

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

Exhibition curated by Edmund Carpenter, assisted by Sean Mooney

Art direction by Douglas Wheeler

Sound design by Philippe Le Goff

The throat-games recorded for the exhibition were performed by women from the Hudson Bay coast: Alasi Alasuaq, Nelly Nungaq, Alasi Tullaugak, Mary Sivuarapik, and Lucy Amarualik. The other voices tell Inuit tales and provide a variety of examples of different dialects of the Arctic. The storytellers are Palluq Inuaraq, Estralla Egede-Drouet, Elisapee Isulutak, Malaia Papatsi, and Lea Nutaraq, who was 107 years old when she was recorded, in 1991.

Text adapted from “Arctic Realities” by Edmund Carpenter, published in the exhibition catalogue

PUBLIC PROGRAM

In conjunction with the related exhibition “Ancestors of the Lake: Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, New Guinea”

Oh What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!

Tuesday, April 19, 8:00 p.m.

This 2003 film (52 minutes) by John Bishop and Harald Prins draws on Edmund Carpenter’s 1972 book of the same name about the effects of film media on the population of Papua New Guinea.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Available at the Menil Bookstore

Anne Bahnson, Mikhail Bronshtein, Edmund Carpenter, Kirill Dneprovsky, Ann Fienup-Riordan, Robert McGhee, and Patricia Sutherland

Exploring the relationship between the aesthetics of native Arctic cultures and their remote environments, this volume brings together significant ancient works from major sites and cultures, including Ekven in Russia, the Ipiutak in Alaska, and Old Bering Sea peoples. Available at the Menil Bookstore
231 pages, 58 black-and-white and 129 color illustrations; \$50

cover:
Head
Okvik, Old Bering Sea I
ca. 200 BC–AD 100
Walrus ivory
2½ x 1¾ x 1¼ inches
Rock Foundation, New York

All photos © 2011 Rock Foundation, New York

All photos by David Heald unless otherwise noted

THE MENIL COLLECTION

1515 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400 www.menil.org

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UPSIDE DOWN ARCTIC REALITIES



Figure with Striker’s Headgear
Okvik, Old Bering Sea I
ca. 200 BC–AD 100
Walrus ivory
5¼ x 17⁄8 x 1¼ inches
Rock Foundation, New York



INTRODUCTION

“Upside Down: Arctic Realities” is a testament to the scholarship of Edmund Snow Carpenter and the unique place he occupies in the history of anthropology in America. His groundbreaking research, conducted over the past sixty years, sheds light on indigenous cultures with oral traditions, particularly those of the arctic regions of Eastern Canada, Alaska, and Siberia, as well as various ethnic groups living in New Guinea. His work speaks to the impact of modern media on these cultures as well as our own. Carpenter’s scholarly contributions derive from a keen understanding of the multi-sensory ways in which human beings conceptualize and process their relationship to the environment and to one another.

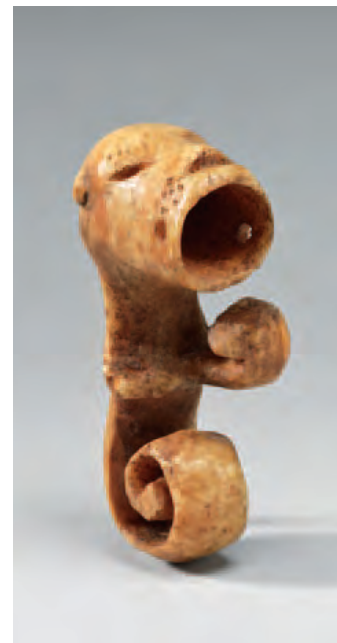
According to Carpenter, the process of creating quotidian objects helps to shape one’s sensory perceptions of the landscape, spiritual orientation, and attitude towards the living and imagined universe. In his influential book *Eskimo Realities*, first published in 1973, he argues that the interaction between artist and material takes precedence over the finished object and what it signifies. In keeping with this philosophy, the exhibition decidedly emphasizes experience over representation. It situates visitors in a multi-sensory space in which they become aware of their immersion in the environment and the ephemeral qualities that produce it, including sound, movement, scale, light, and reflective and matte surfaces. Viewers are invited to become part of its fabric as opposed to being set apart from it. In order to achieve this atmosphere for the viewer, Carpenter invited the artist Douglas Wheeler to conceive the installation. Renowned for his light and space installations that privilege experience over materiality, Wheeler alters the viewers’ perceptions of space—through precisely designed floor and wall constructions and the judicious placement of light sources—in ways that parallel those of the people who created these objects. The soundscape of the exhibition, recorded and composed by Philippe Le Goff, a French sound artist, blends Inuit voices and throat-games with sounds of the wind and cracking ice.

“Upside Down: Arctic Realities” is a crystallization of Carpenter’s thoughts on the metaphysics surrounding Arctic cultures over time. It is a carefully selected assemblage of over three hundred objects, mainly made of walrus ivory, that date between 200 BC and AD 1400 from public and private collections in Denmark, France, New Zealand, and the United States. These include everyday objects, shamanic amulets, funerary offerings, hunting tools, and other small-scale works of art from the ancient cultures of the Ipiutak in Alaska, the Okvik and Puduk on St. Lawrence Island, and other ancient communities of the Bering Strait. An important selection of nineteenth-century Yup’ik masks from Alaska is also presented, illustrating how many of the ideas informing these traditions have been carried into modern times.

The Menil Collection April 15–July 17, 2011



Sea Otter Mask with Spirit Face
Yup'ik, Kiskokwim River, Alaska
Late 19th century
Painted wood, feathers, cane,
and baleen
20½ x 14 x 3½ inches
Rock Foundation, New York.
Photo: Paul Hester



Female Figure with
Concentric Circles
Okvik, Old Bering Sea I
ca. 200 BC–AD 100
Walrus ivory
4 x 1½ x ¾ inches
Rock Foundation, New York

Bear Fetus
Punuk
ca. AD 500–1200
Walrus ivory
2½ x 1½ x ¾ inches
Rock Foundation, New York

ARCTIC REALITIES

Edmund Carpenter

From our point of view, the Arctic has no favorable qualities, unless its severity be counted as such. It appears to us a barren, empty land, largely comfortless and desolate. The endless tundra stretching from sea to horizon has an austere charm, a certain cold, clean-edged beauty. Yet throughout, it is hard on man. To the Eskimo, however, it is home, the earth's most favored place. They are content with this country, which contains enough walrus and seal to satisfy most of their needs.

The Aivilik say, "When a man puts out traps, he must know the country." He must know it to survive. In winter, the horizon recedes into the immense distance and, except when the sun hovers close to the horizon and orange rays briefly define the profile of the plain, there is no line dividing earth from sky. The two are of the same substance. There is no middle distance, no perspective, no outline, nothing the

eye can cling to except thousands of smoky plumes running along the ground before the wind—a land without bottom or edge. When winds rise and powdery snow fills the air, there is neither up nor down and the traveler is left blind white.

In our society, to be real, a thing must be visible—and preferably constant. We trust the eye, not the ear. "Seeing is believing." Space is conceived in terms of that which separates visible objects. We call a gale-swept tundra "empty" because nothing is visible. To the Aivilik, truth is given through oral tradition, mysticism, intuition—all cognition—not simply by observation and measurement of physical phenomena.

The environment encourages the Eskimo to think in this fashion. To Western minds, the "monotony" of snow, ice, and sky can often be depressing, even frightening. Nothing in particular stands out. There is no scenery in the sense in which we use the term.



But the Eskimo do not see it this way. They're interested not in scenery, but in action. Nothing in their world easily defines itself or is separable from the general background. What exists, the Eskimo themselves must struggle to bring into existence. Theirs is a world which has to be conquered with each statement and act, each song and carving—but which, with each act accomplished, is as quickly lost. Carvings are often discarded after being made and:

*Words fade away,
Like hills in fog.*

Language is the principal tool with which the Eskimo make the natural world a human world. They use many words for snow, which permits fine distinctions, not simply because they are much concerned with snow, but because snow takes its form from the actions in which it participates: sledding, falling, igloo-building. Different kinds of snow are brought into existence by the Eskimo as they experience their environment and speak; words do not label things already there. Words are like the knife of the carver: they free the idea, the thing, from the general formlessness of the outside. As a man speaks, not only is his language in a state of birth but also is the very thing about which he is talking.

In the Inuktitut language, the word "to make poetry" is the word "to breathe" (*anersarpok*), both a derivative of *anerca*—the soul, that which is eternal: the breath of life. Art and poetry are verbs, not nouns. Poems are improvised, not memorized; carvings are carved, not saved. No word for "art" occurs in Inuktitut, nor does "artist": there are only people. Every adult Eskimo male is an accomplished ivory carver: carving is a normal, essential skill. Nor is any distinction made between utilitarian and decorative objects. The harpoon is graceful—and deadly. The Eskimo simply say, "A man should do all things properly." My impression is that the Eskimo are among the very few people in the world about whom it may be said that their art and life are interchangeable.



Seal Effigy Knife (*Ulu*)
Old Bering Sea II
ca. AD 100–300
Ivory
1 x 3¾ x ⅝ inches
Rock Foundation, New York

As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, "Who are you? Who hides there?" And then, "Ah, Seal!" He rarely sets out to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find its hidden form and, if that's not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it, humming or chanting as he works. Then he brings it out. Seal, hidden, emerges. It was always there; he did not create it, he released it.

A distinctive mark of the traditional art is that many of the ivory carvings, generally of sea mammals, won't stand up, but roll clumsily about. Each lacks a single, favored point of view, hence, a base. Indeed, they aren't intended to be set in place and viewed, but rather to be worn, handled, turned this way and that. The carver himself explains his effort as a token of thanks for food or services received from the animal's spirit.

In Eskimo thought, where spirit is regarded as separable from flesh and each man has many helping spirits, the lines between species and classes, even between man and animal, are lines of fusion, not fission, and nothing has a single invariable shape. Eskimo carvers—both in ancient and recent times—often depict these diverse characteristics simultaneously as visual puns. Turned this way, Walrus stands out; turned that way, Bear predominates. Other features regress, but never wholly disappear. For them, delight comes from the simultaneous perception of becoming; not metamorphosis but a sense of being, where each form contains multitudes.