

**Paleo-Eskimo Artifacts from the Edmund Carpenter Collection
Populate a Universe of Their Own
In *MicroCosmos: Details from the Carpenter Collection***

On view exclusively at the Menil, August 29, 2015 through February 21, 2016



HOUSTON, TEXAS, August 20, 2015 — Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, Edmund Carpenter—anthropologist, author, broadcaster, filmmaker, and communications theorist—assembled one of the world’s finest and most extensive collections of artifacts made and used by the peoples of the Old Bering Sea cultures of coastal Alaska and Siberia. Dating from as early as 250 BCE and carved from walrus ivory (or wood, as seen in rare examples that have survived), these dolls, ornaments, game pieces,

tools, and ceremonial objects are diminutive in scale. Mere inches in height, they speak powerfully of cultural forces that led to their creation—specifically, a belief in the fluid and fantastic transformation from human to animal and back again. In *MicroCosmos* seals and water fowl sprout human heads, pregnant women grow walrus tusks, shamans fly like birds, and mythical beasts shift into multiple shapes.

The exhibition’s opening on August 29, 2015 marks the first public display of the Carpenter Collection of Arctic Art (a trove of some 150 Paleo-Eskimo objects). Alone among archaeologists and anthropologists when he delved into the Arctic and its peoples, Edmund Carpenter conducted groundbreaking research that led to the

publication of “Eskimo Realities,” (1959/1973), one of many landmarks in a career that spanned the globe. Edmund Carpenter died in 2011 at the age of 88.

Inviting museum visitors into another world, *MicroCosmos: Details from the Carpenter Collection* has been organized by its curator, Sean Mooney. Formerly director of exhibition design at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, he has been involved in the mounting of more than 200 exhibitions around the world. The Menil is the exclusive venue for *MicroCosmos*, which will remain on view for nearly six months, closing February 21, 2016.

Said Josef Helfenstein, director of the Menil Collection: “We are fortunate that Ted Carpenter’s brilliant intellectual contributions included significant activities at the Menil Collection, including the exhibition *Upside Down: Arctic Realities* and the permanent installation *Witnesses to a Surrealist Vision*. Our presentation of *MicroCosmos* is both a tribute to Ted’s memory and a fascinating introduction to a material and spiritual universe that he helped to illuminate.”

In addition to featuring Paleo-Eskimo objects, *MicroCosmos* also includes two storytelling dance masks made by the Yup’ik people in the late nineteenth century. The dances of the Yup’ik—descendants of the Old Bering Sea cultures—characteristically celebrate seasonal activities such as hunting; the masks for these dances are created in pairs to express dualities such as summer and winter, predator and prey, or steadfastness and trickery. Over the years, many of these pairs have been separated. The two masks in *MicroCosmos*—one representing a wolf and the other its prey, a caribou—will be reunited at the Menil for the first time in almost a hundred years.

MicroCosmos: Details from the Carpenter Collection of Arctic Art is generously supported by Clare Casademont and Michael Metz, Anne and Bill Stewart, and the City of Houston.

Public Programs

So Percussion presented by Da Camera of Houston

Sunday, September 27, 3:00 pm

Brooklyn-based ensemble So Percussion performs *Strange and Sacred Noise* by Pulitzer Prize winning American composer John Luther Adams, whose work is rooted in the landscape of Alaska.

The Yup'ik Dance Masks Tradition

A discussion with Yup'ik dancer, Chuna McIntyre, and Sean Mooney

Thursday, October 8, 7:00 p.m.

This talk will focus on the cultural traditions of the Alaskan Yup'ik people, who are the modern living descendants of the Paleo-Eskimo, Old Bering Sea culture. Chuna McIntyre is a Central Yup'ik Eskimo who travels widely sharing Alaska's Native heritage. He is chief consultant at the Smithsonian on Yup'ik language and traditions.

Sean Mooney on the Life and Career of Edmund Snow Carpenter (1922-2011)

Wednesday, December 2, 7:00 p.m.

Over the course of his life, Edmund Carpenter was an archaeologist, visual anthropologist, media theorist, filmmaker, teacher, and author. With his wife Adelaide de Menil, he was a collector of ethnographic art. His installation, *Witnesses*, is on permanent view in Menil's Surrealist galleries. He curated the exhibition *Upside Down* in Paris' Musée du quai Branly and later at The Menil Collection.

All public programs are held in Menil Foyer. Programs are free and open to the public.

About the Menil Collection

A legacy of the late philanthropists John and Dominique de Menil, the Menil Collection opened in 1987. The Menil Collection's main museum building anchors the 30-acre campus, which includes the Cy Twombly Gallery, a site-specific Dan Flavin installation, and outdoor sculpture. Presenting regular rotations of artworks from the growing permanent collection, the Menil also organizes special exhibitions and programs throughout the year, publishes scholarly books, and conducts research into the conservation of modern and contemporary art. The museum is open Wednesday through Sunday, 11am to 7pm, and charges no admission fee.

Image: Human Doll Figure, Okvik/Old Bering Sea I, ca. 250 BCE-100 CE. Walrus ivory, 3 × 1 1/2 × 13/16 in. (7.6 × 3.8 × 2.1 cm). The Edmund Carpenter Collection. Photo: David Heald

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