

Alaskan Native Art

Bone, usually from whales and other marine animals, is used to create carvings and masks. Bone masks are made from the vertebrae or disk of the Bowhead whale. The color of bone masks ranges from light tan to dark brown. Bone carvings also are used as a way to express the Alaskan Native "way of life." Bone items resemble ivory, but are less expensive.

Alabaster, often a white or translucent stone, also is used as a sculpture medium by Alaskan Natives. Alabaster used in Alaska is imported.

Beyond Carvings

Alaskan Native artisans also produce baskets, dolls, drums, masks, prints, and etchings.

Baleen, also called whalebone, is a flexible material from the jaw of baleen whales. It is used to weave baskets and make etchings. Alaskan Native etchings often portray stories from the artist's unique culture; they're done in a style similar to the scrimshaw technique Boston whalers used in the 1800's.

Alaskan dolls are handcrafted by many Alaskan Native women and reflect unique styles. Dolls often portray the activities of the artist's people. Typically, a doll's clothes and body are made from calf skin (calf skin has taken the place of caribou/reindeer hide materials and is not native to the area), mink, badger, sea otter, arctic rabbit, seal, or beaver. In many dolls, dried marine mammal intestine (which sometimes is bleached naturally in cold temperatures and sun so that it is very white, or has a slight yellowed wax paper look to it) is used for clothing. The hair often is made from musk oxen, and some artists use baleen or ivory for the eyes.



Alaskan Native prints are produced using a variety of techniques. **Serigraphy**, also called **screen printing** or **silk screening**, involves printing through a surface, similar to a stencil technique. **Relief print making** is done from a raised surface, like a cut stone or wood block; **intaglio print making** is created using the recessed image from the surface of etchings or engravings on metal plates of copper and tin. **Lithography** involves the artist using a grease-water technique to apply a variety of colors to the etched design on stone or metal plates.

For More Information

To learn more about Alaskan Native arts and crafts, contact:

Alaska State Council on the Arts
411 West 4th Avenue, Suite 1E
Anchorage, AK 99501-2343
907-269-6610; fax: 907-269-6601
Toll-free: 1-888-278-7424
www.aksca.org

Where to Complain

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357), or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

The **Indian Arts and Crafts Board** refers valid complaints about violations of the Indian Arts and

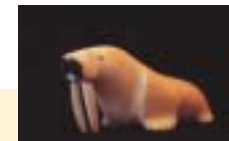
Crafts Act of 1990 to the FBI for investigation and to the Department of Justice for legal action. To file a complaint under the Act, or to get free information about the Act, contact the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, U.S. Department of the Interior, 1849 C Street, N.W., MS 4004-M1B, Washington, D.C. 20240; 202-208-3773; www.iacb.doi.gov.

Complaints to the IACB must be in writing and include the following information:

- The name, address and telephone number of the seller.
- A description of the art or craft item.
- How the item was offered for sale.
- What representations were made about the item, including any claims that the item was made by a member of a particular tribe or statements about its authenticity.
- Any other documentation, such as advertisements, catalogs, business cards, photos, or brochures. Include copies (NOT originals) of documents that support your position.

The **Alaska Attorney General's Office** investigates unfair and deceptive marketing and sales practices in Alaska. To obtain a complaint form, contact the Office of the Attorney General, Consumer Protection Unit, 1031 West 4th Avenue, Suite 200. Anchorage, AK 99501; 907-269-5100; or use the complaint form at www.law.state.ak.us/consumer/index.html.

The Alaska State Council on the Arts, the Federal Trade Commission, the U.S. Department of Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board, and the Alaska Attorney General's Office have prepared this brochure to help enhance your appreciation for Alaskan Native arts and crafts.



March 2002



Alaska is famous for the rugged beauty of its mountains, rivers, and coastlines, as well as for the distinctive arts and crafts produced by Alaskan Native artisans. If you are considering purchasing a Native-made art or craft item, it's smart to invest a little time learning about the processes and materials Alaskan Natives use to make these unique and beautiful objects.

Identifying Arts and Crafts Made by Alaskan Natives

Any item produced after 1935 that is marketed with terms like “Indian,” “Native American” or “Alaska Native” must have been made by a member of a state or federally-recognized tribe or a certified Indian artisan. That’s the law.

A certified Indian artisan is an individual certified by the governing body of the tribe of their descent as a non-member Indian artisan. For example, it would violate the law to advertise products as “Inupiaq Carvings” if the products were produced by someone who isn’t a member of the Inupiaq tribe or certified by the tribal governing body as a non-member Alaskan Native artisan of the Inupiaq people.

Qualifiers like “ancestry,” “descent” and “heritage” – used in connection with the terms “Indian,” or “Alaskan Native” or the name of a particular Indian tribe – don’t mean that the crafts person is a member of an Indian tribe or certified by a tribe. For example, “Native American heritage” or “Yupik descent” would mean that the artisan is of descent, heritage or ancestry of the tribe. These terms may be used only if they are truthful.

Buying Tips

Alaskan Native arts and crafts are sold through many outlets, including tourist stores, gift shops, art galleries, museums, culture centers, and the Internet. Here are some tips to help you shop wisely:

- Get written proof of any claims the seller makes for the authenticity of the art or craft item you’re purchasing.
- Ask if your item comes with a certification tag. Not all authentic Alaskan Native arts and crafts items carry a tag. Those that do may display a **Silver Hand** symbol. This label features a silver hand and the words, “Authentic Native Handicraft from Alaska.” The **Made in Alaska** emblem is another symbol you may find on some Alaskan-made products. This emblem certifies that the article “was made in Alaska,” though not necessarily by an Alaskan Native.
- Get a receipt that includes all the vital information about the value of your purchase, including any oral representations. For example, if a salesperson tells you that the basket you’re buying is made of baleen and ivory and was handmade by an Inupiaq artisan, insist that the information is on your receipt.



It can be difficult to distinguish arts and crafts produced by Alaskan Natives from items that are imitations: Price, materials and appearance are important clues to provenance.

- **Price** – The price of a genuine Alaskan Native art or craft item should reflect the quality of craftsmanship, the harmony of the design and the background of the artisan. Genuine pieces produced by skilled Alaskan Native artisans can be expensive.
- **Type of materials** – Materials often used by Alaskan Native artisans include walrus ivory, soapstone, argillite, bone, alabaster, animal furs and skin, baleen and other marine mammal materials.
- **Appearance** – Try to pick up and examine a piece before purchasing it. Some items that appear to be soapstone carvings actually may be made of resin. Real stone is cool to the touch; plastic is warm. Stone also tends to be



heavier than plastic. And a figure that is presented as hand-carved probably isn't if you see or can order 10 more like it that are perfectly uniform or lack surface variations.

Alaskan Native Carvings

Sculptures and carvings by Alaskan Natives vary in size, and usually portray animals or Alaskan people. Before you buy a carved figure, learn about the different mediums that are commonly used. It can help you spot a fake.

Walrus Ivory is one of the more popular and expensive mediums used in Alaskan sculptures. In carvings, *new ivory* often has “breathing cracks,” or thin black lines that occur naturally and should add to the beauty of the piece. These lines are caused by abrupt changes in temperatures that the walrus experiences when moving from warm rock “haul-outs” to the icy waters of the Arctic region. By law, new walrus ivory may be carved only by an Alaskan Native and it may be sold only after it has been carved. *Old ivory* can be carved by non-Natives. *Fossil ivory* also may be used, though it is both more rare and more expensive. Because of the differences in the fossilized ivory, no two carvings have the same design or color.

Soapstone is a soft rock with a soapy feel. It's popular with Alaskan Native artists because it's widely available and easy to carve. Soapstone ranges in color from gray to green, and while it scratches easily, it also resists acids, chemicals and heat.

Argillite is a compact rock used primarily by the Haida people of Alaska. It usually has a grayish-brown color and is smooth to the touch.

