MicroCosmos is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Sean Mooney, Curator of the Edmund Carpenter Collection.

This exhibition is generously supported by Clare Casademont and Michael Metz, Anne and Bill Stewart, and the City of Houston.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

The Yup'ik Dance Masks Tradition
Thursday, October 8, 7:00 p.m.
Exhibition curator Sean Mooney and dancer and storyteller Chuna McIntyre discuss the masked dances of the Alaskan Yup'ik people.

Introducing Edmund Carpenter
Wednesday, December 2, 7:00 p.m.
Edmund Carpenter was, at various points in his life, an archeologist, visual anthropologist, media theorist, filmmaker, teacher, author, and collector. In this talk, exhibition curator Sean Mooney discusses Carpenter's life and work.

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Cover: Okvik (Old Bering Sea I) culture. Figure with Striker's Headgear, ca. 250–100 BCE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, 5⅛ x 1⅞ x 1⅛ inches (13 x 4.8 x 2.9 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

THE MENIL COLLECTION
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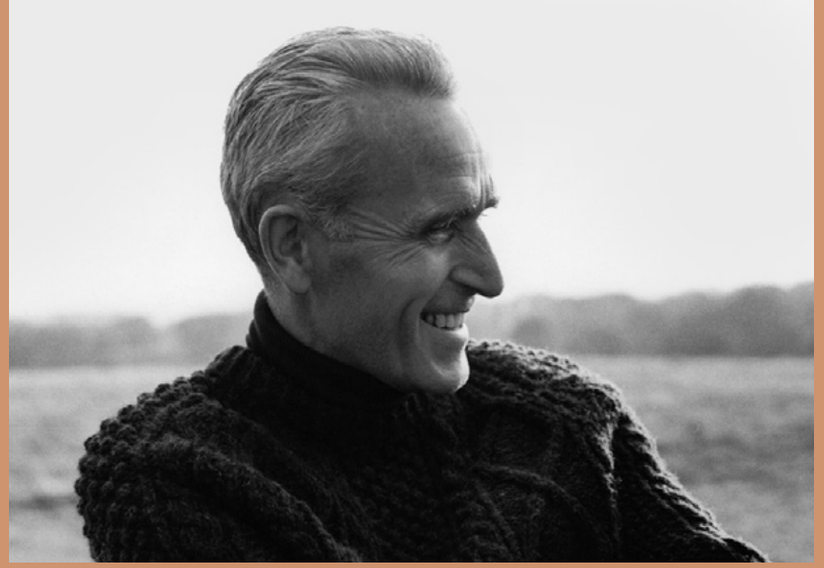
MICROCOSMOS

Details from the Carpenter Collection of Arctic Art

The Menil Collection
August 29, 2015–February 21, 2016



Edmund Snow Carpenter.
Photo: Adelaide de Menil

Introduction

MicroCosmos: Details from the Carpenter Collection of Arctic Art offers a rare glimpse of the intriguingly beautiful material culture of the Old Bering Sea Paleo-Eskimo traditions of Alaska in the form of intricate ivories carved from walrus tusk approximately two thousand years ago. It also effects the unprecedented reunion of two Yup'ik dance masks, a matched pair that had been separated for a hundred years. Chiefly, however, this exhibition presents the profound treasures of the Carpenter Collection of Arctic Art, newly housed at the Menil Collection, to Houston.

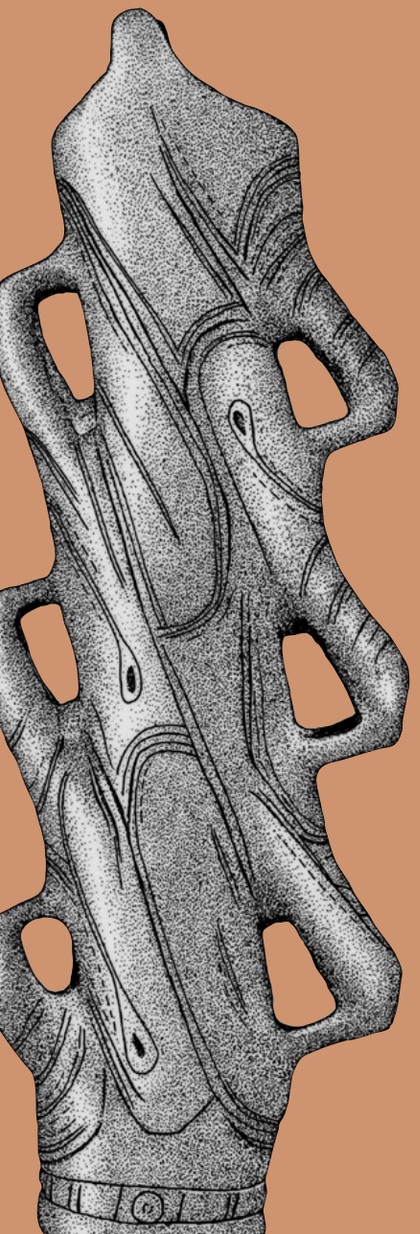
The son-in-law of John and Dominique de Menil, anthropologist Edmund Snow Carpenter (1922–2011) not only built his own collection of objects but also had a tremendous impact on the museum's holdings, making this exhibition something of a family reunion. Carpenter and his wife, Adelaide de Menil, selected a number of the masterpieces of Pacific Northwest Coast and Pacific Islands art that populate the Menil's galleries, and Carpenter masterminded *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*, the innovative and tremendously popular installation within the Surrealism galleries. As part of their private collection, the

Kathleen Borowick, drawing of an Old Bering Sea II harpoon point in the Edmund Carpenter Collection

couple gathered together what many would consider the world's finest assemblage of Old Bering Sea ivories. Composed of over five hundred pieces, it is certainly one of the largest. Though this is not the first time items from this group have been displayed—some may recall Carpenter's ambitious 2011 exhibition *Upside Down: Arctic Realities*, which included a number of works—it is the first presentation devoted solely to the collection and features several objects that have never before been on public view.

This exhibition is about convergences and encounters. It examines the often miniaturized representations of Paleo-Eskimo cosmology, in which each living creature's spirit, its *inua*, might transmute itself from one body to another, either within or between species. Sometimes this concept is represented in the abstracted form of surface patterns and linear designs, like the emphatically repeated circle-cross motif. More dramatic are the hybrid animal forms: a seal with a human face, a pregnant woman with a walrus head and flippers, a tiny bird with the neck and skull of a caribou. We also see clever visual puns, as in the tiny maskette that reveals not one but three faces delineated within the same design, two human and one seal.

What messages do these objects impart? Looking hard, we find many, and some we cannot know. Centuries separate the cultures of the Old Bering Sea periods from those of their modern descendants: the Central Yup'ik, Inupiat, Siberian Yup'ik, and Inuit peoples of today. We can presume that, as coastal villagers known to have been active traders and hunters, they encountered many other populations, and the changes in material culture suggest an ongoing evolution of beliefs and practices, sometimes within a relatively short span of time. The practice of shamanism was in evidence rather strongly, it would seem, in the earliest phase of Old Bering Sea art. It subsequently took on a more animal-centric, stylistically refined guise, then diminished, then experienced a resurgence. With the contact between Alaskan native villages and Russian, American, and British outsiders that began in the eighteenth century, shamanism seemed to practically disappear, except in the remote villages of the Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, where an altogether unique manifestation of Old Bering Sea shamanism survived into the early twentieth century. The history of arctic peoples is like the Bering Sea itself; a series of overlapping waves, it is ever changing, yet constant.



Kathleen Borowick, detail of a drawing of an Old Bering Sea II needle case in the Edmund Carpenter Collection

Who? Where? When?

The heart of Old Bering Sea culture was St. Lawrence Island, which sits near the southern entrance to the Bering Strait. At approximately ninety miles long and twenty-two miles across, it is the sixth largest island in the United States and has been inhabited for at least three thousand years and probably much longer. Yet it is home to only two permanent villages, Savoonga and Gambell (originally known as Sevuqak in the native Yup'ik), and has a total population of approximately fourteen hundred. As recently as the mid-nineteenth century, the island was home to more than four thousand inhabitants, but a devastating famine in 1878–80 decimated the population.

During the ancient Old Bering Sea periods, coastal villages, many of them temporary, dotted the landscape, and each likely consisted of no more than one or two hundred people, as with many Alaskan coastal settlements today. St. Lawrence Island holds several important archeological sites, most notably the Kukulik mound near Savoonga, excavated by Otto W. Geist between 1928 and 1936, and the Okvik and Punuk sites, excavated by Henry B. Collins in the 1920s. Additional ancient villages were excavated by Collins and others near Gambell, on the western side of the island. From these archeological digs, Collins developed a system to divide artifacts into several cultural phases based on a confluence of the depth at which they were found, coastal proximity, and stylistic variations. These distinctions are still used as guides; however, it is difficult to conclusively date artifacts within these cultural periods, and there are numerous examples of idiosyncratic or transitional styles.

Bering Strait region

Kathleen Borowick, drawing of an Okvik (Old Bering Sea I) figure in the Edmund Carpenter Collection

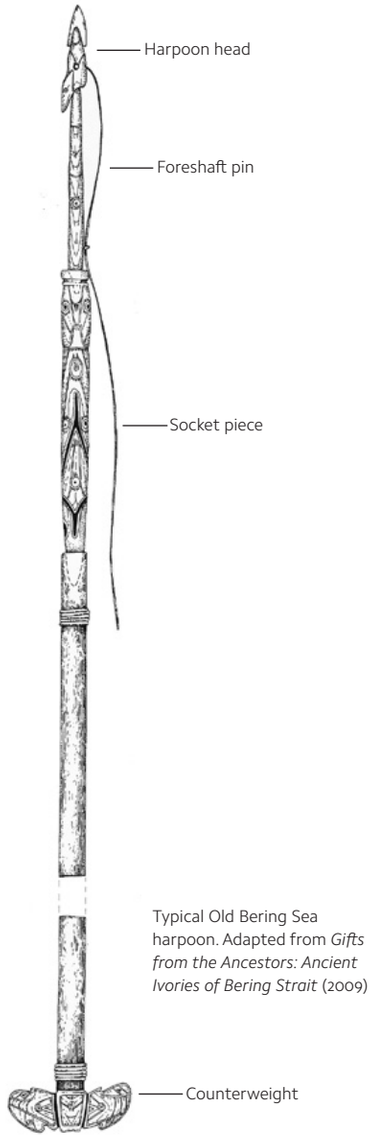
The Okvik Period, or Old Bering Sea I (ca. 250 BCE–100 CE)

The term Okvik comes from one of the earliest known hunting sites on St. Lawrence Island; in the Yup'ik language it means "the place where walrus come ashore." Artifacts from this first known phase of Paleo-Eskimo culture include harpoon components, tools, ornaments, and animal representations, but it is the doll-like carvings that distinguish the period, and their presence and curious aspect are often cited as evidence of shamanism of a personal order. They are stoic, totemic figures, with elongated noses and heads, truncated torsos, and usually no arms or legs, and they have a monumental appearance that belies their small scale. To audiences accustomed to Cubist art, they are almost modern looking. Elegantly carved with stone tools, their bodies are typically decorated with deeply engraved straight lines, sometimes in radiating patterns. These engravings might indicate the skeleton or related tattoos; the skeleton is often emphasized in shamanistic societies, and tattoo patterns that echo skeletal anatomy are relatively common. However we read them, they imbue the dolls with a suggestive supernatural aspect. Though their form is highly stylized, there is a great deal of diversity within the conventions and the quality varies widely, which implies that a considerable portion of the population participated in carving.

Some explanations for the figures, if parallel customs in modern times are considered, are that they were house dolls, protective amulets, or fertility figures. Most of them are presented as female and have exaggerated anatomical features, suggesting that they may have been utilized during birthing practices. Another interpretation is that Okvik dolls were shamans' personal accoutrements and served a ceremonial purpose, now lost, perhaps related to fertility or hunting. Curiously, it would appear that many such dolls suffered some sort of ritual decapitation, as numerous examples have been found with heads cleanly removed.

As with all Old Bering Sea and later periods, art from the Okvik phase is usually carved from walrus tusk ivory, the most abundant material found on St. Lawrence Island. Both then and now, Pacific walrus, as well as a variety of seal species, beach themselves on the island in large numbers. Walrus ivory survived well-preserved for many centuries not only because of its dense material quality but because Okvik and later artifacts ended up buried in ice and permafrost, the permanently frozen soil of arctic lands. Their long interment imparted a rich coloration and patina to the ivory. Carvings from the Okvik period are often now a deep brown, almost black, though we must keep in mind that they would have originally displayed the bright whites and cream colors of new ivory.

Okvik (Old Bering Sea I) culture. Animal, probably *Polraiyuk* (mythical beast), ca. 250–100 BCE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, ⅝ × 2¼ × ¾ inches (1.5 × 5.7 × 1.9 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection



Typical Old Bering Sea harpoon. Adapted from *Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait* (2009)

Old Bering Sea II (ca. 100–300 CE) and Old Bering Sea III (ca. 300–500 CE)

Old Bering Sea (OBS) II and, especially, OBS III artifacts represent a formalist apex of Paleo-Eskimo art. In these periods, human representations became somewhat cruder whereas animal figures became both more numerous and complex, and an intricate visual language in the surface decoration of hunting tools emerged. The differences are great enough that it has been argued that post-Okvik Paleo-Eskimo art might indicate the supplantation of the OBS I peoples rather than cultural evolution.

Motifs and figures associated with Asian and Scythian art were prevalent during this period. For example, the frequently depicted crocodile-like being called *Polraiyuk* in the Yuit languages, a mythical beast with six legs that swallowed both sailors and sea creatures whole, bears a striking resemblance to the dragon in the Chinese tradition. The emphasis on animals in general, and in particular the portrayal of interlocking beasts devouring each other, is one of the most conspicuous similarities between OBS and Asian and Scythian works. It is possible that these developments were the product of a new wave of immigrants from the continent, but they may have been simply a result of increased intercultural contact.

Either way, around 100 CE special attention began to be paid to the decorative aspects of tools and weapons. Especially ornamented were the parts of the harpoon, which was certainly the single most important instrument for survival in the region. Used for hunting seal, walrus, and eventually whales, it was constructed of modular components and represented a tremendous technological advancement. The harpoon used for hunting sea mammals in open water consisted of six parts. In the center was a long wood shaft that was inserted into a heavy ivory socket piece and then connected to a smaller ivory foreshaft pin in front. The rear end of the wood shaft held an ivory counterweight, much like the bannerstones found in eastern North America, with wide "wings" like a bat or huge butterfly (indeed, this piece is often referred to as a "winged object"). These four components would be lashed tightly together with sealskin cords, caribou rawhide strings, whale baleen, or grass. The foreshaft pin would receive a special toggling harpoon head with a stone blade that was held in place by a very long sinew cord, which the hunter would grasp. Using a wood throwing

Old Bering Sea II culture. Harpoon Counterweight, ca. 100–300 CE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, 2½ × 7⅛ × 1¼ inches (6.4 × 18 × 3.2 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

board—which lent the hunter's arm greater leverage—inserted into the "tail" of the "winged object," the hunter would drive the harpoon hard into an animal. Once it struck, the toggling head of the harpoon would pivot sideways, locking underneath the animal's skin and muscle. This ingenious device greatly increased the efficiency and success rate of hunting large sea mammals and, with few variations, was utilized continuously until well into the twentieth century, even after the introduction of firearms to the region.

As the hunt of seal and walrus increasingly became the center of village life, it also became the most important activity in terms of ritual and spirituality, and this greater reliance upon animal resources is reflected in OBS II and III art. As discussed, the number of human representations diminished considerably and they became less visually distinctive, while the depiction of animals became more pervasive and detailed. The change was also reflected in the designs used for tool decoration, which consisted primarily of animal motifs.

The parallel, however, is not only in the nature of the ornamentation but also in *which* tools they adorned. Other than the harpoon, the most elaborately carved implements during the OBS II and III periods were the *ulu* knife and needle case, which were also both closely associated with hunting. The harpoon took the animal; the *ulu* cut the animal and separated it into meat, fat, skin, and oil; and the needle case held the sewing equipment that transformed its skin and innards into clothing, bags, cords, and the outer covering of boats. These items were the means by which humans turned animals into garments, food, and shelter: everything they needed to survive. In a sense, the animals transitioned into humans; skins were worn as clothing—a kind of second skin—and the intestines of seals were formed into raincoats in an inside-out metamorphosis.

Opposite:
Old Bering Sea II culture. Harpoon Head, ca. 100–300 CE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, ¾ × 10 × 1¼ inches (1.9 × 25.4 × 3.2 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

Old Bering Sea III culture. Harpoon Socket Piece, ca. 300–500 CE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, 1½ × 9⅜ × 2⅜ inches (3.8 × 23.9 × 6.1 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

Old Bering Sea II culture. Needle Case, ca. 100–300 CE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, 4¼ × 1½ × ¾ inches (10.8 × 3.8 × 1.9 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

The Transition from Paleo-Eskimo to Neo-Eskimo: The Punuk Period (ca. 500–1000 CE)

Old Bering Sea cultures gave way to the Punuk with the introduction of whale hunting. Technological advancements and a growing population allowed for hunting in larger, organized bands with boats called *umiaks* (as opposed to the *kayak* for a single person) that could hold up to eight people. Evidence of this cultural transition was first noted on the namesake Punuk Islands, located near the eastern edge of St. Lawrence Island. During this period, we see the continuation of Old Bering Sea artistic traditions inasmuch as the types of dolls, tools, and ornaments are the same, but they are typically less elaborately decorated. This has been pointed to as suggesting that the practice of shamanism diminished during this phase; certainly the highly stylized motifs of interlocking animals and curvilinear patterning that were earlier integrated into almost every type of hunting object seemed to disappear, as did the ceremonial objects that evoked animal spirits. Punuk artifacts are distinguished by their simpler forms, with surface decoration limited to more crudely drawn straight lines ending in uniform circles or dots, devoid of much of the fantastical imagery seen in OBS times. With growing communities and the hunting of larger game, perhaps people of the Punuk era simply didn't have as much time on their hands. It is presumed that this society, being more populous, was more hierarchical than previous cultures. Roles would have been more strictly defined, meaning that spiritual practices that were once considered the purview of the entire community were increasingly relegated to the shaman. It is likely that the emergence of the Punuk peoples represented an influx of outside groups to St. Lawrence Island and the coastal Chukchi Peninsula villages, and the blending of the Old Bering Sea tradition with new beliefs.

Punuk culture. Bear, ca. 500–1,000 CE. Neo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, 1⅜ x 4¼ x ⅞ inches (3.6 x 10.8 x 2.3 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

Neo-Eskimo to Historic Times: The Thule Tradition (ca. 1000–1800 CE)

By the beginning of the second millennium, the Bering Strait region, including St. Lawrence Island, the Siberian coastal villages, much of the Seward Peninsula on the Alaskan mainland, and coastal areas north of the strait, had been overtaken by Thule cultures following the migration of whales through the strait into the Chukchi Sea. It is not clear whether the Thule peoples evolved directly from Punuk cultures or were distinct from them, but their capacity for and efficiency in hunting whales and other large sea mammals enabled them to spread throughout the area and to penetrate far eastward into modern-day Canada and Greenland. They are the ancestors of the Inuit and Inupiat cultures as well as the Kalaalliit of Greenland. While elaborate walrus ivory carving diminished greatly in the Thule period, highly naturalistic renderings of animals—including birds and fish, which were not commonly seen before—pendants and amulets of whales, and distinctively slim and simplified human representations were part of visual culture, as was a tendency to miniaturize subjects with astonishing accuracy and detail. In Thule culture, we begin to see the arrival of an "art for art's sake" mindset, with small objects made for strictly decorative purposes, as toys, or as game pieces. Even so, elements of animistic practices are still visible, especially those relating to hunting. There are numerous examples of net sinkers, spear and harpoon rests, float plugs, knife handles, and other implements decorated with the heads and bodies of the various animals they were meant to hunt or with human-animal hybrids. These may be seen as representing the *inua* of those animals or as spirit-helpers of the hunter that aided him in his supplication to the hunted animal, asking it to give its life, which would release the *inua* and allow it to reincarnate in another form. While the form of shamanism may have changed, it certainly did not disappear from Thule communities, and to this day certain rituals, like the washing of a hunted seal's mouth with fresh water, are still respected.

Western Thule culture. Game Pieces, ca. 1400–1700 CE. Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, dimensions vary, length approx. ½ to 1½ inches (1.3 to 3.8 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

Western Thule culture. Female Figures, ca. 1400–1700 CE. Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, dimensions vary, heights approx. ½ to 2 inches (1.3 to 5.1 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

Modern Mainland Alaska: The Central Yup'ik of the Kuskokwim-Yukon Delta

Just as the Thule became the modern Inuit and Inupiat peoples of today, Old Bering Sea cultures survive both genetically and culturally in their Central Yup'ik descendants. Because of their remote location upriver, contact with southern outsiders, such as traders, miners, and missionaries, came relatively late in their history. Those arriving at Yup'ik villages along the Kuskokwim River in the nineteenth century witnessed a flourishing tradition of masked dancing narratives that were performed at seasonal potlatches where one village welcomed another in elaborate celebrations of gift giving. While material evidence of masked dancing is not widely seen among Old Bering Sea archeological sites, it is thought that the practices witnessed among the nineteenth-century Yup'ik are probably very ancient, traditions carried over and evolved from earlier times that celebrated similar events and honored the cyclical nature of the immediate environment. Indeed, the iconography of Yup'ik masks contains a panoply of elements: winds, animals, *inua*, even grasses and bubbles are represented in them. They are performative and transformational, showing events rather than fixed creatures.

In *MicroCosmos*, we have only one pair of Yup'ik masks on view, which we offer as perfect examples of how the cosmology of the Old Bering Sea could have been carried into modern times. Their remarkable story is unique and will be described thoroughly in an upcoming publication. But in short, the two masks were collected from the Alaskan village of Napaskiak around 1915 and separated soon afterward. They are being reunited here at the Menil Collection, one hundred or so years later, for the first time.

Like many Yup'ik masks, these are a matched pair. They are Wolf and Caribou, predator and prey; in the life cycle of Central Alaska, they are naturally co-dependent beings. Each is incomplete without the other and they are oppositional. Wolf has one right ear, one right eye, one right nostril, and an open jaw that curves to the left. Caribou has one left ear, one left eye, one left nostril, and her jaw curves toward that of Wolf. Together, they form one face. Additionally, Wolf is painted black and represents the night. He has white spots like stars that are reflected in the crown of long feathers, stripped except for their starry tips. Caribou is white, representing the day, with short swan feathers close to the neck. Their song is layered in meaning and metaphor; they are inseparable spirits, defined by the borders of each other.

Central Yup'ik peoples. Wolf Mask and Caribou Mask, late 19th century. Alaska, Napaskiak. Wood, feathers, and pigment, 17½ x 9½ x 6⅜ inches (44.5 x 24.1 x 16.2 cm) and 20 x 14 x 10 inches (50.1 x 35.6 x 25.4 cm). Collection of Adelaide de Menil and Edmund Carpenter. Photo: George Hixson

Kathleen Borowick, drawing of an Old Bering Sea II or III needle case in the Edmund Carpenter Collection

What Comes Around, Goes Around, or the Meaning of *MicroCosmos*

If *Micro* means "small details" and *Cosmos* means "the larger universe," then the title of this exhibition suggests that these two concepts are both oppositional and unified. In Old Bering Sea cultures, the world itself was metaphorically contained within the very smallest of its aspects. Indeed, many of the objects on view are miniscule in size, practically microscopic in comparison to sculpture from other cultures, and within them even smaller designs are etched: patterns, lines, circles, dots, various disembodied parts—all of which contribute to the works' expressive character and indicate their spiritual importance to the carvers. The inclusion of large projections of close-up photographs is one method of getting at the meaning of *MicroCosmos*. At forty times their actual size, features are revealed that our naked eyes could never perceive. While we marvel at the intimate scale of the actual objects in the gallery before us, we find ourselves equally awed by the incredible layers of detail in the photographs, many of which may have been invisible to the carver himself, except perhaps in thought.

Most indigenous art is, simply put, conservative in nature. It celebrates ritual practice, continuity, and tradition. It should not surprise us, then, to see the insistent repetition of motifs and forms returning after gaps of centuries, even when a culture has evolved considerably through integration with outsiders. Dependence upon the lives of sea mammals in the sometimes brutal climate of the arctic naturally imbues a sense of respect for them, and ancient arctic cultures developed an animistic cosmology of myths and rituals that has negotiations with animal spirits at its core. Representations of animals and humans, often transitioning from one to the other, reflect the ethos of this universe.

Even today we see aspects of animistic practice in the subsistence hunting of coastal Alaskan villages. They are, and for the most part always have been, small communities of interrelated families. The combination of a small population and remote locale likely meant that specialization as we know it did not exist until modern times. It is unlikely that there was any one person carving dolls, tools, or weapons to the exclusion of other skills and tasks, and there was probably little hierarchy of mastery within the community. Nobody was an "artist."

Old Bering Sea III culture. Head, ca. 300–500 CE. Paleo-Eskimo; Alaska, St. Lawrence Island. Walrus ivory, 3⅛ x 2 x 1 ½ inches (7.9 x 5.1 x 3.8 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection

This may explain why, when we look at work from that time, there is a remarkable variety within the conventional forms. All Okvik dolls, for example, have undeniable similarities, but no two are decorated in quite the same manner nor are they of a uniform size. A wide range of features, gestures, and patterns can be found even though they exhibit strict adherence to a paradigm in other respects.

Carving was also of critical importance to village survival. As previously noted, to be a successful hunter in the arctic meant that one had to pay respect to a hunted animal's *inua*, its spirit, since it was thought that an animal would return only to those hunters who observed the rituals dictated by their cosmology. Yuit people believed there to be a fixed number of *inua* that inhabit the bodies of animals and that when one was killed, the *inua* reincarnated, usually as another such animal, and remembered the hunter that took its life. Provided that due respect and humility were demonstrated and the appropriate rites performed, it would eventually return to that same hunter to offer itself again. A chief manifestation of proper honoring of the animal was the elaborate decoration of the hunter's tools, with the most beautiful weapons belonging, by default, to the most successful hunter. In Old Bering Sea times, then, we see the remarkable example of a society where one's skill as an artist was crucial to the very survival of oneself, family, and community. In the universe of *MicroCosmos*, without art, life cannot exist.

— Sean Mooney

Visit the Menil Collection Bookstore for a selection of books by Edmund Snow Carpenter and publications related to the themes explored in MicroCosmos.