

Living Our Cultures: Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska.* Aron Crowell, Rosita Worl, Paul C. Ongtooguk, and Dawn Biddison, eds. in association with the Arctic Studies Center, National Museum of Natural History and the Anchorage Museum at the Rasmuson Center. Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2010. 312 pp.

Reviewed by Aldona Jonaitis

Anchorage Alaska is about as far away as you can get from Washington, DC and still be in the United States (as long as you stay on the North American continent!). During the 19th and 20th centuries, explorers, collectors, and anthropologists from the Smithsonian Institution traveled to this huge and spectacular land to learn about the indigenous groups residing there and to acquire artifacts as scientific specimens documenting their soon-to-disappear cultures. As a result, thousands of carvings, textiles, baskets, beaded objects, garments, and other items ended up on the east coast. For source communities, the removal of their material culture, coupled with factors such as official government assimilationist policy led to the increasing rarity of certain types of objects, as well as the activities associated with them. For example, the prohibition missionaries placed on Yup'ik masked dancing resulted in loss of ritual knowledge and diverse aesthetic expressions.

The loss of elements of culture was, despite appearances, not total. The discourse of the “disappearing Native” has been fully discredited in recent decades as non-Natives belated realized that many Native people endured formidable challenges but maintained their identities and various aspects of their culture. This was certainly the case in Alaska.

In 1994, the National Museum of Natural History’s Arctic Studies Center (ASC) established an Alaskan branch at the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center. Reflecting the new paradigm of museums forming partnerships with those whose cultures they hold in their storerooms and exhibit halls, staff brought teams of Alaska Native consultants to Washington DC to explore the treasures that had been removed from their communities years before. Dozens of Alaska Native cultural specialists visited Washington DC from the late 1990s until 2009, and contributed immensely to knowledge about these materials.

The Anchorage Museum had long needed to expand, and in the late 1990s it embarked on an ambitious campaign to raise funds for this purpose. Today, the dazzling new facility that stands adjacent to the original building has thousands of square feet of new exhibit space, 12,000 square feet of which are dedicated to the Arctic Studies Center gallery. *Living Our Cultures: Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* features over 600 objects from the Smithsonian’s collections at the National Museum of Natural History and the National Museum of the American Indian. Although still owned by the Smithsonian, these borrowed objects will remain in Anchorage until at least 2017.

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The eponymous publication under review is far more than a mere catalog of these objects, for it includes abundant information on a variety of topics: an introduction by anthropologist Aron Crowell to the various groups who live in Alaska; Paul C. Ongtooguk and Claudia S. Dybdahl's presentation about Native perspectives on Alaska history; a concise and enlightening summary by Rosita Worl of the complex political world in which Alaska Natives live; a beautifully illustrated survey of many of the finest examples of Alaska Native art; a series of first-person narratives relating indigenous perspectives on connection to the land, family and community, and ceremonies. Each of these sections is written by a distinguished member of that Native group and reflects each individual's personal description of growing up within that culture. Shorter sidebars written by younger Native people offer the next generation's connections to culture.

There is so very much to enjoy in this publication that it is difficult to single any one element out for special praise. But as an historian of Native art, I was especially drawn to the way in which objects are presented one to a page. Next to text that provides extensive information on the piece is a photograph or historical image that illustrates the object type being used. For example, underneath a Yup'ik 19th century doll is a small, charming photograph of a Chevak girl and her doll taken in 1963. A 1851 drawing of Gwich'in men contextualizes a full set of Athabascan beaded summer ceremonial clothing. Accompanying each of these small images is a quote from one of the consultants who offers a personal comment about the type of object. Most of these personal quotes are by consultants, but some are by traders, priests, and previously published Native comments. A 1883 photograph of a Haida house that illustrates a carved house model includes text from a story recorded in 1900-1901. A Sugpiaq spruce root hat, along with by a 1790 drawing of a Kodiak man includes a quote from a Russian naval officer describing such a hat in 1802. The richness of this documentation means one keeps learning more as one returns to the illustrations.

Living Our Cultures is replete with recently taken photographs documenting the vitality of contemporary Alaska Native culture. These images bring to life such subjects as: Yup'ik women cutting fish. A one-foot-high-kicker pictured at the World Eskimo Indian Olympics. A subsistence rights march taking place in Anchorage. An Athabascan potlatch photographed in process. Southeast Alaskan men, women and children photographed wearing dazzling clothing at the biannual Celebration event. A Haida dancer wearing a contemporary mask.

The words in the book's title, "living our cultures," alludes to the ongoing strength of Native traditions. The process of extensive consultation and texts written by knowledgeable individuals buttresses this message, as do the photographs of people today engaged in different types of cultural activities. Nonetheless, it is the historic material that receives pride of place in this publication—each object has its own page, with a small contextual image.

Recently made pieces, mostly relegated to sidebars or supplementary illustrations, are not similarly featured, with the possible exception of artist David Boxley's chapter on the Tsimshian. I wish the editors had included pieces like Athabascan George Albert's snowshoes, or Tlingit Terri Rofkar's Raven Tail robes, or one of the many wonderful contemporary Yup'ik coiled grass baskets.

This is, however, just a quibble. *Living Our Cultures: Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* is one of the finest recent publications on Native American art and culture. It is gorgeous, interesting, educational, and a model for how established major museums can work successfully with originating communities to create an exhibition and a catalog that replaces the troubled history of museums and Native people with a celebration of collaboration and cultural vitality.

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