

A LEGACY OF ARCTIC ART. By DOROTHY JEAN RAY. Seattle, Washington: University of Washington Press, 1996. Published in conjunction with the exhibition *A Legacy of Arctic Art* at the University of Alaska Museum, June–November 1996. 196 p., colour and b&w illus., index, notes, appendix. Hardbound, US\$40.00; Softbound, US\$24.95.

This book, the result of an exhibition of Dorothy Jean Ray's private collection, contains an interesting account of Ray's 50 years of friendship and study among the Alaskan Eskimo. The illustrations are first-class and she writes, as always, with informal, entertaining style. More autobiographical than her other books, *A Legacy* explains the events that led to her vocation, tells the stories of many of her artist friends, provides some enlightening anecdotes about fakes, and features a varied collection of early historic and contemporary Alaskan art.

Ray's first chapter begins with a discussion on "curio makers," "artisans," and "artists," along with her opinions on the aesthetics of Alaskan representational art. Ray takes issue with comments concerning souvenir art made in 1938 by another art historian, Hans Himmelheber, who noted that the Kuskokwim Eskimo made art for the sake of representation rather than for aesthetic effect (p. 7). Ray rightly believes that art can be aesthetically "art" although made for the souvenir market. I am not sure I fully agree with her repudiation of Himmelheber, however, for in the Eskimo/Inuit tradition, art *is* representation. The Inuit, and presumably the Alaskan Eskimo, had no special word for "art" in their own language: in Inuktitut the closest expression was "*sananguaq*," which Swinton, with the help of Inuit translators, has determined to mean something like "a little likeness-reality that we have achieved" (1972:130). Until very recently, this idea was true for most Inuit artists, as Kalvak attests in Dorothy Eber's article "Talking with the Artists": "White people tell stories in books, I tell them by my drawings" (1993:430). Regardless its intention, much of the art stemming from the Arctic is aesthetically pleasing to our Western eyes. Perhaps the argument can be paraphrased in a quote whose source, as well as the precise wording, I've forgotten: "The craftsman works with his hands, the artisan with his hands and his head; the artist works with hands, head, and heart." When Eskimo/Inuit artists work with all three, we are stunned by their ability. Unfortunately, I don't believe this book contains more than a few examples of working with more than hands and head, though I'm certain Ray would not agree with me.

This semiautobiography includes many references to Ray's research and to the background of her books and articles, each of which has its own story. She is obviously an author driven by her own sense of adventure and discovery, as opposed to an academic who writes out of professional necessity. Her enthusiasms attest to this: for example, she has written on the *billiken*, a ubiquitous and dubious item somewhat comparable to the garden gnome, and produced for considerable profit by the Alaskan Natives. Her detective story about its origins and manifestations is both amusing and enlightening.

The Alaskan contemporary work is quite distinctive, although I noticed, not for the first time, that some of the graphics and textiles show similarities to those of the Labrador Inuit who also were heavily influenced by the Moravian Church. An example is the appliqué and embroidery piece on page 67.

In general, the Alaskan art in this book represents the European tradition, fairly sophisticated and realistic, but unfortunately also sterile and unimaginative. A few woodcuts, particularly Bernard Tuglamena Katexac's *Old Ivory Etchings* and Peter J. Seeganna's prints on pages 46 and 47, show real delight in the possibilities of the medium and seem to arise from a spontaneous sense of "Eskimo-ness." Interestingly, Ray sees their work as precisely the opposite, saying that these works show "the benefits of formal training" and evidence of a change from "'Eskimo art' to a wider world of art" (p. 46–47). It seems to me rather that, in Seeganna's case at least, the main benefit of formal training may have been the freedom to think and create in his own aesthetic tradition. Otherwise, how can we explain the dramatic change in the Eastern Arctic once the constraint was removed of producing things that (southern bureaucrats thought) would sell down south? Here, Western representationalism was almost magically transformed, with little or no formal training, from sterile representation into the wildly creative—and distinctly Inuk—art of the late 1950s and 1960s, and later.

Ray is obviously charmed when the creative juices flow, as shown by her appreciation of a wonderfully playful coiled basketry kerosene lamp by Susie Chanigkak. She comments that it has a "whimsy that is rarely seen in Eskimo art" (p. 56). (It is rare in Alaskan art prior to 1970, but "whimsical" is an apt term for a great deal of Inuit art of this period.)

In talking about the background to her authorship and fieldwork and her relationships with artisans and artists, Ray drops wonderful tidbits like her exposure of scrimshaw fakes perpetrated on 1800-year-old artifacts. A legitimate art in its own right when practised honestly, new pictorial engravings on ancient ivory recovered from archaeological sites (a practice that gives archaeologists nightmares, as it has destroyed many sites) are sometimes sold by unscrupulous or unaware dealers as genuine prehistoric art.

Ray includes a chapter on the history of Eskimo scrimshaw or "engraved ivory," along with the stories of specific illustrated pieces. This pictorial art form was probably exclusively historic and derived from Russian sources, but nevertheless was compatible with the earlier Native tradition of decorating ivory tools and utensils with geometric patterns. Ray notes that this became high art during the Okvik, Old Bering Sea, and Punuk periods of St. Lawrence Island and among the Ipiutak of Point Hope on the mainland c. A.D. 1000. The illustrations of early 20th-century cribbage boards and other ivory pieces by anonymous artists and by the famous Happy Jack are exquisite, and the accompanying text thoroughly explores the history and the rise in both popularity and mastery of this art. Its quality declined following the devastating influenza epidemic during the winter of 1918–19, which claimed thousands of lives, including those of

experienced artists, right across the Arctic and ultimately forced the abandonment of many of these settlements.

Ray's final chapter "Can This Be Eskimo Art?" is an interesting historic contribution to the ongoing—and ultimately unsolvable—debate about the authenticity of Eskimo/Inuit art. One example she uses is steak knives designed by talented Alaskan Natives but mass-produced in elephant ivory by their Seattle employers. She ends with descriptions of dubious practices and of outright fraud, helpful to the unwary tourist and the well-intentioned amateur art collector.

The collection Ray put together over her worthwhile career makes an excellent museum exhibition, offering the opportunity to trace the development of a regional art character over several hundred years. I don't care for much of the contemporary art: to me, it has none of the excitement, liveliness, or creativity of that emanating from the Eastern Arctic over the past 50 years. Dorothy Jean Ray's love for Alaskan art and artists therefore makes this book one I will gladly add to my shelf, to remind me that we art lovers, like the artworks themselves, are a diverse bunch.

#### REFERENCES

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**CARVED FROM THE LAND: THE ESKIMO MUSEUM COLLECTION.** By LORRAINE BRANDSON. Churchill, Manitoba: Diocese of Churchill Hudson Bay, 1994. 200 p., maps, b&w illus., bib., list of artists, index. Hardbound. Cdn\$35.00.

Reviewing this catalogue on the heels of another (Dorothy Jean Ray's *Legacy of Arctic Art*) was an enlightening experience. Two collections, two very different approaches to collecting: whereas Ray purchased mainly Alaskan artifacts that she judged to be of artistic or anthropological value, the Eskimo Museum is the child of dedicated missionaries who lived among the Inuit and were interested in documenting their entire culture and its history. The results are fascinatingly different kinds of collections.

Beginning in Chesterfield Inlet in 1912, the Oblate Fathers established six mission stations centered on the northwest corner of Hudson Bay, serving a diocese scattered over 2.3 million square kilometres. By 1944, the Fathers had amassed enough material to establish a small

museum in one room of the Bishop's residence at Churchill, Manitoba. This early collection already bore the eclectic signs of that which can be seen in today's modern facility: ivory cribbage boards engraved for the early whalers and other visitors of the historic past, prehistoric Dorset and Thule culture artifacts, and wildlife specimens lay alongside the soapstone carvings collected from contemporary Inuit that were shortly to become so famous. In 1948, Brother Jacques Volant was appointed the museum's curator (p. 9–10). The book is dedicated to his memory.

Lorraine Brandson, assistant and then curator of the Eskimo Museum since Brother Volant's final illness in 1986, has played a vital role in documenting and caring for the collection since the 1970s and is equally responsible for its present status and visitation of nearly 10 000 per year: an admirable achievement in a town of only 3000 residents.

The book, as much a collection as the museum itself, includes the history of the Oblate Missions; the climate and natural history of the Arctic; story excerpts from the missionaries' journals; a history of Arctic archaeology and culture; the yearly cycle of the Inuit; descriptions of Inuit tools, housing, transportation, and clothing; and a chapter devoted to, as Brandson puts it, "*silatuniq*, the wise way of understanding things" (p. 167). Her detailed account of the seasonal movement, activities, and intricate social relationships of central and eastern Inuit groups will interest both the casual reader and the anthropologist. Overall, she has achieved an excellent balance that should be the envy of many more prolific anthropologist scribes.

The text is closely accompanied by photographs of the collection illustrating the subject matter. Text and photographs together explain why the individual artifacts were collected and illuminate the entire philosophy of the museum. The result is a rare example of an art book that is truly coherent.

A review of a book so dependent upon photographs would scarcely be complete without some comment on the quality of the photography. Robert Taylor's prints vary from excellent to adequate: the lighting is uneven enough that detail is occasionally lost in the shadows, and some shots would have benefited from better depth of focus. On the other hand, the angles are selected with great sensitivity and discernment and give an accurate impression of most pieces. It's an astonishing collection, especially considering its small size—only 800 pieces—and my biggest regret is that the small size of some of the photographs does not do justice to the quality of the work.

For anyone who has visited the Eskimo Museum, for those who have been to the Eastern Arctic and missed the Eskimo Museum, and for those who will, someday, follow their dream and visit the Arctic and its people, *Carved From the Land* should fill a niche in your library.

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