

Subsection label:

Native community and museums working together

In 1998, Chuna McIntyre, a Central Yup'ik artist, was asked to restore the missing parts of the Yup'ik masks in the Thaw Collection without altering the original material in any way. McIntyre's traditional upbringing with his grandmother in Eek, Alaska, his training in Yup'ik cultural history, and his travels to see his culture's masks in museums and private collections throughout the world made him uniquely qualified to restore the objects. In McIntyre's words, the masks "were brought back to life."

Figure, ca. A.D. 100 – 600

Iputak (prehistoric Eskimo)

Arctic region

Ivory

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0225

According to modern Eskimos, miniature animals live within powerful land and sea spirits and journey to the human world, where they allow themselves to be hunted. Humans honor and summon them with amulets carved in their likenesses. This ancient polar-bear effigy may have served such a purpose.

Harpoon Counterweight, ca. A.D. 800 – 1000

Punuk

Arctic region

Ivory, pigments

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0591

Goggles, A.D. 100 – 500

Old Bearing Sea

Arctic region

Walrus ivory

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0811

Slit-eyed snow goggles shielded the eyes from blinding light, but the eye openings here are too large to do so; perhaps they were used like masks at ceremonies. These elegantly carved goggles have a distinct raised brow and inverted whale's-tail nose. A dancer may have worn this pair while representing one of many spirit beings, during a dramatic enactment of various forces in Alaskan Native life.

Walrus Tusk, 1900-1904

Angokwazhuk (Happy Jack), ca. 1870 – 1918

Inupiat (Bering Sea Eskimo)

Arctic region

Walrus tusk, graphite

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0713

Angokwazhuk, also known as Happy Jack, introduced gifted translations of photographic images into the venerable indigenous ivory tradition. Here, he depicted himself and his first wife, Malinda, who died before 1908, in a signed double portrait. Known as the preeminent Alaskan ivory-souvenir artist in his day, Angokwazhuk later fell into obscurity. Recently, however, his work has been rediscovered and his reputation restored.

Dance Fans (Finger Masks), ca. 1870

Central Yup'ik

Arctic region

Wood, duck-tail feathers, snowy-owl feathers, caribou fur , pigment, pebbles (feathers, fur, and pebbles replaced)

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0228a,b

Among the Yup'ik, the human hand is a site of tremendous power, and masked dancers never perform bare-handed. Paired dance fans offer protection from the spirits. Each of these fans rattles as it moves, and is balanced by the faces carved on it: on one side, a male (upturned mouth) and on the other, a female (downturned mouth).

Mask, ca. 1850

Central Yup'ik

Arctic region

Cedar wood and cedar bark, duck feathers, snowy-owl feathers, sandhill-crane feathers,
caribou fur, white clay pigment (feathers replaced)

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0600

Although the Yup'ik did not often make masks representing ravens, the bird is central to their spiritual beliefs. Raven created the means for man to interact with nature, and enabled him to prosper by providing food and teaching him hunting skills.

Nepcetat Mask, ca. 1840 – 60

Central Yup'ik

Arctic region

Wood, swan feathers, duck feathers, snowy-owl feathers, fox teeth, sealskin thong, reed, blood, pigment, ochre, charcoal (feathers and teeth replaced)

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0231

Shamans wore Nepcetats, the most powerful of all Yup'ik masks to influence animals and predict the future, among other things. The backboard represents the universe pierced by sky or ice holes (here edged by seals) through which animals move into the human realm. It is said that the shaman's power enabled the mask to stick to his face without the use of ties; only a few Nepcetat have mouth grips that would have facilitated this.

As [our son-in-law] watched, he saw the mask fly up [from the ground as the shaman] stooped down. . . . He wore it and moved to the rhythm. It wasn't tied to his head. . . . He said [afterwards that] the mask couldn't come off. . . . When he pulled very hard, it finally fell down. . . . The mask . . . had really kissed him hard.

—William Kamkoff, Yup'ik elder, 1994

Parka, ca. 1890 – 1910

Central Yup'ik

Arctic region

Seal intestine, walrus fur, polar-bear fur, sinew, hide, thread, aniline dyes

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0763

In the late 1700s, the explorer Captain James Cook, remarked that in creating garments, Arctic women's ingenuity was "excelled by no People under the Sun." To make this waterproof parka, the seamstress cleaned and blew air into seal gut to form tubes; she then cured the gut by freeze-drying it, which gave it an opaque appearance. (Curing in the summer turns the gut transparent.) In the past, shamans sometimes used special gut parkas for ceremonies.

The angalkuq [shaman] would ask the seal-gut rain parka, "What is this person like?" or "What did she do?" The gut parka would answer. . . . The angalkuq would understand what that raincoat said, but the rest of the people didn't. . . . The [helper] spirit of the angalkuq would answer.

—Peter Lupie, Yup'ik, 1985

Goggles, ca. 1900

Inupiat (Bering Sea Eskimo)

Arctic region

Wood, twine (restored)

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0605

Slit-eyed goggles were essential in the Arctic to prevent blindness caused by the reflective glare of snow and water. Functioning on the same principle as a pinhole camera, goggles also improved distance vision by focusing light through thin slits.

Hat, ca.1840 – 50

Central Yup'ik or Inupiat (Bering Sea Eskimo)

Arctic region

Wood, Native-tanned hide, rusk stitching, bone, duck feathers

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0235

Worn on land and water, bentwood hunting hats shielded the eyes from sunlight and rain or splashing waves. They also collected sound to make vocal contact with paddlers in other boats easier. The spray of duck feathers at the back of this hat imparted to the hunter the keen instincts of the waterfowl.

This hat is a submarine! You can breathe in front when the water [of a wave] passes over.

—Kangrilnguq (Paul John), Yup'ik elder, 1997

Firebag, ca. 1875

Tahltan

Arctic region

Woolen cloth, glass beads, dentalium shells, smoked tanned caribou or moose hide,
sinew, cotton thread and cotton cloth

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0801

In the early nineteenth century, men used so-called firebags to carry tobacco and fire-making equipment such as flint and tinder. Later, the bags carried ammunition for muzzle-loading guns. By the 1900s, these objects had become part of ceremonial dress.

Outfit, ca. 1880

Gwich'in (Kutchin)

Arctic region

Tanned caribou hide, porcupine quills, sinew, aniline dyes, wool, silverberry seeds, ochre

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0237a-e

This summer outfit may be a commissioned work based on an earlier style of Gwich'in (Kutchin) dress; by the time a British army officer collected the ensemble in the 1880s, European-style clothing predominated in Gwich'in territory. The discrete ornamentation is made of old-style, folded porcupine quills, which are remarkably well preserved.

Basket, ca. 1890 – 1910

Aleut

Arctic region

Wild rye grass, wool yarns, dyes

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0612a-b

Eskimo women on the westernmost U.S. Aleutian island wove extremely fine baskets from wild rye beach grass. Grass weaving was an ancient Aleutian twining technique, but Attu women drew upon European basket forms and designs to create a new style of basketry for foreign markets. These innovations resulted in small lidded baskets with distinctive knobs and yarn embroidery done in delicately stylized floral or geometric patterns.

Moccasins, ca. 1980

Slavey

Arctic region

Tanned and smoked moose hide, dyed moose hair, beaver fur, thread

Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, N.Y. T0663a-b