

Yup'ik (Arctic) labels & extended texts



Harpoon counterweight (“Winged object”), ca. 100—300 CE
Old Bering Sea II culture, Sivuaq (St. Lawrence Island), Alaska
Walrus ivory
Private collection

Among the earliest known evidence of Indigenous culture in the Arctic regions are refined carvings made from walrus ivory. These were made by ancestral peoples on Sivuaq (St. Lawrence Island), south of the Arctic Circle in the Bering Sea. The Old Bering Sea peoples, who are considered ancestors of the current population of Siberian Yupik, settled the island around 300 BCE. Subsisting by hunting migratory birds and sea mammals—seal, walrus, whale—that pass by the island, they created a highly developed culture, making symbolic use of animal and spiritual motifs to assure the hunter’s successful encounter with each animal, for the community’s survival in this harsh location.

To help the hunter communicate with the *inua* (spirit) of the hunted animal, all tools—and especially the all-important harpoon—were elaborately decorated. This counterweight would be placed at the “tail” end of the harpoon, and its carved designs suggest birds in flight.



Atkuq Yaqulelek (Bird parka), ca. 1950s
Yup'ik, maker not recorded, Eek, Alaska
Alpa (murre) skins and feathers and *Kegluneq* (wolf) fur
Private collection

Yup'ik parkas made from the skins of birds, mainly water fowl such as *alpat* (murre), were constructed in combination with other animal furs (this one is trimmed with *kegluneq* - wolf fur). Such bird parkas were rare even in pre-contact times, and their traditional use eclipsed in the early 20th century. Still, this late version follows the traditional Yup'ik construction and color scheme of black and white, colors symbolic of the outer universe, of the visible and invisible celestial entities. The triangular shapes at the bottom trim make reference to snow-covered mountains.



Ellam Yua, 1995

Chuna McIntyre (Central Yup'ik), b. 1955

Batik fabric

Private collection

This painting represents *Ellam Yua*, the human manifestation of the spiritual universe. It contains many of the ancient motifs seen throughout the arts of Arctic and sub-Arctic cultures: its earrings mimic the “circle-dot” design that indicates the four cardinal directions, which are also eyes and spiritual thresholds through which entities pass. The mask-like *yua* face follows traditional mask design, with concentric *ellanguaq* hoops indicating knowledge and awareness of the outer universe. Beyond them appears the stars and the heavens. Labrets and forehead decorations indicate wisdom and sacred knowledge.

***Tulukaruq* (Raven story)**

Yup'ik artist Chuna McIntyre tells of a Raven creation story that explains the making of the Milky Way, as well of the creation of the Yup'ik language:

In the beginning was the void (*Tangaq*), complete and utter darkness. In the middle of *Tangaq* was Raven, *Tulukaruq*.

Raven decided that the void should be filled and began to create the heavenly bodies and the planets. In the process, he created Brother and Sister, and as they ran after each other, they became Sun and Moon, which provided light to the universe.

While Raven was making the Earth, he realized that he was lonely and wished to have other creatures to talk with him. He picked up different substances from the ground, compacted them in his claws, and threw them back down again. The first time he did this, some humans grew up from the scattered pieces, and Raven tried to talk with them. The humans spoke a language that sounded like gibberish to him, and so being frustrated, Raven tried again. He flew off to another place, picked up a different substance, and threw it back down again. This time, more humans emerged from the ground, but again Raven could not understand their speech. He continued many other times, flying all around the Earth. Finally, Raven found a special substance, a spongy brown clay called *Maraq*. This time, the humans that grew from the *Maraq* that Raven scattered spoke a language that Raven could understand. This language was Yup'ik and Raven was happy with the Yup'ik people and was no longer lonely.

The Yup'ik phrase for the Milky Way is *Tulukaruum tumai*, which translates roughly to "Tracks of the White Raven." This phrase explains that when Raven was creating the universe, the stars of the Milky Way were left as his footprints as he hopped across the sky. This term suggests the story of how Raven was changed from ivory white to charcoal black. The word *tuluk* means "endeared ivory," and Raven was known to have been, originally, an ivory white in color, and very proud and boastful in character, almost arrogant. There are many stories that tell how Raven became black. One of them describes other spirits who wished to teach Raven a lesson in humility, and they lured Raven into the ceremonial house, the *qasgi*, with the promise that he would receive special gifts inside and dances of praise from the people. To his surprise, Raven entered the *qasgi* only to find it empty. Inside, as usual, the house was lit with firelight, but this time the light came from the Eternal Fire. The spirits sealed the door behind Raven as he entered the *qasgi*, and the house soon filled with smoke. Raven managed to escape by flying through the smoke-hole in the roof and, as he did so, his feathers were stained with soot. Because the smoke came from the Eternal Fire, Raven has remained black ever since.



***Tulukarug kegginaquq (Raven dance mask)*, ca. 1870**

Central Yup'ik, Lower Kuskokwim, Alaska

Carved wood, pigment, feathers, caribou fur

Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, NY. Gift of Eugene and Clare E. Thaw, T0600

This mask is a traditional Yup'ik dance accoutrement used in ceremonial storytelling dances and represents the *yua* (spirit) of *Tulukarug* (Raven). As in many Yup'ik dance masks, the imagery and construction have metaphoric meaning. The central face is essentially human, as the *yua* is considered the “personal human” of the animal or bird represented in a mask. Its wings (*yaquk*) are symbolic of flight, but might also represent other animals, such as whales, as Raven is also known to transform into other manifestations. Surrounding the face are the *ellanguaq*, the “model universe” composed of concentric rings and represents the outer universe and the boundaries of awareness and the spirit world, through which Raven travels. Three special feathers, called *agyat* (stars), reminding us this special ability and of Raven's place in the heavenly world. Note the careful treatment of each of Raven's eyes, as they describe sun and moon.



Pair of dance fans, ca. 1870

Central Yup'ik, Lower Kuskokwim River, Alaska

Wood, feathers, pigment

Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, NY. Gift of Eugene and Clare E. Thaw, T0596a-b



***Nepcetaq* (“Sticks to the face” mask), ca. 1850**

Central Yup'ik, Alaska

Carved wood, pigment, seal blood, feathers, fox teeth, seal skin

Collection of the Fenimore Art Museum, Cooperstown, NY. Gift of Eugene and Clare E. Thaw, T0231

The masks known in Yup'ik culture as *nepcetaq* (“those that stick to the face”) are a special category of mask, mainly utilized by the *angalkuq* (shaman) to demonstrate magic and spiritual powers. There are no visible means of securing it; it's the shaman's control over natural forces that holds it to his head. The mask is a demonstrable avatar of the shaman, a vehicle communicating between the spiritual and the earthly universes. Its forms symbolize this power: the mask face is round and moon-like, and the three holes represent passageways used by the effigies of sea mammals to cross between earthly and spiritual worlds. The artist of this *nepcetaq* mask shows both the shaman's humanity and his dual role, in acceptance that we exist at the mercy of larger forces beyond our comprehension.



***Irci agayaq* (Spirit dance mask)**, ca. 1920
Possibly made by Pugtuaq (Cup'ik)
Nunivak Island, Alaska
Wood, pigment, vegetal fibers, feathers
Myers Berman Collection



***Irci agayaq* (Spirit dance mask)**, late 1940s
Cup'ik, Nunivak Island, Alaska
Wood, pigment, vegetal fibers, feathers
Heard Museum Collection, NA-ES-I-1

Many masks on Nunivak Island are referred to as *irci*, which are half-human/half-animal *yuit* (spirits). They often appear vertically split in half, one side looking clearly human and usually painted red (which symbolizes human life), and the other side looking like an animal, often painted blue or white (symbolizing a spiritual entity). The term is related to *ircenrrrat*, legendary figures who are invisible except to *angalkut* (plural of shaman) and may take human or animal form interchangeably. In this mask, the human and spiritual associations are inverted, with the red side of the mask indicating a spiritual entity, and the human entity painted white.



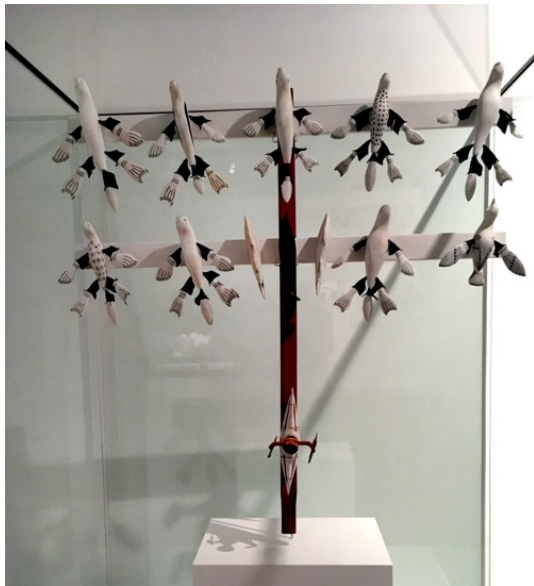
Qaurailitalek agyuararluni (Tattooed woman with a forehead mask, accompanied by a star), ca. 1950

Cup'ik, Nunivak Island, Alaska

Wood, pigment, vegetal fibers, feathers

Private collection

This unusual modern-style mask displays the hallmark details of Nunivak dance masks, but here the *yua* face also wears a traditional forehead mask. It is something of a “mask within a mask,” with a single *agyat* (star) feather companion.



Keniraraun (dance staff), 1940s–70s

Larry Float (Cup'ik), 1935–2001

Nunivak Island, Alaska

Dyed feathers, driftwood, paint

Private collection

According to Chuna McIntyre, dance staffs such as this have a specific purpose. “It’s imploring the animals depicted here, ‘Please come to us in plenty. We cannot survive without you. We absolutely need your assistance. May our arrows be true.’ ”

Dance staffs or trays are called *keniraraun*—a Cup’ik term meaning “pointing implement” (from *kenir*, “to point”). They are used at the beginning of the Messenger Feast (*Kevgiq*), one of the annual festivals celebrated on Nunivak, in which one village invites members of another village to a dancing and gift exchange feast. Two messengers are sent out to invite the other villagers to the festival, which begins when they return. The *keniraraun* is used as the dancers march from outside to inside, in a parade-like procession, which marks the beginning of *Kevgiq*. The dance staff is like a heraldic symbol, demonstrating the bearer’s history. Literally speaking, as a pointing device, it is declarative: it points to the future, to the animals, and to the spirits.

The Cup’ik people of Nunivak Island, Alaska, are close cousins to the Central Yup’ik people of the southwest mainland, and share many of their traditional dance and masking ceremonies. Being less accessible than their Yup’it cousins, Nunivak Islanders (Nunivaarmiut) continued their traditions without interruption throughout the periods of missionary, trading and mining activities in Alaska in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While many of their ceremonial traditions blend with those of the Yup’it, some manifestations of mask-making and dancing ceremonies are unique to Nunivaarmiut. Master carvers and painters of traditional arts continue to flourish today.



Mask with *Maklaaq* (seal) effigy, late 19th century

Yup’ik, Alaska

Driftwood, pigment

Honolulu Museum of Art Collection, Gift of Mrs. Irma Fulwider, 1946 (367.1)



Mask with *Maqaruaq* (Arctic snowshoe hare) effigy, late 19th century
Yup'ik, Alaska
Driftwood, pigment, glass beads
Honolulu Museum of Art Collection, Gift of Mrs. W. Thomas Davis, 1989 (5864.1)



Hunting hat, 2003
Peter Lind (Alutiiq), b. 1930
Wood, pigment, walrus ivory, feathers, cordage
Heard Museum Collection, Bequest of Dr. E. Daniel Albrecht, 4837-38

This hat is modeled on an early-twentieth-century version from the Bering Straits region. The traditional forms of hunting hats and visors have been shared by many coastal Alaskan cultures, and this Alutiiq version includes elements seen in Yup'ik and Iñupiat style hats. The carved ivory animal effigies employ ancient iconography indicating spiritual importance, with circle-dot motifs signifying spiritual awareness. Worn while hunting in a skin kayak, such hats have a practical and symbolic purpose: they shield the hunter's eyes from the sun and reflected light on the water, but also aid in encouraging swiftness and skill. The long beak and bird feathers mimic those of powerful sea birds, and encourage the hunter's harpoon to fly in their skillful manner. These elements reinforce the intimate bonds between humans and all of nature.



***Quarulek anguarun ingringualek* (ridged oar with mountain motif), 1950s**

Cup'ik, Nunivak Island, Alaska

Wood

Private collection

The ridged central line of the *qayak* oar is symbolically connected to the arteries of the human kayaker's body, whose life depends on being connected to the water.



Owl-Seal hybrid figure

Betsy Meeko (Inuit), b. 1943

Soapstone

Private collection



Owl

Wilson Okoomealingok (Siberian Yupik)

Walrus ivory with baleen inlays

Private collection

These small figures share a posture referred to as *kingyaq* in Yup'ik that Chuna McIntyre has described: "*Kingyaq* is to look back, like the sun when it sets. . . . Brother Sun looks back to remind us he will return in the morning. It is like the parents looking back at the children to check on them, walking behind." *Kingyaq* is a gesture of concern and reassurance, that we are safe within our place in the world, and in the family.



Dancing seal, 1980s
Inuit, Canada
Soapstone
Private collection



Basket with musk ox finial, 1992
Kowtak (Yup'ik), Wainwright, Alaska
Woven baleen, fossilized walrus ivory
Private collection



***Tupilaq*, ca. 1950**
Kalalliit/Greenland Inuit
Sperm whale tooth ivory
Private collection

There are many protective animal spirits depicted in Arctic iconography. This example, a dog-like creature known as *tupilaq*, is “a spirit that gobbles up the bad things that might harm us.” Often, to emphasize their spiritual essence, animal skeletal structures are exaggerated, a technique seen consistently from Old Bering Sea times to the present day.



***Agayaq* bowl, 1960s**
Johnny Weston (Cup'ik)
Nunivak Island, Alaska
Driftwood, paint
Private collection



***Ladle of Long Life*, ca. 1960**
Swan wing bone
Yup'ik, Quinhagak, Alaska
Private collection

“The great swan has come for me” (as told to Minnie Carter by a dying woman).
In traditional Yup'ik practice, a swan wing bone was used as a ladle to put water in the mouth of newborn baby, as part of the Yup'ik naming ceremony. The swan is symbolic of the passage of life, and the transference of the spirit from one life to the next.



Photo by Chuna McIntyre, 1985, of his grandmother at age eighty-five wearing a fur hood called a *yuraryaraq* (“one you don on”, indicating for special occasions). Her English name was Minnie Carter and in Yup’ik she was named Augilnguq (“bloodless one”), born in an ancient place near the village of Quinhagak, Alaska.



***Yuraryaraq* hood, 1980s**

Made by Augilnguq (Minnie Parker)

Yup’ik, Eek, Alaska

Muskrat fur, calf skin, furs of Kuskokwim mink, seal, wolf, wolverine, Arctic hare and beaver

Private collection

This hood appears in the photo of Augilnguq (Minnie Carter), who created it for her grandson, Chuna McIntyre.



***Yaaruin (story knife)*, 1990s**

Thomas McIntyre

Wood, pigment

Private collection

Young Yup'ik girls use *yaaruin*, usually made from bone or ivory, to carve stories in snow and in riverbanks to amuse their younger siblings. Often, the stories were for teaching lessons, following the tradition of passing knowledge through the family. This *yaaruin*, like other examples, includes ancient motifs of the circle-dot and arrow-like drawings, which assist the storyteller but also symbolize the connection between the family and spiritual realms.



***Tuggkaraat (walrus tusks)*, ca. 1940**

Cup'ik, Nunivak Island, Alaska

Carved walrus tusk

Walrus ivory, with baleen inlays

Heard Museum Collection, 3280-137

***Walrus tusk*, 1910–47**

Cup'ik, Nunivak Island, Alaska

Carved walrus tusk

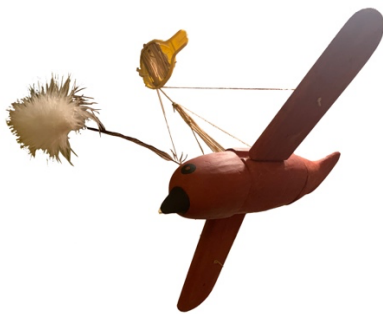
Walrus ivory with baleen inlays, pigment

Heard Museum Collection, Gift of Betty and Sam Kitchell, 4940-1

Elaborate full-tusk carvings with overlapping animal figures are a hallmark of Nunivak Island classical sculpture. These pieces are a tour-de-force of carving mastery. The layered animal imagery compositions are reminiscent of how herds of walrus gather together on the shore, and are a playful take on such scenes of nature. The compositions, with the animals in full- and bas-relief, also hark back to ancient Dorset (pre-Inuit culture) carvings, where multiple figures are stacked together in reference to ancestral genealogies. As with Yup'ik masks, tusk figure carvings suggest the abundance of animal life, and are a meditation on the *yua* (spirit) of the walrus. The term *tuggkaraat*, plural for tusks, not only describes the tusk itself but also suggests reverence, honor and endearment, culminating in a sense of collective pride.



Reindeer representations, 1980s
Iyg'oravetl'a (Indigenous Siberian)
Walrus ivory
Private collection



***Al'ailun* (“that which is visible”)**
Yup'ik, ca. 1970s
Wood, pigment, feathers, string
Private collection

This bird carving is a rare example of a ceremonial object that is suspended from the ceiling of a *qasgi*, the Yup'ik ceremonial house. Such figures would be witnesses at dance ceremonies, as emblems of the spiritual world, a manifestation of *Ellam Yua* (Spirit of the Universe). The title *Al'ailun* (“that which is visible”), suggests that the bird is an incarnation of the celestial world above, reinforced by the inclusion of its single *aqyat* (star) feather emanating from the bird's head, and the metaphor of flight, which connects it to the human world below and the heavens above.