materials and the nomadic way of life made smallness of scale a virtue. In the Yup'ik area, large rivers bring bigger driftwood logs from the interior forests in the summertime, making feasible the carving of masks and other, larger, objects. This wood is seen as a gift from the water, since no large trees grow on this flat river delta. Many of these objects have survived in the northern permafrost, and the Arctic presents one of the richest and longest archaeological records in the world. During the past century, collections of Arctic materials have grown steadily as a result of archaeological research, demonstrating the antiquity of art and of hunting ideologies in the far north. In Alaska, in the historic period, thousands of masks and ivory carvings were collected by missionaries, explorers, and anthropologists, especially in the years after 1850. A brisk tourist trade in these items developed at the end of the nineteenth century, caused by the gold rush, the maritime trade, and successive

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Verna Itsi and her daughter,  
Fort McPherson, Northwest  
Territories, 1991

Though not as common as in earlier days, the custom of carrying babies in decorated baby belts continues among Dene women. Verna Itsi wears one decorated with the colourful floral beadwork that has characterized Dene art since the mid-nineteenth century.

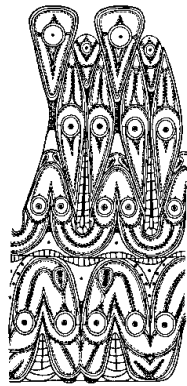


100 Okvik artist

Female figure (walrus ivory),  
c.100 BCE, Okvik, Punuk  
Island, Alaska

With her expressive face, incised torso, exaggerated genitalia, and legs ending in bear paws rather than human feet, this small figurine suggests an ancient ceremonialism concerned with human fertility and shamanic transformation.





**101**  
Semi-abstract engraved patterns on a harpoon head, c.100-400 CE, Old Bering Sea style, Alaska

waves of tourism. Evidence is mounting that Eskimo-carvers made many of the 'ethnological specimens' collected during the late nineteenth century specifically for sale.

### Ancient artists of the Arctic

Successive waves of Eskimoan peoples have migrated from Siberia, across the Bering Strait to Arctic America during the last 10,000 years. People of the earliest 'Palaeo-Arctic Tradition' were sophisticated tool-makers, but not until after 500 BCE was advanced artistry in non-perishable materials widespread. Although archaeologists have divided the material record into numerous sub-types and regional traditions, in the limited space available here we can only hint at particular techniques and iconographic themes that have great longevity, and that suggest great time depth for cultural and religious practices.

Ancient ivory carvers not only made functional tools for hunting marine mammals, they also elaborated these tools, small-scale replicas, and amulets with incised and carved designs. In coastal regions of North and West Alaska, starting around 500 BCE this cultural complex is termed 'The Norton Tradition', or sometimes 'The Old Bering Sea Culture', with various names for different phases and regions. 'The Dorset Culture' is the name given to the civilization of skilled tool-makers, artists, and sea mammal hunters who flourished across Arctic Canada and Greenland. The Norton or Old Bering Sea Culture and the Dorset Culture are most likely part of one widespread tradition transmitted from west to east, and flourishing in the centuries from 500 BCE to 1000 CE.

One early site was Okvik, on a small island off the coast of St Lawrence Island in the Bering Sea, where archaeologists excavated several dozen small ivory figurines, mostly female, suggesting ceremonialism centring on a female supernatural with both human and animal characteristics [100]. Most have expressive faces, and lines incised on their bodies. One holds a bear cub, suggesting that she is an ancestral version of the Bear Mother, a supernatural figure of Arctic and Northwest Coast myth who gives birth to a child who transforms into a bear. Here and at numerous other sites were found large quantities of finely carved and incised ivory harpoon heads, shafts, and winged counterweights. Sinuous designs in semi-abstract style cover the surfaces of these objects, suggesting modern hunters' idea that animals allow themselves to be caught by beautiful implements is a belief of great antiquity in the Arctic [101].

At Ipiutak, a thriving community of several hundred households on the shore near Point Hope, Alaska, numerous carved and ornamented tools were found within the households, while burials of great hunters or shamans contained ceremonial replicas of tools, amulets of bears,

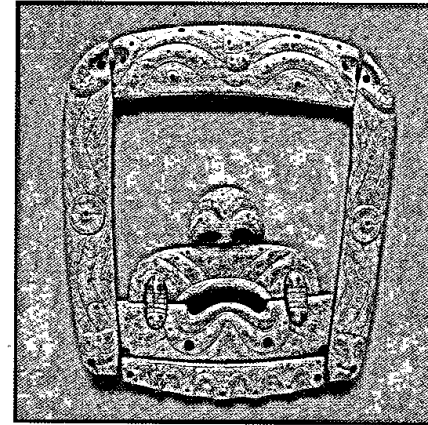
walruses, and loons, as well as unusual interlocking chains carved from a single walrus-ivory tusk. The most famous work of art from a burial at Ipiutak is a multi-part mask laboriously carved in ivory, on which low-relief animal heads are combined with the incised circles and curving lines which ornament so many tools and sculptures from the Norton Tradition [102].

Characteristic of Norton carving, as exemplified by the Ipiutak mask, is what has been called its 'polyiconic nature'.<sup>17</sup> A seal's head morphs into another form; seemingly abstract designs emerge as abstract faces and heads. This is true of Dorset carving as well [17] and persists in both Arctic and Northwest Coast carving styles to the

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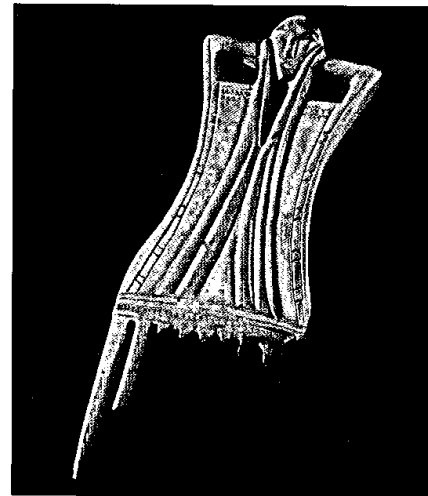
Burial mask (ivory), c.100 CE, Point Hope, Alaska, Ipiutak culture

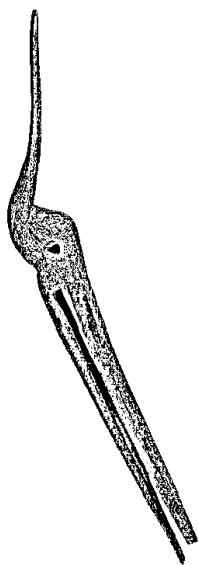
Numerous heads and eyes animate the mask. Even the down-turned mouth with jet inlays representing labrets (jewellery that pierces the lip) reads as an upside-down face. This ivory mask may have had wood or other perishable materials covering the cheeks and eyes of the wearer.



### 103 Thule artist

Comb (ivory), Thule period, Eastern Canadian Arctic, Inuit





104

Ivory carving of a loon head from an Ipiutak burial, c.100 CE, Point Hope, Alaska, Ipiutak culture

Loon imagery is ubiquitous in the art of ancient Alaska. At Ipiutak, many burials contained carved ivory replicas of loon heads. The loon, an expert diver, guides the shaman who penetrates diverse worlds and sees things not apparent with ordinary human sight. In Eskimo myth, these birds restore the sight of the blind.

present [122]. George Swinton has posited a 'common ancestry of Okvik, Ipiutak, Dorset, ancient Aleut, as well as early Northwest Coast art' in the world-view and art of ancient Siberian hunting peoples.<sup>18</sup>

In the ancient art of the Arctic we find a legacy of fine carving that lasted for some fifteen centuries. All are small-scale and portable, as befits a migratory culture of hunters. The most elegant forms appear in the coastal regions of Arctic Alaska, at sites such as Okvik and Ipiutak, where complex geometric patterning is combined with sleek, sculptural forms. In Dorset art of the Canadian Central Arctic, there is not the same luxurious elaboration of both instrumental and ceremonial goods. Fewer items were carved, and they were crafted with a rough, expressive naturalism [17, 103] echoed in some modern Inuit carving of the same region. The polar bear seems to have been the predominant animal in Dorset ideology; ivory carvings of swimming polar bears, with rather crude incising marking its skeletal structure (in a shamanic type of x-ray vision, perhaps), are found in diverse regions of the Canadian Arctic. In addition to ivory carving, more items of wood, antler, and stone carving occur here than in the Alaskan Arctic.

After 1000 CE, another wave of Eskimoan culture, known as the Thule, arose in the Bering Sea region and quickly spread from west to east across the Arctic. In the East, where Dorset people had been isolated from their Bering Sea relatives for as long as a millennium, the Thule immigrants quickly displaced or absorbed them. Thule people were successful whale hunters; even their architecture reflects this, for they used enormous whale ribs as the framing for the roofs of their turf-covered houses. Modern Arctic peoples are the direct descendants of the Thule, and historical traditions of carving and engraving walrus ivory grew directly out of Thule precedents.

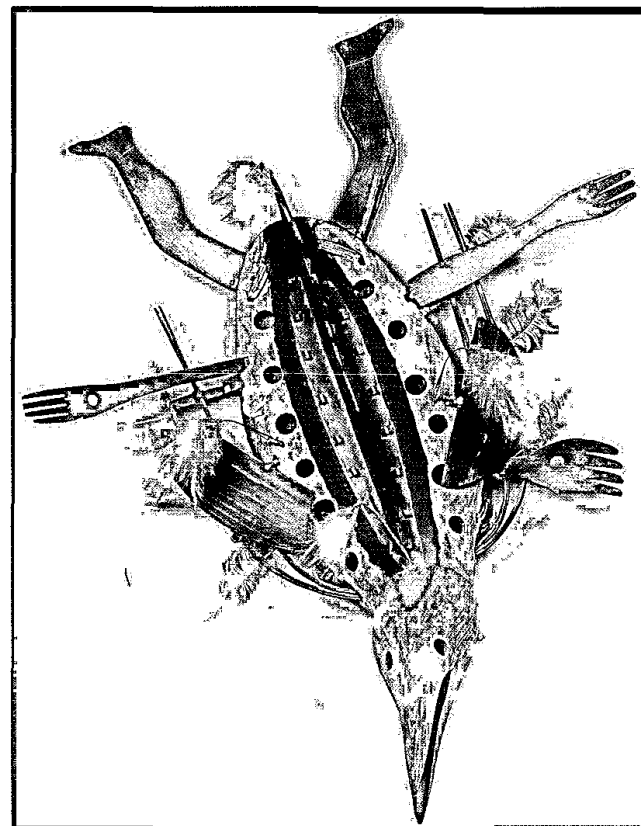
While it is sometimes dangerous to use modern historic data (what archaeologists call 'ethnographic analogy') to interpret archaeological materials, it seems clear that the religious ideologies of Arctic peoples have great temporal depth and coherence across vast distances. Despite the fact that successive waves of people—from the earliest Palaeo-Arctic peoples, to the Dorset, to the Thule and their descendants—settled the North over several thousand years, we find a remarkable uniformity in the conceptual underpinnings of their art: a concern with human-animal relationships, from the success of the hunt to the success of the shaman's journey to the world of the spirits.

A highly elaborated ceremonial and artistic life that centred on shamanism was shared on both sides of the Bering Sea. An early female shaman's grave at Ekven on the Chukchi Peninsula, Siberia, contained men's and women's tools, masks, drums, and other goods.<sup>19</sup> Studies of Siberian and North American Eskimo shamanism in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has shed light on the practices

105 Yup'ik artist

Mask of diving loon (wood, paint, owl feathers), before 1892, St Michael, Alaska

The human appendages perhaps indicate the loon's identification with the shaman as he moves between worlds. The carved loon head opens to reveal a small human face.



of ancient hunters of the Arctic. The ivory chains and loon heads found at Ipiutak [104] have parallels in ancient and historic Siberia, where metal chains and amulets were part of shamanic ceremonial equipment. Loon imagery, ubiquitous at Ipiutak in 100 CE, was still carved on Yup'ik masks further south in Alaska some 1,800 years later [105]; in the last years of the twentieth century, drum dancers in the Western Canadian Arctic were wearing actual loon beaks as part of their caps during winter ceremonial dances that remind humans of their profound ties with animals. Neither the nineteenth-century Yup'ik nor the twentieth-century Canadian Inuit dancers would have had trouble recognizing the power of a loon skull with inlaid ivory and jet eyes buried with an Ipiutak shaman nearly two millennia earlier. The Dorset carver who fashioned the tube ornamented with interlocked walrus heads [17] could easily have bridged 1,500 years and 6,000 kilometres to understand the sympathetic magic that drew the

marine mammals to the visor-clad hunter [109] in his kayak in Bristol Bay. The Aleut artist who carved the walrus heads and abstract amulets affixed to his visor was, nearly 2,000 years later, indirectly heir to the tradition of carving and incising walrus ivory with geometric spirals, circles, and other curvilinear designs at Ipiutak and Okvik. In both cases, the intent was to attract walruses by carving implements in a pleasing manner.

### Historic arts of the Arctic

Clothing made from animals is important throughout North America, but nowhere is it as fundamental to survival as in the Arctic North. Eskimo and Aleut bands have endured thousands of years of arduous winters due to the skill of male hunters and female clothing specialists. Three-thousand-year-old bone needles perfectly preserved in the Canadian High Arctic hint at the facility with sewing the skins needed to survive an Arctic winter.<sup>20</sup> Today, the Arctic, while still distant and harsh, is connected to the world economy through airstrip, satellite dish, and computer hook-up, and its people rely on Gore-tex and fibre-fill parkas as well as fur garments. When eighteenth- and nineteenth-century whalers and explorers went north, they had much to learn from native people about northern survival. One of the first things they recognized was the superiority of native garments to their own.

Three examples of Arctic clothing highlight women's artistry in media which include skins of caribou, seal, and walrus, fur of numerous mammals, feathers, skins, and beaks of puffins, cormorants, auklets and other birds, salmon and pike skins, and even walrus and seal intestine [106, 107, 108]. The tailored, slip-on parka, usually with a hood, is worn across the entire Arctic. Distinctive tailoring and

#### 106 Iglulik Inuit artist

Shaman's garments, late nineteenth century, Eastern Canadian Arctic

The collector of this garment recounted that Qingailisag, a shaman, commissioned this outfit to commemorate his encounters with magic caribou people. Its elaborately scalloped, striped, and fringed borders as well as the figural imagery on both front and back make it a unique outfit.



#### 107

Niviatsianaq in her beaded *amautiq* (parka), c.1900, Canadian Arctic, Inuit

Niviatsianaq of Southampton Island on the west side of Hudson's Bay was one of the most exceptional of the late nineteenth-century northern artists who produced innovative work in hide and beads. She has decorated her parka in remarkably detailed fringes and emblems, including a compass rose and a lady's high-heeled boot on the chest. Her braids are wrapped in decorative patterns, and her face shows the traditional tattoo designs worn by Inuit women.



decorative patterns characterize different regions. Inuit women of the Canadian Arctic, for example, generally cut their own parkas with generous hood-like pouches large enough to hold a baby. (This can be seen in the sculpture in 112.) Sometimes, contrasting colours of animal fur were inset into garments for decorative effect [106]. During the winter, the furry side of the garment would be worn on the inside, to hold in body warmth, and even two such layers might be worn.

While such garments were refined and modified over the centuries, some of the most dramatic modifications took place in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. When trade beads became available, women here, like those across lower regions of North America, adeptly incorporated them into a traditional repertoire. Beaded parkas became popular in the Hudson's Bay region in the nineteenth century and remain so today [107]. Lightweight fur-trimmed cloth parkas, or parka covers, called 'Mother Hubbards', became popular in Alaska early in the twentieth century, and are still worn. Fine work in skin and hide has been experiencing a revival all across the North, as young women have begun to realize that a vast storehouse of technical knowledge was in danger of dying out with their grandmothers.

Among the most ingenious uses of animal products for human clothing is the working of gutskin (the tough, dense, inside layer of walrus or seal intestine) for waterproof garments. The Aleut are especially renowned for their gutskin parkas, but these were made and worn by Siberian and Alaskan Eskimos too. Extraordinarily flexible, and

#### 108 Aleut artist

Gut cape (woollen yarn, human hair, cotton string, sea-lion oesophagus membrane, walrus intestine), before 1850, Alaska

Painstakingly sewn together of narrow bands of walrus or seal intestine, the gutskin cape provided an elegant and waterproof cloak for Russian Naval officers in Alaska. The double-sewn, water-tight seams are inset with short fringes of yarn and human hair. Other decorative touches on such capes often include seal-pup skin, caribou fur, and bird feathers.



weighing just a few ounces, a gutskin parka could be worn over a regular fur parka when extra protection was needed. Constructed by seamstresses to protect their male relatives while hunting in icy waters, some gutskin parkas were constructed to be lashed to the opening of the kayak to form an impenetrable barrier protecting both the wearer and the boat's interior. Women would themselves wear gutskin parkas, not only for rain protection but also to protect their clothing while butchering animals.

A late eighteenth-century innovation was the gutskin cape, tailored in the style of a Russian Navy officer's greatcoat [108]. Over 100 feet of intestine can be garnered from one walrus, and about half as much from a seal, so one or two animals would provide enough material for a cape. There was evidently a prodigious trade in such capes in the nineteenth century, reflecting the merger of an effective indigenous technology with an introduced clothing form to produce an object widely traded and admired. Today, some Aleut, Yup'ik, and Iñupiaq women still work with gutskin.

Just as ivory artefacts signalled the importance of animals and their powers in the human realm, so too did skin clothing reflect this preoccupation. As Valerie Chaussonnet has noted,

Animal skin, transformed into a second skin for humans by the work of the seamstresses, still maintained its animal identity. From the killing of an animal through the tanning, cutting, and sewing of its skin into a piece of clothing, the qualities and characteristics attributed to it in life were maintained and passed on to the wearer of the finished garment. This important spiritual

principle linked animals, hunters, and seamstresses together in an intricate and circular set of relationships.<sup>21</sup>

Male hunters procured the animals and female artists transformed them into clothing that was both physically and spiritually protective. Moreover, respect for the living animal also dictated respect for each of its component parts after death. Rita Pitka Blumenstein, a contemporary Yup'ik artist, relates:

*In respect for the fish and the seal, you use every bit of it: the head, the insides, the bones, and the skin of the fish. And then whatever we don't eat goes to the dogs. The bones go back to the river or the lake, wherever you caught it from. If they're from the ocean, you take them there. That will ensure more fish in the next years. If it's a seal, same way. The bladder goes back to the sea. The seals will come back. You bury the bones near the sea so you won't find them floating all over the beach. I appreciate very much the respect for things when I was growing up. So you use every bit of it—the bones for tools, the insides for clothing, eat the kidneys and liver and the meat. Use the seal oil also. The stomach is used for storing the seal oil and for when you gather salmonberries. The skin you use for parkas, mittens, or mukluks. The bones you use for scrapers, runners for sleds and for tanning. The whiskers are used for tooth-picks, and the faces are used for ornaments. The bladder goes back to the sea.<sup>22</sup>*

Among the Yup'ik, sending the bladder back to the sea was part of an elaborate performance that involved carved and painted masks. Indeed, masking was more highly developed in the Yup'ik region than anywhere else in the Arctic. As discussed for other regions of North America, these masks can best be understood in the context of dance, gesture, song and drumming, as well as in the context of pan-Arctic beliefs about souls. Most Arctic peoples believe that all the world is animate, and that animals have souls or spirits (*inua* in the Iñupiaq language, *yua* in Yup'ik). Some masks represent the animal spirits encountered by shamans; other masks worn by non-shamanic dancers depict animal spirits in the broader sense. As Dorothy Jean Ray has described it, these did not represent a single animal, 'but the vital force representing a chain or continuum of all the individual spirits of that genus which had lived, were living, or were to live. Therefore, when a human face or representative part of it such as a mouth or an eye was placed on a seal spirit mask, it did not represent an individual seal, but an abstraction of the entire genus of the seal's spirit.'<sup>23</sup>

The Bladder Festival, which opened the winter ceremonial season, ensured success in hunting by memorializing all of the game animals killed in the previous year. Because the animal's soul was thought to reside in its bladder, the bladders of game animals were saved, inflated, painted, and hung in the ceremonial house, then released back to the sea to transmit a message of homage and respect to the living seals. As Ray points out, however, propitiating the game animals was not the

only reason for community performance: The complicated staging and long practicing for dancing roles were perfected by performers for human as well as spiritual critics. The various long winter festivals, although aimed primarily at fusing the spiritual world with the earthly one, were in many cases ... occasions of great importance to the solidarity of intertribal relations, and all entertainment was prepared with that in mind.<sup>24</sup> As on the Northwest Coast, winter festivals were the opportunity for lavish gift-giving and displays of generosity (see Chapter 6).

Yup'ik masks exist in a remarkable variety for they represent not only idiosyncratic visions by particular shamans but also the great freedom of expression afforded to individual carvers. Collecting cottonwood or spruce limbs that had floated down-river from the vast forests of the interior, they would carve and paint the masks, and adorn them with flexible willow-root hoops, as well as feathers. (Today, in the resurgence of carving taking place in some Yup'ik villages, some mask-makers carve replicas of the feathers of birds that are protected by US environmental laws, while others, asserting that laws concerning religious freedoms supersede environmental laws, claim the right to hunt the birds they need for the making of masks.)

Yup'ik women rarely wore masks, except in the case of female shamans; female dancers often wore, and still wear, 'finger masks' carved of wood and adorned with feathers to accentuate their delicate hand gestures.

Unlike masks in some other parts of Native North America—such as Pueblo masks whose power and sacredness require that they be hidden, nourished, and refurbished from year to year, or Northwest Coast masks which are the prized property of individuals or clans—Yup'ik masks were normally made for one occasion, then destroyed or abandoned. Explorers and traders thus found it easy to buy masks, and in this way thousands of Yup'ik masks were collected by agents for the Smithsonian Institution as well as several European museums.

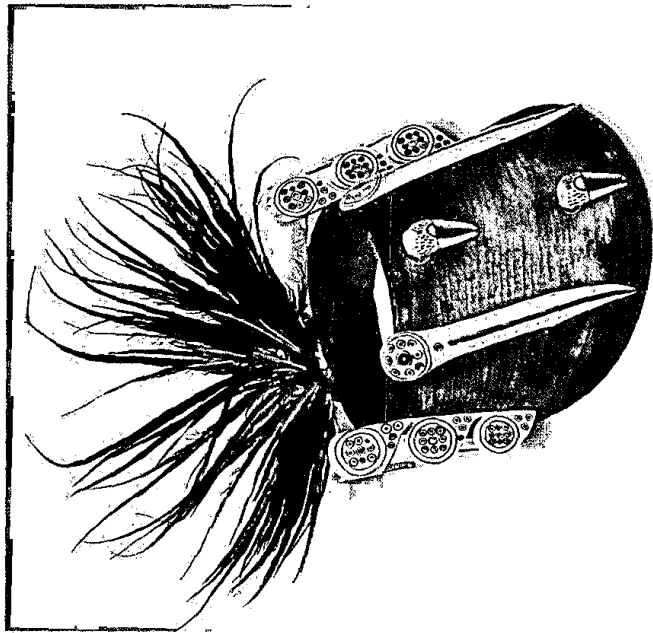
Yup'ik and Aleut carvers sometimes used steamed bent-wood technology, like their Tlingit and Haida neighbours to the south (see Chapter 6). Bent-wood containers and hats were popular nineteenth-century forms (109). While these distinctive visor-shaped painted or decorated hats are commonly thought to be Aleut in style, in fact, they were made and worn throughout the Yup'ik area as well.

During the historic era, Canadian Inuit carvers, like their Dorset and Thule predecessors, continued to make amulets and equipment of ivory. In addition, they carved small-scale models of kayaks, animals, and human figures to market to northern explorers and traders. But such carvings for the tourist trade were much more plentiful in coastal Alaska, where the sheer volume of whalers, explorers, gold-seekers, and tourists caused an explosion in arts for the curio trade. Thirty

#### 109 Yup'ik artist

Aleut-style visored hat (wood, ivory), c.1820, Norton Sound, Alaska

In this hat, the semi-abstract bird heads and the long, pointing walrus tusks set up a pleasing rhythm that echoes the long, angled shape of the hat itself.



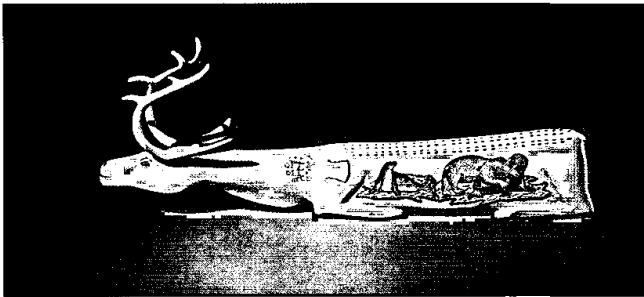
thousand prospectors arrived in Alaska in 1900 alone; they and the tourists who followed wanted souvenirs of their northern visit. Male ivory carvers and female basket weavers were happy to provide such commodities. Aleut basketmakers, to mention just one example, made small, elegant baskets for the Russians and subsequent visitors. Their chief characteristic was the fineness of weave. Successive waves of smallpox and influenza decimated the Aleut population; their capture and evacuation during World War II was responsible for almost extinguishing their artistic traditions. Today, only a small number of weavers and carvers work in the old style.

By far the most widespread artefacts made for sale were ivory carvings which grew out of an indigenous Inupiaq tradition of carving walrus tusks and engraving them with small-scale pictographic scenes. The bowl drill, an indigenous tool for carving the obdurate ivory, was often etched with such depictions, including scenes of animals, hunting parties, and village life. Tusks were carved into non-functional pipes, walking-stick handles, and cribbage boards (110). Small pieces of ivory were fashioned into buttons, miniature tools, salt and pepper shakers, and jewellery. Nome was, and remains, the centre of this northern carving style.

**110 Inupiaq artist**

Cribbage board in the shape of a caribou (walrus ivory), 1890s, Northern Alaska

Cribbage boards were a favoured souvenir among gold-miners at the turn of the century. Some feature engravings of traditional subjects, while others demonstrate the engraver's mastery of foreign pictorial styles, sometimes with photo-like realism.



One other distinctive North Alaskan art form worthy of mention is the baleen basket.<sup>25</sup> Made for the tourist trade after 1915, it too, like so many northern arts, evinces a remarkably ingenious use of animal products. Baleen, the giant, fingernail-like plates that hang from the mouth of whales in order to filter the tiny plankton they eat, was harvested and torn into thin strips. Men in northern coastal communities began to weave baskets of these strips, and carved ivory knobs for the lids. Elsewhere in the Arctic, basketry was a women's art, as it was over most of North America, but here, as an introduced art form, it developed principally as a male occupation, possibly because its materials were so strongly identified with whalers and ivory carvers.

**Contemporary arts in Arctic Canada and Alaska**

Many Canadian Inuit continued their traditional nomadic way of existence until the 1950s when famine, disease, and poverty forced them to settle into permanent villages set up by the government. The modern practice of making sculpture, prints, and drawings for sale to outsiders was soon established in these settlements. For around fifty years now, in many Arctic communities the making of art has become a defining feature of Inuit life. In most instances, art has been marketed through a local community co-operative. The Inuit co-operative movement started in the 1950s in response to the breakdown of the traditional Inuit economy and the ensuing reliance on a cash-based system. Its initial leaders were, for the most part, the most successful male hunters and trappers—that is, those who were formerly among the highest-status members of a relatively egalitarian society.<sup>26</sup> By featuring consensus, limited hierarchy, and group effort, the co-op continues traditional Inuit ideals. Art co-ops were among the first to be created, although in many communities fishing and other activities are far more profitable.

Since the 1960s, several communities have issued their own annual editions of art prints. The West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative at Cape Dorset, the oldest and most famous, has marketed annual editions since 1959, with a cumulative production of over 2,000 different images

**111 Jessie Oonark (c.1906–85), Inuit**

'A Shaman's Helping Spirits' (stone cut, stencil), 1971, Baker Lake, Canada

The artist's work often deals with themes of shamanic transformation: humans transform into animals, or fly across the sky with their spirit helpers. She also draws old stories and legends, characteristically rendering forms in bold blocks of colour, with a graphic artist's flair for the interplay of positive and negative space.

