

## I and J Animal Spirit Helpers

An array of animals populate these two cases. At one end of Case I, a large flying walrus springs up from the sea, representing a shaman's spiritual journey between sea, sky, and land. Next to him are two small walrus pendants, each engraved with ancestral patterns, followed by a group of seals, some with human faces that represent their *inua*, or spirit. A mother seal and her child cleverly disguise a container, with the baby seal as the lid.

In Case J, we move onto land with ivories depicting a caribou, its hoof, a muskox, walking birds, and a lone human. Beside him is a metamorphosing bear, whose body curls in upon itself, its head expanded to form a hollow cone. This creature was likely a shaman's "sucking tube," which he would hold to his mouth to pull bad spirits and sickness out of the body of an ill villager. At the far end of the case, two flying creatures descend from the sky. They are rendered as herring gulls, which dive rapidly to catch fish. But they also appear distinctly reptilian and somewhat monstrous, like the mythical *Polraiyuk*, a beast with six legs that dominated the bottom of the sea.

## K Ulu and Scrapers

A woman's knife, called an *ulu*, consisted of a carved ivory handle inset with a broad blade of ground slate. The counterpart to the harpoon, it was used to butcher animals, and in Old Bering Sea times it was considered equally important. Many of the *ulu* are carved with a stylistic complexity on a par with those of the harpoon components in Case B. Each of the remarkable examples on view has an animal representation, sometimes in multiple forms; bears, seals, and walrus abound. On one, a wolf devours a puffin. On another, a fanciful pattern appears to trace the profile of intestines in a literal representation of what the knives were used for. Scrapers, which were used to

separate blubber and fat away from the skin and for flattening the intestines, were also an essential tool. Many are decorated with fantastical animal forms whose "heads" form the handles.

## L Game Pieces

These small ivories were used in a game that was played in arctic communities for centuries. They are usually waterfowl—many are so detailed that specific species can be distinguished—but some have hybrid forms, like swimming caribou, fox, or even human-bird hybrids. Most are carved from walrus tooth rather than tusk ivory as the smaller teeth lent themselves to this use and the larger tusks were needed for other purposes. Many have holes drilled through the tail so that they could be strung together as a set.

To play, the participants would sit in a circle and toss the game pieces onto the floor. By at least one account, after the toss any of them that landed upright would be collected by the player at which the piece's beak was pointed. The remainder would proceed to the next round and the tossing would continue until all the birds had been picked up. Whoever ended up with the most pieces won the game.

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

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## THE MENIL COLLECTION

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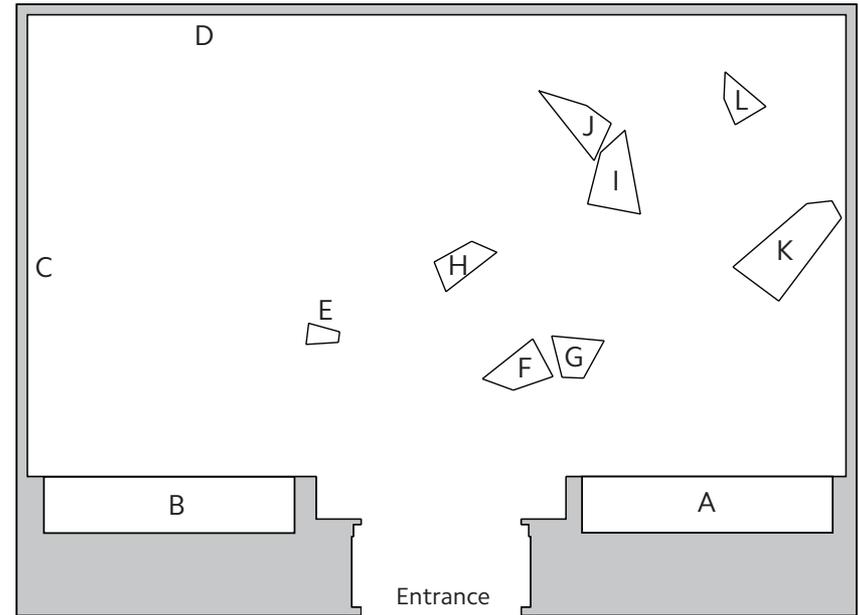
# MICROCOSMOS

## Gallery Map

Details from the  
Carpenter Collection  
of Arctic Art

The Menil Collection

August 29, 2015–February 21, 2016



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Okvik Figures

**B**  
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*Ulu* and Scrapers

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## A Okvik Figures

With the exception of the five objects on the far right, these thirty doll-like carvings date from the earliest known phase of Old Bering Sea culture, the Okvik period (250 BCE–100 CE). The figures and heads likely served a spiritual purpose and may have been protective amulets, fertility figures, or hunting aids. The female figures fourth and fifth from the left in the top row were likely used during the rituals that accompanied childbirth (see Case H for similar figures from later periods). The figure with the small head carved onto its torso is one of only several known carvings referred to as an “Okvik Madonna.” Immediately to her right are two male figures with remnants of the headgear worn by a “striker” pursuing seal or walrus from a kayak or *umiak*. The striker was considered the most important member of a hunting party, the strongest and most skilled, so it is not surprising to see him honored in effigy.

The case also contains a very unusual representation of a flying shaman on the bottom row, second from the right. It would be a typical example of an Okvik-period doll if not for its upside-down head. The flying walrus figure in Case I may also be interpreted as a shamanic being traveling from one spiritual plane to another.

## B Harpoon Components

Two examples of harpoons used to hunt sea mammals are reconstructed on the middle and bottom shelves of this case. Space has been left between the wing-like counterweight and the large socket piece, foreshaft pin, and toggling harpoon head, indicating where the wood shaft would have been. All these components would have been lashed together with animal skin or whale baleen cords, except for the pivoting head, which would have been secured by the foreshaft pin and attached to a long cord used to capture the struck

animal. Examples of two such harpoon heads with their blades intact are shown at the top right. The one on the right has a stone blade but the one on the left sports an iron one. Iron was not in common use when the ivory head was created, which suggests that these tools were used for many generations with the blades changed out periodically.

The five harpoon counterweights in the top left of the case represent a span of over a thousand years. From left to right, they are from the Okvik (250 BCE–100 CE), Old Bering Sea II (100–300 CE), Old Bering Sea III (300–500 CE), early Punuk (500–800 CE), and late Punuk (800–1000 CE) periods. By the time of the rise of Thule culture, ca. 1000 CE, this “winged object” had been replaced with a spike-like pointed counterweight that was used for testing the thickness of sea ice and as an additional striking instrument.

## C Projected Images

These photographs depict many of the carvings in the Edmund Carpenter Collection at forty times their actual size, allowing the viewer to examine details that are all but invisible to the naked eye. The sequence ends with two photographs taken in the same location on the Bering Sea six months apart, in August and February.

## D Yup'ik Masks

Representing Wolf (left) and Caribou (right), these masks are a matched pair. Collected around 1915 by Adams H. Twitchell in Napaskiak, Alaska, a Central Yup'ik village on the Kuskokwim River, they were sent to New York to become part of the Museum of the American Indian. As happened with many other such pairs, the two were separated, and in 1999 the Wolf mask came to the Menil Collection, where it was installed by Edmund Carpenter in *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*. In 2014, its long-lost mate became available and was acquired in anticipation of this historic reunion.

## E Tattooed Figures

These three figures demonstrate the persistence of figural representation and body decoration over three cultural phases: early Punuk, Thule, and Old Bering Sea III. The large Punuk figure and tiny Thule carving have nearly identical tattoo patterns across their torsos, perhaps suggesting a spiritual radiance or ancestral design, which is remarkable given their separation of nearly a thousand years. The Old Bering Sea III figure may have been part of an ornamental buckle or attached to a rope or cord, and it shows the linear patterns of the torso expanding into symmetrical animal forms, as if its arms and legs were metamorphosing into devouring bears.

## F and G Hunting Gear and Effigies

An array of hunting amulets and tools, some in miniature, are seen in Case F. There is a highly accurate representation of a kayak, with its counterbalancing sealskin pouches and floats, and a hunter figure wearing a triangular visor that shades his face, allowing him to peer down into the water. Next to him is a walrus-face effigy, an object that would have decorated such a hunting visor. Nearby is a set of snow goggles, with slit openings—the world’s first “sunglasses.” These fit tightly to the face so that they would prevent the eyeballs from freezing in winter as well as protect the wearer from snow-blindness.

Also in this case are a series of harpoon finger rests and spear rests with animal heads adorning them. Finger rests would have been lashed onto Thule-period harpoons to provide additional leverage and mark the most balanced point at which to grasp them. Most of these are decorated with the heads of seals, the animal that was hunted with this particular type of harpoon. Spear rests would have been attached to the sides of kayaks, facing inward, to prevent spears and harpoons from sliding off the sides of the boat.

They are similarly decorated with the heads of the sea mammals being hunted, perhaps in honor of the animals but also as a labeling system for the hunter’s tools.

Bears are commonly represented on hunting implements, as decorations on harpoons and toggles, and as carved effigies that would accompany a hunter. Being skilled and strong hunters themselves, they were considered desirable helping spirits. In Case G, several examples of bear figures from different time periods are found alongside line trace toggles, which kept multiple lines from tangling where they converged. One of the two large toggles on view has three bears’ heads cleverly carved together; the rawhide cords would have slid through their open mouths. The other is suggestive of an animal’s snout, and the line would have exited through its nostrils.

## H Fertility and the Life Cycle

A common thread running through much of arctic material culture is the continuity of life. This case contains some explicit manifestations of this concept. Three figures are depicted with pregnant bellies, one of which is a remarkable hybrid creature: a walrus-woman. Nearby is what, at less than one centimeter tall, might be the collection’s tiniest object. It depicts two figures, one riding piggyback on the shoulders of the other. Continuing this theme are three pairs of sea mammals, one depicting seals, the other two walrus. Each consists of a larger animal carrying a baby upon its back. In the walrus pieces, the babies climb their mothers’ backs as if ascending ladders. This composition expresses the life cycle as the child takes its inevitable path toward death, represented by the hollowed skull of the adult figure.