

5. Yup'ik Masks (West Wall)

A
Tomanik (Wind-maker) Mask
Yup'ik / Napaskiak or
Kinugumiut, Kuskokwim River,
Alaska, early 20th century
Rock Foundation, New York

B
**Shaman's Mask with
Bear and Sea Creature**
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1875
Private Collection

C
Dance Mask
Yup'ik, Hooper Bay, Alaska,
ca. 1880–90
Collection of
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Diker

D
Dance Mask
Yup'ik, Hooper Bay, Alaska,
ca. 1900s
Collection of
Mr. and Mrs. Charles Diker

E
Whale-Human Headdress
Yup'ik, Alaska, early 20th
century
Rock Foundation, New York

F
Sculpin Mask
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1890
Private Collection

G
Shamanic Seal Mask
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1860–70
Pinchas and Lois Mendelson
Collection

H
Diving Shaman Mask
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1890–1900
Private Collection

I
**Sea Otter Mask
with Spirit Face**
Yup'ik, Alaska, late 19th century
Rock Foundation, New York

J
Spirit Mask with Diving Loon
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1900
Private Collection

K
Dance Mask
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1890–1900
Collection of James Economos

L
Walrus-Wolf Mask
Yup'ik, Kuskokwim River,
Alaska, late 19th century
Rock Foundation, New York

M
(left)
Human-Wolf Mask
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1880
Pinchas and Lois Mendelson
Collection

(right)
Human-Bird Mask
Yup'ik, Alaska, ca. 1860–70
Private Collection, New York

N
(left)
Shaman's Mask
Yup'ik, St. Michael's or
Nelson Island, Alaska, ca. 1880
Collection of
Jeffrey and Arlene Myers

(right)
Caribou Mask
Yup'ik / Anvik, Alaska,
ca. 1890–1900
Private Collection, New York

O and P
Nepcetaq Dance Masks
Yup'ik, Nelson Island, Alaska,
ca. 1880–90
Collection
Jeffrey and Arlene Myers

Yup'ik People and Art

The contemporary Inupiat, Yup'ik, and Siberian Yup'ik people are widely understood to be the direct descendants of the ancient Old Bering Sea cultures whose ivory carvings are represented in this exhibition. The tradition of ivory carving, as well as the subsistence hunting of sea mammals, fish, and game has continued into the present, the introduction of western missionaries and traders into the region notwithstanding. However, one tradition that was almost completely discontinued is that of masked dancing, a unique storytelling tradition that took place in special ceremonies.

During the early years of Western contact, the late 19th and early 20th centuries, many dance masks were obtained by curious Westerners and brought to the east coast of the United States. Others made their way to Europe, where their amazing formal qualities influenced the work of modern artists, especially the Surrealists. Some early Western residents in the region, notably Adams H. Twitchell, who collected fifty-five masks on behalf of the Museum of the American Indian, remarked that they had witnessed masks

placed in trees to be left to the elements after being used in certain ceremonies.

It is very likely that the practice of mask making and ceremonial dancing dates back to ancient times; however, given the ephemeral nature of the materials utilized (wood, feathers, and pigments) no known examples created prior to the 19th century have survived. But in their essence, one can see clear connections between these modern masks, primarily made by the Yup'ik people of the Kuskokwim and Yukon river deltas, and the ancient Old Bering Sea artistic traditions. Each display hybrid human and animal forms and demonstrate narrative events through time and movement. Some masks are kinetic, with flap doors that can be raised to reveal another face, but even those without moving parts often have multiple aspects so that we see spirits “released” from within animals or birds and witness the embodiment of multiple characters and activities in a given mask, to be emphasized variously through the course of the story and the dance.

Texts adapted from the exhibition catalogue

This exhibition is generously supported by the Rock Foundation, Edmund Carpenter and Adelaide de Menil, and the City of Houston.

Front: *Tomanik* (Wind-maker) Mask, Yup'ik / Napaskiak or Kinugumiut, Kuskokwim River, Alaska, early 20th century. Wood, feathers, pigment, and fiber, 37 x 16 x 10 inches
Photo: Paul Hester. Photo © 2011 Rock Foundation, New York

THE MENIL COLLECTION

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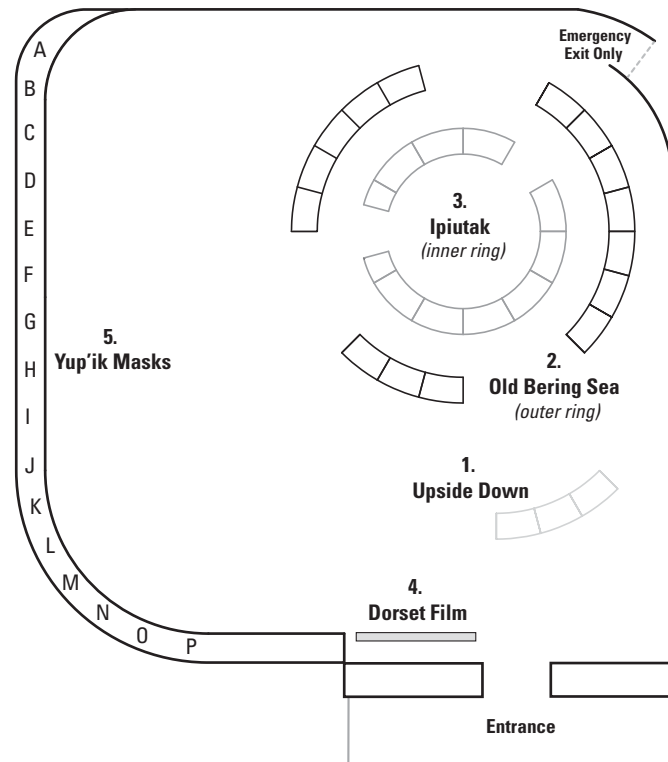
Exhibition Map

UPSIDE DOWN ARCTIC REALITIES



The Menil Collection April 15–July 17, 2011





Arctic Objects (Display Cases)

1. Upside Down

The gap between the earliest horizon of Eskimo archeology and the Upper Paleolithic of the Old World is enormous; yet the resemblances are unmistakable and one cannot escape the impression that the Eskimo have, in their art, somehow carried Paleolithic traditions into recent times.

Some Paleolithic figurines from France and European Russia hung upside down. So did figures found in Malta, a late Paleolithic site in central Siberia. Presumably hung on necklaces or as single pendants, this custom was clearly established throughout wide areas of Eurasia, from Aurignacian through Magdalenian times. The practice continued in Eastern

Europe, the Near East, Polynesia-Indonesia, and especially arctic Canada-Greenland.

The inverted human figure also occurred in Polynesia, both in naturalistic and in more abstract form. Neighboring Borneo had entire necklaces of inverted human figures. The symbolism remained unchanged: a protective border of ancestors guarding the living, sometimes encircling a human neck, sometimes encircling a ceremonial house.

In Eskimo cultures figurines of certain pendants resembled birds. Some had human busts or the heads of other animals, and they were used them in a game of chance, *tingiujaq*. The Eskimo

often perforated each bird at its tail and then, to store them, strung them on a cord from which they hung—head down. Strung sets resembled necklaces of female images.

Even in our own culture, this symbolism still plays a role in funeral ceremonies, especially for prominent persons. Soldiers stand at attention with inverted rifles; a riderless horse with reversed boots followed the catafalque in John F. Kennedy's funeral procession; even a national flag may be flown upside down, as was done in the funeral of King Paul of Greece in 1964.

Reversal symbolizes the departure of the soul from this world and its arrival in the next. There, the soul awaits rebirth, head down, in the position of delivery.

Perhaps it was in terms of these ideas that Paleolithic and later tribesmen wore these beautiful images dangling from their necks.

—Edmund Carpenter

2. Old Bering Sea

For the purposes of this exhibition, Old Bering Sea refers generically to the Paleo-Eskimo cultures centered on St. Lawrence Island, which flourished across the surrounding coasts of modern-day Alaska and Chukotka, Siberia. Important archaeological sites have been discovered along both coasts; however, this exhibition concentrates on works from two of the most significant and distinctive sites: St. Lawrence Island and Point Hope.

The Old Bering Sea cultures also include what is referred to as the Thule tradition, the most recent historic era of these cultures. The Thule people migrated across the entire arctic north of

Canada into Greenland, eventually overtaking the earlier Dorset culture that inhabited these eastern regions. Most modern-day indigenous arctic peoples—the Inuit and Kalaallit of Canada and Western Greenland, the Inupiat and Yup'ik of Alaska, the Siberian Yup'ik of St. Lawrence Island, and the Chukchi of Siberia—are believed to descend from the Thule.

While it is not possible to conclusively establish dates for Old Bering Sea art, we can follow these general guidelines for each cultural period and sub-style, as defined by stylistic differences in decoration and form:

- Old Bering Sea I / Okvik (200 BC–AD 100)
- Old Bering Sea II (AD 100–300)
- Old Bering Sea III (AD 300–500)
- Punuk (AD 500–1200)
- Thule (AD 1000–1600)

The artifacts mounted in the outer ring of cases present specimens from the collection of the Rock Foundation, New York. These works are mainly attributed to the earliest known OBS tradition, commonly called Okvik, and are from St. Lawrence Island. Seen clockwise, the cases include: “strange animals,” figurines and game pieces with animal and human representations; utilitarian objects such as *ulu* (knives), chains, scrapers, needle cases, body ornaments, buttons, snow goggles, and a bowl; parts of harpoons used to hunt walrus; and Okvik and Punuk doll figures and heads.

3. Ipiutak

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, in the village of Point Hope, Alaska, the excavation of around six hundred ancient houses and burial sites was undertaken by archaeologists Froelich Rainey from the American Museum of Natural History, New York, and Helge Larsen from the Danish National Museum in Copenhagen. The site was unusually large, representing a village more populous than any native village on coastal Alaska even today, and the remarkable findings were so distinctive from those of St. Lawrence Island and Siberia that Larsen and Rainey theorized that the village represented a separate Old Bering Sea culture, which they termed Ipiutak. Their discoveries were published in a field report in 1948, which remains the primary survey of Ipiutak culture. Subsequent scholars have hypothesized that the unique presence of Asian artistic motifs in Ipiutak art may indicate that the culture was the result of a separate, later migration directly between Asia and Alaska. Archaeological evidence suggests that the Ipiutak artifacts from the Point Hope site date from AD 200–600, though some scholars feel that the size of the settlement indicates it may have been occupied for thousands of years.

During their years in Point Hope, Larsen and Rainey catalogued over ten thousand artifacts, which were divided between their two museums and have been housed there ever since. This exhibition offers a rare opportunity to view a significant selection from each of the two collections. The artifacts on view consist of grave objects, openwork carvings, tools, and animal representations made from walrus ivory, some inlaid with jet or baleen, from the collections of the Danish National Museum, Copenhagen,

and the American Museum of Natural History, New York. Works from the AMNH are exhibited courtesy of the US Bureau of Land Management and the Native Village of Point Hope, Alaska. We would like to particularly express our gratitude to the Native Village of Point Hope for their permission to exhibit these artifacts.

4. Dorset Film

In 1957 Edmund Carpenter began a film project documenting the art of the ancient Dorset people and comparing it with Inuit examples that had been collected by filmmaker Robert Flaherty in 1913. With renowned cinematographer Fritz Spiess as his cameraman, Carpenter shot 108 reels of 35mm film. His notes indicate narration by actor Hans Conried along with a musical composition, but the film was never completed. Carpenter's raw footage has been restored for this exhibition.

The Dorset lived in northeastern arctic Canada until the arrival of the Thule people around AD 1400, after which they disappeared. Though the Inuit are thought to be descended from the Thule and are not technically related to the Dorset people, the two cultures have certain commonalities, including the practice of shamanism, which is expressed through their art in numerous ways. The intent of Carpenter's film is not to document the ancient Dorset people from an archaeological perspective; rather, through direct observation, he explores how contemporary Inuit may have inherited some of their shared traditions and viewpoints.

The Dorset artworks that appear in the film are currently in the collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau, Ottawa.