The Alaska Native Woman and Her Art

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

Susan J. Holmes

Thesis Advisor

Maude Jennings, Ph.D.

Ball State University

Muncie, Indiana

May 1993

Graduation Date: May 1993
Purpose of Thesis

This discussion of the Alaskan Native woman and her art is limited to three tribes and three forms of art: Athabaskan beadwork, Athabaskan and Aleut basketry, and Tlingit Chilkat blanket weaving. In addition, there will be examples of each form of these arts. It is hoped that familiarity will breed appreciation.
Alaska has been my home since 1974. During this time I have had the honor and pleasure of being exposed to a new and exciting world. Those who are not familiar with the culture and history of the people of Alaska may not be aware of the extraordinary art forms created by the Alaskan Native women. The more one understands the history of the Aleut, Athabaskan, and Tlingit people, the greater the appreciation and enjoyment one receives when viewing the weaving, beading, and basketry designs of the Alaskan Native woman.

There is a school of thought that says we need only see the art object, and that background information is not essential to our appreciation of art, but I think knowledge will only serve to deepen our appreciation, especially if we are looking at art from a culture other than our own. The art of the Alaska Native may not meet our typical expectations, but that is part of its joy. The Western perception of the artist as a specialist, even as one set apart from his society, does not describe the Alaska Native woman and her art. While these women are recognized for their accomplishments, they are not perceived in their communities as inhabiting the niche of "the artist".

These artists, these women of another culture, have taken their utilitarian needs and created their various arts in many beautiful ways. One of the major distinctions of this Northwest Indian art is its forcefulness - there is a certain energy that radiates to those who take the time to see.

When viewing Native art, one needs to try to appreciate the individuality that is held by each piece of this and the other traditional arts. This theme is especially important in understanding art from outside a culture, where, on a superficial glance, everything may look very much alike. Tribal arts are frequently characterized as unimaginative or uncreative, not because they are so, but more simply out of ignorance of the cultural "rules" within which they operate, and consequently, ignorance of what constitutes innovation and individual style or expression.

The term "Alaska Native" applies to the many early settlers of Alaska - the Eskimos, Aleuts, and Indians; of these groups, Eskimos and Indians are divided into further tribes. Although unified for political reasons, they are of many races, creeds and philosophies, and as a result, are many nations.

For the purposes and limitations of this paper, Alaska Natives include the Indians - who are divided into the Athabaskan Indians of the Interior, who have 11 different languages among them as well as varying lifestyles and the Tlingit Indians, who were once fierce conquerors of many tribes with whom they had

---

1 Alaska Natives were united under one name in 1966 in order to claim title to their traditional lands from the United States Government. Their suit was eventually successful.
little in common; and the Aleuts, who have several different vocabularies, depending on where their forbearers settled.

Although these groups - Aleuts, and Indians (Athabaskans and Tlingits) - are collectively called Alaska Natives, the most impressive common denominator is that they have been here since before time was recorded, and other Alaskans have not.

These discoverers of America were also the continent's first human occupants — restless hunters who followed their game across the tundra that connected northwestern America with northeastern Siberia. They apparently made their trek over the land bridge sometime between ten thousand and forty thousand years ago (Hunt 11). Descendants of these early hunters include the three broad, general groups of native Alaskans: Aleuts, Eskimos, and Indians.

The history of Alaska and its native peoples is fascinating, and does help to enhance one's appreciation of the Native Alaska woman's art.
The beadwork of the Alaska Athabaskan women is an example of superior craftsmanship and beauty. While this may be evident to some, others, especially those who are not familiar with the history and culture of these women, may not notice the delicacy and workmanship that goes into the art of beadwork.

When I first saw this Athabaskan craft, I thought of the inexpensive bead change purses or moccasins that we used to see at the local five and dime. Craftsmanship? Art? No - these were simple, inexpensively made tourist-trap paraphernalia. After all, couldn't I just go to a craft store, buy some beads, string them on a thread and have a very similar product? We, the uninformed, are so quick to criticize. Beadwork as a form of art, a thing of beauty at Woolworth's? Education, interest, and exposure to a people and their culture raised my shallow, inexperienced notions. I hope that you, too, will discover and recognize the beauty and grace in the craft of the Athabaskan art of beadwork.

As Kate Duncan says in her book Some Warmer Tone, bead embroidery is a gift of color, joy, love, time, and creativity. “Through hours of fond, painstaking sewing, the beadworker captures the fleeting colors of summer, containing their brilliance and gaiety for continued pleasure during the days of brief, diffused winter light and endless monochrome of snow” (13).

A "good" Athabaskan woman was expected to be an excellent sewer; mastery of these skills was part of what was expected for a women of this culture. As a result, there are strong cultural and even moral values attached to one’s competence in carving, sewing, or weaving (Fienup).

Embroidery in the form of beadwork has been the art through which the Athabaskan woman has added beauty to her world and exhibited her creative skills. The artistry of the Athabaskan beader can be seen in her use of colors, the evenness of stitches, the smoothness of the beads, the balance of the items, the flowing lines, and the overall care taken in and of the work.

The Athabaskan beader develops a pattern in her head and transfers it by sketching the intricate design in detail to the material or a hide with flour paste or by the burnt end of a stick. Otherwise, the beader simply created the pattern as she beaded along (Duncan 9).

Athabaskan-speaking Indians are the Natives of Alaska’s interior. The earliest European visitors to the North were impressed by the sophisticated porcupine quill embroidery on Athabaskan skin garments and commented on its elegance and skill of workmanship. The earliest embroidery used woven or folded porcupine quills in their natural color, and in golds, browns, and black from vegetal and mineral dyes. Quillwork bands with geometric designs accentuated the chest, hem, and cuffs of long
tunics, and the legs and ankles on leggings. Quilled garments in
various museum collections date from the 19th century and came
from Alaska, although the same types were once worn by Canadian
Athabaskans (Duncan 13).

Female children learned to bead from their mothers, female
relatives, or friends, and developed their skills as they grew
older. In early times, a girl was secluded at the time of
puberty for a period of months - although more recently that has
changed to weeks or days - and for a few days each month
thereafter. "During the initial seclusion she observed certain
taboos, learned about her duties as a woman, and became more
proficient at sewing and garment ornamentation. Her competence
at handwork was important to her marriageability since she would
be responsible for making the clothing needed by her family, and
her industry, skill, and creativity would reflect individual and
family pride and prestige. After marriage these skills continued
to be refined, and embroidery became a part of daily routine for
many women" (18). What may appear to us today as a form of
imprisonment must be viewed with a perspective of the time.
Older women have commented that the "short monthly seclusions
were often welcomed as a time when a woman was relieved of some
of her usual responsibilities and could embroider uninterrupted." (18).

The Athabaskan women, both young and old, did their beading
along with the other daily chores: caring for the children and
elders; cooking and cleaning; moving from one seasonal hunting
camp to another; carrying wood, water, and ice; preparing the
game men brought home; preparing berries and fish in various
ways; etc. (Duncan 9)

Embroidery, particularly beadwork, continues to play an
important role for Alaska Athabaskan women, and, as with many art
forms, continues to change over time. New designs are influenced
by fashion, inspiration, and innovation. Although there is less
beadwork being produced now than had been in the earlier part of
the twentieth century, there is an increasing interest in the
cultural heritage among Alaska Athabaskan women by scholars - an
interest which, hopefully, will allow it to retain its importance
for years to come.
Jackets

Chief Thomas' Jacket, ca. 1910, Tanana Athabaskan. "The "Chief's Jacket" has been popular among the Tanana and Upper Tanana people . . . as the garment of prestige" (Duncan 22).

The tradition of heavily decorated clothing worn by men of prestige and power in a band has a long history among Alaska Athabaskans. Beaded panels of fabric ornament the lapels, yoke, cuffs, and sometimes pockets of "Chiefs' jackets" (23).

Mittens and Gloves

Beaded Mittens, Athabaskan, ca. 1925.

Mittens and gloves were embroidered with porcupine quills in early times, and they have since been favorite items for beaded decorations. Both mitten back and gauntlet cuff are often beaded with the two areas separated by a fur band (24).
Baby Belts

Beaded Baby Belt, Kutchin Athabaskan, Old Crow, Canada, ca. 1940.

Baby carrying belts are a tradition that continue today. A strap, 3 to 5 feet long and 4 to 5 inches wide, was lovingly created for a child by a mother or female relative. When a baby was old enough, it was gathered into a shawl and carried on the back, with the belt used for support. The baby could ride facing in the direction in which the mother was moving, free to look, listen and enjoy, or to sleep when tired. The mother’s hands were free for her to go about her work, yet the child was close and his needs were attended. Today, a baby’s belt is considered to belong to the baby, and it may be displayed on the wall after the child is too old to be carried" (25).

Sled Bags

Beaded Sled Bag, Kutchin Athabaskan, Arctic Village or Fort Yukon, ca. 1905.

A horizontal bag with a large decorated flap, the sled bag was hung on the handlebars at the back of the dog sled, convenient for carrying and getting to things as needed (28).
Another facet of Native Alaskan art is basketry - an art which is shared by women of all Alaska Native groups. Constructed of local grasses, roots and barks, baskets were lightweight, portable containers useful to people who traveled, at least seasonally, in search of food. Baskets were also storage containers and, in some cases, cooking utensils. Although they were made as functional items in traditional societies, baskets were often also highly artistic, both in their weaving and in their decoration.

In addition, baskets were items of trade in some areas, and after contact with Russian, European and American traders, many native groups made baskets to sell to these merchants. The materials used in basketry deteriorate with time and use, so very few ancient baskets have survived. Research available to the Alaska State Museum in Juneau indicates that the most elaborate and finely made baskets were made in historic times after the commercial market for them developed.

Materials

According to Allan Lobb in Indian Baskets of the Northwest Coast, "the Indian women gather the material for baskets from many sources, primarily from the regions in which they lived, although there was occasional trading with Indians of other areas for desirable grasses for ornamentation." The foundation or structural materials for the baskets included rye grass, roots and limbs from young spruce and cedar, shreds of bark from cedar and birch, bast or inner bark of cedar, young shoots of hazelnut and willow, juniper roots, cattail, rush and tule stalks. The roots and limbs were peeled, then split into strands or splints. Many of the grasses were split into fibers almost as fine as thread. After the materials were split or shredded into the desired width, they would be sorted according to size, variety and length and stored. Soaking the materials in water for periods of time was essential in preparing them and making them pliable for use. Color was provided by natural materials and through the use of dyes.

Aleut Basketry

The Aleut lived along island coasts of Alaska where rye grass grew in abundance during the short summers. They used only twining as a weaving technique, but the variations in twining produced both loosely woven utilitarian baskets and finely woven delicate baskets. For the fine baskets, grass was split into very thin strips which could be woven very tightly. Overlaid patterns of decorative embroidery could be done only with silk thread that was introduced by the Russians in the later part of the 18th century.
According to an Alaska State Museum publication, designs for the larger weave baskets were sewn on after the baskets were completed. They could be in fish skin, seal intestine, eagle down, or later, colored yarn, cloth or embroidery floss. It is believed that Aleut baskets were made to be sold as early as the beginning of the 19th century. The finest among them are so closely woven they are watertight.

In addition to making baskets, the Aleut used coarser grass stems to make grass matting for sleeping mats, bed coverings, screens that were used as interior household partitions, bags and kayak seats.

Aleut Baskets

Aleut twined grass baskets.

Some of the finest basketry in the world was produced by the native women of the desolate, treeless, storm-swept Aleutian Islands. The women showed extraordinary skill in using a variety of twining weaving techniques to make the small tightly-woven baskets for which they are famous. These baskets were made of slender strips of rye grass, some as fine as silk. The Aleut women split the fibers with their fingernails, which they allowed to grow long for that purpose (Lobb 11).
Athabaskan Basketry

Among Alaska Athabaskan women, two very different kinds of baskets were produced: birch bark baskets and woven baskets of twined willow or spruce roots. According to information supplied by the Alaska State Museum, birch bark baskets were made of solid pieces of birch bark shaped and reinforced with spruce roots. Spruce pitch was applied to glue and seal these rigid containers to make them watertight. Before the introduction of metal pots, food was boiled in birch bark baskets by dropping hot stones into water. In some groups, woven baskets were traditionally more common than birch bark containers. Woven baskets were constructed of twined roots which, if woven tightly, became watertight. At first these containers tended to leak, but after use they shrank and the crevices filled with grease from cooking.

Athabaskan Baskets

Among Northern Athabaskan groups, twined spruce or willow baskets were traded to the Inupiat, or Northern Eskimos, who did not make baskets of their own. A few coiled baskets were produced by Athabaskan Indians who had close contact with coastal Eskimos living in adjacent territories, but such baskets are rare.
Athabaskan Willow Root Tray.
WEAVING - TLINGIT

The Tlingit Indians applied their decorative art to practically every object of personal, social, ceremonial, and practical use, and are famous for their beautiful and complex art and regalia. The women of the Tlingit tribe and other Alaska Native groups are experts weavers, and produce some of the world's most fabulous baskets and woven garments.

One of the most valued trade items was the skillfully woven Chilkat blanket. These beautiful articles, woven from mountain-goat wool and dyed, were objects of pride to their owners, who displayed them at special feasts, dances and festive occasions. The patterns woven into the Chilkat blankets expressed inventiveness, a strong sense of color and form, great skill, and the wealth of a region that supplied plenty of diverse materials (Hunt 19).

Chilkat Blanket

Woven into the blankets was the Northwest Coast Indians' view of the world - a world in which the Tlingits have a kinship and communication with all living things: grizzly bears, wolves, beaver, eagles, ravens, etc. Fish, birds, and animals were not only equal to man but shared the same languages and longings, existing as powerful elements of a spirit realm. These beings were incorporated into the design of the blanket.
The ceremonial robes, called Chilkat Blankets, are worn by Tlingit dancers after being woven from the wool of the mountain goat (Emmons 224). The weaving was confined to the woman and the man furnished the pelt of the mountain goat, the cedar bark, the frame, the painted pattern board, and the few tools required. The woman prepared and wove the materials. In early days, when superstition was common among the people, the woman could not have intercourse with a man for two moons before she prepared the materials, otherwise the dyes would be uneven and the result would be a failure. She fasted throughout the first day of preparation.

Three goatskins were necessary for the manufacture of one blanket. The method of dying the wools for these blankets seems, at best, odd to us - the spring hemlock bark was boiled in stale urine as a first dye bath, producing a red-brown color, followed by an overdye of copper oxidized in stale urine (226).

The design to be woven was taken directly and in exact size from a painted pattern board close at hand, on which half of the figure was shown in black. This figure was always an animal form, conventional and symbolic. A practiced weaver would finish a blanket in five to six months (227).

The color scheme of all blankets, regardless of pattern, is practically the same. The field is the natural white wool of the goat, and the figure is outlined in black bands or lines, while particular parts were filled with yellow and blue. These last colors were for ornamental purposes only, to give life to the picture. In the opinion of many researchers, the robe offered one of the most attractive examples of primitive decorative art of any people (227).

The finished blanket was used as a ceremonial robe by the wealthy, and every chief or prominent Tlingit possessed one or more. They were used at ceremonies and dances, worn over one, or generally over both shoulders, and secured by thongs sewed to the top of the blanket. Blankets might be given to the more honored guests at potlatches, or cut into two or three strips to be given away. Such pieces were highly valued, as they could be later combined and made into dance aprons, leggings, or caps (228).
As a final use, after a death, the blanket would be thrown over the body while it lay in state. After cremation, or in the case of the shaman, after his burial, the blanket might be hung up over the gravehouse (228).

Our modern times and technology have both aided and abused the creative endeavors of the women of these cultures. Fortunately, the recent interest in women’s issues has created an awareness in the images, the values, and the place of the women in their societies. As a result, we have come to recognize and appreciate the Native women’s arts - not as the pastimes of an uncivilized people, but as the producers and suppliers of life’s essentials - baskets as water-carriers, beadwork as baby-carriers, blankets as ceremonial mainstays, and beauty.

Unfortunately, we, and they, the women of the Native cultures, have lost a great deal due to modern technology. Mail order catalogues now do a huge business with people of the Alaskan villages - J.C. Penney’s will provide your mittens, your baby carrier, your cookware, your parka, your boots. Need a coat? Just go to the telephone, the one in your house or the community hall, dial 1-800-INstant, and you’ll speedily have your modern, new-fangled, mass-produced gizmo, guaranteed bland and void of cultural trappings.

The Western cultural and social lifestyles are contributing to the demise of the Alaska Native’s lifestyle and culture, and, as a result, we are losing a legacy that has been woven into their art. Knowing the historical and cultural dimensions of their work enhances and deepens our understanding - giving us a chance to experience something that is very precious. The women and the arts of the Aleut, Athabaskan and Tlingit groups are a fascinating and creative asset - one not to be lost.
Works Cited


Lobb, Allan. *Indian Baskets of the Northwest Coast*. Graphic Arts Center, 1978.