

HOMECOMINGS

ALASKA NATIVE ART RETURNS TO ITS PLACE OF CREATION

BY ERIC LUCAS

Margie holds sunglasses that were the height of fashion a century ago on Alaska's Seward Peninsula. Handcarved from a single piece of driftwood, they are actually wraparound snow goggles with narrow slits for vision, designed to fend off the fierce Arctic sunshine blazing across Bering Sea ice.

She tries them on, pretending she's a fashion model styling an ultrahip space-age set of shades. "How do I look? Maybe we ought to keep these," she muses, jokingly.

She grins and sets them back down on a table in her sister Jean's Western Washington living room. "Nah, they should go home."

The snow goggles are headed to Nome this fall, returning to the land where they originated more than a century ago—and they will not be alone. The Indigenous art and cultural objects the sisters inherited from their missionary grandparents will join other such collections already given to the Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum: Inupiat cultural items donated by another branch of Jean and Margie's family several years ago, and artwork acquired by Nome educator Walter C. Shields, including a beautiful walrus ivory drill bow engraved with scenes of hunting, fishing and village life.

"That's where our grandpa is buried, and that's the proper home for these items he gathered," explains Philip Shields of the decision he and his brother Tad made to send their grandfather's collection back to Alaska.

These are among many such 21st century homecomings. Hundreds of valuable items have been finding their way back to the Great Land from which they were removed decades or centuries ago, and the phenomenon is a heartening illustration of human kindness and individual integrity.

Now, housed in museums and interpretive centers, everyone can see them, residents and visitors alike.

In many cases, the modern owners, who are often non-Native people in the Lower 48, could sell the objects for significant returns. Or they could keep them on private display. Instead, they have determined that the right move is to send the items back to the peoples who created them, and for whom they are significant, even sacred.



A 2017 Spirit Dance at the Sealaska Heritage Institute in Juneau welcomes the return of a Chilkat robe.



NOBU KOCH, COURTESY SEALASKA HERITAGE INSTITUTE

"WE BELIEVE EVERY OBJECT HAS A SPIRIT, AND THAT SPIRIT IS OUR ANCESTOR," SAYS ROSITA WORL, PRESIDENT OF JUNEAU'S SEALASKA HERITAGE INSTITUTE. "AND OUR ANCESTORS ARE TELLING US THEY WANT TO COME HOME."

For instance, a highly valuable Chilkat robe from the late 19th century was donated by a Seattle family to Juneau's Sealaska Heritage Institute two years ago. A beaded caribou-skin Dena'ina Athabascan girl's dress, collected in 1890, was given by a Hawai'i resident to the Alaska State Museum in Juneau in 2009. A prehistoric stone oil lamp, found on a beach on Kodiak Island by a resident of Wasilla, Alaska, was sent to the Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak several years ago. Similar ancient lamps are still used today by the island's Alutiiq residents for lighting ceremonies, such as at school graduations.

Conservation biologist David Lodge, a Cornell University professor, recently gave an early-19th century Aleutian puffin-skin parka to the Alaska State Museum. His great-great-grandfather was a surgeon in the U.S. Navy who attended the Sitka transfer ceremony in 1867 when the United States bought Alaska from Russia. That's when he acquired the garment.

Lodge sees this return to Alaska as a meaningful spiritual circle. "I hope it can be a source of pride in past and present culture, and an inspiration to future generations," he says.

Sisters Margie and Jean own a large collection of Inupiat objects acquired in and around Cape Prince of Wales in the late 19th century by their grandparents William Thomas Lopp and Ellen Louise Kittredge Lopp. They were Presbyterian missionaries and teachers who arrived in the westernmost place on the North American mainland in 1890 to teach. Many of the hundreds of items brought back to the Lower 48 in 1902 have passed down to the sisters.

Spread out on a table, these objects include an awesome array of materials and designs, and purposes ranging from utilitarian to decorative to commemorative. There are ulus, awls, bowls, spoons, bracelets, knives, cups, animal figures, toys, fishing weights, charms, arrows, ladles and an atlatl, which is a spear-throwing instrument. Objects are made of bone, stone, wood, sinew and walrus ivory. Some are unadorned; others have elaborate carvings and decorations. It's possible some of the items are centuries old.

The sisters haven't had the collection appraised, but it's certainly valuable. And as a record of their grandparents' dauntless early life, it holds great familial meaning. But to the Inupiat peoples who still live—and

thrive—on the Seward Peninsula, the collection is literally priceless.

Nome's Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum is a leading repository for Indigenous Arctic material. It's the nearest such facility to what is now just called Wales, and the museum's director, Amy Phillips-Chan, is ecstatic to be receiving these artifacts.

"This is an amazing collection of material culture from a period during which Bering Sea coastal communities were transitioning from ancient traditions and practices to incorporate more modern technologies. These items provide a firsthand window into Inupiat culture and heritage," says Phillips-Chan. "Having these heritage objects here in Nome is an invaluable resource for our Native community members to understand their rich history, learn the techniques their ancestors used and provide inspiration for their work today. Ivory harpoon heads may seem prosaic to modern eyes, but a great deal of thought, meaning and knowledge went into their creation centuries ago, because people depended on these materials for their very survival."

Some historical and cultural objects carry deep and specific spiritual meaning. Many Native cultures believe everything in the universe has its own spirit, especially ceremonial masks, which are imbued with huge metaphysical meaning. Some were never meant to be seen outside the ceremonies they were made for; some were supposed to be destroyed after use, thus neutralizing the powerful spirit embodied by the mask. But whether they are powerful masks, decorative tapestries, immense cedar totems, carefully fashioned bentwood boxes or any of a hundred other items, they are more than just items to look at.

"We believe every object has a spirit, and that spirit is our ancestor," says Rosita Worl, president of Juneau's Sealaska Heritage Institute. "And our ancestors are telling us they want to come home."

Worl was delighted last year to welcome another Chilkat robe into SHI's collection—it was the final work made by her own grandmother, famed Tlingit weaver Jennie Thlunaut, who was born in 1892 and first learned her art in the early 20th century. The robe's owners, former residents of Juneau, sold it to SHI for one-quarter of its appraised auction value. It joins dozens of other items that have been given to SHI.

A. (84-9073-17) PHOTO BY DANE PENLAND, RALPH RINZLER FOLKLIFE AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION; B. ALASKA STATE MUSEUM (2015_10_1); C. ALASKA STATE MUSEUM (2009_10_1); D. & E. ERIC LUCAS; F. ALASKA STATE MUSEUM (2015_10_1 [DETAIL]); G. TEMCIYUSQAQ—SKEPTICAL ONE, SPRUCE, RED PAINT, COLLECTED IN EAGLE HARBOR, 1872. 988-2-141, PINART COLLECTION, MUSÉE DE BOULOGNE-SUR-MER. PHOTOGRAPH BY WILL ANDERSON, COURTESY THE ALUTIIQ MUSEUM.



A.



B.



C.



D.



E.

A. Tlingit weaver Jennie Thlunaut and apprentice Anna Brown Ehlers.
B. Original tag marks 1867 Aleutian parka.
C. Dena'ina Athabascan dress.
D. Inupiat snow goggles worn by Margie.
E. Thule culture ivory figure that dates to between 1500 and 1800.
F. 1867 Aleutian puffin-skin parka.
G. Alutiiq mask.



F.



G.

Collecting Indigenous objects for sale or exhibit in Western culture first reached Alaska in the early 19th century. No one knows how many items were acquired in a fair fashion, and how many were collected by unscrupulous means. The grand total, over more than two centuries, is likely millions of items. Alaska has been inhabited for 25,000 years—according to some estimates—by many dynamic, creative cultures. Their output was engaging to Western cultures.

“Today, most objects held as sacred by Alaska Natives, and those holding secrets of lost artistic techniques, are outside of Alaska, in private collections and museums,” says Steve Henrikson, curator of collections at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau.

“Returning these items home is a way to share the dynamics of human power,” says Angela Linn, senior collections manager at the University of Alaska Museum of the North in Fairbanks, which holds many thousands of cultural objects among its 2.2 million items. “Almost every donation offer I get these days includes the phrase, ‘This should come home to Alaska,’ and since a museum’s mission is to protect, preserve and perpetuate, we’re here for just that.”

Many Alaska Native items wound up in Europe, and bringing them back from the Old World has been a ticklish subject for decades. These difficulties have led some Alaska Native cultural leaders to adopt collabora-



MARLISE LEE, COURTESY ALUTIIQ MUSEUM

A 500-year-old Alutiiq ancestral stone oil lamp.

tive arrangements with European museums.

The Alutiiq Museum in Kodiak has established such a relationship with the Musée de Boulogne-sur-Mer in France, which houses an extensive collection of Alutiiq artifacts from an 1871–72 Alaska trip of anthropologist Alphonse Pinart, who paddled around Kodiak Island.

April Counciller, executive director of the Kodiak museum, says this positive international friendship has been highly beneficial—on display today in the Alutiiq Museum are several items collected by Pinart, including a cone-shaped mask whose angles and forms illustrate a traditional carving style that modern Alutiiq artists are now adapting for their own work.

The mask, plus several other historical items, is on

JOIN THE MOVEMENT

If you have Indigenous work you want to return to Alaska, contact: Alaska State Museum, Curator of Collections Steve Henrikson, steve.henrikson@alaska.gov; Alutiiq Museum, Executive Director April Counciller, april@alutiiqmuseum.org; Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Museum Director Amy Phillips-Chan, achan@nomealaska.org; University of Alaska Museum of the North, Senior Collections Manager Angela Linn, ajlinn@alaska.edu; Sealaska Heritage Institute, History and Culture Director Chuck Smythe, chuck.smythe@sealaska.com. —E.L.

WHERE ART IS HOUSED

The story goes that decades ago, Alaska’s legendary U.S. Senator Ted Stevens was given a tour of Smithsonian archives in the nation’s capital to view the collection of Indigenous artifacts from the Great Land held there. Asked later what he thought, Stevens replied: “It’s fantastic. Why isn’t it in Alaska?”

Thus was born the **Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center** (anchoragemuseum.org/visit/smithsonian-arctic-studies-center/) at the Anchorage Museum, which displays a comprehensive survey of art and artifacts representing a dozen major Northland Indigenous peoples. It is just one of the amazing museums across Alaska that document Alaska Native cultures:

- **Alaska State Museum, Juneau:** A new building has expanded space for display of art and artifacts—including several items for which the state and Native clans share ownership (museums.alaska.gov/asm/).
- **Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak:** Artwork and artifacts tell the continuing story of the Alutiiq people and include masks collected in the 19th century (alutiiqmuseum.org).
- **Carrie M. McLain Memorial Museum, Nome:** Explore the cultures of the Inupiat and St. Lawrence Island Yupik peoples of the Bering Sea coast (nomealaska.org/department/index.php?structureid=12).
- **Jilkaat Kwaan Heritage Center, Klukwan:** See Northwest

- Coast Art, including early-19th century house posts of the Chilkat’s Whale House Clan. (jilkaatkwaanheritagecenter.org).
- **Sealaska Heritage Institute, Juneau:** The display center includes a set of posts, panels and beams bearing nearly a million hand-adze marks (sealaskaheritage.org).
- **Totem Heritage Center, Ketchikan:** The collection of 19th century totems and other items is augmented by modern works, such as masks (ktn-ak.us/totem-heritage-center).
- **University of Alaska Museum of the North, Fairbanks:** Among the items on display is the *Okvik Madonna*, a 2,000-year-old Arctic ivory carving (uaf.edu/museum/). —E.L.

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long-term loan from the museum in France, and when it's time for particular objects to go back to France, others will head west to replace them in Kodiak displays.

"The idea is to repatriate knowledge," says Counciller. "Now people in Kodiak can study these without going all the way to France. We want our own people to learn how to make these again."

But as marvelous and attractive as all the masks, carvings, weavings and figures may be, it's a simple granite stone that makes the biggest impression on me when Counciller takes me into the Alutiiq Museum archives. The piece is a 500-year-old lamp that Alutiiq ancestors used to burn seal oil for light. The oval hollow in the burning surface still bears char marks from its last use.

Holding this lamp in my hands brings a wave of warmth over me—a sensation that pulses with the rhythm of human life and love, yearning and hope.

That's what all these items are. They don't just *represent* human impulses—they *are* these impulses. Think of the significance that providing light has held for the billions of people who preceded us.

Counciller says that when the stone is put away, Alutiiq custom requires it to be placed upside down, so its spirit will not depart. This piece, found on a beach near Kodiak several decades ago, was taken to the Alaska mainland by its finder, and then returned to Kodiak several years ago.

With it steady in my hands, feeling its aura, I'm certain the stone's spirit has no wish to depart.

It's home. ✎

Eric Lucas lives on Washington's San Juan Island.