ESKIMO REALITIES

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ESKIMO REALITIES

From the writer's point of view, the Arctic has no favorable qualities, unless its severity be counted as such. It is a barren, empty land, largely comfortless and desolate. The endless tundra stretching from sea to horizon has an austere, monotonous charm, a certain cold, clean-edged beauty. Yet throughout it is hard on man.

To the Eskimo, however, it is home, the earth's most favored place. They have no desire to go elsewhere; they are content with this country which contains enough walrus and seal to satisfy most of their needs.

In its topography, the eastern Canadian Arctic ranges from great glistening, colored cliffs to flatlands that roll away, mile after empty mile, featureless and undifferentiated, save for quiet inland pools that blue-spangle its monotonous expanse. The wind seems never to stop. It is a hard land, with few extras.

The fleeting weeks between the passing of one winter and the coming of another witness temperature, even warm weather. Snow melts, flowers bloom, birds flock from the south. The land becomes somber brown, not colorless, but dead in color, save for the brilliant orange of lichen-covered rocks.

The Eskimo are familiar with the most intimate details of this land. In 1929, when George Sutton visited Southampton Island, a land mass of nearly 20,000 square miles, no accurate maps of this island were available, so he obtained from two Aivilik Eskimo, Ookpuktowk and Amaulik Audlanat, the two upper sketches reproduced here. The amazing accuracy of their combined efforts can be seen by comparing them with the modern map, just below them, prepared years later from aerial photographs. Certain digressions, often shared, are immediately apparent, particularly in the enlargement of the Bell Peninsula, a favorite hunting ground. But the striking feature is certainly accuracy, especially in the details of the shoreline.

Aivilik men are keen geographers when describing their immediate surroundings. But once they venture to tell of the outer world, geography gives way to cosmography. I asked a number of them to describe the world. The earth, they replied, is merely several weeks' journey in extent from their home. Most agreed that it is both flat and circular, with Southampton Island as its center. The sun, following an irregular course, travels about it, lighting first the upper and then the under side. At the end of the earth stand four great pillars which support the sky dome. Here are the stars which burn so brightly in the heavens on clear nights. The Aivilik consider these to be moving spirits.

I asked several Aivilik to make sketches of this world. After much giggling on the part of the women and joking by the men, they produced a number of interesting maps, two of which are shown. The first, made by Karleaner, is limited to a series of dots, each representing a trading post and including all settlements known from experience and hearsay. Southampton Island is in the center; other trading posts lie, in the broadening circles of familiarity, like small islands in a vast sea. Karleaner assigns three trading posts to the white men, one of these being Brandon Sanatorium where tubercular Eskimo are hospitalized. Both her directions and estimates of distances are good, although the distances are increasingly underestimated as one travels from Southampton Island.

• GREENLAND

• PORT HARRISON

• CAPE DORSET

• SUGLUK

• FROBISHER BAY

• LYONS INLET

• PONDS INLET

• IGLULIK

• ADMIRALITY INLET

• REPULSE

• BATHURST

• WAGER INLET

• SOUTHAMPTON ISLAND

CHURCHILL •

• CHESTERFIELD

• COATS ISLAND

• ESKIMO POINT

MARBLE ISLAND •

• WALRUS ISLAND

• BRANDON

• OTTAWA ISLANDS

• WHITE MAN'S LAND

• MORE WHITE MEN

FORT ROSS

PONDS INLET

IGLULIK

REPULSE

SOUTHAMPTON ISLAND

CHESTERFIELD

ESKIMO POINT

WINNIPEG

YORK

NELSON

This is also the case with the second map, which was made by Agoolak. As a hunter, he knows the coastline well, but is understandably in error in his placement of Winnipeg. In making these maps, several Aivilik oriented them by having west away from the body and north on the righthand side, but others chose to draw them from still other angles, and there was no agreement.

Once when I asked an old Iglulik hunter to draw a map of the islands north of Foxe Basin (no simple task for they are most irregular), he rapidly and accurately sketched them in the air with his right forefinger. But when urged to use paper and pencil, with which he was unfamiliar, he repeatedly declined and then, finally consenting, produced with difficulty an inferior map. He mentioned no names for most of the islands, though he did for salient points on their coastlines. In other words, he had no interest in land mass, only in geographical points.

Although the Aivilik are familiar with the details of both the coastline and the lands which they hunt, they are largely uninformed about the outer world. Agoolak was amazed when the United States Army built an air strip near Coral Harbour. For years he had seen the same white faces in the North. Those who "went out" often returned, and all knew one another well. He reasonably concluded that though white men differed from Eskimo, they were far less numerous. He and others were astonished when, during the Second World War, so many strange faces appeared from the outer world.

They are equally uninformed about lands to the south. When told of the heat of the summers, of the great forests and factories—blow a whistle: five hundred men walk in; blow another: out they march—Tutinar was fascinated. "Are there many caribou?" she asked.

"None."

"Seal? Walrus? Bear?"

"None at all."

"Oh!" she replied in astonishment and pity.

Even Ohnainewk, sophisticated and learned in the ways of the white man, found domestication of animals incomprehensible. One day, in a borrowed magazine of mine, he came upon a picture of a farmer plowing a field with two horses. Such a man, he said, must be exceedingly brave, particularly since the whip he held was very small.

Orientation

The Aivilik say, "When a man puts out traps [sometimes as many as two hundred], he must know the country." He must know it to survive. In winter, the horizon recedes into the immense distance and, except when the sun hovers close to the horizon and orange rays briefly define the profile of the monotonous plain, there is no line dividing earth from sky. The two are of the same substance. There is no middle distance, no perspective, no outline, nothing the eye can cling to except thousands of smoky plumes running along the ground before the wind—a land without bottom or edge. When winds rise and powdery snow fills the air, there is neither up nor down and the traveler is left blind white.

But, if they must, hunters travel in such weather, even though the trail is lost and the dogs uncertain. I believe they can do so because of their knowledge of topography and winds. Their astonishing gifts of observation, their familiarity with the smallest details of this monotonous land, particularly its coastline, never failed to amaze me. Rarely did a man seem uncertain. But as I looked about, at the utter sameness of the land, I simply could not imagine what reference points he was using. Even when traveling by sled in the dark, and most travel is done at this time, there was little hesitancy or delay.

I recall one exhausting trip back from seal hunting when the lead dog was scarcely visible, and neither moon nor stars could be seen. Yet we proceeded directly to a tiny island in South Bay where we planned to spend the night. Not finding suitable snow for house-building, we started home, through the turnings and twistings of the pressure ice until I was sick with dizziness. Once on the sea ice, we headed directly home, back to the unlit settlement, hours distant.

Of course, what appeared to me as a monotonous land was, to the Aivilik, varied, filled with meaningful reference points. When I travel by car I can, with relative ease, pass through a complex and chaotic city, Detroit for example, by simply following a handful of highway markers. I begin with the assumption that the streets are laid out in a grid and the knowledge that certain signs mark my route. Apparently the Aivilik have similar, though natural, reference points. By and large these are not actual objects or points, but relationships: relationships between, say, contour, type of snow, wind, salt air, ice crack. I can best explain this with an illustration: two hunters casually followed a trail which I simply could not see, even when I bent close to scrutinize it; they did not kneel to examine it, but stood back, examining it at a distance.

Stars are sometimes used as guides, but rarely, and stories were told to me of men who had been misled when they used them. A hunter may rely on old sled tracks, but often his lead dog chooses not to follow them if it takes too long to keep checking the trail. The hunter merely keeps his eye on landmarks and depends on the direction of the wind. He quickly senses any change in the wind's direction, and confirms it by checking wind cuts in snow drifts and ridges.

Similarly, when traveling by boat along the coastline in heavy fog, a navigator relies on the sound of waves and the direction of the wind. Without seeing light or land or star he is still able to find his course by checking the wind and listening to the sound of the surf.

In Aivilik, there are at least twelve unrelated terms for various winds. This is understandable, for mild summer breezes are not to be classed with winter blasts which quickly freeze faces and force snow inside clothing. At their height, such storms prevent the erection of cover, snipping off block after block. They are the implacable foe of the Aivilik, many of whom have been multilated or indelibly bitten by these cruel winds.

Although there are words like north-wind (ooangniktook) and south-wind (nigitook), these have little to do with direction, but refer to kinds of winds. Where winds come from is less important than where they strike and what effect they have. When ooangniktook carries the floe out, seal hunting is good; when konungniktook brings the floe back, walrus can be taken. The source of each wind is incidental.

I cannot overemphasize the role of winds in Aivilik life. One hunter, far more acculturated than any other member of the group, kept a diary for several years at the suggestion of an itinerant anthropologist. Nearly every entry begins with an account of the winds; only rarely is anything else mentioned. With such concern, it is understandable how a traveler can orient himself by them, how, almost unconsciously, he can record their slightest variation. Even a good lead dog is apparently indoctrinated with some of this knowledge, or at least possessed of a remarkable ability of spatial orientation. A hunter sits on his sled, usually facing to one side, away from the wind, with his parka hood closed except for the small hole through which he breathes and sees, but at a slight change in the wind, which he notices from the direction the fur on his parka blows, he checks his position and keeps on.

The Igloo

The familiar Western notion of enclosed space is foreign to the Eskimo. Both winter snow igloos and summer sealskin tents are dome-shaped. Both lack vertical walls and horizontal ceilings; no planes parallel each other and none intersect at ninety degrees. There are no straight lines, at least none of any length.

An Eskimo doesn't mold his igloo from the outside looking in, but from the inside looking out. Working from the center, he builds a series of concentric circles, tapering upward conically. When the keystone at the apex has been set in place, Eskimo and structure are one. Only then does he cut the small hole at the base through which he crawls—in effect, doffing his igloo.

Generally each igloo has several rooms. To enter Amaslak's, an Iglukik one, you went first through a vestibule, next past a storage room for dead seal, then through a "hallway" off of which opened three "rooms," each with a snow sleeping platform and a stone lamp burning seal oil. Amaslak, his wife, two children, and I had one room; to the left lived his parents and their favorite grandchild; to the right, his sister, her husband and child.

Visually and acoustically the igloo is "open," a labyrinth alive with the movements of crowded people. No flat static walls arrest the ear or eye, but voices and laughter come from several directions and the eye can glance through here, past there, catching glimpses of the activities of nearly everyone. The same is true of the sealskin tent. Every sound outside can be heard within, and the women inside always seem to be turning and stretching so they can peer out through holes in the tent.

Acuteness of Observation

As observers, in both detail and precision, the Aivilik continually amazed me. Again and again, they saw what I did not. A seal on the ice was known to them long before I could see it, even when the direction was indicated. Yet my eyes are 20-20. Standing at the floe edge they could tell at a glance whether it was bird or seal, seal or square-flipper. The shout tingmisut! (plane) usually went up long before I could see anything and the children would continue to watch long after it had disappeared from my view. The same was true of boats.

I am not suggesting that their eyes were optically superior to mine, merely that such observations are meaningful to them and that years of unconscious training have made them masters at it. Moreover, they enter into an experience, not as an observer, but as participant. This is the only way I can describe, or rather account for, the wonderful naturalism of their carvings and mimicry of animals. Here the artist or hunter participates in seal-ness, becomes one with the seal, and thus finds it easy to portray, for he is now, himself, Seal.

Both children and adults are often superb mimics, wonderfully imitating someone to the delight of all. I have seen take-offs that would do credit to professional comedians; children especially seem gifted in this line—I know because I was their favorite subject. A hunter's imitation of a seal is sometimes good enough to fool the hunted seal. Some men can parody anything: bear, iceberg, yes, even wind!

There is also a remarkable retention of observation. Show the Aivilik a new dance step, sing a new song or play an unfamiliar tune on the accordion (which since whaling days has replaced the drum), and several will always reproduce these instantly and perfectly.

Thus, though the exposure is fleeting, details can be taken in at a glance and are long retained. When a man travels by sled into unfamiliar country, he continually looks back to see how the country will appear on his return. These brief glimpses, vividly recorded and faithfully remembered, are enough so that he can find his way back with ease. An elderly hunter may efficiently guide a party through an area he has not seen since his youth, and then but once. I do not mean that no Aivilik is ever lost, but a good hunter rarely if ever is.

An arctic resident who had been intimately associated with the Eskimo for thirty years told me the following: "Around 1930 an Eskimo passed a strange ship employed in walrus hunting off Baffin Island. At Pantirtung the Eskimo casually mentioned the vessel to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police constable who, suspecting poaching, investigated. When he reached the spot, the ship was gone, and the only evidence of its identification was a sketch made at his request by the Eskimo. Yet this sketch was so detailed and accurate it included the ship's name and port, which the Eskimo, ignorant of the Latin alphabet, could have perceived only as a design. The owners of the ship, a Norwegian one, were convicted and fined on this evidence."

In checking the story, I wrote to H. A. Larsen, famed arctic authority and Superintendent of "G" Division, RCMP. He replied that he knew nothing of the incident, but thought it might be true and would investigate. Some weeks later he wrote that the man from whom I had heard the story had been interviewed in Churchill and had nothing but hearsay on the subject. "He referred us to Corporal L. Corey who is stationed in Ottawa. Corporal Corey had nothing definite and referred us to ex-corporal H. Margette who was interviewed at Kemptville..." etc. etc. Apparently the story is untrue, but I think it noteworthy that so many men, all familiar with the Eskimo, found it plausible.

Mechanical Aptitude

If arctic literature rarely mentions the Eskimo's mechanical aptitude, it is simply because it is so often silent about those things which are taken for granted about Eskimo life. Yet all observers to whom I have spoken agree there is something here not easily explained. I have heard many stories about Eskimo mechanics, some difficult to credit were it not for the fact that such achievements can be observed daily.

Aivilik men are first-class mechanics. They delight in stripping down and reassembling engines, watches, all machinery. I have watched them repair instruments which American mechanics, flown into the Arctic for this purpose, have abandoned in despair. Working with the simplest tools, often handmade, they make replacements of metal or ivory. Towtoongie made a hinge for me, so small I had to hold it directly before my eyes to see how it worked. Omowyak took a driving shaft from a large engine and, finding it too large for his own engine, reduced the diameter by a third, in the most ingenious manner, using only simple hand tools. No engine is beyond repair. Admittedly, some are odd-looking affairs by the time the Aivilik are through with them, but they run.

Part of this ability is obviously hand dexterity, particularly in manufacturing small objects. But there is more involved. One day I was asked by a missionary to look at a complex machine of his that had stopped working. I removed the top plate and realized at a glance it was far too intricate for me to repair or even to understand. As I hesitated, an Aivilik, who had been watching, slipped his hand under my arm, made a few quick adjustments, and it was fixed.

I think the explanation for this phenomenon lies in the over-all picture of Aivilik time/space orientation. At least three factors are involved: first, Aivilik do not conceptually separate space and time, but see the situation or machine as a dynamic process; second, they are acute observers of details; and third, their concept of space is not one of static enclosure, such as a room with sides or boundaries, but as direction, in operation.

The first factor is reflected in language. Eskimo contains a number of terms—tima (here/now), for example—that alone or as suffixes indicate time/space orientation. Moreover, the so-called case system in Eskimo, which is as important in that language as, say, tense is in English, is concerned with position, especially spatial relationships. The attention we lavish on time, Eskimo accord to space.

If one man starts working on an engine, the men and boys of the camp crowd close about, talking and helping. Once they see how to fix it, they rarely forget. I think the first thing that impresses them about Western culture is its machinery.

We often have difficulty in understanding a purely verbal notion. In Alice in Wonderland, "...the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury found it advisable—."

"'Found what?' said the Duck.

"'Found it,' the Mouse replied rather crossly: 'of course you know what "it" means.'

"'I know what "it" means well enough when I find a thing,' said the Duck: 'it's generally a frog, or a worm. The question is, what did the archbishop find?'"

We feel happier when it is visible; then we feel we can understand it, judge it, perhaps control it. In our workaday world, space is conceived in terms of that which separates visible objects. "Empty space" suggests a field in which there is nothing to see. We call a fume-filled gasoline drum or a gale-swept tundra "empty" because nothing is visible in either case.

The Eskimo do not think this way. One hunter I knew, when assured by a white man that a gasoline drum was "empty," struck a match and peered inside: he bore the scars for life.

Acoustic Space

With them the binding power of the oral tradition is so strong as to make the eye subservient to the ear. They define space more by sound than sight. Where we might say, "Let's see what we can hear," they would say, "Let's hear what we can see."

In the beginning was the Word, a spoken word, not the visual one of literate man, but a word which, when spoken, imposed form. This is true, as well, of the Eskimo, but with one significant difference: the Eskimo poet doesn't impose form, so much as reveal it. He transfigures and clarifies, and thus, sanctifies. As he speaks, form emerges, temporarily but clearly, "on the threshold of my tongue." When he ceases to speak, form merges once more with unbounded reality.

In our society, to be real, a thing must be visible—and, preferably, constant. We trust the eye, not the ear. Not since Aristotle, in the first sentence of Metaphysics, assured his readers that the sense of sight was "above all others" the one to be trusted, have we accorded to sound a primary role. "Seeing is believing." "Believe half of what you see, nothing of what you hear." "The eyes of the Lord preserve knowledge, and he overthroweth the words of the transgressor," Proverbs 22:12. Truth, we think, must be observed by the "eye," then judged by the "I." Mysticism, intuition, are bad words among scientists. Most of our thinking is done in terms of visual models, even when an auditory one might prove more efficient. We employ spatial metaphor even for such inner psychological states as tendency, duration, intensity. We say "thereafter," not the more logical "thenafter"; "always" means "at all times"; "before" means etymologically "in front of": we even speak of a "space" or an "interval" of time.

To the Aivilik, truth is given through oral tradition, mysticism, intuition, all cognition and not simply by observation and measurement of physical phenomena. To them, the visible apparition is not nearly as important as the purely auditory one.

The essential feature of sound is not its location, but that it be, that it fill space. We say "the night shall be filled with music," just as the air is filled with fragrance; locality is irrelevant. The concert-goer closes his eyes.

Auditory space has no favored focus. It's a sphere without fixed boundaries, space made by the thing itself, not space containing the thing. It is not pictorial space, boxed-in, but dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment. It has no fixed boundaries; it is indifferent to background. The eye focuses, pinpoints, abstracts, locating each object in physical space, against a background; the ear, however, favors sound from any direction.

I recall traveling in fog along a dangerous coastline. Visibility was zero, yet we neither delayed nor detoured. My companions listened to the surf and to cries of birds nesting on promontories; they smelled the shore and surf; felt the wind and spray on their faces and "read," through their buttocks, the wave patterns created by the interplay of wind and swell. Loss of sight was not a serious handicap. When they used their eyes, it was often with an acuity that amazed me. But they weren't "lost" without them.

I know of no example of an Eskimo describing space primarily in visual terms. They don't regard space as static, and therefore measurable; hence they have no formal units of spatial measurement, just as they have no uniform divisions of time.

Forms Revealed

Eskimo wed themselves to nature, for nature's forms, they believe, lie hidden until man reveals them one by one. This is difficult for us to conceive, for our language emphasizes nouns, things already there, set apart from us, clearly defined and easily seen. The Eskimo language, by contrast, makes little distinction between "nouns" and "verbs"; rather, all words are forms of the verb "to be," which itself is lacking in Eskimo. That is, all words proclaim in themselves their own existence.

Eskimo isn't a nominal language; it doesn't name things which already exist, but brings things/action (nouns/verbs) into being as it goes along. This idea is reflected in the practice of naming a child at birth; when the mother is in labor, an old woman stands around and says as many different eligible names as she can think of. The child comes out of the womb when its name is called. Thus the naming and the giving birth to the new thing are inextricably bound together.

The environment encourages the Eskimo to think in this fashion. To Western minds the "monotony" of snow, ice, and sky can often be depressing, even frightening. Nothing in particular stands out. There is no scenery in the sense in which we use the term.

But the Eskimo do not see it this way. They're interested not in scenery, but in action. This is true to some extent of many people, but it's almost of necessity true for the Eskimo, for nothing in their world easily defines itself and is separable from the general background. What exists, the Eskimo themselves must struggle to bring into existence. Theirs is a world which has to be conquered with each statement and act, each song and carving—but which, with each act accomplished, is as quickly lost. Carvings are often discarded after being made, and

Words fade away,
Like hills in fog.

The secret of conquering a world greater than himself is not known to the Eskimo. But his role is not passive. He reveals form; he cancels nothingness.

The Eskimo seem to be saying that nature is there, but man alone can free it from its dormant state; that it requires a creative human act before the world explored becomes a world revealed; that the universe acquires form, "existence," only through man the revealer: he who releases life inherent in nature and guides its expression into beautiful forms.

Language is the principal tool with which the Eskimo make the natural world a human world. They use many "words" for snow which permit fine distinctions, not simply because they are much concerned with snow, but because snow takes its form from the actions in which it participates: sledding, falling, igloo-building. Different kinds of snow are brought into existence by the Eskimo as they experience their environment and speak; words do not label things already there. Words are like the knife of the carver: they free the idea, the thing, from the general formlessness of the outside. As a man speaks, not only is his language in a state of birth, but also the very thing about which he is talking.

Poet, like carver, releases form from the bonds of formlessness; he brings it forth into consciousness. He must reveal form in order to protest against a universe that is formless, and the form he reveals should be beautiful.

Spirits exist outside of men, but only as long as men think of them. If they ever go out of mind, they go out of existence. Hunters who honor slain animals guarantee the survival of their spirits. Neglected spirits disappear.

This applies equally to human spirits. An Eskimo tribe consists of a collection of names reincarnated in successive bodies. Between incarnations, names aren't mentioned, but they must be kept in memory, a responsibility that falls in particular to elderly women. Otherwise the spirits contained within these names are lost forever. Among these hunters, belief, language and existence are inseparable.

Sila

Perhaps the most ambiguous Eskimo concept, to Western minds, is expressed in the term **sila**, which means both thought and outside. In one sense, it refers to the world outside man, especially weather, elements, the natural order. **Silakrertok** means fair weather; **silalutok**, bad weather; **silami**, outdoors; **silata**, outside; **silapak**, outer garment; **silalereit,** neighbors; **silalleq,** the one farther out; **silallerpaaq,** the outermost one.

But **sila** also refers to the state of the inner mind: **silatunerk**, has intelligence, shrewdness; **silaitok**, has no intelligence; **silatusurpok**, prudent, thinks ahead.

Thought, to the Eskimo, isn't a product of mind, but the forces outside of man. Yet thought can't exist without man. True, the universe must speak first, make itself known to man, affect him, move him. But he alone can release it from its chaotic state.

When nature moves man, when he feels emotion welling up within him, then he knows the feeling of being alive, of existing in relation to the universe, and at this moment he gives expression to these feelings.

Here, then, is a world of chaos and change, a meaningless whirl of cold and white; man alone can give it meaning—its form does not come ready-made.

Sila, goddess of the natural order, is also the goddess of thought. The successful hunter is her conscious self: he who obeys her laws, prospers. He who ignores her, suffers and dies.

Thus the question of compulsory education was settled, as far as the Arctic is concerned, long ago. Incapacity and ignorance are penalized as sharply as willful disobedience. Parental training prepares the child, but nature is the real authority, man merely her voice.

Knud Rasmussen, the arctic explorer, in a sensitive, moving account, tells of a conversation with an Iglulik hunter: "For several evenings we had discussed rules of life and taboo customs, without getting beyond a long circumstantial statement of all that was permitted and all that was forbidden. Everyone knew precisely what had to be done in any given situation, but whenever I put my query: 'Why?', they could give no answer. They regarded it, and very rightly, as unreasonable that I should require not only an account, but a justification of their religious principles. They had of course no idea that all my questions, now that I had obtained what I wished for, were only intended to make them react in such a manner that they should, excited by my inquisitiveness, be able to give an inspired explanation. Aua had as usual been the spokesman, and as he was still unable to answer my questions, he rose to his feet, and as if seized by a sudden impulse, invited me to go outside with him.

"It had been an unusually rough day, and as we had plenty of meat after the successful hunting of the past few days, I had asked my host to stay at home so that we could get some work done together. The brief daylight had given place to the half-light of the afternoon, but as the moon was up, one could still see some distance. Ragged white clouds raced across the sky, and when a gust of wind came tearing over the ground, our eyes and mouths were filled with snow. Aua looked me full in the face, and pointing out over the ice, where the snow was being lashed about in waves by the wind, he said:

"'In order to hunt well and live happily, man must have calm weather. Why this constant succession of blizzards and all this needless hardship for men seeking food for themselves and those they care for? Why? Why?'

"We had come out just at that time when the men were returning from their watching at the blowholes on the ice; they came in little groups, bowed forward, toiling against the wind, which actually forced them now and again to stop, so fierce were the gusts. Not one of them had a seal in tow; their whole day of painful effort and endurance had been in vain.

"I could give no answer to Aua's 'Why?', but shook my head in silence. He then led me into Kublo's house, which was close beside our own. The small blubber lamp burned, but with the faintest flame, giving out no heat whatever; a couple of children crouched, shivering, under a skin rug on the bench.

"Aua looked at me again, and said: 'Why should it be cold and comfortless in here? Kublo has been out hunting all day, and if he had got a seal, as he deserved, his wife would now be sitting laughing beside her lamp, letting it burn full, without fear of having no blubber left for tomorrow. The place would be warm and bright and cheerful, the children would come out from under their rugs and enjoy life. Why should it not be so? Why?'

"I made no answer, and he led me out of the house, into a little snow hut where his sister Natseq lived all by herself because she was ill. She looked thin and worn, and was not even interested in our coming. For several days she had suffered from a malignant cough that seemed to come from far down in the lungs, and it looked as if she had not long to live.

"A third time Aua looked at me and said: 'Why must people be ill and suffer pain? We are all afraid of illness. Here is this old sister of mine; as far as anyone can see she has done no evil; she has lived through a long life and given birth to healthy children, and now she must suffer before her days end. Why? Why?'

"This ended his demonstration, and we returned to our house, to resume with the others the interrupted discussion.

"You see,' said Aua, 'you are equally unable to give any reason when we ask why life is as it is. And so it must be. All our customs come from life and turn towards life; we explain nothing, we believe nothing, but in what I have just shown you lies our answer to all you ask.'"

Commenting on this moving passage, the anthropologist Paul Riesman writes: "A very important idea emerges from this intense episode. This idea is clearly stated at the end when Aua says, 'All our customs come from life and turn toward life.' It is an idea which is so basic to the Eskimo sense of place in the universe that it is not really an idea at all, but a way of being in relation to life. This way of being is the highest value for the Eskimo. It is not an easy way to be, but it is a necessary condition for being Eskimo."

Poetry

The land is snow-covered most of the year. It never thaws. Winds exceed seventy miles-an-hour.

Yet, when life is reduced to its barest essentials, art and poetry turn out to be among those essentials.

In Eskimo, the word "to make poetry" is the word "to breathe"; both are derivatives of anerca—the soul, that which is eternal: the breath of life. A poem is words infused with breath or spirit: "Let me breathe of it," says the poet-maker and then begins: "I have put my poem in order on the threshold of my tongue."

"'My Breath'—this is what I call this song," said Orpingalik, "for it is just as necessary to me to sing it as it is to breathe," and then began: "I will sing this song / A song that is strong...."

"Songs," he added, "are thoughts, sung out with the breath when people are moved by great forces and ordinary speech no longer suffices. Man is moved just like the ice floe sailing here and there out in the current. His thoughts are driven by a flowing force when he feels joy, when he feels sorrow. Thoughts can wash over him like a flood, making his blood come in gasps and his heart throb. Something, like an abatement in the weather, will keep him thawed up. And then it will happen that we, who always think we are small, will feel still smaller. And we will fear to use words. But it will happen that the words we need will come of themselves. When the words we want to use shoot up of themselves—we get a new song."

When Orpingalik says, "And we will fear to use words," he doesn't mean he's afraid of the words themselves. He means he's in awe of their power to bring the universe into existence. Words must "shoot up of themselves." They must arise naturally out of experience. To impose words of his own would be sacrilegious.

"Many are the words that rush over me, like the wings of birds out of darkness."

"How many songs I have I cannot tell you," said Orpingalik. "I keep no count of such things. There are so many occasions in one's life when a joy or sorrow is felt in such a way that the desire comes to sing; and so I only know that I have many songs. All my being is song, and I sing as I draw breath."

Uvavnuk, delighting in the joy of simply being moved by nature, sang:

The great sea
Has sent me adrift,
It moves me
As the weed in a great river,
Earth and the great weather
Move me,
Have carried me away
And move my inward parts with joy.

Here the phrase translated "moves me" also means "to be in a natural state"; to be moved by nature is to be in nature, to belong there. Emotions are expressed as physical responses: anger—loosening bowels; fear—tightening sinews; joy—floating viscera. Man is small, no more than a weed moved endlessly by the current, but intensely aware of forces acting upon him, and delighting in even the most trivial:

And I think over again
My small adventures
When with a shore wind I drifted out
In my kayak
And thought I was in danger.
My fears,
Those small ones
That I thought so big,
For all the vital things
I had to get and to reach.

And yet, there is only
One great thing,
The only thing:
To live to see in huts and on journeys
The great day that dawns,
And the light that fills the world.

Toothless Kuilasar told of starvation, of children born and husbands lost, of new lands and faces, and concluded, "How happy I have been! How good life has been to me!" She hadn't conquered life, nor been rewarded by it, but life had acted upon her, spoken through her, and this was joy.

One hears singers, often improvising, throughout the day; a young woman sewing; children catching lemmings; a hunter back from the kill, exactiy mimicking the powerful, lumbering gait of the bear; an old man seeking to dispel nostalgia and sadness:

May my song healingly
Breathe through my throat
May my little song
Dispel from my soul
My great worries.

I watched one couple courting; she recited a verse, then shyly ducked behind a boulder; he found her and replied—like children playing on the tundra.

Art and poetry are verbs, not nouns. Poems are improvised, not memorized; carvings are carved, not saved. The forms of art are familiar to all; examples need not be preserved.

When spring comes and igloos melt, old habitation sites are littered with waste, including beautifully designed tools and tiny carvings, not deliberately thrown away, but, with even greater indifference, just lost.

Art

No word meaning "art" occurs in Eskimo, nor does "artist": there are only people. Nor is any distinction made between utilitarian and decorative objects. The Eskimo simply say, "A man should do all things properly." My use of both words here is strictly Western: by art I refer to objects which a Western critic would call art; by artist I mean any Eskimo.

Carving, like singing, isn't a thing. When you feel a song within you, you sing it; when you sense a form emerging from ivory, you release it.

As the carver holds the unworked ivory lightly in his hand, turning it this way and that, he whispers, "Who are you! Who hides there!" And then: "Ah, Seal!" He rarely sets out to carve, say, a seal, but picks up the ivory, examines it to find its hidden form and, if that's not immediately apparent, carves aimlessly until he sees it, humming or chanting as he works. Then he brings it out: Seal, hidden, emerges. It was always there: he did not create it, he released it; he helped it step forth.

I watched one white man, seeking souvenirs, commission a carving of seal but receive instead a carving of a walrus. Another, who wanted a chess set, though his explicit instructions were clearly understood, received a set in which each pawn was different. Ahmi—"it cannot be known in advance" what lies in the ivory.

Ohnainewk held a baby walrus tooth in his palm, turned it slightly, and there, unmistakably! Ptarmigan almost burst through the surface. As he cut lightly here, indented there, he spoke softly, diffidently; he was not passive, yet his act of will was limited, respectful: respectful to the form that was given.

The Eskimo language has no real equivalents to our words "create" or "make," which presuppose imposition of the self. The closest Eskimo term means "to work on," which also involves an act of will, but one which is restrained. The carver never attempts to force the ivory into uncharacteristic forms, but responds to the material as it tries to be itself, and thus the carving is continually modified as the ivory has its say.

Great Western artists sometimes thought in these terms and even expressed themselves so, but with one difference: they were exceptions in their own culture, independently reaching this attitude only after long experience and contemplation; whereas the Eskimo learn it as a mother-tongue and daily give it social voice and expression. It is their attitude not only toward ivory, but toward all things, especially people: parent toward child, husband toward wife.

We think of art as possession, and possession to us means control, to do with as we like. Art to them is a transitory act, a relationship. They are more interested in the creative activity than in the product of that activity.

What has impressed me, above all else, about the Eskimo is their sensitivity toward others. I am aware that smiles may mask hostility; generosity may conceal avarice; politeness may hide jealousy. But even in these situations, there is usually keen awareness of, and respect for, the identity and integrity of others: there is a self-respect which respects the humanity of others.

One day when Kowanerk and I were alone, she looked up from the boot she was mending to ask, without preamble, "Do we smell?"

"Yes."

"Does the odor offend you?"

"Yes."

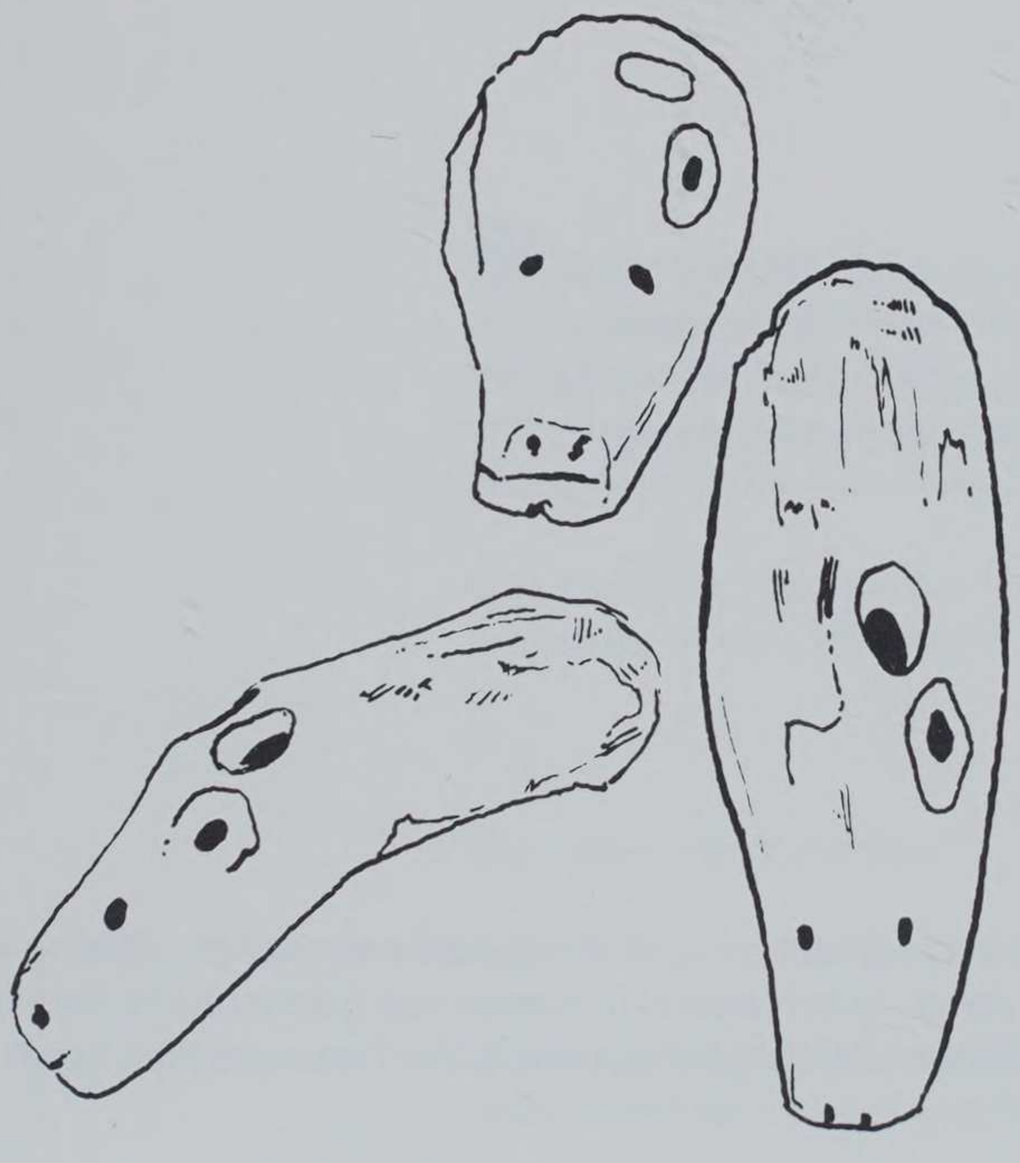
She sewed in silence for awhile, then said, "You smell and it's offensive to us. We wondered if we smelled and if it offended you."

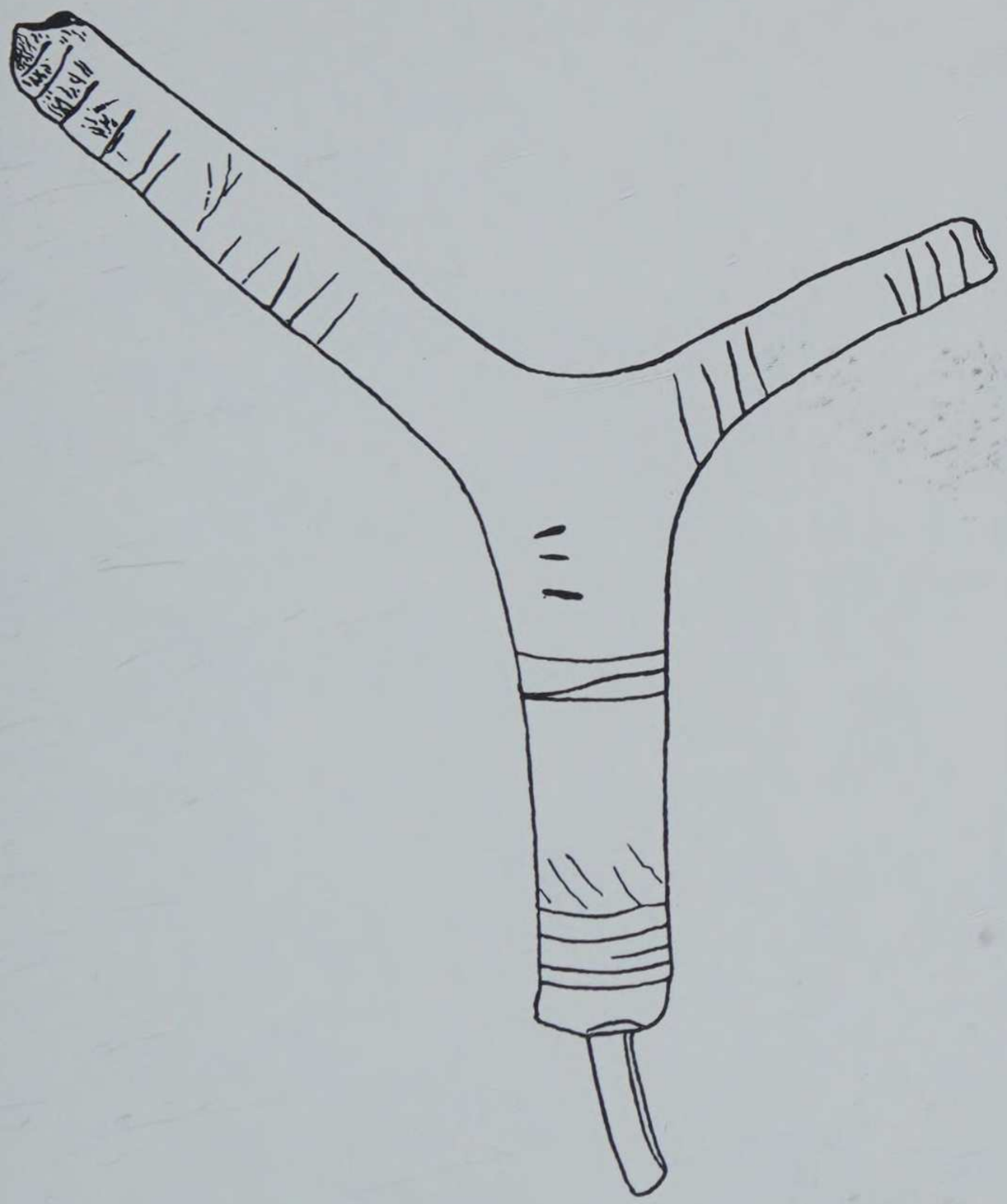
I have often heard white men comment on the odor of the Eskimo, but I have never heard one turn this observation to self-awareness.

Father Guy Mary-Rousseliere, O.M., tells the story of Erngaut, who loved her husband, Utukutsuk. Another hunter coveted her, threatened to abduct her, and would have killed her husband. One night she got up and dressed, singing to herself. She left her cooking pot beside her stepdaughter, then went outside and shot herself, giving her life to save her husband's.

Here one recognizes a sudden access of dignity and intensity of suffering which resemble those of the great heroines of literature and shame one by their unexpectedness in what had seemed, at first glance, to be a life of no more than harsh practicality.

A charm from Cape Dorset, a bear's tooth to be worn on clothing. Cut here, smoothed there, a few dots added and it's a perfect bear's head, yet still a tooth, identifiable by species and age.

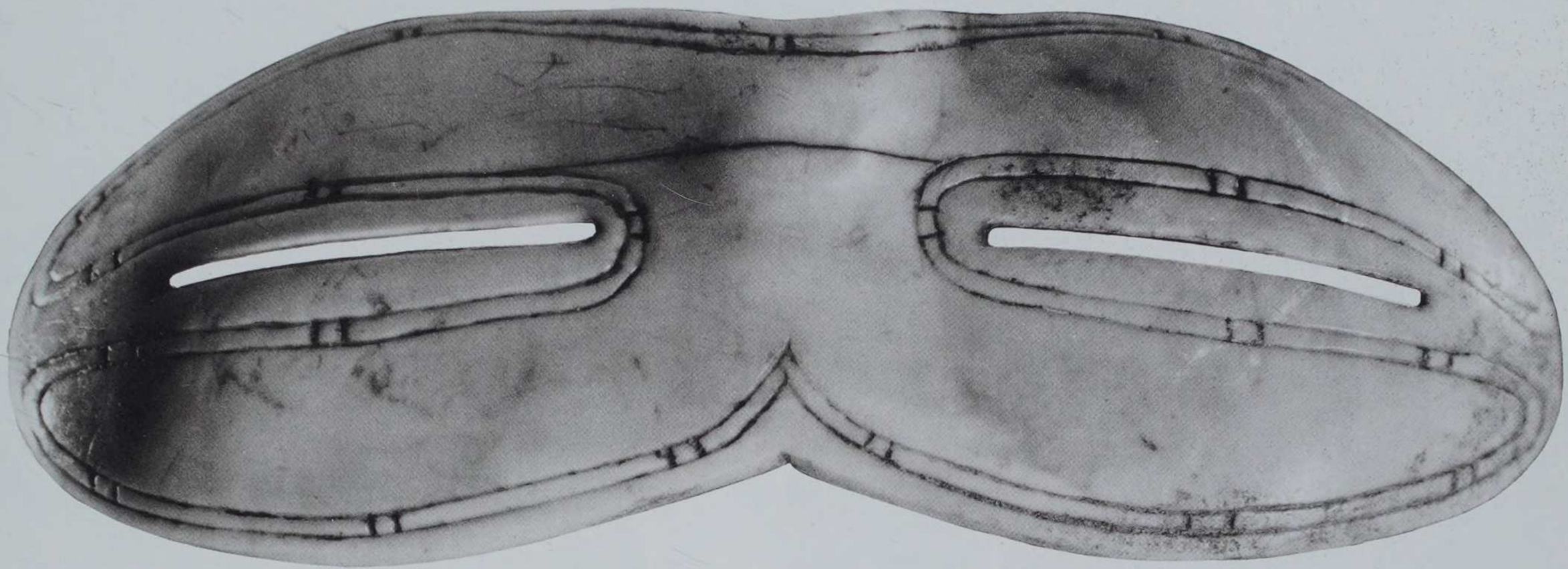


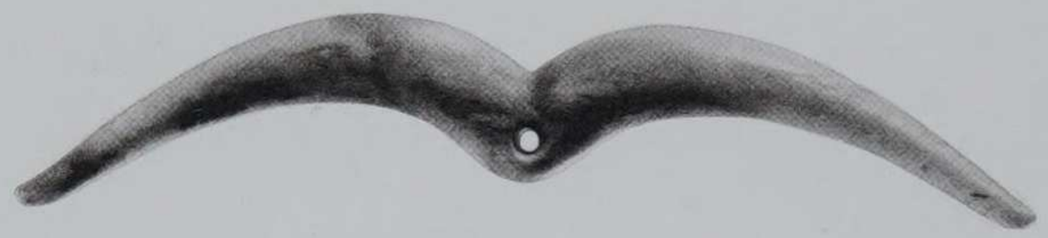


One very characteristic Eskimo expression means "What is that for?" It's most frequently used by an Eskimo when he finds some object and stands looking down at it. It doesn't mean "What can I use that for?" but rather something closer to "What is it intended to be used for?" That portion of the antler, whose shape so perfectly fits the hand and gives a natural strength as well, becomes, with slight modification, a chisel handle. Form and function, revealed together, are inseparable. Add a few lines of dots or tiny rings or merely incisions, rhythmically arranged to bring out the form, and it's finished.

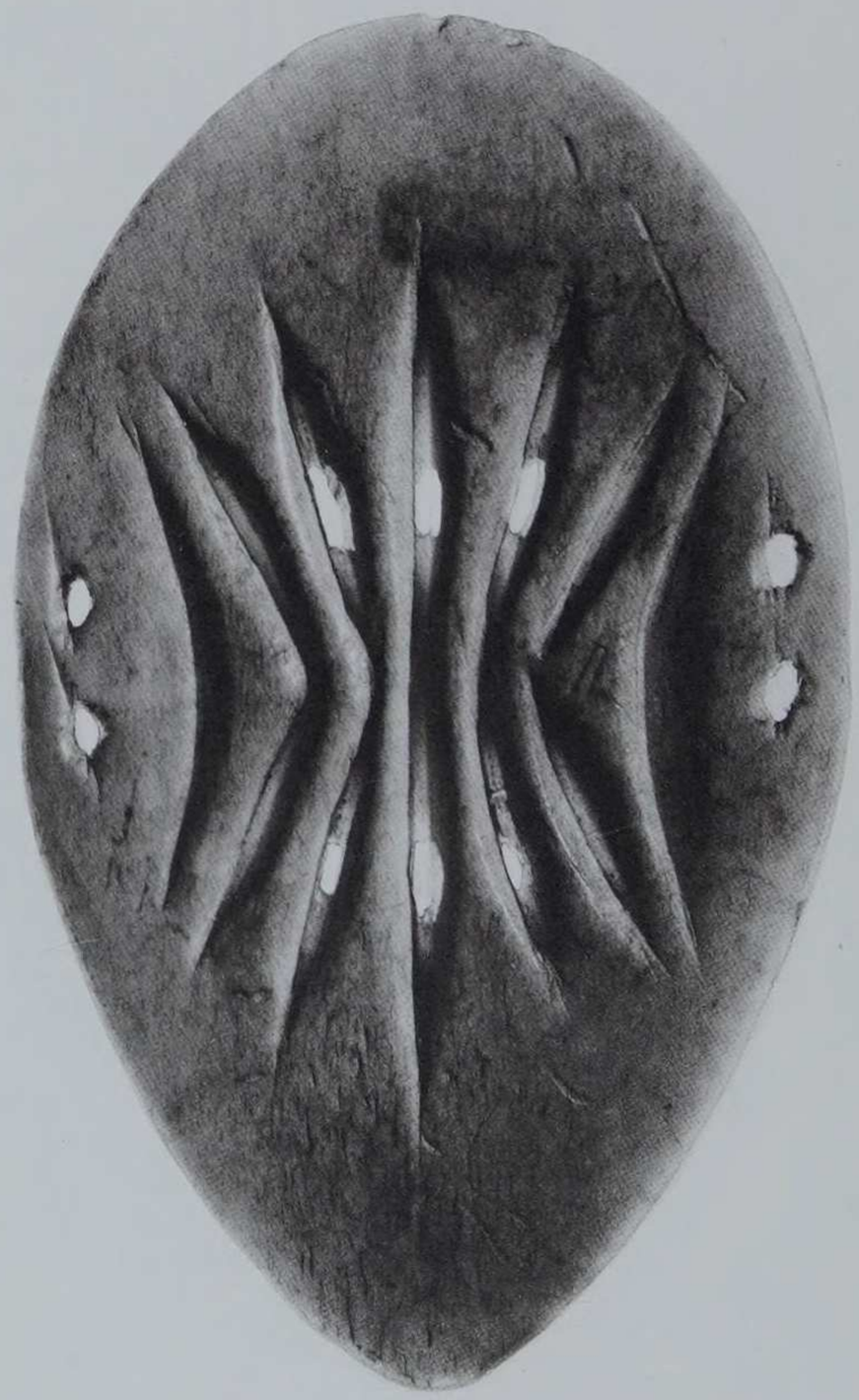
Carving of wolf and man, their relative positions influenced by the ivory. Each may be viewed independently or seen together. Turned this way, there is one relationship; turned another way, something else is involved. The possibilities are many in a society where, in fact and in myth, relations between man and wolf are intimate, complex.

This carving is one of many obtained by Robert Flaherty. How natural that this great film maker, recording action, would understand and appreciate, as a still-camera artist might not, the nature of Eskimo art.



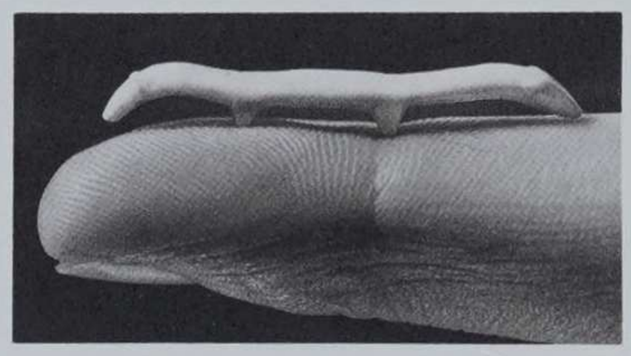


Every adult Eskimo male is an accomplished ivory carver: carving is a normal, essential skill, just as writing is with us. And carving is done for a purpose, just as writing is with us. The carver doesn't divide his products into works of art and utilitarian objects, for the two are usually one: the sun goggles are beautiful—that line which is aesthetically so appealing is the line that fits the brow so perfectly. The harpoon is graceful—and deadly. Even the most mundane tool becomes an art object, for the Eskimo—can I say "spontaneously"?—add a line here, a face there, and it becomes a delight.



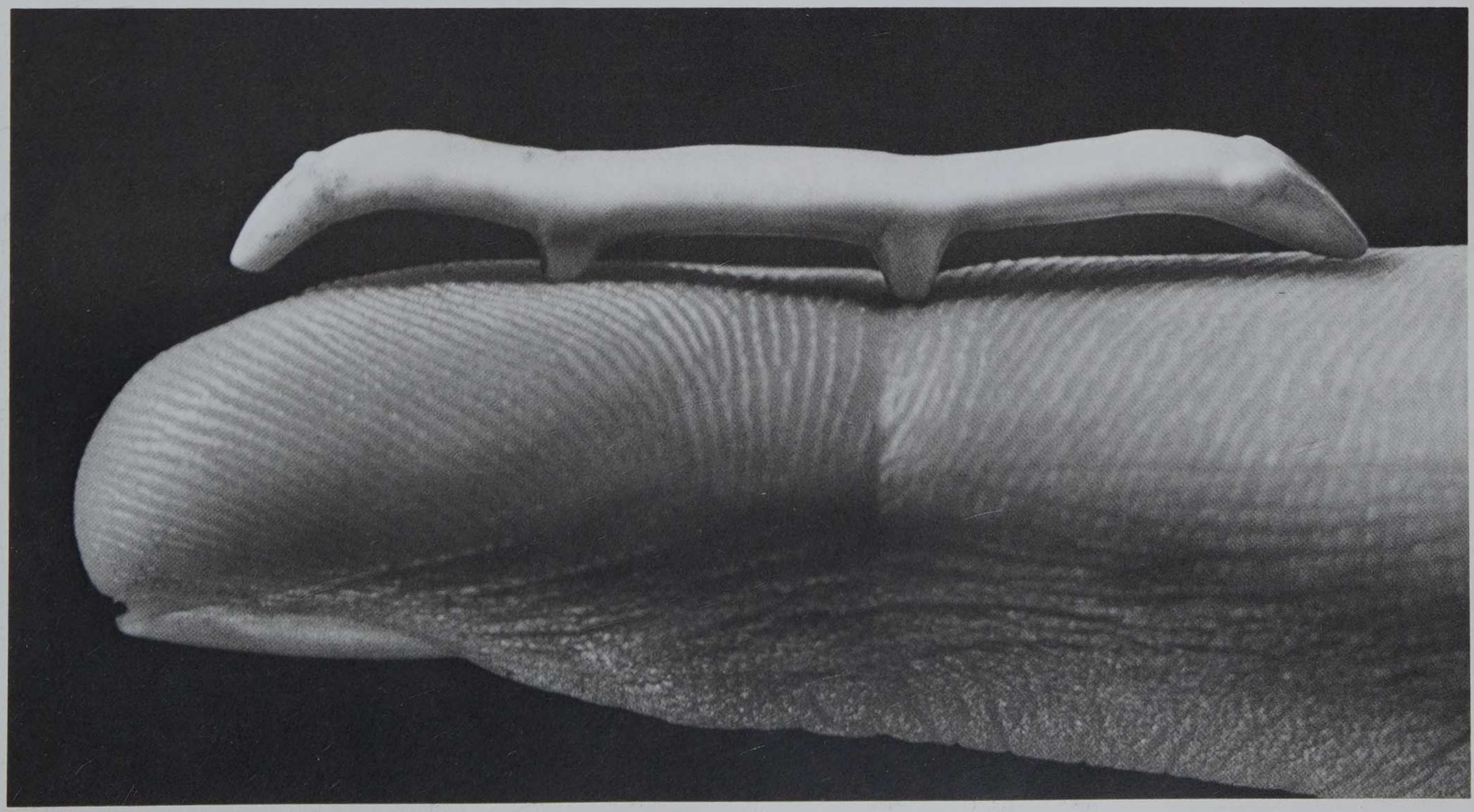
Figures are carved in the round for ornamental or religious purposes, in the latter case usually to evoke the absent animal or propitiate it after it is slain. Here the image of the animal whose meat is sought or whose aid has been secured through a dream is thought to be equivalent to the creature itself: carving its image brings it within the influence of the hunter's spirit. Once carved, with full details, even to the animal's sex organs, but never with a favored side for viewing, it may be passed from hand to hand, then dropped indifferently into a toolbox or simply lost. Art to the Eskimo is an act, not an object; a ritual, not a possession.

Carvings live in the hand or on the clothing or equipment to which they are attached as charm, ornament, toggle. They live in man's companionship with them.



Though tiny, these effigies lack the fragility of miniatures, and give the impression of power. Each seems independent, self-contained.

Eskimo tales share this quality. Generally the narrator speaks only of the things you can touch and see. He constantly chooses the concrete word, in phrase after phrase, forcing you to touch and see. No speaker so insistently teaches the general through the particular: he has mastery over the definite, all-engrossing, particular image.



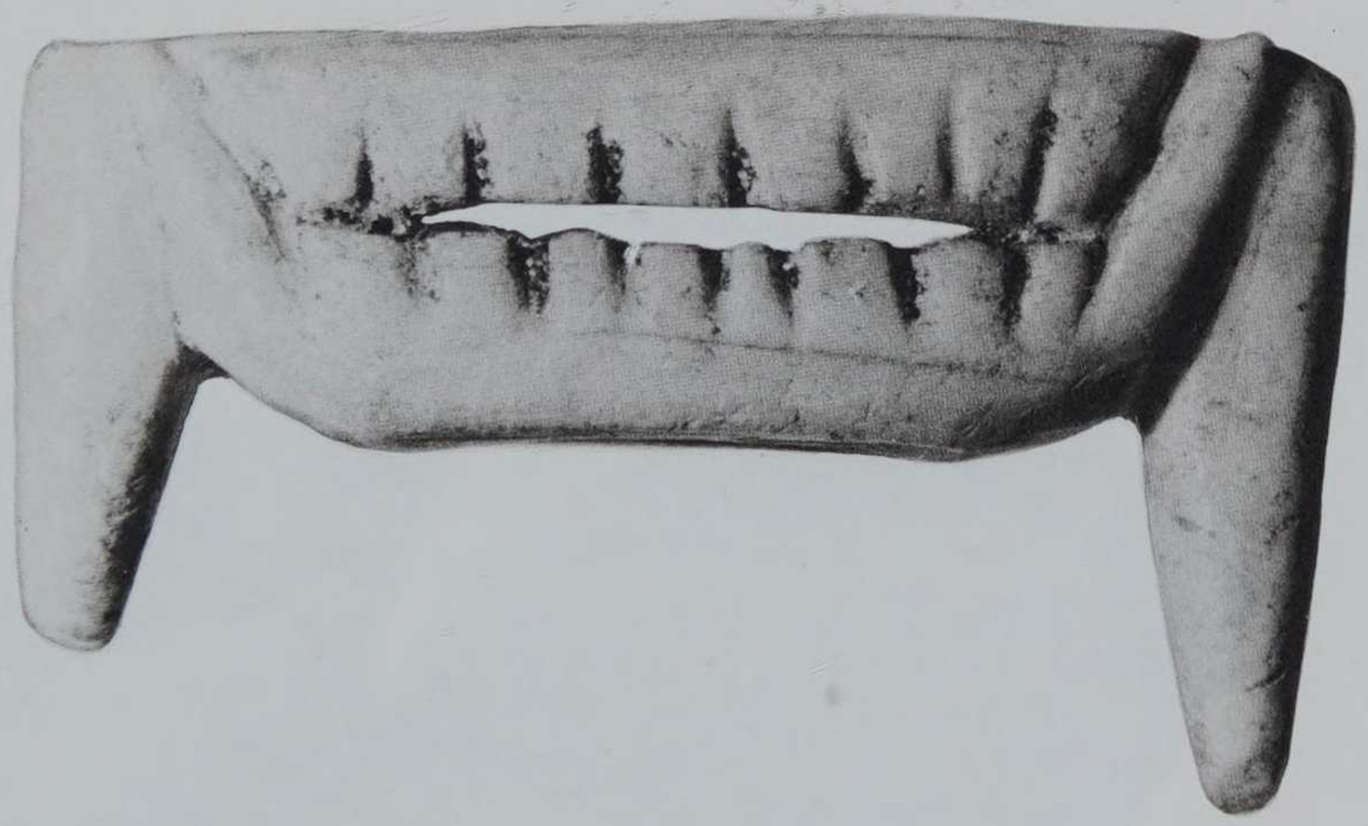
The Eskimo language, being polysynthetic, isn't composed of little words chronologically ordered, but of great, tight conglomerates, like twisted knots, within which concepts are juxtaposed and inseparably fused. Such congomerates are not 'verbs' or 'nouns' or even 'words'; each is a linguistic expression for an impression forming a unit to the Eskimo. Thus, 'the house is red' in Eskimo is phrased 'the-house, looking-like-flowing-blood-it-is'; the sequence may indicate a kind of subordination, but 'red' is felt and treated as a substantive. Such parts of speech, though they follow one another, are remarkably independent, with the result that Eskimo is jerky; it does not flow. What we call action, Eskimo see and describe as a pattern of succeeding impressions.

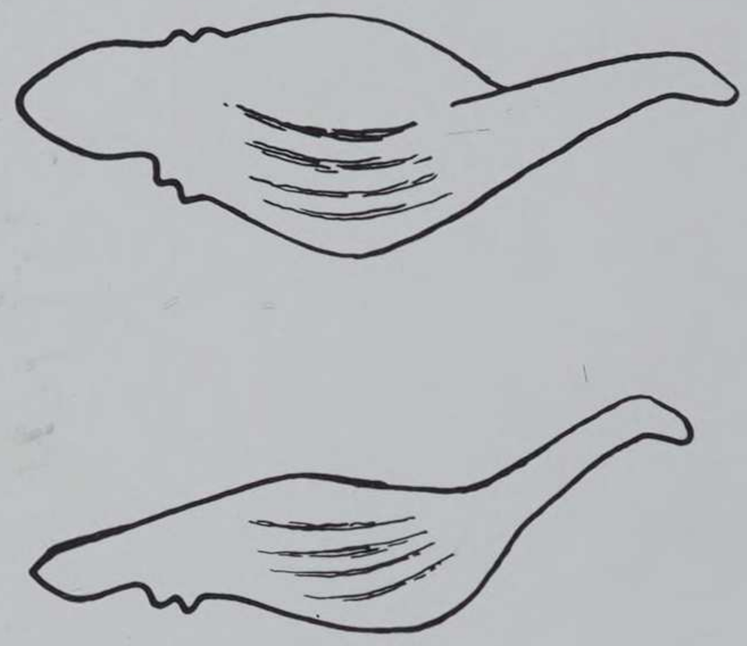
Though these tales seem indeterminate and inconclusive to those accustomed to the crises and resolutions of Western tales, the speakers have an unusual ability to create pithy images, to give pleasure, and at times to say a great deal, and to say it very lucidly, about the human experience.

Our scientific approach encourages us to strip words down to precise, minimal meanings. We do the same with art objects: we whittle them down, reduce them, with much resulting diminution and loss.

With the Eskimo, however, carvings are denser, heavier, imbued with much we eliminate. A brief narrative can be a complex myth; a few words can be a poem; and a single carving can relate to many other elements, for in this culture, nothing is spiritually meaningless.

The Dorset carvings below, representing animal teeth, may have been worn by a shaman.





When the hunter makes an effigy of a hunted animal, he produces a straightforward copy, an exact facsimile in all ways save size. Perhaps he does this with the illusion of being able to possess the animal through the medium of its effigy, but he himself explains his effort as a token of thanks for food or services received from the animal's spirit.

Dorset

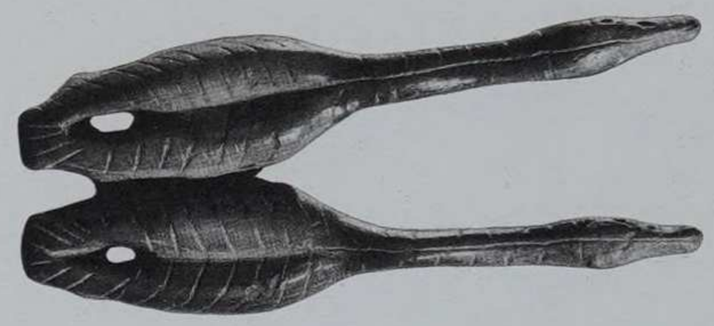
Perhaps in no other area of the world is the link between the ancient past and the recent present as close as it is in the Arctic. Many beliefs and attitudes, originally associated with the early art of this area, appear to have been handed down from generation to generation, surviving—especially among the Netsilik—until the coming of the white man.

The Eskimo tell of an earlier people, much like themselves but shorter, who inhabited this land when their ancestors arrived. They call them the Tunrit or Tunit and credit them with legendary strength. They say they dragged walrus on man-hauled sleds, and brought down caribou on foot, armed only with spears. Seal hunters warmed themselves at breathing holes by leaning forward, letting their inner furs cover lighted lamps and sometimes burning themselves. Their tiny houses were oblong or square, and the women sat by open hearths within the doorways, preparing food. These accounts accurately describe a group known to archeologists as the Dorset people.

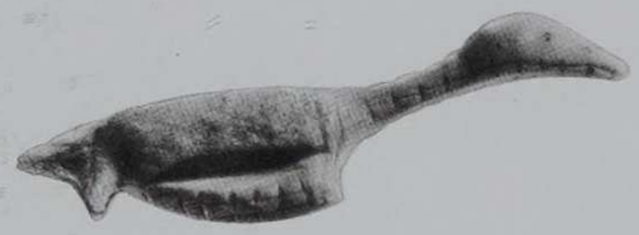
The Dorset people (800 BC—AD 1300) consisted of small bands who moved with the seasons, hunting seal, caribou, birds and other game, and exploiting the run of char in arctic rivers. They wintered in settlements of a few subterranean huts, summered in skin tents, and dressed in tailored furs. They probably used skin boats and had small, man-hauled sleds.

They were not the first people in the Canadian Arctic, nor the most populous, but their art was the finest. They excelled in carving tiny, exquisite effigies, probably amulets and shamans' gear.

Whistling swan in threatening position. In the spring, a clamoring, quavering call is heard across the tundra, first full and loud, then gradually dying. It is the male swan performing for the female. He walks about with arched neck and spread wings, stepping high. Both bow to each other and then, after a few minutes, take wing—their long necks outstretched and great black feet extended, their wings slowly, powerfully beating—and drift across the tundra a hundred yards or so, where they repeat the ceremony.



All actual size. The Glaucous Gull head weighs less than 1/60th of an ounce.

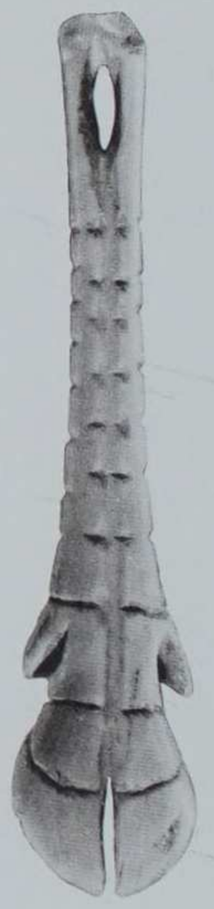


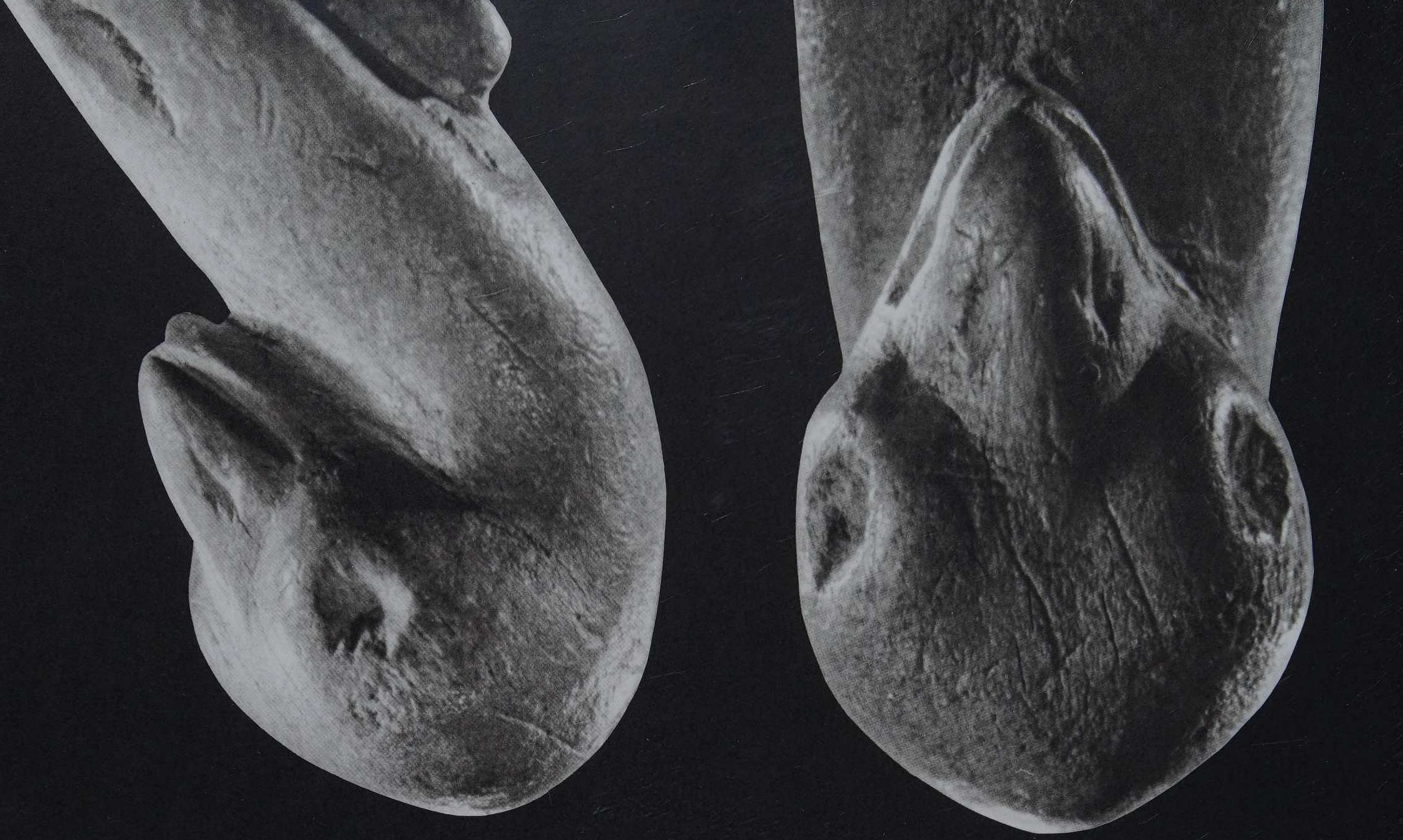
Rasmussen tells of collecting amulets among the Netsilingmiut in 1923: "I had begun to think my case hopeless when a young girl, who had discovered that I also had beads, came to the doorway and seemed to hesitate to crawl inside. We called to her, and she crept in through the passage with all the amulets she wore for the protection of her future son. Women rarely wear amulets for their own protection. The view is that men, not women, fight the battle of life, and consequently even girls of five or six wear amulets intended to protect sons they will some day have; for the older an amulet, the more powerful.

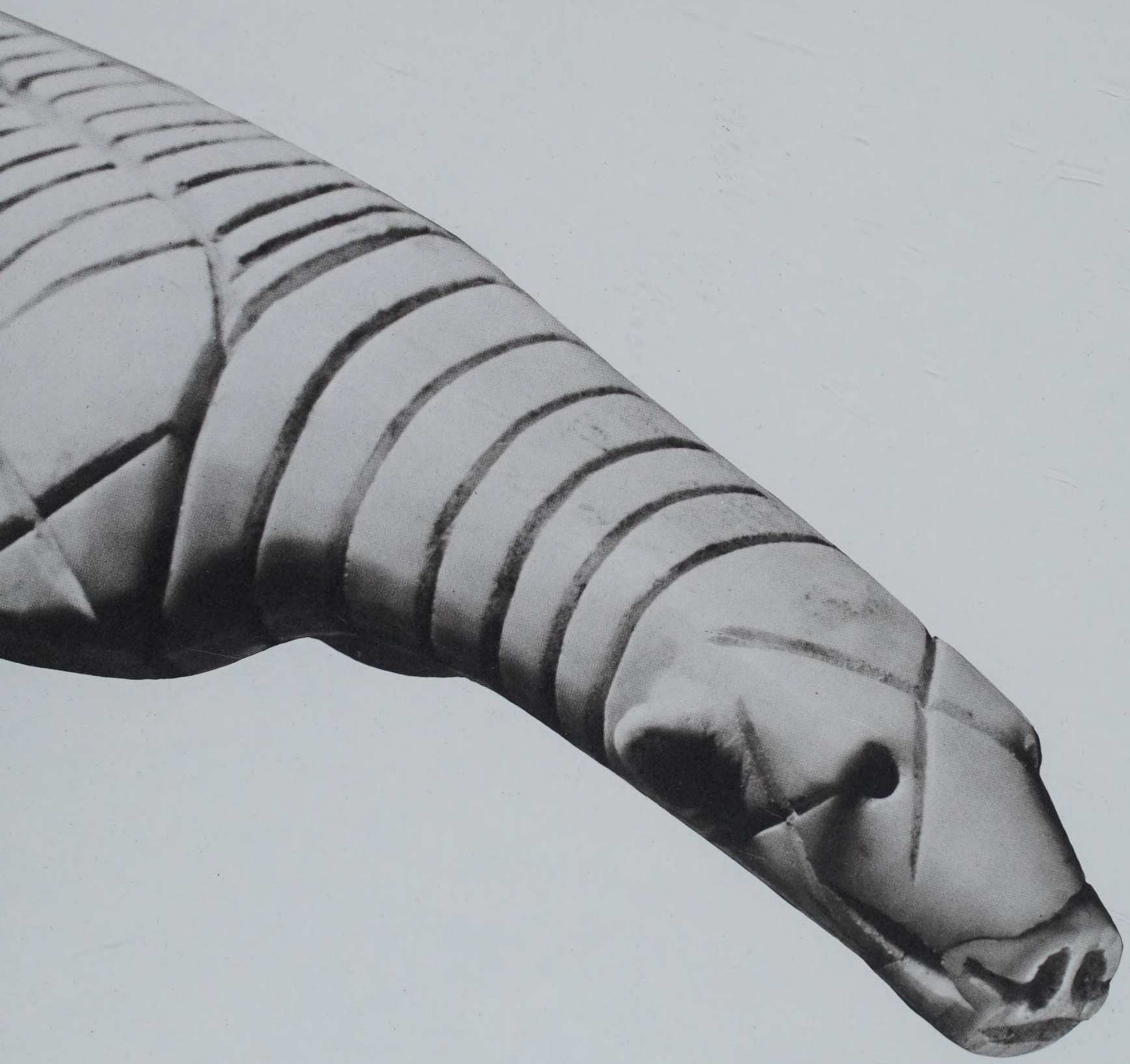
"This young girl, Kuseq ("the drop"), handed me a small skin bag in which she had placed all the amulets she had worn on her jacket up to a few minutes before. I emptied the bag of its contents: insignificant, curious, mouldy objects that smelt horribly and bore not the slightest indication of their sacred, protecting powers. I asked her about a long, black swan's beak. She was inexpressibly bashful and dear when she lowered her eyes: 'So that the first child I have may be a boy.'

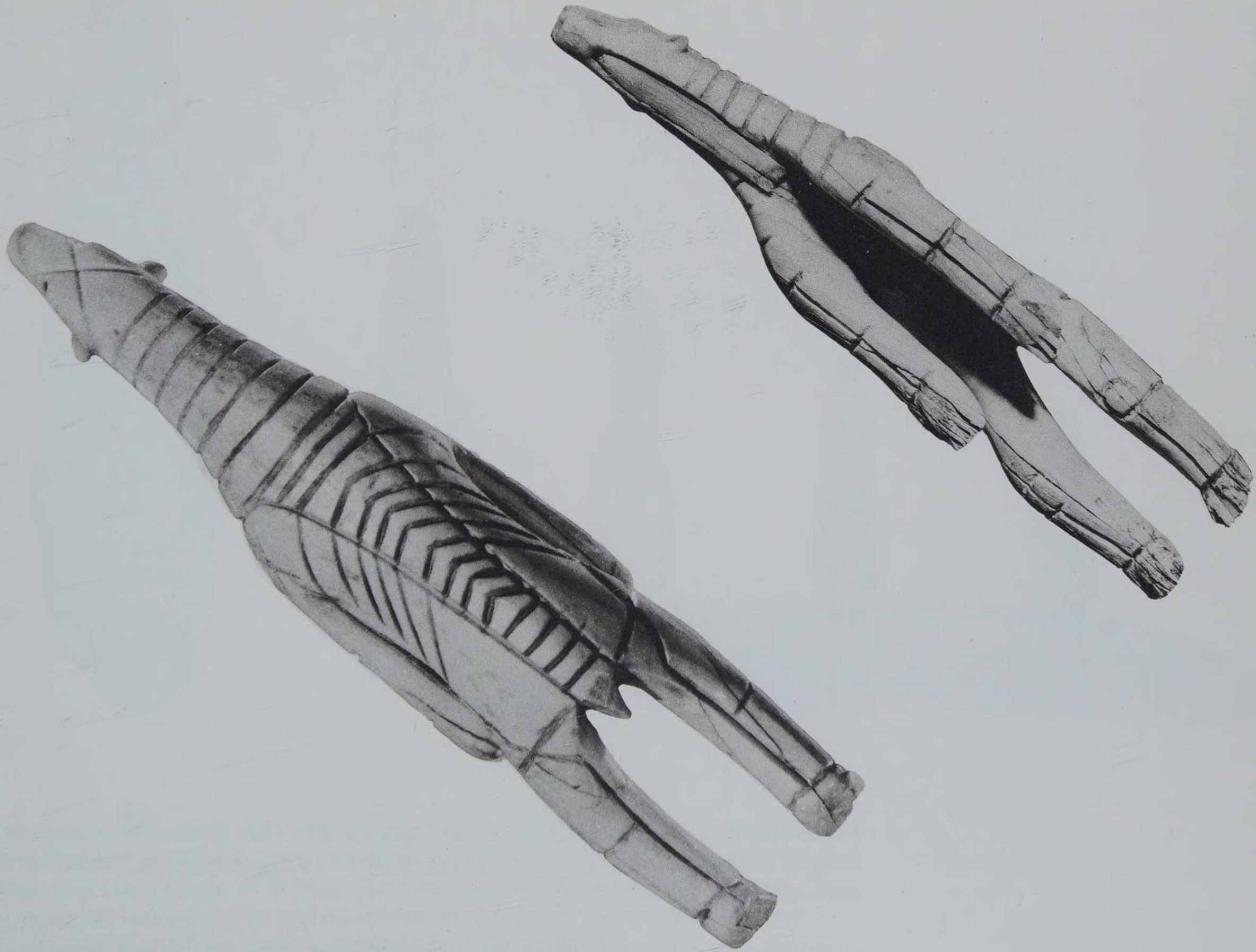
"A ptarmigan head tied to a ptarmigan foot meant, she said, that the boy would become a fast, untiring runner when hunting caribou. A bear's tooth gave a good bite and good digestion; an ermine skin, with the skull tied to the skin of the head, meant strength and adroitness; a little flounder was protection against dangers when meeting a strange tribe."

Among the amulets the Netsilingmiut considered most valuable, the tern was a bold, unfailing fisher; the great northern diver's foot made a man a skillful kayak rower; a raven's head and claws ensured good shares during hunting because the raven has the peculiarity of always being present where quarry are brought down; caribou teeth, worn on clothing, made a good caribou hunter; a bee, with all its progeny, sewn into a piece of skin and fastened to the hood, gave a strong head; a fly gave invulnerability because it was difficult to hit; a water beetle gave strong temples. One of the few amulets intended for women was the scaly stripe on a salmon skin: it gave small, strong stitches when sewing.

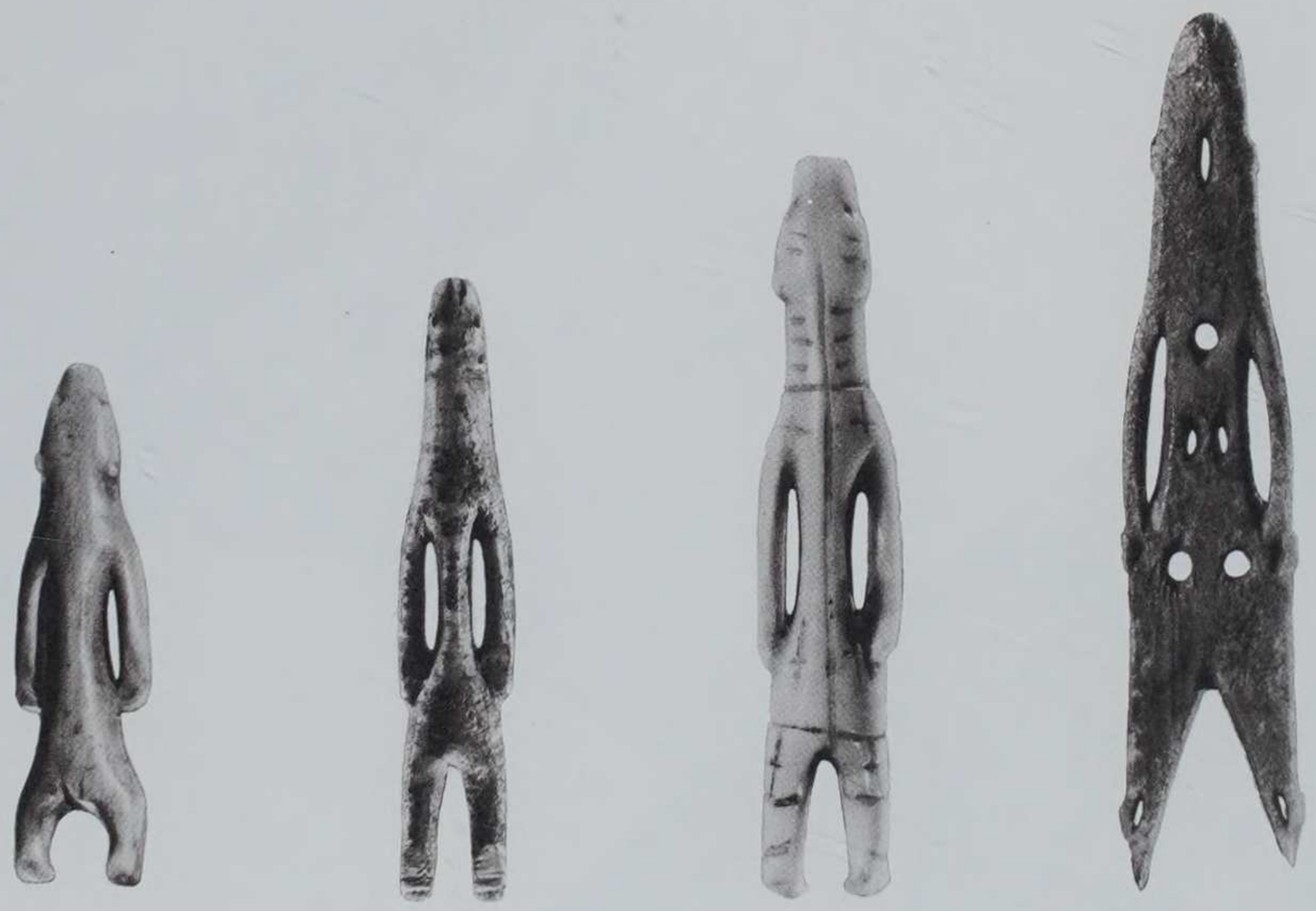






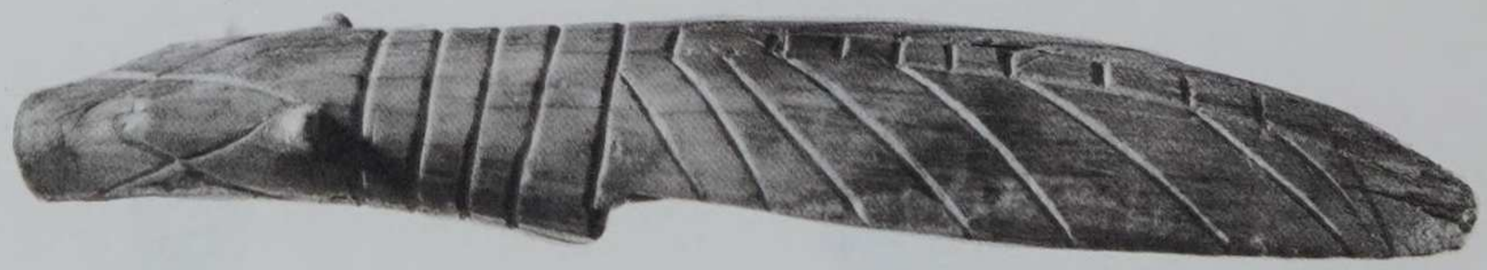


Presumably, this bear carving was the property of a shaman. The neck and chest were hollowed out and in the throat cavity was placed red ochre, probably symbolizing blood. A sliding lid closed this cavity, creating a secret compartment for the ochre.



These man-bear carvings probably depict either a shaman's helping spirit, floating or flying noiselessly through the nether world, or the shaman himself who, in spirit form, journeys to this world.

In real life, bear are fat with thin necks. In these carvings, they are thin with fat necks. And so is Tornartik or Tornarssuk, master of the helping spirits, a supernatural bear in nineteenth-century east Greenland mythology, who gave power and aid to the shaman. Tornartik was identified in carvings by his thick neck and lean body.



Bear hold a pre-eminent place in Eskimo mythology, perhaps because they look like men, but are not men. When they stand on their hind legs, shading their eyes from the sun, or lie skinned on their backs, they seem almost human. No animal's life is taken lightly by the Eskimo, but the death of a bear is the focus of special attention.

Dorset bear heads. The three stylized ones come from Newfoundland and appear to be self-contained amulets, perhaps worn on clothing or attached to hunting weapons. The upper four, however, come from Abverdjar, near Igloolik, and appear to have been cut from complete effigies.

At Kaersut Island, near Igloolik, a decapitated bear effigy was discovered alone in the center of what seems to have been a sacred fireplace: perhaps a special kill, a special burying.

The tiny carvings share a quality of sizelessness. Magnified photographically, they suffer no qualitative change of effect. Each has been reduced to basic essentials.

All were produced without the aid of magnifying lenses, of course. It is conceivable that minute quantities of Siberian trade iron reached these regions at this early date, but evidence of this has not been recognized. It seems more likely that carvers were restricted to tools of chipped stone.

Falcon. Carvings are frequently "open," revealing both inside and outside.

Falcon. Found in a scattered human grave along with the whistling swan on page 83, the three swans on pages 84-85, and various other carvings and utensils, all probably part of a shaman's kit.

In Eskimo thought, where spirit is regarded as separable from flesh, and each man has many helping spirits, the lines between species and classes, even between man and animal, are lines of fusion, not fission, and nothing has a single, invariable shape.

Eskimo carvers—both in ancient and recent times—often depict these diverse characteristics "simultaneously." Turned this way, Walrus stands out; turned that way, Bear predominates. Other features regress, but never wholly disappear.

And so it is in Eskimo mythology: not a concept of becoming, not even metamorphosis, but rather a sense of being, where each form contains multitudes.

Visual Puns

Dog-Man

Man-Harpoon head

Seal-Man

Bear-Bird-Wolverine

Comb-Man-Hand

Tube of ivory, carved from the base of a small walrus tusk. The nearly closed end terminates in two walrus heads with interlocking tusks. Opposite the "bear" is a seal, each with a suspension hole beside its head. Such tubes may have held a shaman's amulets and carvings of spirit helpers.

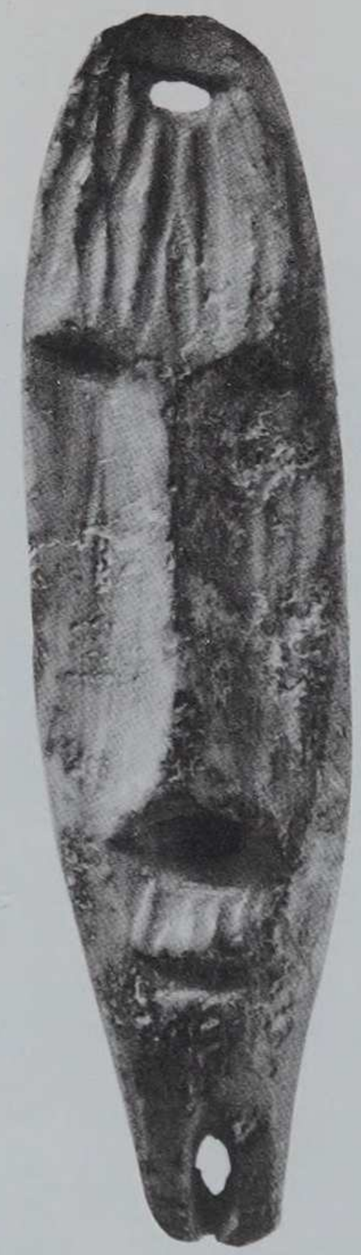
Two sides of a Late Dorset amulet showing the stylized designs of, or symbols for, Bear, Seal, Man, Walrus.

One interpretation of this tiny Dorset carving is that it represents a hunter spearing a bear. The wide hips and heavy buttocks, however, suggest a woman, and her position suggests intercourse with the bear, a common theme in Eskimo myths.

Perhaps it is both: a visual pun of a hunter killing a bear who has had intercourse with a woman.

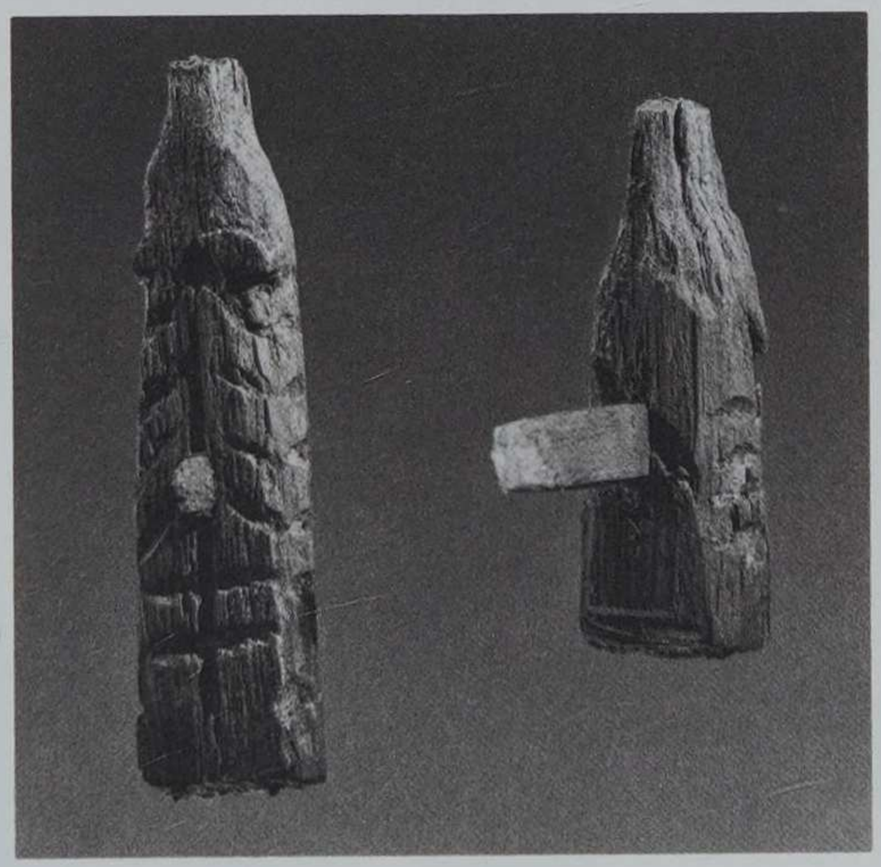
The figure was decapitated after the carving was finished.

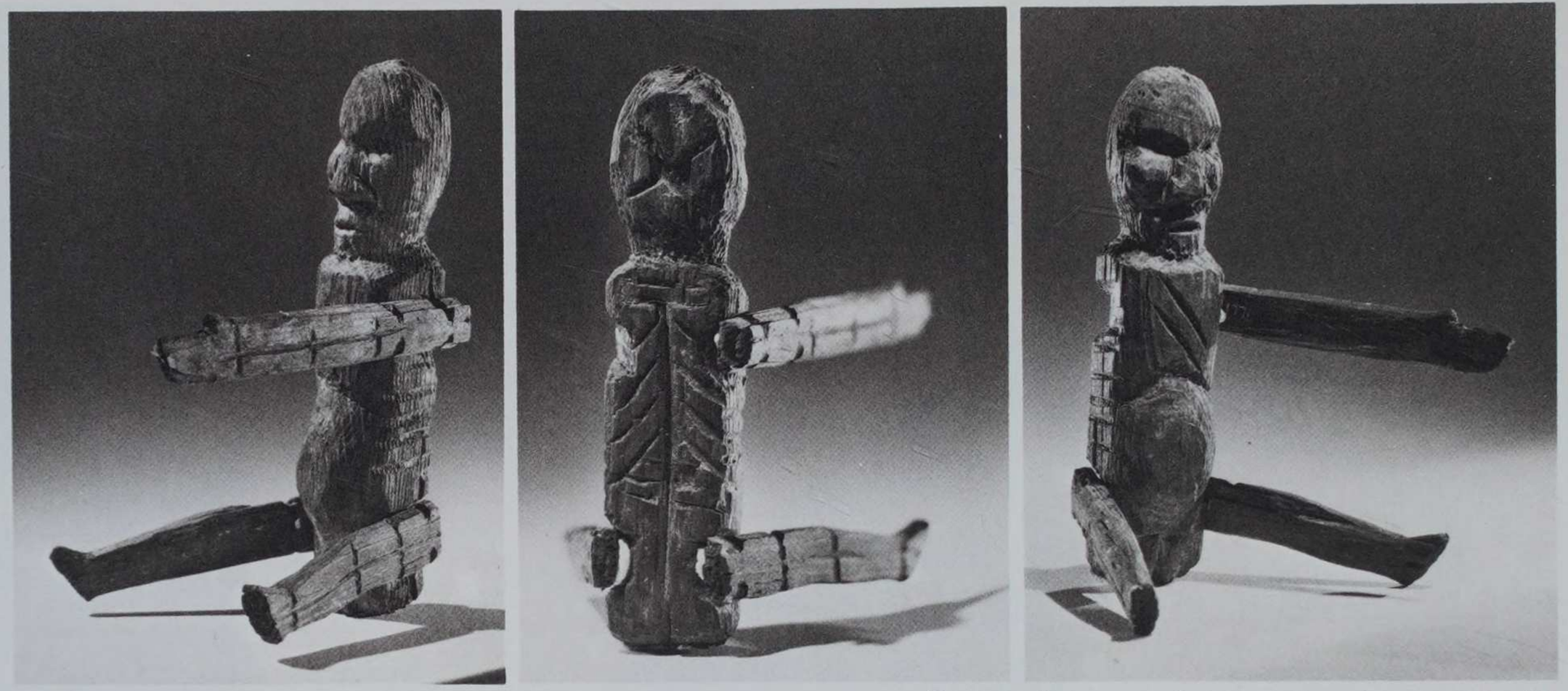
Man with head tilted back, holding child. This carving was long regarded as visually ambiguous. But recently, when this book was being laid out, the designer's son, Alexander, exclaimed, "The daddy is looking up at the baby!"



Stylized rendering of skeleton. The X represents the head; transverse lines, the vertabrae and scapulae; slanting lines, the ribs; longitudinal lines, the leg bones. Dorset artists used this motif repeatedly, both for human and animal representation, particularly on small ivory spatulas. A somewhat similar design is found in Alaskan Ipiutak art, circa A.D. 500.

Carvings of game animals often have a small slit between the shoulder blades into which a sliver of wood has been pushed. This was probably done in the hope that by magically killing the animal's effigy, the real animal might be taken with ease. There are also carvings of humans with a slit at the throat, filled with wood fragments.



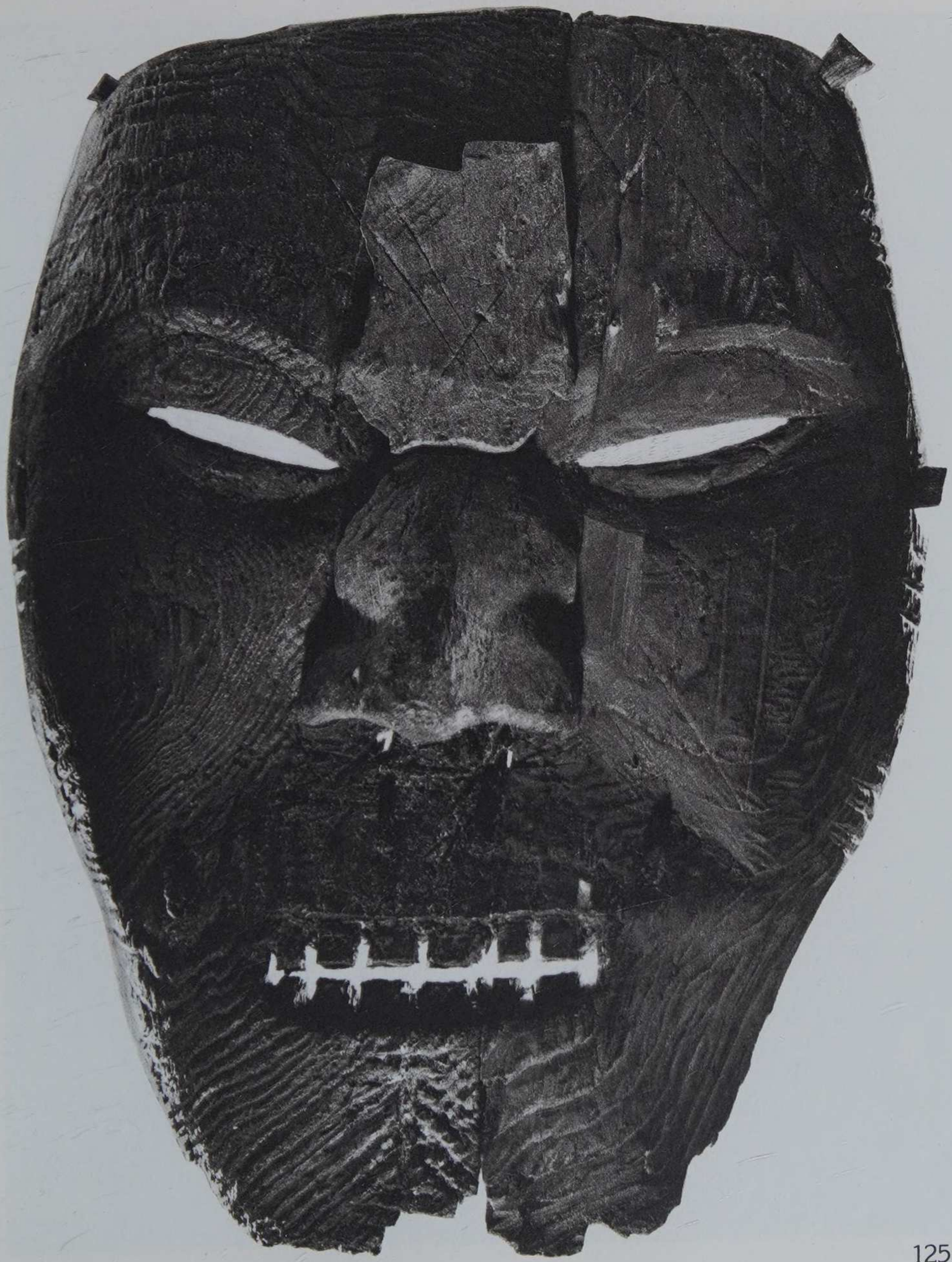


Pregnant woman above, aroused man opposite.

Dorset wooden artifacts were often, though not exclusively, religious objects, perhaps because wood was very special. It drifted ashore from the same sea that provided food, waterproof clothing, tents, hunting gear, heat, light. "No wood of size grows in north Baffin—the ground-hugging Arctic willow might grow as thick as your thumb; the nearest scrawny trees are some 900 miles away. How, then, did these Dorset people explain a log eight inches thick? Did they construe it as supernatural and assume it originated in, rather than arrived by, the sea or did they speculate on a land of giant plants and people beyond their range?"

The Netsilik believed trees grew at the bottom of the sea, like seaweed, and were torn loose by tremendous storms.

Two Dorset masks of driftwood. Button Point site. Both actual size. Mask above is stained with red ochre.

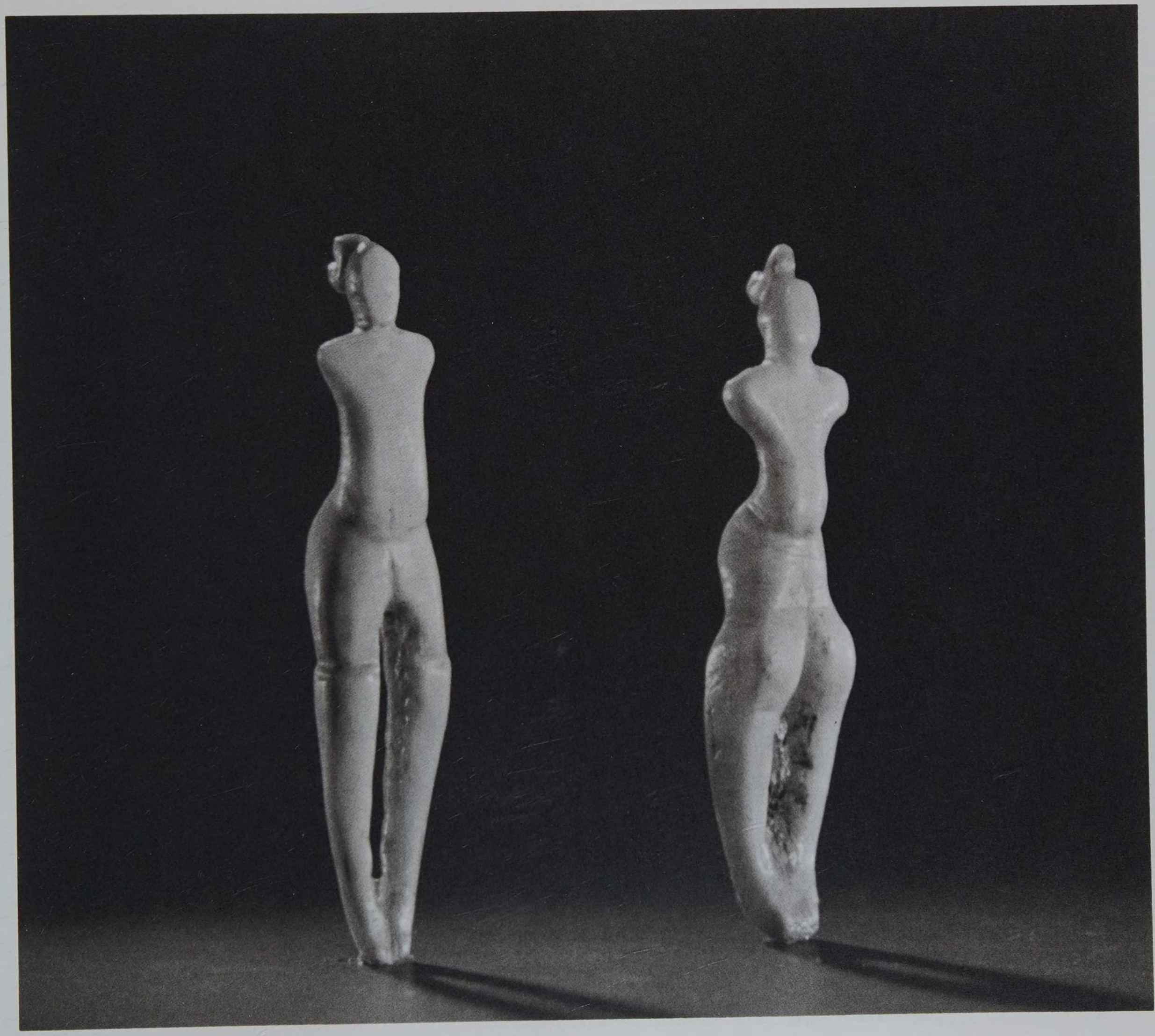


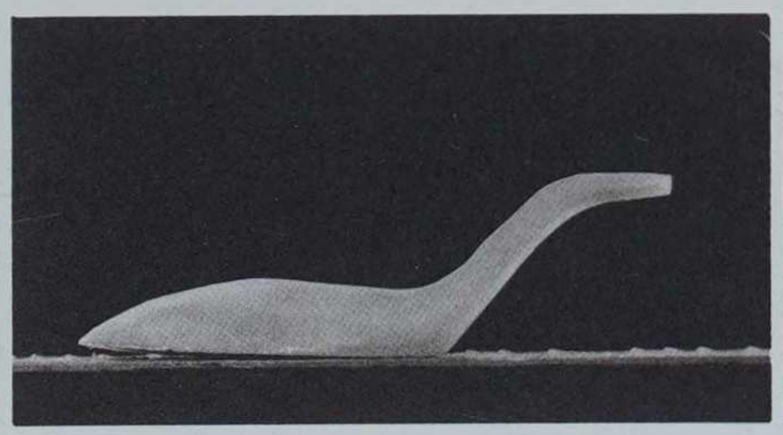
Thule

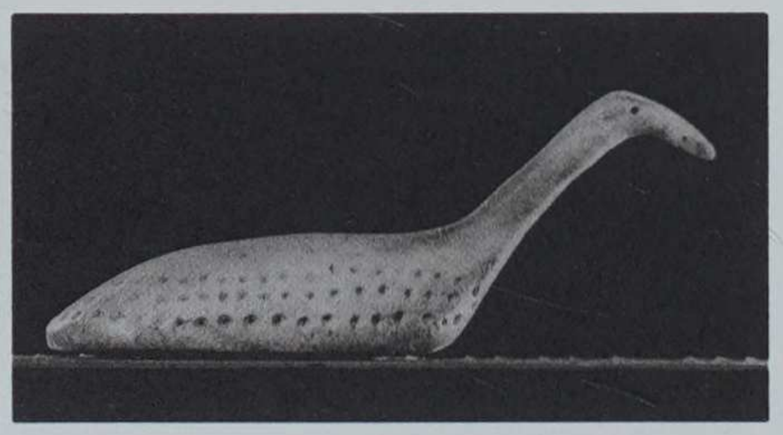
Thule, a fully Eskimo culture with a homeland on the north coast of Alaska, began to replace Dorset as early as A.D. 900. Unlike Dorset, Thule hunters harvested the great baleen whale, using elaborate hunting gear and umiaks—large, open skin boats. They had permanent winter villages of sturdy houses built of whalebone, sod, and stone slabs. They also had dogs, which they used to pull sleds. Their artists incised pictorial art on flat, framed surfaces. Thule effigies are rare, often crudely finished, and only casually polished, although there are a few happy exceptions, including the carvings, opposite, of two naked Thule women standing in high boots.

Dorset art didn't immediately disappear. Elements may have survived even into historic times. A tiny stone figure in the Metropolitan Museum of Art is absolutely identical with late nineteenth-century "spirit figures" from East Greenland. Conceivably, but by no means certainly, it comes from north of Repulse Bay. If so, it may be the prototype for those made centuries later far to the east. Unlike Thule carvers, both East Greenland and Dorset carvers were skillful and much concerned with animal effigies.

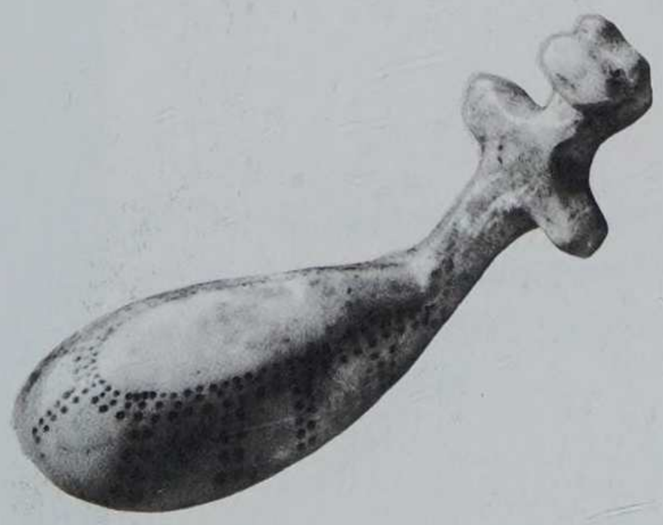
A more reliable parallel lies closer. Flat, stylized bear effigies made by late Dorset carvers closely resemble "geometric" carvings made by the Beothuck of Newfoundland. Exterminated early in the nineteenth-century, these bands were thought to have spoken an Algonkian language, but among the few words recorded, several resemble special, mysterious, and presumably ancient terms used until recently by East Greenland shamans. Could these possibly be Dorset words?

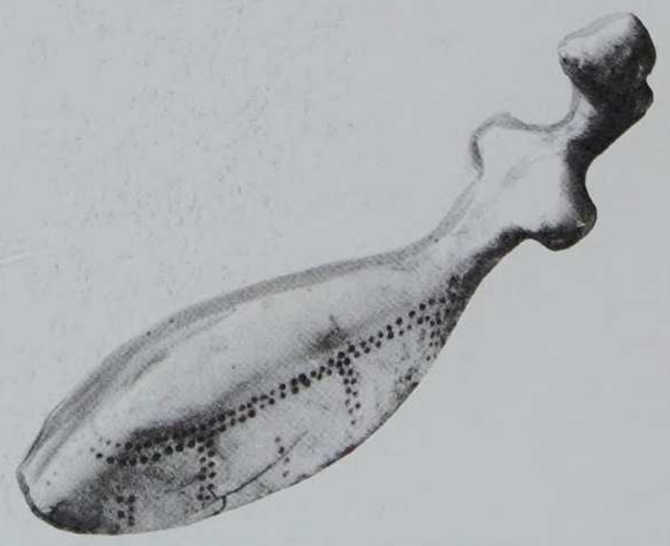






Thule bird carvings resemble those made by Dorset carvers. They also resemble those used by present-day Eskimo in a game of chance in which a handful of carvings are tossed to see how they lie. Some are so accurate, so detailed, one can tell a Common loon from a Red-throated loon.





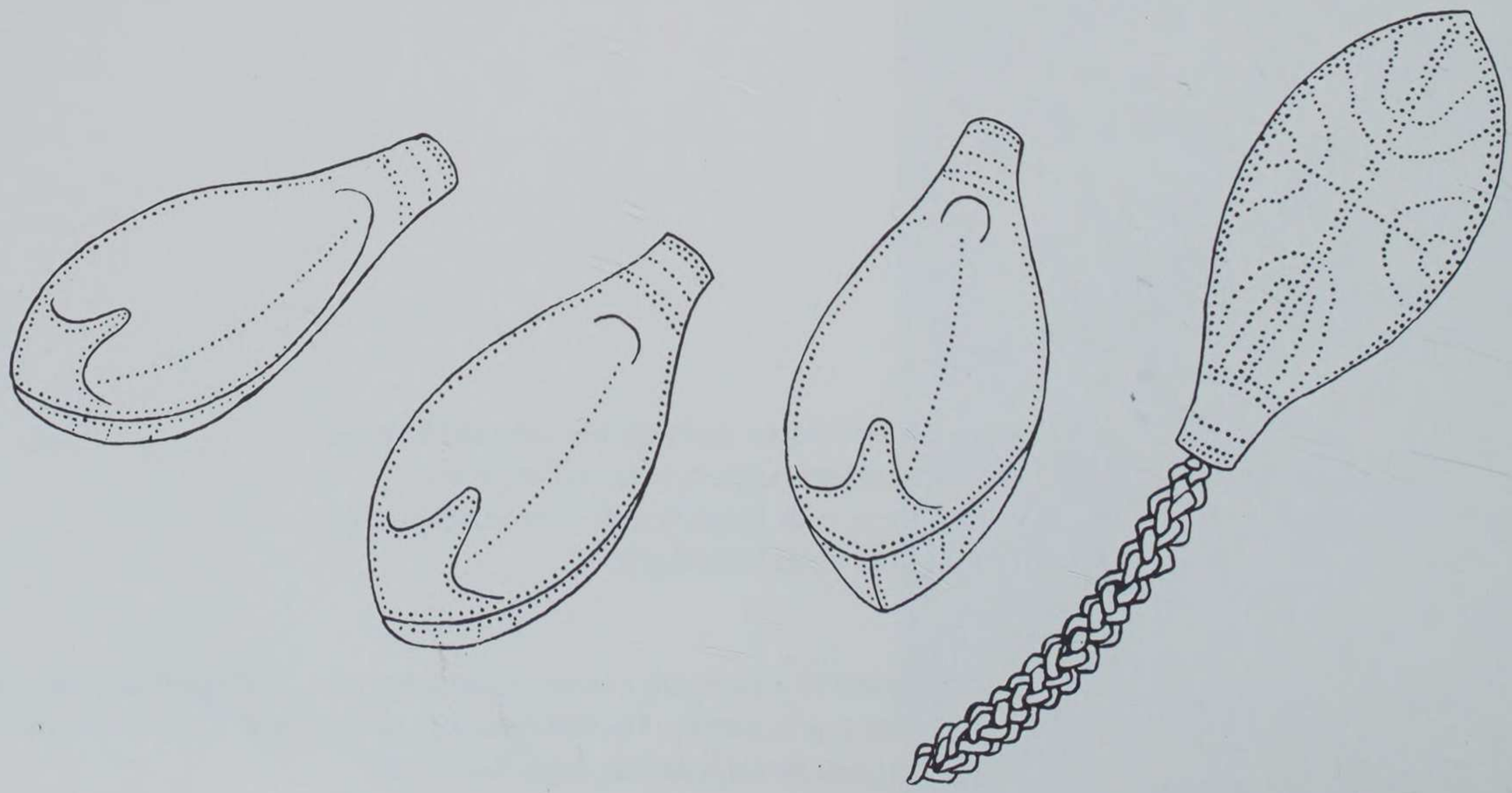
Variations include a bird-woman and, more rarely, a bird-man.

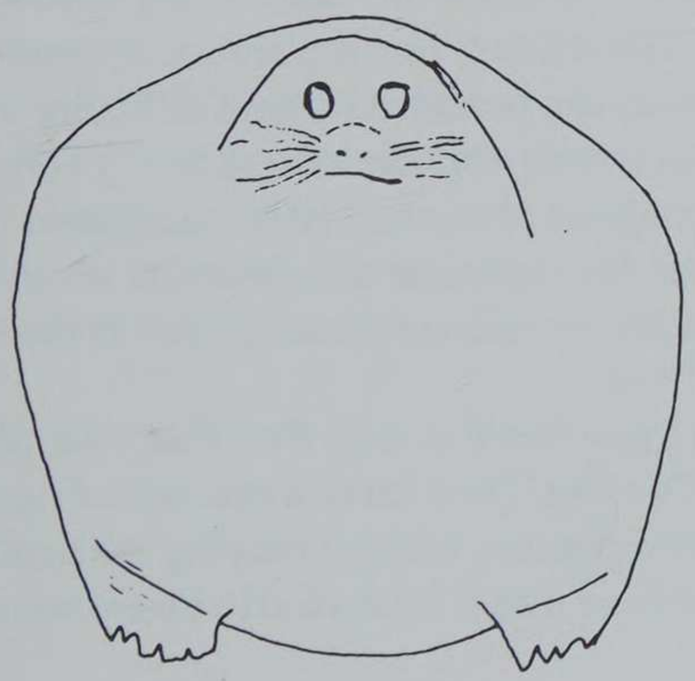
Human faces, in Thule art, are generally left blank, perhaps because the Eskimo regard the eye as both a transmitter and a receiver. A stare, even a glance, it is thought, may penetrate another, instilling there—for good or evil—some alien spirit force. Children in particular must be protected, even from dolls.

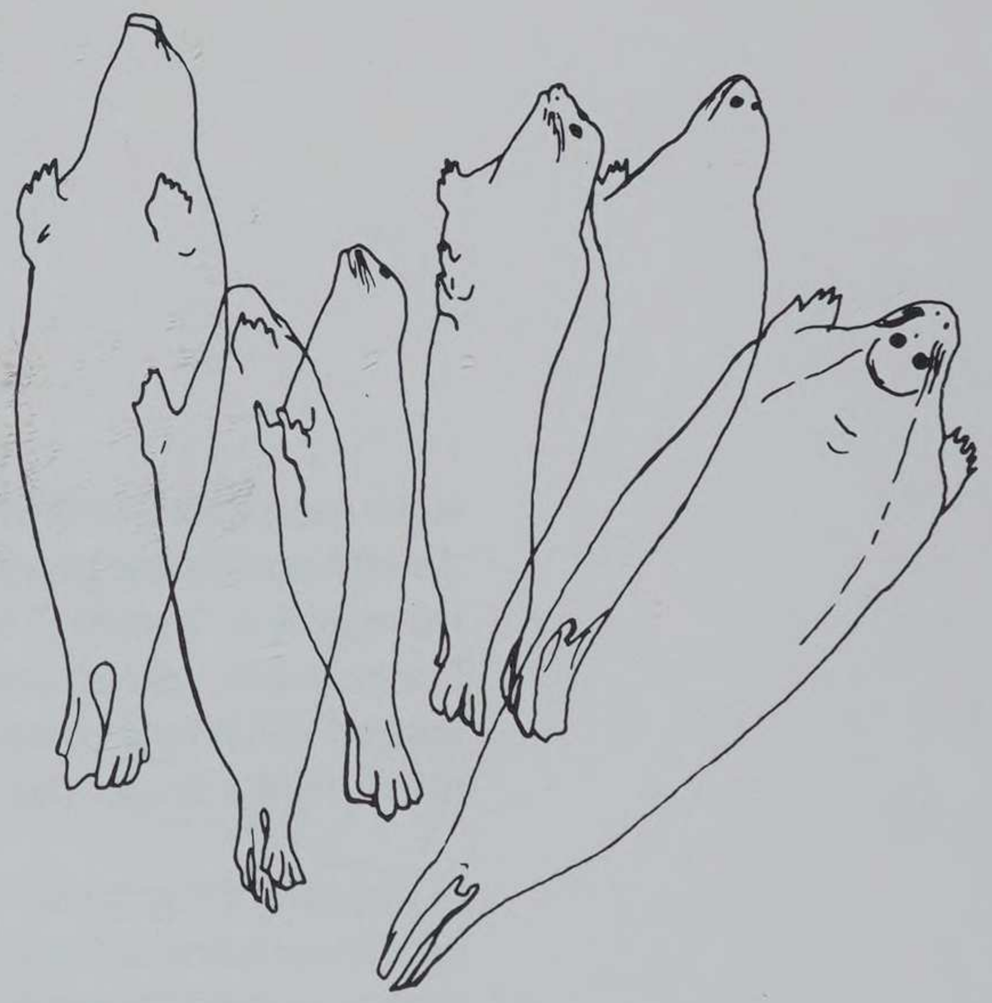
In paleolithic cave art, human figures are rare. The few that exist are headless or masked or in profile. Human figurines of this period, like more recent Eskimo ones, often lack facial features, especially eyes.

Perspective

A distinctive mark of the traditional art is that many of the ivory carvings, generally of sea mammals, won't stand up, but roll clumsily about. Each lacks a single, favored point of view, hence, a base. Indeed, they aren't intended to be set in place and viewed, but rather to be worn or handled, turned this way and that. I knew a trader with a fine, show-piece collection of such carvings who solved this problem by lightly filing each piece on "the bottom" to make it stand up, but alas he also made them stationary, something the carver never intended.



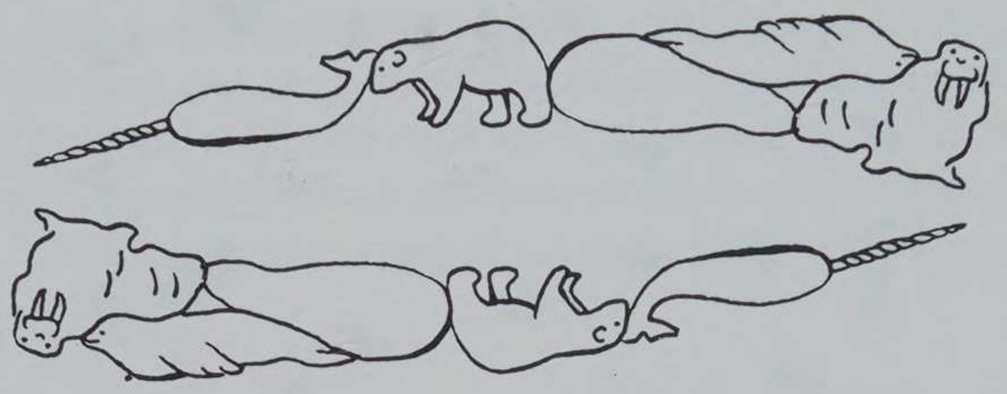




There are several reasons why Eskimo art lacks perspective or the favored point of view. The primary one is absence of literacy. As with nonliterate peoples generally, the Eskimo can perceive without difficulty what we regard as "inverted" figures. Another reason is their attitude toward the "given." For example, walrus tusks are carved into aggregates of connected but unrelated figures: some face one direction, others another. No particular orientation is involved, nor is there a single "theme." Each figure is simply carved as it reveals itself in the ivory.

In handling these tusks I found myself turning them first this way, then that, orienting each figure in relation to myself. The Eskimo do not do this. They carve a number of figures, each oriented—by our standards—in a different direction, without moving the tusk. Similarly, when handed a photograph, they examine it as it is handed to them, no matter how it is oriented.

I ran an experiment with a number of Eskimo. I sketched on paper some twenty figures, each oriented in a different direction. Then I asked each individual to point to the seal, the walrus, the bear. Without hesitation, all located the correct figures. But though I had made the drawings, I found it necessary to turn the paper each time to ascertain the accuracy of their selections.

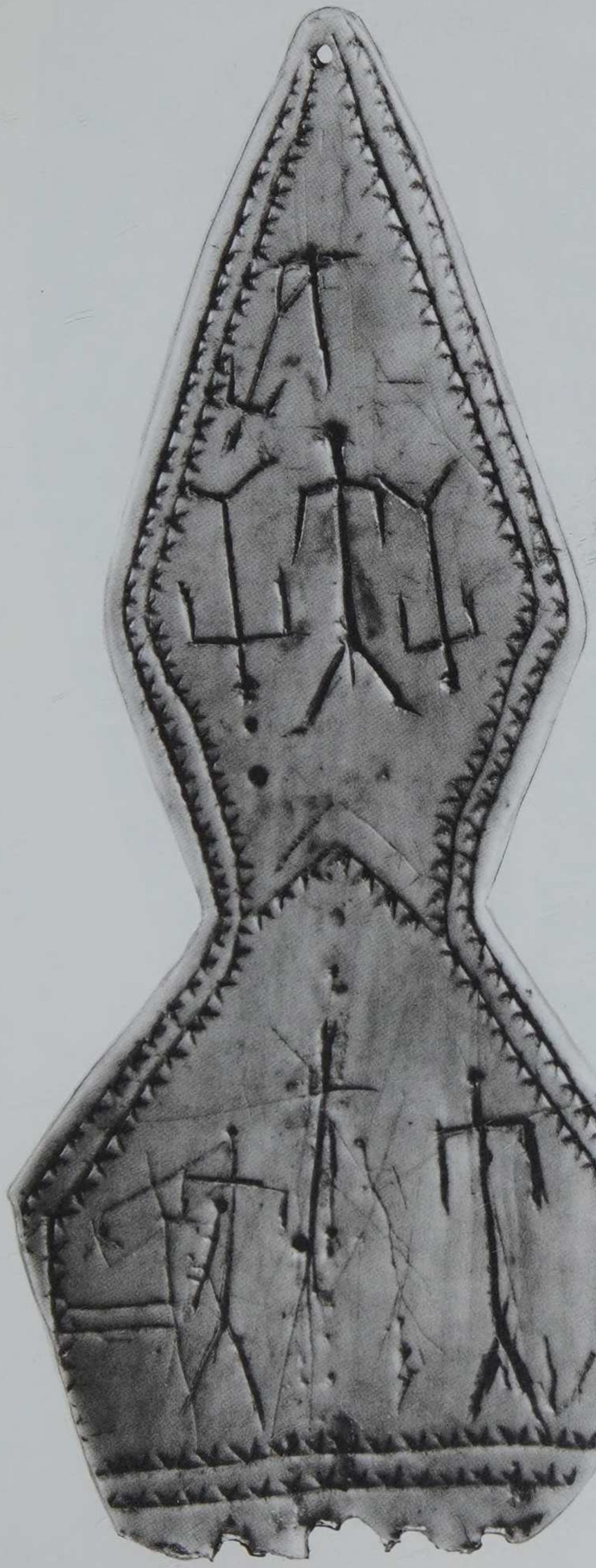


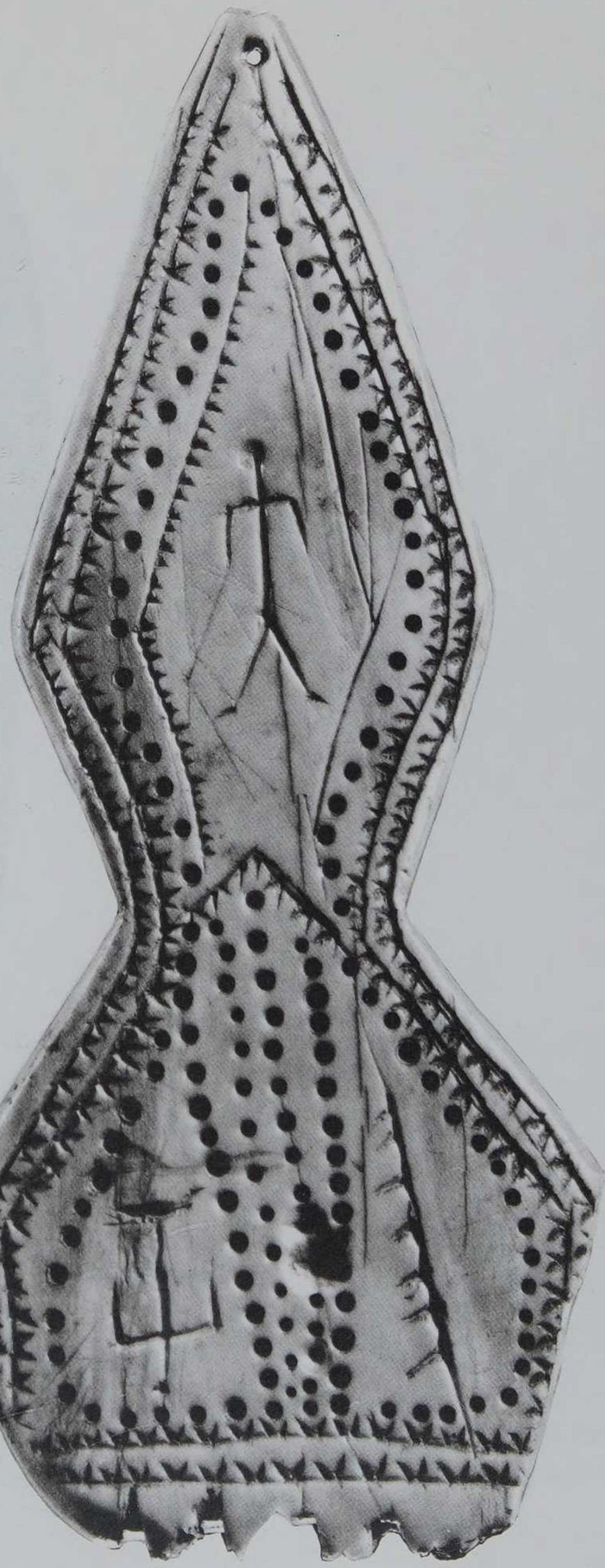
Igloo walls are often covered with magazine pictures obtained from the trader. These reduce dripping; perhaps they are enjoyed for colors as well. Some—but little—effort is made at vertical rendering, and the over-all result is haphazard. When children wanted to imitate me, a sure way to provoke delighted laughter was to mimic my twisting and turning as I tried to look at the LIFE pictures.

With multiple perspective, the moving eye of the observer glances here, there, over here, until the observer himself is drawn unconsciously into the scene. Similarly, Eskimo narrators shun single perspective, preferring to describe an object from many angles, or to evoke a mood by juxtaposing discontinuous images. They maintain no singleness of tone, no fixed position, but verbally move about, letting the story itself speak, assert its own form unhampered by fixed perspective.

Verticality

Eskimo carvers appear indifferent to verticality. The value we place on verticality stems from the strength of literacy in our lives. The Eskimo, lacking literacy, are less concerned.





Carved antler, Dorset, meaning unknown. Note lack of verticality. At least three other examples have been found in Canada, made of antler or bone, and two more in Greenland, made of wood.

There are twenty-eight faces on the Dorset carving opposite. Though none wears a labret, one is tattooed on chin and forehead, and all are remarkably similar to present-day Eskimo in the same area.

Few examples illustrate this absence of vertical rendering quite so charmingly as this simple etching of a caribou on an antler knife handle: seen one way, the caribou grazes, head lowered; now turn this page ninety degrees counter-clockwise; the caribou stands head up, watchful.

The Eskimo, of course, wouldn't turn it. For them, delight comes from the simultaneous perception of multiple meanings within one form.

"Those familiar with the art of the Eskimo from earlier times, as brought to light by archeologists, have often noticed strange resemblances between this art and that of the prehistoric hunters of paleolithic times in Europe and Asia, whose way of life must have been, in many respects, like that of the modern Eskimo. The gap in time between even the earliest horizon of Eskimo archeology (a few thousand years ago) and the Upper Paleolithic of the Old World (from about ten to forty thousand years ago) is enormous; yet the resemblances are unmistakable, and one cannot escape the impression that the Eskimo have in their art, as in other aspects of their life, somehow perpetuated paleolithic traditions into recent times."

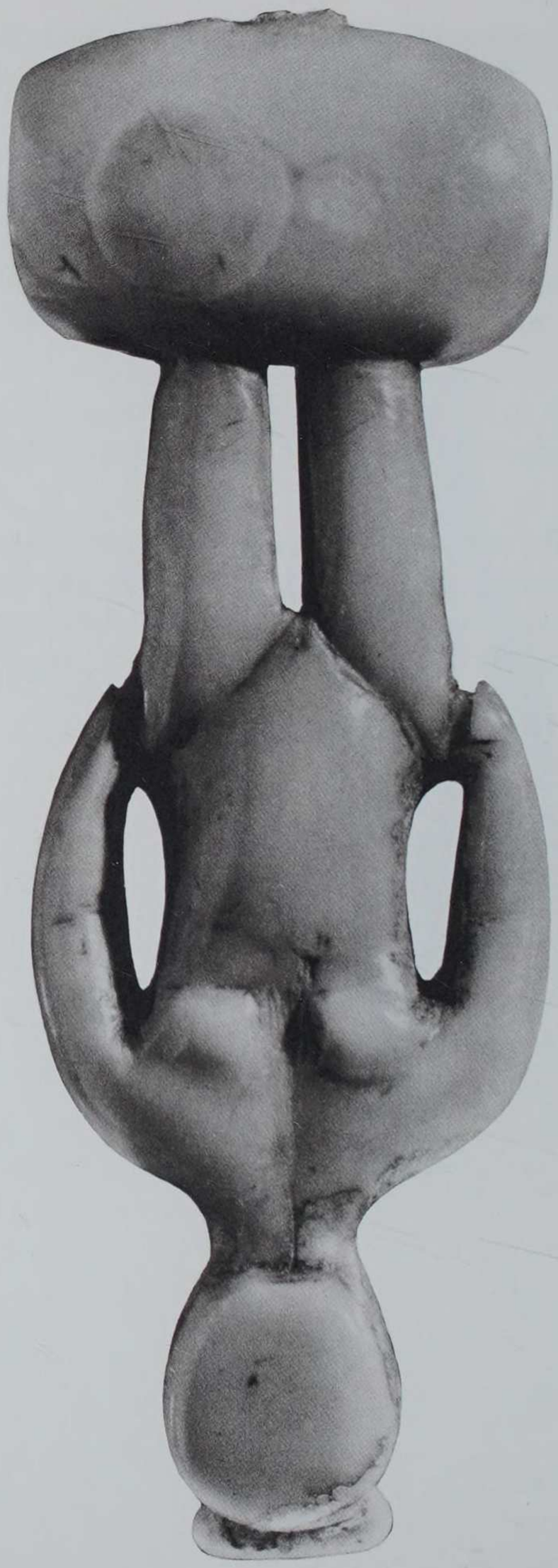
Upside Down Ladies

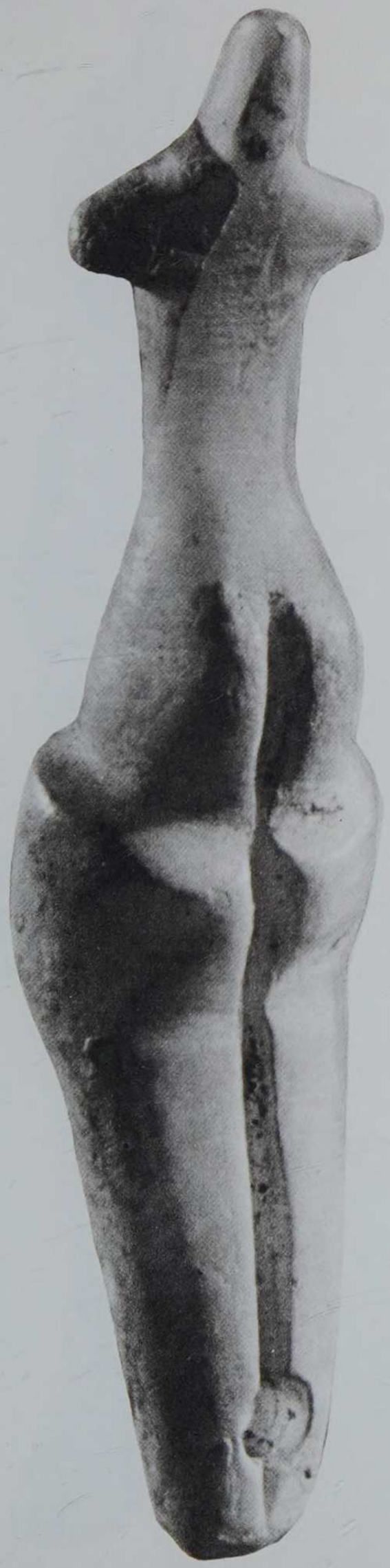
One resemblance, the late anthropologist Carl Schuster noted, can be seen in small female figurines of ivory brought to light in the eastern Canadian Arctic and in Greenland. Most are attributed to the Thule Culture, but one especially fine example appears to be a product of Dorset Culture. Though they vary considerably in style, all share one peculiarity: they were made to be suspended upside down. Most have a specially drilled perforation for suspension between the feet, or the calves are separated by an opening which obviously served the same purpose.

Similar figurines from the Upper Paleolithic epoch have been found in Siberia and Europe. Not all were perforated for inverted suspension, but many were, and the custom did persist, at least sporadically, from Aurignacian through Magdalenian times.

Such inverted figurines occur ethnographically in other parts of the world and sometimes bear striking resemblances to paleolithic ones. They are often said, by their makers, to represent deceased persons—ancestors who protect the living.

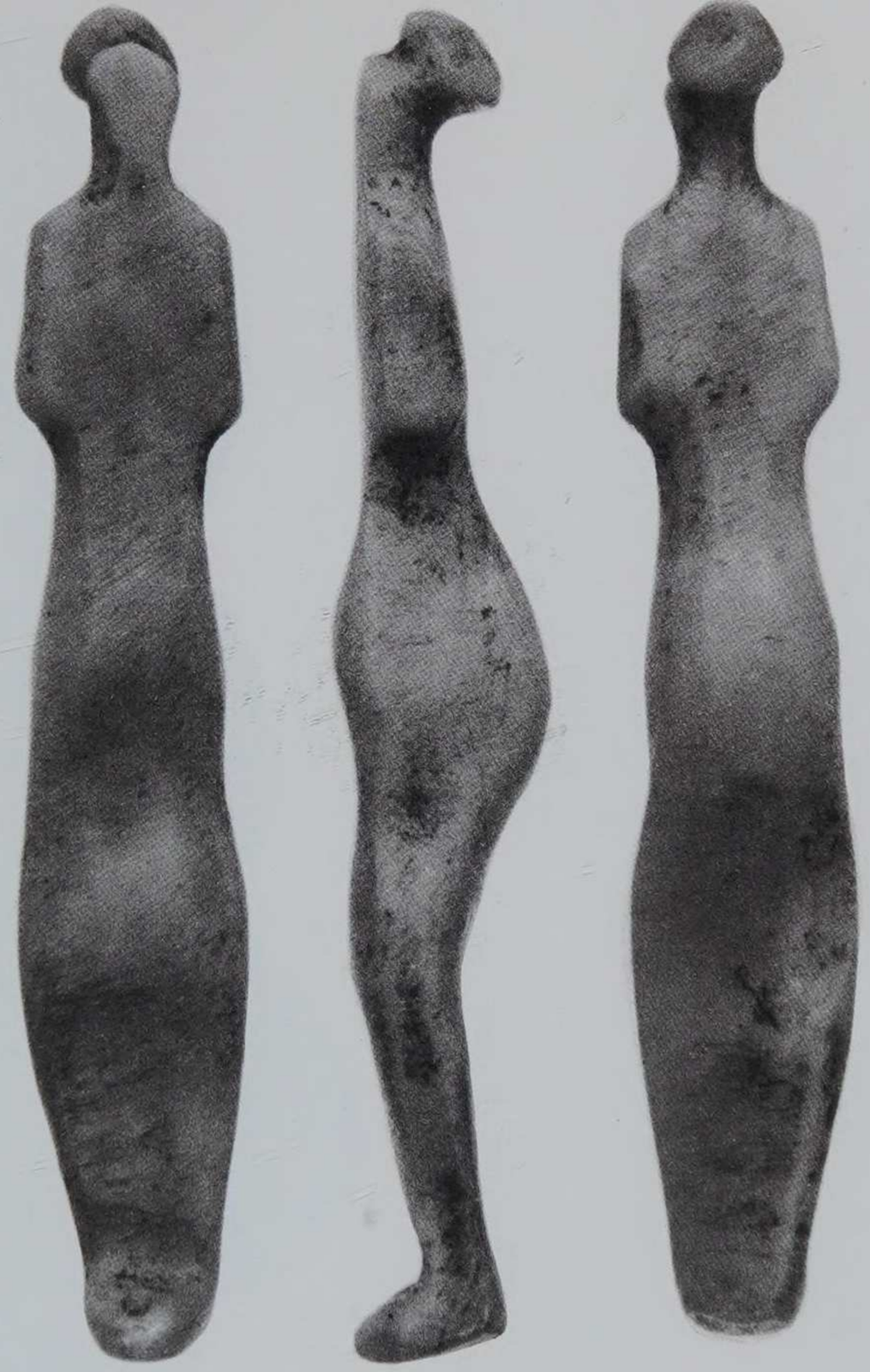
The notion that death is an inversion of life is widespread and presumably very ancient. I suspect Dorset and Thule Eskimo wore these beautiful images dangling by their feet out of respect for the dead. Most of their carvings of animals were also made to be hung—probably from clothing and tools—upside down, presumably to honor the spirits of deceased animals and to seek their protection.





An alternative interpretation is offered by the arctic archeologist, Henry B. Collins. He suggests these effigies were worn by pregnant women to insure proper delivery. Fear that an infant might not appear head first is especially strong among women lacking modern medical facilities. They sometimes wear amulets and obey taboos designed to offset this problem. Thus pregnant women among the Cherokee are forbidden to eat crawfish—which move backward.

In many oral and manuscript cultures, reversal is employed as a magical technique, at once sacred and profane, the focus not only of special interest but of anxiety.



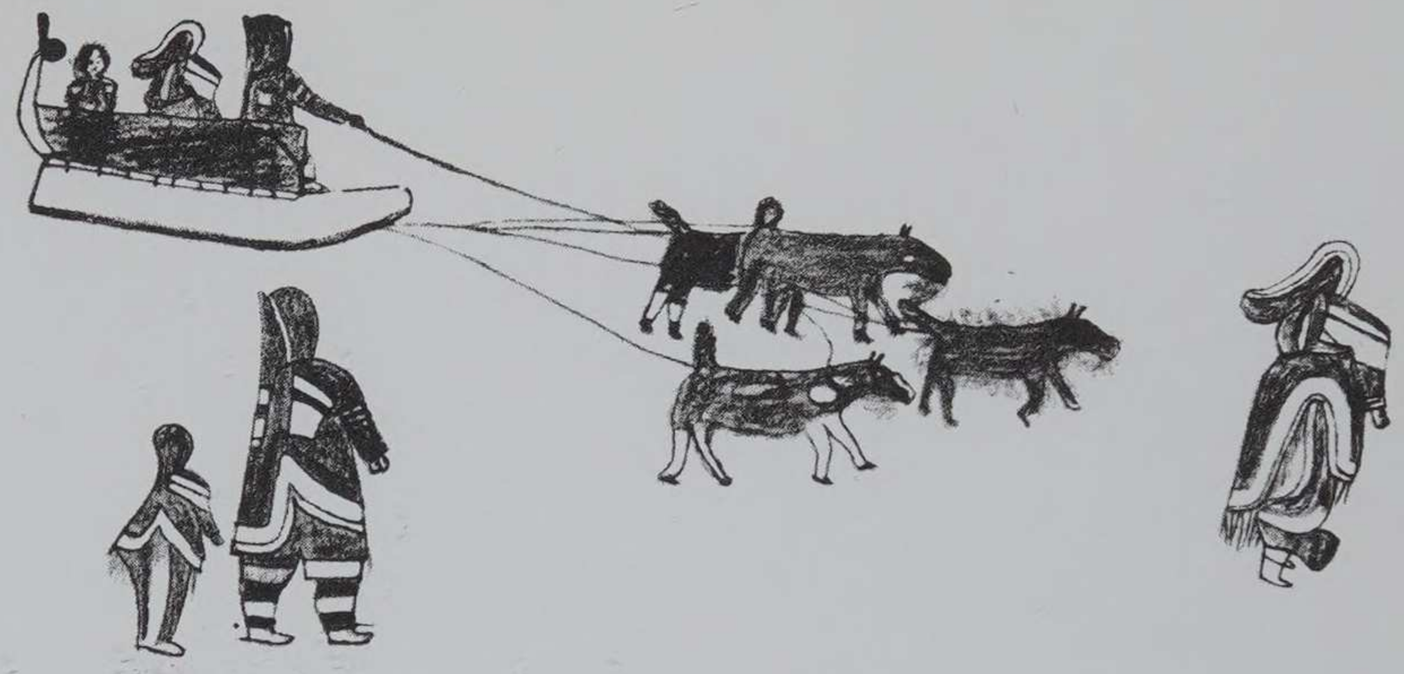
Both this female figurine, and the male figure shown on page 116, were discovered in an ancient village on Southampton Island. In 1966, Carl Schuster wrote to me: "She is a great beauty, very 'Aurignacian,' and I feel sure she was a pendant, before the piece was broken out between her feet. Henry Collins was wild about her and said she was Dorset for sure."

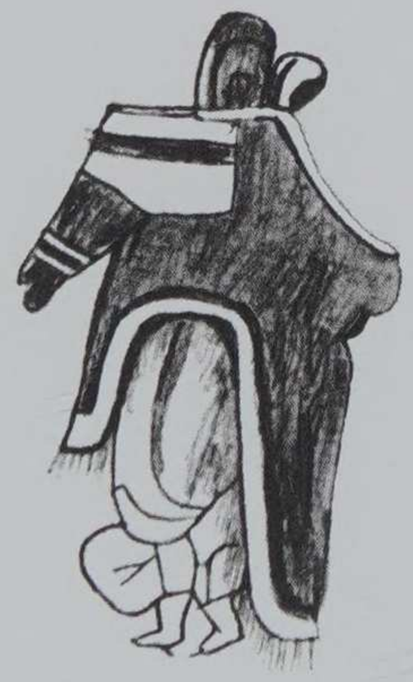
Tailored Garments

Among man's earliest art motifs are geometric designs, interpreted by Carl Schuster as representations of tailored fur garments. These are found in paleolithic paintings and particularly on small, flat stones, widely distributed in time and space. Usually the head, feet, and hands are omitted: the person or ancestor is shown simply as clothing seams.

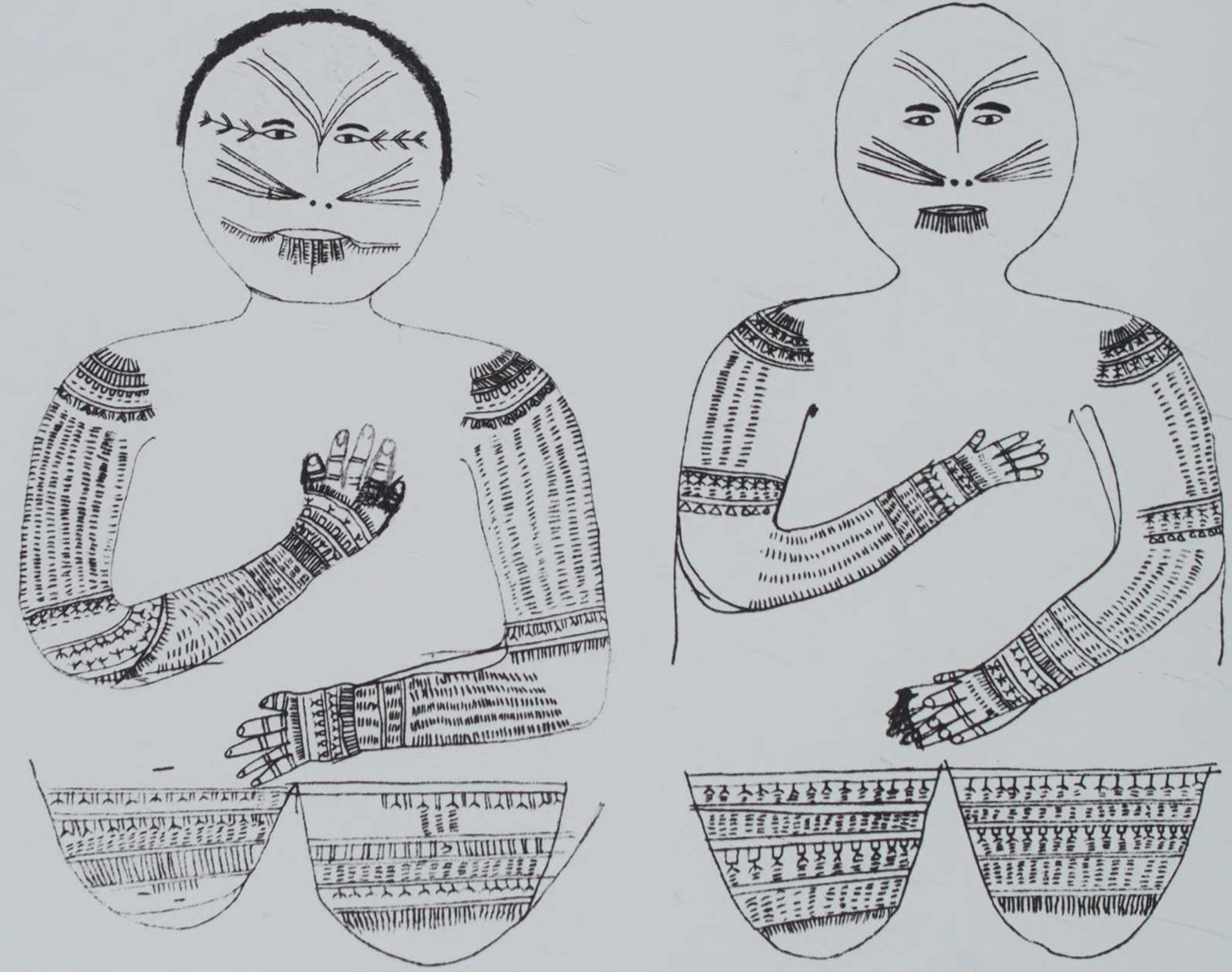
Did these conventional designs, like military uniforms, depict social, corporate roles rather than unique, private identities? Was man regarded as merely a shell, with external forces entering and leaving him? Or was it man-made qualities—garments, tattoos, etc.—that defined him, set him apart from the given, the raw.

Sketch by an Iglulik girl, Eqatlioq, of a family going visiting.

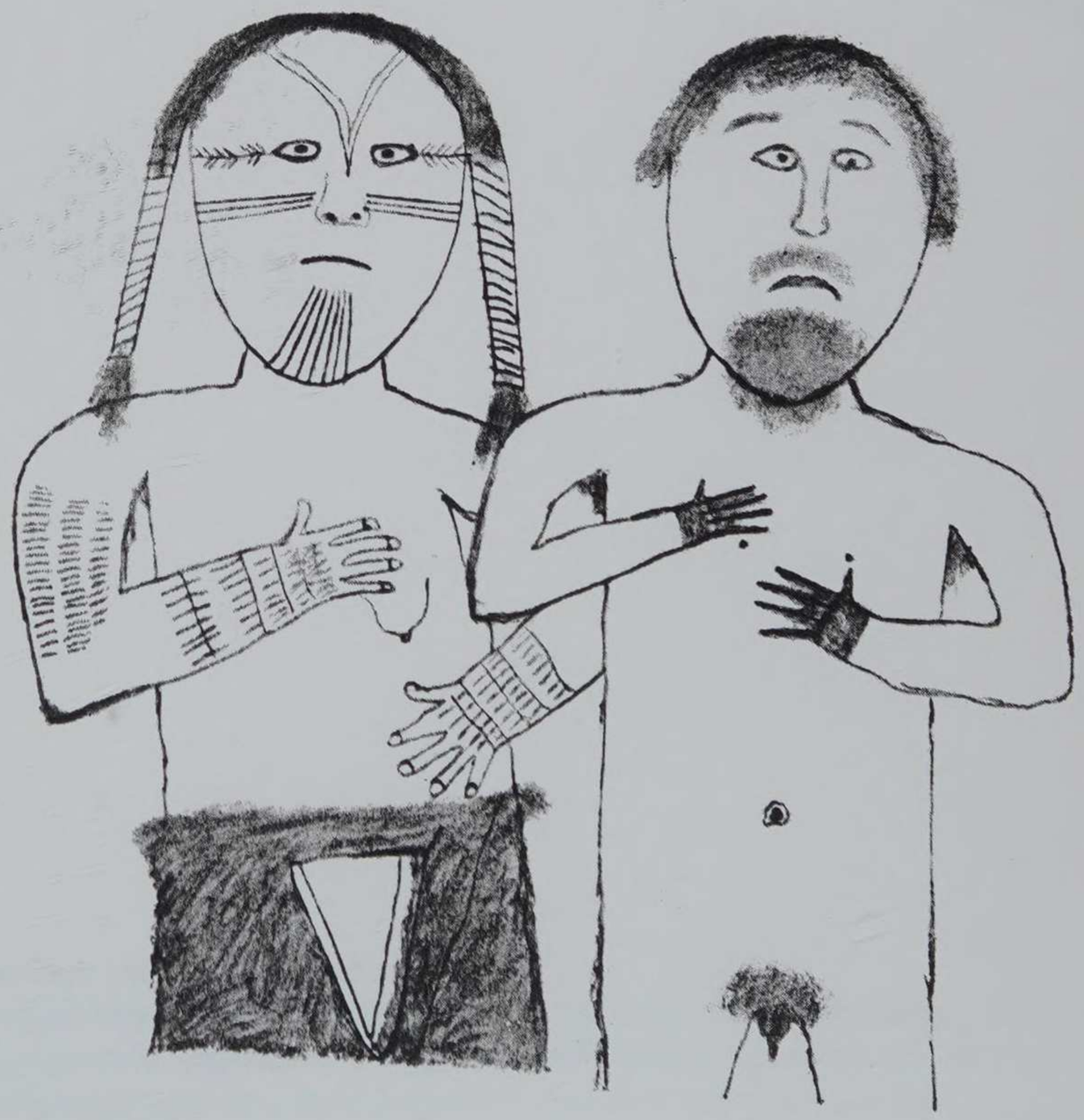




Fur garments are sometimes elaborately cut, the seams being emphasized by ornamentation. But the ways to utilize a fur or skin are limited. Even elaborate garments usually derive from simple, traditional forms. This is also true of skin tents. My impression is that both garment and tent designs are often very ancient, the work of Eskimo women being conservative and circumscribed.



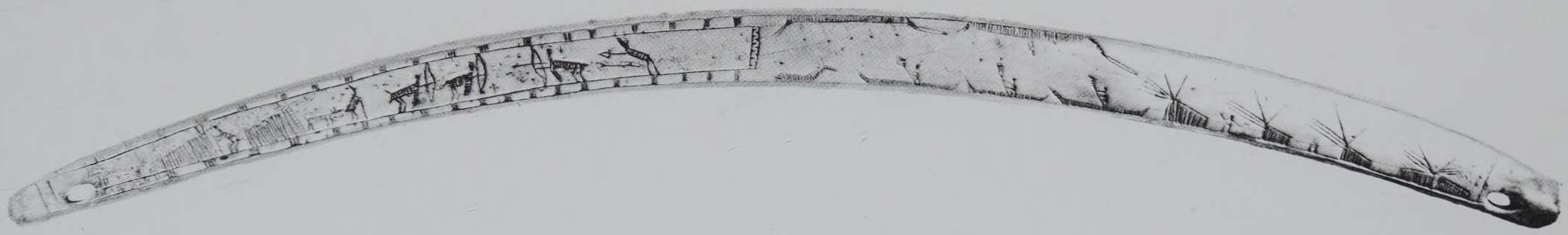
Netsilik women are not tattooed until married. Tattooing is thought to protect and assist them in childbirth. It does far more, of course. Like the mask, it defines roles and confers mythic significance. And it is aesthetically, even erotically, attractive. The Eskimo know themselves and others through art.



Man and woman, Copper Eskimo.

Flat Surfaces

Images from summer life, incised on both sides of an ivory bow-drill: umiaks for travel; whale hunters armed with harpoons in umiaks; caribou hunters in kayaks; single- and double-skin tents; archers using compound bows; an old person in a hooded parka, holding a cane; and an Eskimo dog with tail characteristically upcurled over its back.



The discovery of this Thule bow-drill (dated circa A.D. 1450) near Arctic Bay, Baffin Island, was not wholly surprising. Fragments of similar pieces, some even older, had been found in the area, as well as crude silhouette engravings on ivory or bone, circa A.D. 1000. However, the striking parallels between this example and Alaskan ones are remarkable. In the nineteenth century, the Alaskan Eskimo frequently incised such "pictures" on bow-drills. Presumably they had been doing so for some time because the explorers, Choris, in 1816, and Beechey, in 1826, obtained examples from them.

Note the border or frame, also seen on Thule combs. The technique of incising "pictures" on flat, framed surfaces was alien to Dorset carvers, who preferred shaping "things" in the round. Did early Thule migrants, moving east from their homeland in northern Alaska, bring with them Siberian Iron Age notions of contained space and pictorial representations?

At times in this land, no horizon is visible. At other times, it is the most distinctive feature of the landscape. Snow goggles, with narrow, horizontal slits, accent this line.

When the Eskimo incise on ivory or sketch on paper, they often organize figures in a line. On a single surface, they may show a number of parallel lines, each line usually constituting a separate space.

Figures on different lines, even on the same line, may or may not be related.

On Alaskan bow-drills, where borders or frames serve as horizons, one line of figures is often inverted over another.

At first glance, some sketches appear to tell a story, perhaps illustrating the details of camp life at a given moment. But often this is misleading. Inquiry reveals that in some instances when the Eskimo draw several figures on flat ivory, all are of one man or one animal, the purpose being to show different roles. Even on those few carvings that are clearly accounts of hunting trips, little attention is paid to continuity or unity. Asked to draw everything that had taken place in the interval since I had last seen him, a hunter sketched many independent scenes, often unrelated, not in sequential order, but scattered about on paper without any particular orientation.

Because there is no background to which to relate these figures, sketches have only accidental organization; as in Aivilik star-lore, figures are generally independent of one another. Each experience is confined to its own space/time life, without reference to wider spatial relationships; their comprehension is not connected with an understanding of the surrounding space. Each lives in spatial independence.

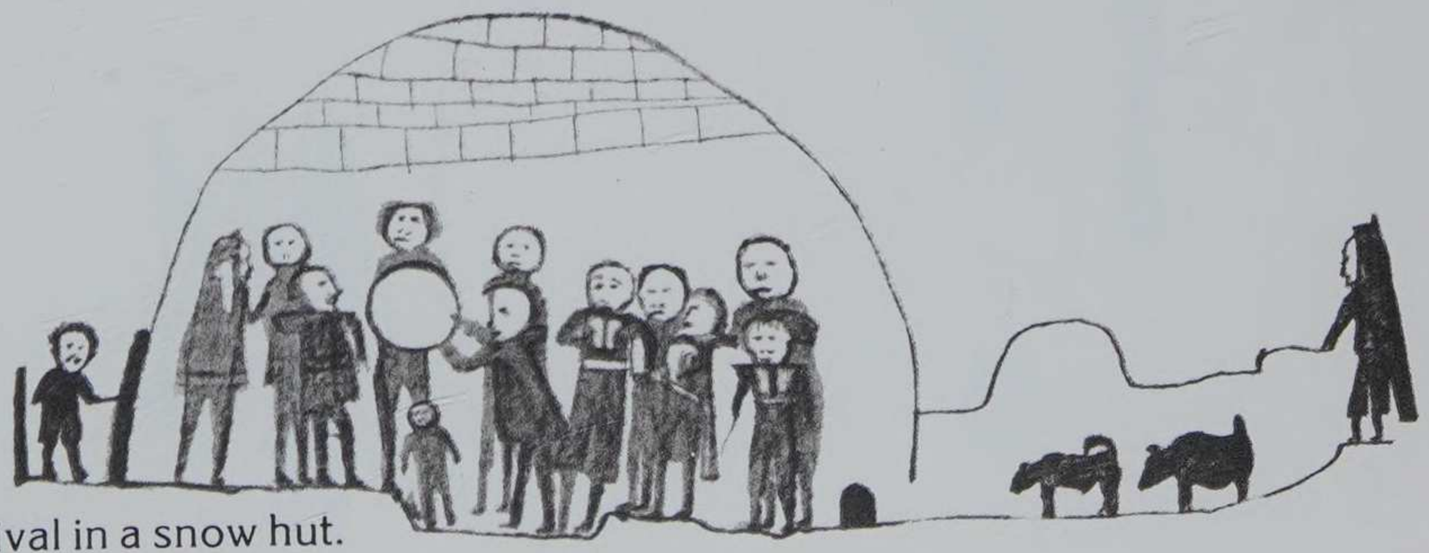
Just as the singer chants, over and over again, the name of the animal he wishes to evoke, sometimes repeating it monotonously without variations: "avik! avik! avik!, walrus! walrus! walrus!", or in different contexts: "You who are the big walrus! You who are the strong walrus! You who are the brown walrus!", so the artist, working on flat surfaces, draws the animal again, again, again. He doesn't fill in vacant spaces: each figure stands alone, like a lone hunter in snow wastes, or more accurately, like a single word, for emptiness is to space what silence is to sound.

On a flat piece of ivory before me are incised two hunters, two seal, a caribou, walrus, and dog-team. One hunter appears to be shooting the other, but this is misleading: both figures, the artist told me, were of the same man engaged in different activities. A seal apparently floats through the air over their heads, but again, this is deceiving. Each figure is completely independent and therefore has its own, unshown, horizon.

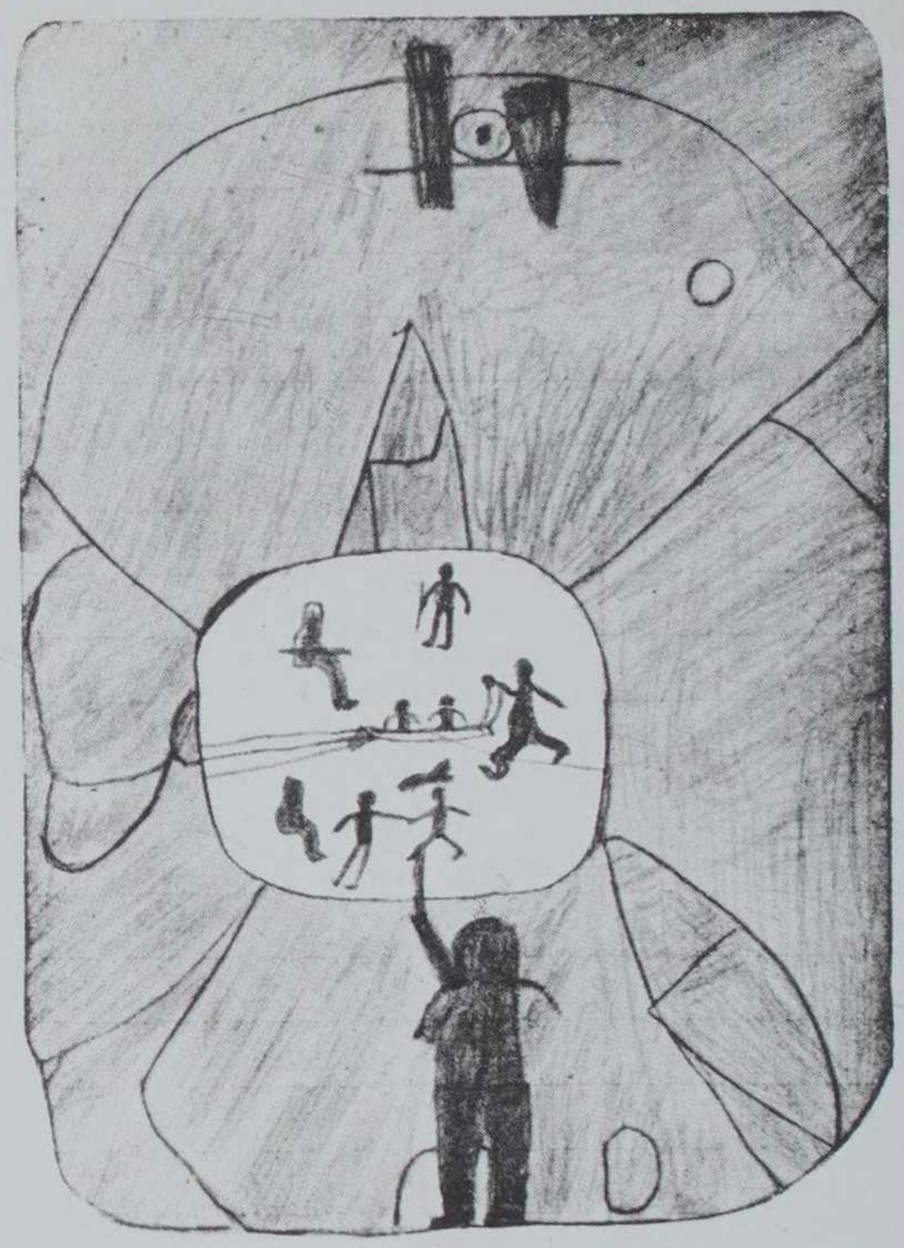
In the sketch opposite, a hunter arrives on the sea ice by sled; sits beside one hole, waiting; stands as the seal approaches; gets ready; harpoons the seal.

Sometimes Aivilik take an old engraving and, without cleaning off the earlier work, simply put a new engraving on top of it. To us, but not to the Aivilik, the results appear sloppy and confusing. We react similarly to their habit of sketching until a figure reaches the limits of the ivory, then turning the tusk over and completing the figure on the reverse side. Or they may complete a unit, such as a dog-team, on another horizon.

At times when figures overlap, they are endowed with transparency: "x-ray" pictures which penetrate and make visible objects hidden from the eye. A man may be shown inside an igloo, an egg in a bird, or a child in a womb. Two wrestlers may be sketched with four arms showing. This transparency means the simultaneous perception of different spatial locations. Space fluctuates in continuous activity as one sees each figure now as the closer, now as the farther one.



Sketch by Alorneq, a Netsilik, of a song festival in a snow hut.



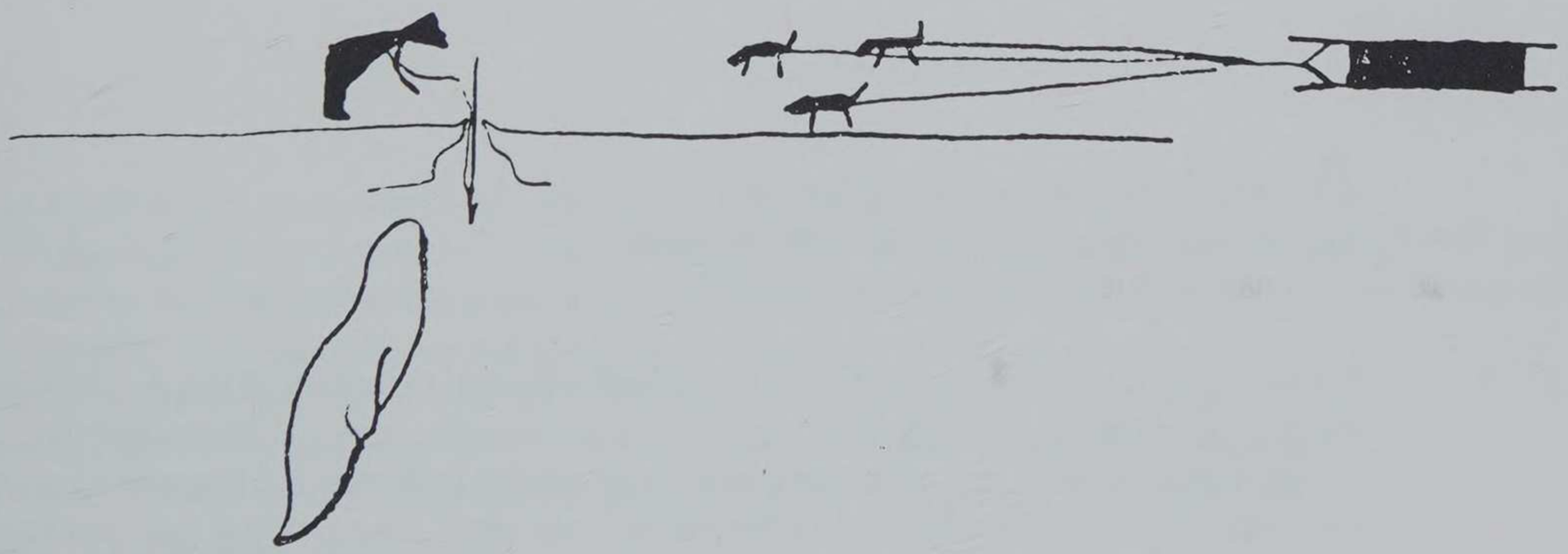
Iglulik sketch of a boy drawing pictures with a knife on the rime of the ice-window. The snow house is lined with skins.

Sketch by Pakak, an Igulik, of the wife-changing game. Women wait in the snow house and men stand outside ready to choose, while masked dancers stand beside the lamp block, singing.

The object isn't seen at an artistic remove: instead, the carver enters into it, mingles, fuses with it. He doesn't remain apart contemplating, controlling, but, to the extent his cognition impinges upon it, he participates in Seal-ness or Walrus-ness. This participation isn't limited to the sense of sight, for Aivilik art doesn't render the visible: it renders visible. It portrays not merely what is perceived, but what is known and true, and since truth here involves all senses, plus tradition and imagination, it enhances all cognition.

All essentials are therefore brought to the fore, including those made invisible by the optical. This technique was employed in the scene opposite, drawn on paper at my request, of a lone figure hunting seal through the ice. Like a scientist's diagram or an engineer's sketch of the moving parts of an engine, all relevant elements are shown, in spite of the fact they could never be observed in a single moment. The dog has just located the breathing hole, which is being approached by the seal, but the harpoon is already in flight. Thus each figure is drawn in its most characteristic role, in spite of the fact the actions shown couldn't have been simultaneous.

In this scene, as in other such "group" sketches I observed, the action is unresolved. The seal has not been taken, may perhaps not be taken; the outcome is uncertain—alive.



Aivilik artists draw all etched figures in a direct horizontal position, never from a bird's-eye or frog's-eye view, perhaps because the figures are so tiny that any optical distortion would make them unrecognizable.

Yet three-dimensional perspective is completely absent in traditional art. A religious carving of a seal may be very "realistic," but only because "realism" has cabalistic power in this context, just as, in the chant, exactness in pronouncing the seal's name is essential. But when transferred to a flat surface, we see that something else was really involved all along. For now the artist, as if telling a story, selects and accents, saying: this is relevant, this is mysterious, this is important. Carving a seal in the round, the carver brings out these features verbally; working on flat surfaces, he brings them out visually.

For example, on these cribbage boards the hierarchy of size is intimately associated with the hierarchy of power. In myths, a dreaded soul-seeker is gigantic when attacking a helpless man, but diminutive when vanquished by man's superior magic; so in this art there is a correspondence between size and symbol. An ivory tusk, like an oral myth, has its own spatial world, not in a naturalistic sense as an illusion of actual distances between represented elements, but in the sense that in it the size of the figure and the importance of the word are in graphic, meaningful connection. Aivilik art obeys the ear more than the eye.

In 1950, in igloos of the more acculturated few were to be seen bundles of photographs which were taken out and silently examined with great concentration. But this was recent and rare. The traditional artist selected what he thought relevant, important, humorous. It was a personal selection, not the impersonal one of the camera which mechanically excludes movement, time, myth, color, sound, odor, imagination, dream. The static black-and-white photograph offers pure form without the distraction of these other stimuli, but it satisfies only the eye, or rather, that type of self which relies primarily upon the sense of sight. To the older Aivilik Eskimo, it is a form without meaning or value. To their children, it's often of the greatest interest and value.

"We believe that people can live a life apart from real life," said Nalungiaq, a Netsilik woman.

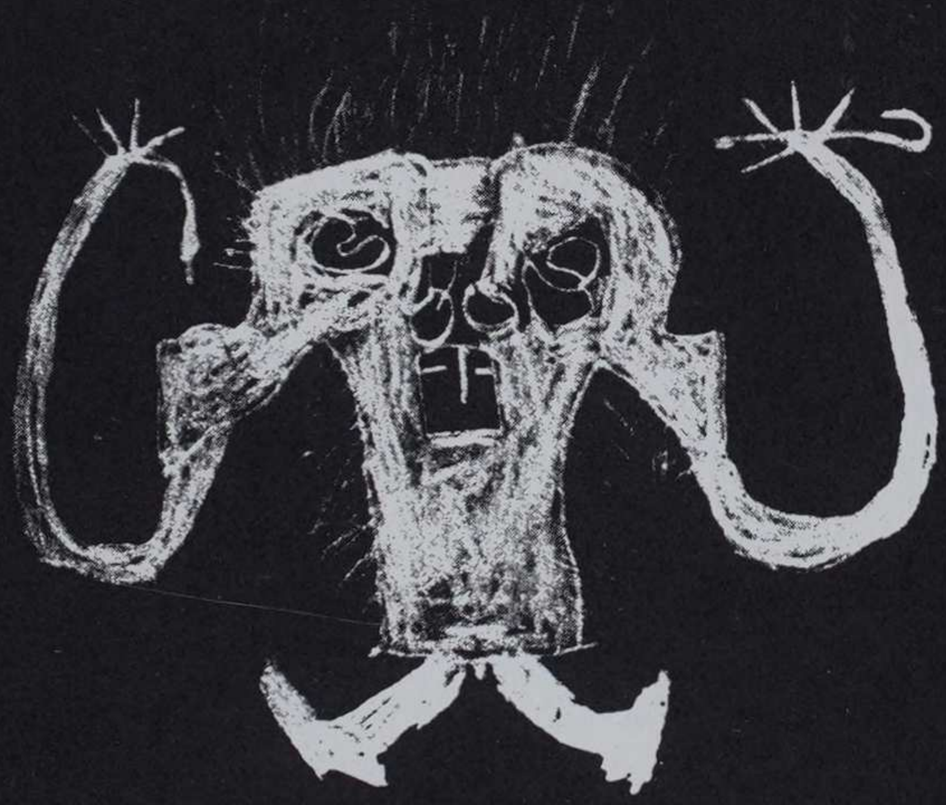
In contrast to images relating to the outer world of the hunt, images belonging to the inner world of dreams and seances are surrealistic. Such images are usually much alike, not only within a given area, but over great spans of time and space.

In short, when the task of artistic inspiration and creation is assigned to the unconscious, the images that result are corporate ones: they do not come from the depths of any private, individual unconscious; they come out of individual dreams, but from dreams that also belong to the whole tribe. Nothing about them can be called private or individualistic. The dreamer looks inward, but his trip takes him directly to the collective unconscious, that storage system for the collective experience of the tribe. When he returns, he is often better equipped to handle functions of the mind too obscure for deliberate, conscious activity, and to do so lucidly, communicating easily with those who share these complex perceptions and ancient memories.

Inner World

Anarqaq, a shaman from King William Land living among the Iglulik, was asked by Knud Rasmussen to draw spirit visions for him. "He hesitated at first for fear of offending the spirits, but when I promised him payment enough to content his helping spirit into the bargain, he agreed, on the condition that I might do as I pleased with the drawings in the white man's country, but undertook not to show them about among his own people. He had, of course, never before drawn with a pencil on paper, but it must be said he set about the new method of work with the true humility of an artist. There was no careless scratching or scribbling; he would sit for hours with closed eyes, solely intent upon getting the vision fixed in his mind, and only when this was done would he attempt to put it into form. Sometimes the recollection of the event affected him to such a degree that he trembled all over, and had to give up the attempt."

The drawings that follow were made by Anarqaq on this occasion.



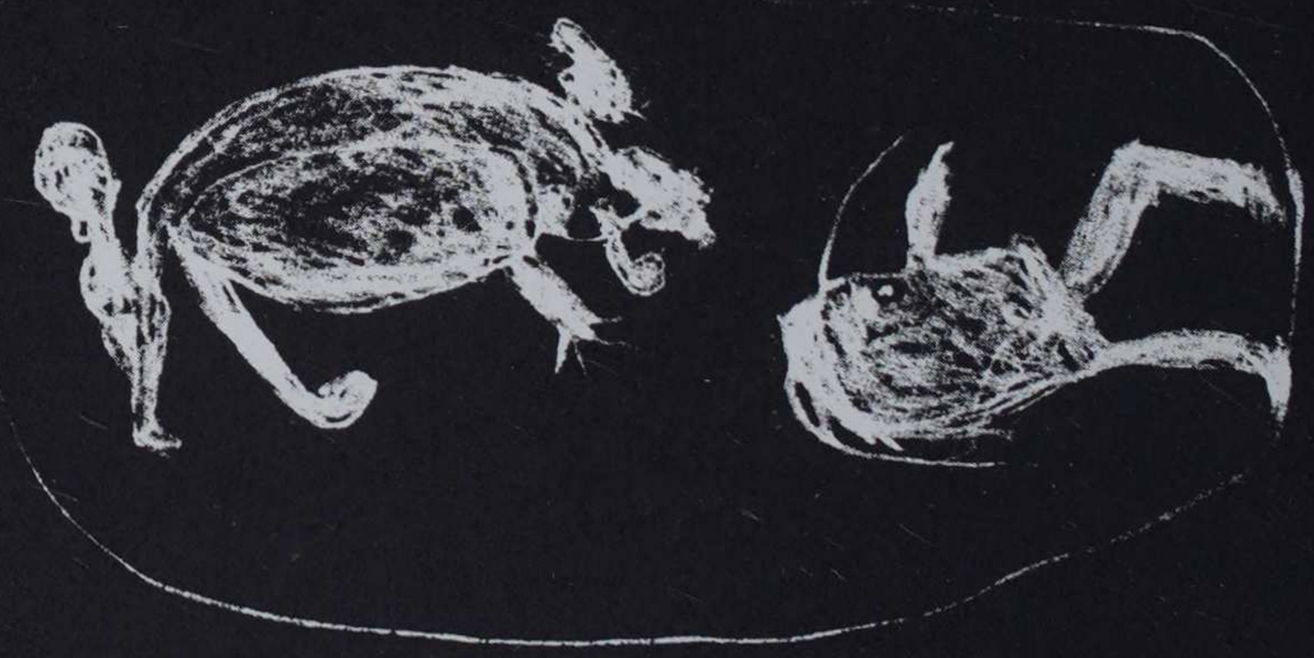
Soon after Anarqaq lost his parents, the gloomy helping spirit Issitoq ("giant eye"), whose specialty is finding people who have broken taboo, came to him and said: "You must not be afraid of me, for I, too, struggle with sad thoughts; therefore I will go with you and be your helping spirit."

Nujaliaq ("the hair woman") carries a sealskin line to catch caribou and specializes in procuring land animals. She has no body, only a behind; one arm; black, bare skin except for a white face; a nose at the side; a fold of skin around her neck; and long, unruly hair sticking out to all sides.

Left: Nuvatqik, a good soul-seeker, i.e., as a helping spirit, it finds the stolen soul and therefore heals the sick. It has three tusks in its mouth, but no belly, and can change into a dog and into a man. It has a hot temper: it split Anarqaq's brow the first time he saw it, but once tamed, became obedient and gentle. Middle: Sangungajoq, a dead man from the Adelaide Peninsula, now a helping spirit. Right: Uvliaq, a spirit Anarqaq inherited from his mother's brother; ugly, without hair, but not dangerous; it heals.

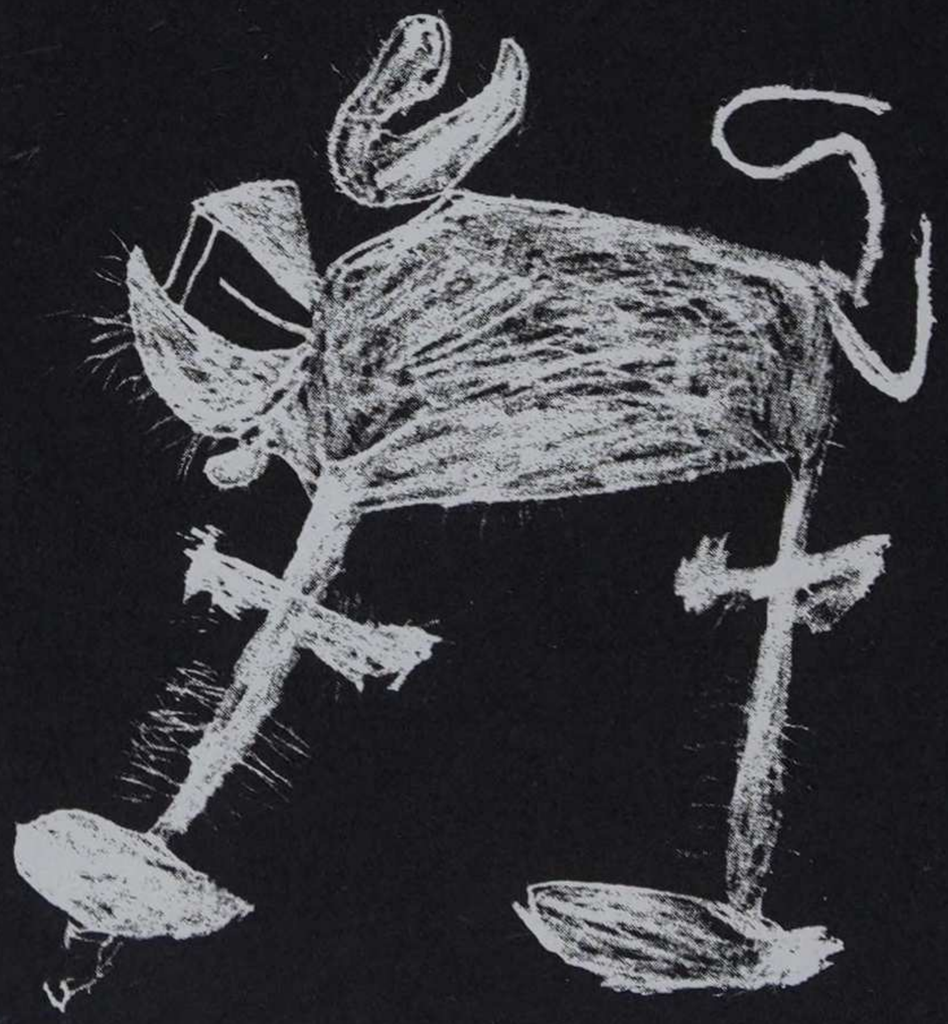
When Anarqaq was hunting caribou, a spirit, with its nose on its forehead and its lower jaw running into its breast, rushed threateningly at him, but disappeared when he prepared to defend himself. It appeared again, calmly, and said its name was Nartoq ("the pregnant one," or "the one with the big stomach"), that it had been hot-headed only because Anarqaq angered too easily, and that, if he abandoned his short temper, he need never fear it. It became one of his best helping spirits.

When booming is heard in the mountains, it is Igtuk ("the boomer"), moving his jaws. No one knows where he stays. His legs and arms are on his back; there is a tuft of hair on his chin; his great eye is level with his arms and ears, while his nose is hidden in his mouth which opens, disclosing a dark abyss.



Left: Nasalik ("the one with the cap"). The cap is wooden, but musk ox hair grows from it. Its eyes are level with its mouth; its long tongue hangs between its eyes; the haunch of one hind leg hangs almost loose and wobbles when it walks. Right: Issitoq ("the one with the big eyes") had originally been the helping spirit of a fox, but Anarqaq took possession of it. It consists of a head and legs, with hair of willow twigs.

Two restless souls. The larger, Nalaqnaq ("the listener"), has a large mouth, two teeth, a protruding tongue, shapeless hands with six fingers, and moves at a run. The smaller, Pungoq ("the dog"), has long ears, two mouths, three legs, and a shapeless rear. One night, while Anarqaq slept in a stone shelter, these evil spirits came over him and would have eaten him if dogs had not kept them at a distance.

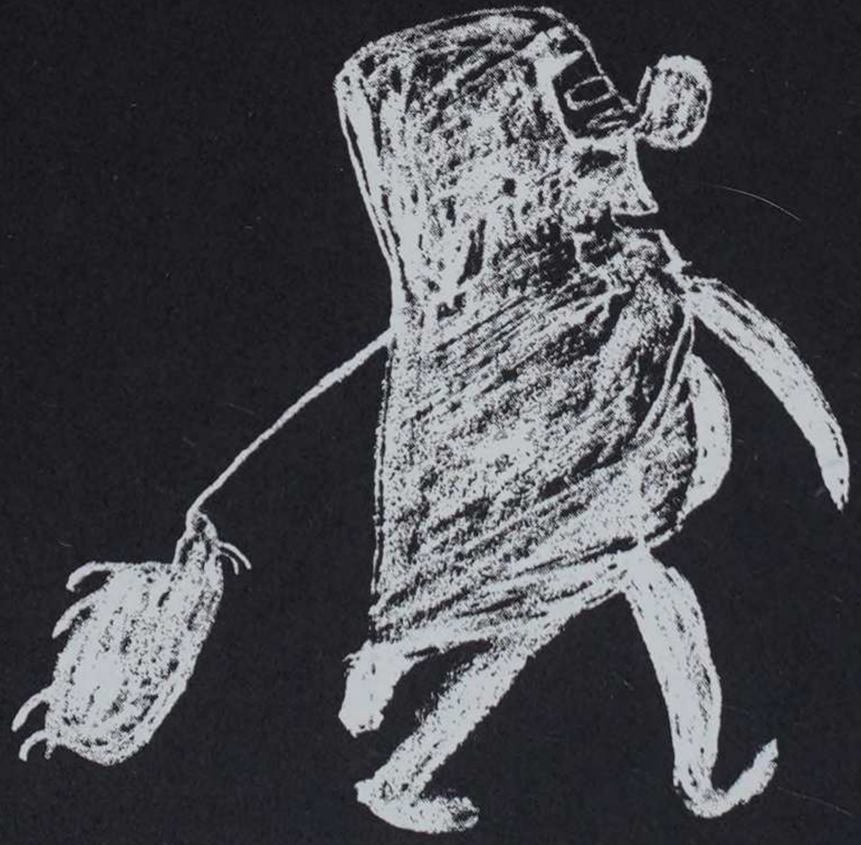


One spring when Anarqaq was sealing, the monster Kigutilik ("the spirit with the giant's teeth") came out of an opening in the ice and roared, "Ah—ah—ah!", frightening him so badly he fled home without first securing it as a helping spirit. It was bare, with only fringes of hair; as big as a bear and taller; with two tails, one big ear that seemed to be joined only to a fold in the skin, teeth the size of walrus tusks, and long legs with large bumps at the joints.

Anarqaq had this vision while wandering in the mountains. The spirit's silent horribleness affected him so violently that he fled without first securing it as a helping spirit.

When Anarqaq met the goblin woman Manilaq ("pack-ice"), she looked so frightful, he fell and lost consciousness and recovered only through his dog licking his navel. Manilaq, who specializes in getting quarry for the hunter from Sedna, mother of the sea animals, became his helping spirit.

One spring, near a village, Anarqaq saw his father's helping spirit, Qungiaruvlik, steal a child and put it in her parka hood. His mother's helping spirits, Puksina and Navagioq, killed Qungiaruvlik.



Self portrait of Anarqaq, drawn as an expression of his thoughts. Because he constantly hungers for dainties, he drags a fat animal, and because tobacco is his dearest enjoyment, his nose is a pipe-bowl.

Anarqaq was indifferent to the demands of the optical eye: he let each image fill its own space, create its own world, without reference to background or anything external.

Each image lives in spatial independence. Size and shape, proportions and selection, are set by the image itself, not forced from without. Like sound, each image creates its own space, its own identity: it imposes its own assumptions.

Such sketches accomplish what neither waking reality nor dream accomplish alone: they give a wakeful reality to the dream, and a dreamlike freedom to wakeful life, and thus make possible a human world.

In recent years, many factors have changed traditional Aivilik art. Most involve indirect changes in Eskimo personality and society, yet at least two are direct. The first is difficult to validate, yet I think real. Behind the altar in the Catholic mission there is a religious painting with three-dimensional perspective which depicts a single moment in time and can be accurately seen only from the single position of the kneeling worshipper. As far as I know, this represents the first contact the Aivilik had with a composition done in linear perspective. It involved an extreme break with their traditional conception of space and introduced the artistic counterpart of the modern notion of individualism, every element being now related to the unique point of view of the individual at a given moment.

This tendency has been furthered by the Welfare Teacher who, arriving in 1950, has given art instruction to some of the older children at Coral Harbour. They have been encouraged to abandon multiple perspective and to imitate slavishly the apparent optical image of the three-dimensional object-world.

A few younger children, unable to master immediately linear perspective, assign it a diametrically opposite role from that given it by the teacher: they make parallel lines converge as they approach the spectator and thus they open up, instead of close space. Still others indicate a position in depth by different elevations of figures: the bottom of the paper is represented as the closest visual point, higher positions as more distant. I saw no examples of shading, though depth is occasionally indicated by overlapping figures.

The majority of drawings made under the supervision of the Welfare Teacher exhibit linear perspective, with the vanishing point in the middle of the picture plane. The same is true of the stone carvings made for shipment south. This type of perspective, of course, attempts to reproduce a scene perceived by the eye in a given moment: it eliminates time and confines itself solely to space. The strange fascination which linear perspective has for the younger Aivilik cannot be accounted for exclusively by a craving for verisimilitude. Conditioned by the individualism and outlook of the Western world, they seek to express this goal by focusing always on one cut-out sector of the unbounded wealth of the surrounding nature. Thus they eliminate the flux of the innumerable visual relationships that the world has for the spectator and which their elders so effectively portray. They freeze the living, fluctuating wealth of the visual field into a static geometric system, eliminating the time element always present in the experiencing of space, and thus destroying the dynamic relationships in the experience of the spectator. Clearly, the introduction of three-dimensional perspective, along with other Western concepts of individualism, has led to changes in the manner in which the Aivilik perceive their world, and in the way they conceive of themselves within it.

Souvenir Art

Contrary to much that has been written, stone carvings made by modern Canadian Eskimo do not constitute an indigenous art, newly discovered but ancient in origin. These carvings came into being after 1949 as a direct result of the teachings and promotions of James Houston, an artist representing, first, the Canadian Handicraft Guild and, later, the Canadian government. The carvings share little with traditional Eskimo art, though they do show marked resemblances to Houston's own work. Full credit goes to him, not for liberating a repressed talent, but for creating a new, delightful art that brings financial assistance to needy Eskimo and joy to many Western art connoisseurs.

Most of these carvings are massive, heavy, and fragile, designed to be set in place and viewed by strangers. The traditional role of art is gone: object has replaced act. Traditional perspective is gone: stability and single perspective have replaced mobility and multiple perspective. Traditional notions of discovering and revealing are gone: asked by the Queen how he decided what to carve, an Eskimo replied that he consulted Mr. Houston because he had no desire to produce anything unsalable.

That the Eskimo could move into a new art form with ease and success is significant: clearly old resources combined with new notions of individualism. That the government should promote this art is understandable: such publicity increased Eskimo income, helped certain government agencies and policies, and appealed to Canadian nationalism. What is less commendable is the acceptance of this propaganda as reliable, and this art as "Eskimo," by professional anthropologists.

Both in print and film the notion of discovering forms in "living stone" has been associated with these stone souvenirs. I found no such association among the Eskimo themselves in 1950. However, following a series of CBC radio talks by me on Eskimo notions of revealing forms and forces hidden in nature, these notions were quickly incorporated into government propaganda about stone carving, and soon the Eskimo were themselves indoctrinated.

Prior to Western influence, Eskimo art had an amazing unity in time and space. The souvenir art exhibits no such unity. From Greenland come surrealistic figures; from Canada, Henry Moore-like sculptures; from Alaska, curios; from Siberia, ivory tableaux. Unconsciously each dominant culture had the Eskimo produce art meeting the particular alter-ego needs of the conquerors.

"It's the power of belief," writes the arctic archeologist Froelich Rainey, "which makes all the difference between original native art and contemporary native crafts."

Can the word "Eskimo" legitimately be applied to this modern stone art? I think not. Its roots are Western; so is its audience. Some carvers have been directly trained by Houston; others follow a government manual. Carvings are produced by Eskimo working at craft centers in the north and by tubercular Eskimo in southern sanitariums. Not a few are made by Chinese in Hong Kong, a competition that led the Canadian government to put labels of "authenticity" on Eskimo-made carvings. The following news item shows how complicated even this became:

OTTAWA: Jack Shafter, vice-president of Regal Toy Co., today accused the Department of Northern Affairs of "wheeling and dealing" in making private arrangements for commercial production of Ookpik, the fuzzy, saucer-eyed version of the Arctic owl. Designed by an Eskimo woman in Fort Chimo, N.W.T., and made of sealskin, Ookpik was promoted by the Government at trade fairs. When orders outstripped Eskimo production, Northern Affairs granted rights to the Reliable Toy Co. to manufacture Ookpiks of white plush synthetic fabric to sell at about $2.98. Another version, made of imported possum pelts, sells at around $7. Ookpik has been registered with the trademark division and unauthorized copies are illegal. Lawrence Samuels, vice-president of Reliable, said: "We've been told bluntly to keep our mouths shut about this thing. Any public relations or publicity will have to come from Northern Affairs."

In addition to carving stone, the Eskimo were trained to make totem poles, pottery, and prints, though all were alien to Eskimo culture. Production of totem poles was abandoned and pots sold poorly, but prints proved enormously popular. They combined Siberian designs with techniques learned directly from Japanese printmakers. By a fascinating error, a designer selected from the huge library of his father-in-law, an elderly anthropologist, Siberian designs and included these in a booklet on Canadian native designs. The Eskimo were given this booklet for reference. Many Eskimo prints displayed in art museums and printed on Christmas cards owe their forms to this error.

That Eskimo artists have the desire and confidence to improvise is a happy situation. I regret, however, that the new ideas and materials they employ are supplied by us, not selected by them. We let the Eskimo know what we like, then congratulate them on their successful imitations of us.

What shall we call this new art? Eskimo? If so, what does that word mean?

In the United States, many of the plastic Christian art objects are manufactured by Jews: plastic Jesuses for dashboards; grains of sand from the Red Sea embedded in plastic cubes with the caption, "He Trod On This"; even a plastic do-it-yourself crucifixion kit. The fact that Jews make these doesn't mean they are Jewish art. They remain Christian art—made for, used by, and believed in, solely by Christians.

Eskimo stone art was made for, used by, and believed in, solely by Westerners—that is, until recently. Now it also serves to give identity to the Eskimo themselves. Having deprived him of his heritage, and even the memory of this heritage, we offer him a substitute which he eagerly accepts, for no other is permitted. And so he takes his place on stage, side-by-side with the American Indian whose headdress comes from a mail-order catalog, who learned his dances at Disneyland, and picked up his philosophy from Hippies. He knows no other identity, and when he is shown the real treasures of his culture, when he hears the old songs and reads the ancient words, he aggressively says, "It's a lie, a white man's lie. Don't tell me who I am or who my ancestors were. I know!"

Communal Consciousness

"Art" is a term traditionally reserved for works of creativity and self-expression. Critics and collectors, taking a belated interest in aboriginal Eskimo art, now accord it the dignity of this title on the grounds it meets these standards. But questions of "creativity" and "self-expression" in aboriginal Eskimo art should be asked and answered with caution. I think they belong to other traditions.

The image of the Eskimo artist as a roleless individual who seeks to discover himself and reveal his private point of view is nonsense. He doesn't seek to enjoy, in Emerson's words, "an original relation to the universe."

Eskimo societies are implosive: everybody is involved with everybody, simultaneously and instantaneously, in a seamless web of human kinship and responsibility. There is no isolating individualism, no private consciousness, no private point of view. The private wits or senses of men were released from their corporate restraints largely by the fragmenting power of writing and print.

Individualism means fragmentation, self-expression, private point of view. People who fill integral roles have no private point of view; they share group awareness and wear corporate tribal masks.

Eskimo are conventional role-players, faithful mask-wearers. Wearing a mask means to divest, not express, oneself. A mask or role is not an extension of its wearer so much as a putting on of the collective powers of the audience. The speaker assumes the collective mask of the image he presents. He manifests a corporate attitude toward life.

Some writers say that the anonymity of Eskimo art is a myth, that the Eskimo themselves can identify with confidence the works of individual artists. But the marks of identity turn out to be details of craftsmanship or minor stylistic innovations. This is not self-expression. Carvers merely interpret traditional designs the way actors interpret parts. There is a vital difference between artists who maintain the freshness of a style and artists who replace it. The real question is: Does the artist manifest a corporate view of life or seek to develop a private point of view? Does he unite with the corporate mask of his culture or become an innovator who ignores social conventions?

"I flew by the nets," said Joyce. Did he mean past the nets of family, Church, and country, or by means of them? Literate artists flew past the nets, Eskimo artists by means of them.

I am aware that there are modern Eskimo who use art as a means of lonely self-identity. I have known such men. But I believe they are new on the arctic scene, products of Western influence. Their art should not be confused with aboriginal Eskimo art, which is of an entirely different order. Some of this new art is genuine enough: as people change, so their art changes, and the Eskimo are changing rapidly. Among them there are growing notions of individualism, new attitudes toward controlling the external, and, hence, a way of perceiving that separates time and space. The old Eskimo world of all-contemporaneous time and interpenetrating space belongs to the past. The new stone carvings, each with its base and its favored point of view, reflect all this and are therefore much easier for the Western art connoisseur to appreciate.

In promoting the new stone carvings, the Canadian government has publicized the works and names of certain expert carvers—a new concept, out of keeping with the complete anonymity of aboriginal Eskimo art. True, a clever seamstress enjoys genuine esteem: she and her family take pride in her reputation. But this is not the case with religious carvings. Carvers make no effort to develop personal styles and take no care to be remembered as individuals; they simply disappear, as it were, behind their work.

The concept "art" is alien to the Eskimo, but the thing itself, the act of art, is certainly there, carefully implemented as a dimension of culture. It is not, however, always easy to recognize. The Eskimo don't put art into their environment: they treat the environment itself as art form.

Such art is invisible: it belongs to that all-pervasive environment that eludes perception. It serves as a means of merging the individual and his environment, not as a means of training his perception upon that environment.

Carving and sewing, to the Eskimo, are like penmanship with us. Some people are better at it than others, but there are no professionals.

This is by no means true of all preliterate peoples. Among Indians on the Pacific Northwest Coast, great art was produced by a few men of genius, supported by appreciative, wealthy communities. Some artists had long, slowly maturing, highly productive careers. Their output was immense. They had workshops. They used templates. Some carved portrait masks of dead and living subjects. All worked on commission for clients. A few were lavishly paid. Their works were treasured, even by distant tribes. There were stories of rivalry between masters and apprentices, even tales of artists being kidnapped like atomic scientists or Renaissance goldsmiths.

Not so with the Eskimo. There is no hint of professionalism among them. I don't mean that Eskimo carvers lack standards or discipline, but simply that they don't treat carving as a separate activity. My impression is that the Eskimo are among the very few people in the world about whom it may truly be said, their art and life are interchangeable. For them, art is an ever-present dimension of experience.

Love of Life

The Eskimo sing of many things, but one theme in particular stands out: life itself is good. A hunter may recount one misfortune after another, his every hope turned tragedy, hunger and shame and loneliness his only companions. But when he asks, "Say, tell me now, was life so good on earth?", he answers, "Yes."

Not rewards, not ease, but life, pure life, stripped down to a new dawn, full of movement, uncertainty, anticipation.

I arise from rest with movements swift
As the beat of a raven's wings
I arise
To meet the day
Wa-wa.
My face is turned from the dark of night
To gaze at the dawn of day,
Now whitening in the sky.

I will walk with leg muscles
which are strong
as the sinews of the shins of the little caribou calf.

I will walk with leg muscles
which are strong
as the sinews of the shins of the little hare.

I will take care not to go towards the dark.
I will go towards the day.

The huge, hairless dog-husband of Sedna, goddess of the fruitful sea, who guards her marine estate, keeping out the living, keeping in the dead, periodically rises from the nether world to bring death and disaster. As the aged, ill Ohnainewk lay gasping on the sleeping platform, he saw this beast approaching, and, raising himself, called out:

Who comes?

Is it the hound of death approaching?

Away!

Or I will harness you to my team.

Sedna

Of the myths that are half told, half sung in the igloos and sealskin tents, none is more important than the myth of Sedna. Every Eskimo knows it and has his own version, all equally true, for this myth is too complex for any single telling.

Sedna or Nuliajuk ("young girl") rejected all suitors until a stranger induced her to elope with him. He was, in fact, a cruel dog disguised as a man, but she discovered this only after reaching her new home on a distant island.

Escape was impossible until one day when her family came to visit her. Her husband always refused to let her leave the tent, except to go to the toilet, and even then tied a long cord to her. But this time when she went outside and he called, asking why she delayed so long, she had the ball of cord reply that she would soon return.

In the meantime, she ran to the beach and joined her parents in their great walrus-skin boat. But no sooner had they set out to sea, than her husband discovered the ruse and, transforming himself into a bird, swooped low over the fleeing family, turning the sea to storm, and threatening them with drowning. To save themselves, they cast Sedna overboard.

At first she clung to the gunwale. But her father cut off the first joints of her fingers; when she persisted, he cut the second and third joints. These sank into the sea to become the seal, walrus, and whale that Eskimo hunt today.

In desperation, Sedna hooked her elbows over the side, but her father struck her with his paddle, gouging out an eye, and she sank into the sea, fingerless and one-eyed.

From the bottom of the sea, she now rules all creatures. Their floating bodies nearly fill her house. Periodically she sends animals forth to be taken by hunters, but only by hunters who perform rites and show respect for slain animals.

Other hunters return empty-handed. That is, Sedna withholds life from them, for they cannot survive without the food, clothing, and fuel that come only from her subjects.

She is the most feared of all spirits, the one who, more than any other, controls the destinies of man.

In the various versions of this myth, Sedna is sometimes an unwanted daughter cast into the sea by her father, or a girl who has rejected all eligible men, or an orphan nobody wants; in one version, she is already a mother, abandoned by her own children. In each, she is someone the family abandons for its own safety.

Abandonment of people is not purely mythical. The Eskimo do, in fact, abandon old people. Killing new-born girls is common. And the position of orphans is precarious: one's own family always takes precedence. These are normal experiences in Eskimo life—cruel necessities forced on them by scarcity.

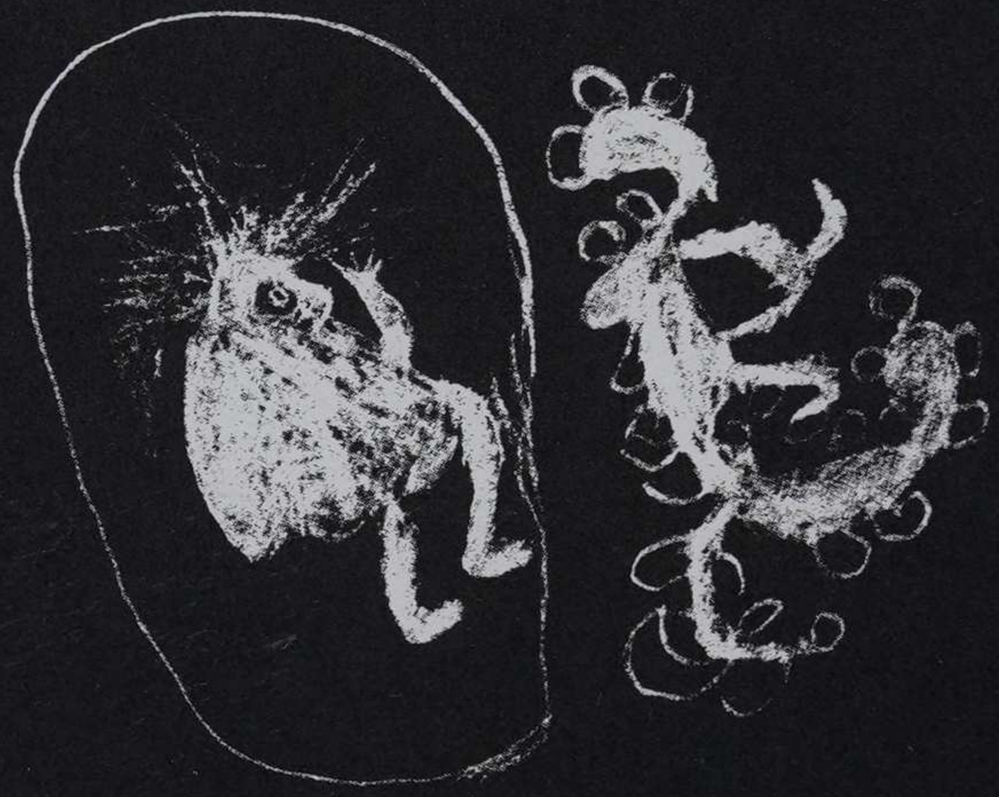
I shall never forget an incident that occurred in the winter of 1951. An emergency arose while we were hunting and we put in at a neighboring camp of poor newcomers whose presence Ohnainewk, my host and companion, resented. I entered a cold igloo and in the pinched, chalk-like faces of five children saw starvation. Their parents were dead, there was no food, and they simply sat there, silently waiting for the oldest boy who was hunting alone on the sea ice. I looked at Ohnainewk and somehow knew he had known all along.

Either because of my presence or perhaps out of genuine compassion, the children were adopted into various families. Into the igloo where I stayed came a boy of eight, an unattractive lad with great dark eyes. His foster mother never spoke kindly to him; the other children pointedly ignored or abused him. He couldn't control his bowels and constantly soiled the furs. On this excuse, they forced him to sleep on the damp snow floor, condemning him to pneumonia and inevitable death. Just before the lad died, I saw him standing alone in the center of the igloo, trembling with cold and fright. I took a great knife, a spectacular thing someone had given to me, and offered it to him. He stood confused, then slowly, with the most wonderful light in his eyes (he must have thought he was going to be spared) reached out for it. But a hand shot out—Ohnainewk's—and the knife was taken from me and given to a favorite son.

It is a hard land. A knife like that goes to one who will live to use it.

The Sedna myth represents this dilemma, as the Eskimo see it. They never asked that the universe be this way. But, ayornamut ("it cannot be otherwise"); they accept life on its own terms.

They do more than accept: they take upon themselves the responsibility for the fact that life is the way it is. They give Sedna the power of life and death over them. Those who were forced to abandon her now place themselves in her power, dependent upon her good will, her respect for all life.



Drawing of Sedna by Anarqaq

The last part of the Sedna myth reveals the role of art. There is a maze of the past to be entered and come out of alive, bringing the innocent to safety. And in this maze there lives the monster dog whose name is Death. Find the door that opens the past. Unravel the ever-tangling threads of time. Rescue the innocent. And beware the dog.

The task falls to the angakok or shaman. The occasion is a seance where he seeks to cure the sick and save the dying. If he fails and his patient dies, its soul goes beneath the sea to Sedna's home. The angakok follows, traveling on the sound of his drum. A snarling dog—Sedna's husband—blocks the entrance to her home, keeping out the living, keeping in the dead; but the angakok paralyzes it with a chant, and enters her strange house, confronting her directly. First he tries to reason with her, arguing that she has taken a life without reason. But she ignores him. He begs for pity, but she laughs. In anger, he twists her arm and beats her with a walrus penis bone. But she is not afraid. Then he becomes cunning and appeals to her vanity by combing out her tangled hair. But she is unrelenting. Finally, ignoring her altogether, he steps back and, with drum held high, sings of life.

Sedna is sometimes so touched by his song, so moved by his singing, she releases the soul of the dead person, and the angakok returns with it to the land of the living.

In a life where neither reason nor strength prevail, where cunning counts for little and pity least of all, the Eskimo sings of life, for only art avails, and even then, not always.


RESOLUTE
MAXWELL BAY
BUTTON PT.
ARCTIC BAY
POND INLET
PRINCE OF WALES
IGLOOLIK
ABVERDJAR
ALARNERK
CORONATION GULF
PELLY BAY
NAUJAN
CAPE DORSET
MILL IS.
SOUTHAMPTON IS.
TYARA
NUVUK
WOLSTENHOLME
FULLERTON
MANSEL IS.
HUDSON BAY
BELCHER IS.

Acknowledgment

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The photographs were made under extraordinarily difficult circumstances. Those by Eberhard Otto (EO), courtesy of artscanada, were mostly shot in color. Those by Fritz Spiess (FS), courtesy of Robert Lawrence Productions, are from a movie shot in 1959. Carl Schuster (CS), Jorgen Meldgaard (JM), George Swinton (GS), and Frances Brittain (FS), provided additional photographs and sketches. The remaining photographs, and all specimens, come from Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology (CUMAE), Danish National Museum (DNM), Eskimo Museum (EM), Elmer Harp (EH), McCord Museum (MM), Musee de l'homme (MH), Museum of the American Indian (MAI), National Museum of Canada (NMC), Pitt Rivers Museum (PRM), Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), York University (YU), and Ayala Zacks (AZ).

Sources

Front end paper, sketch, Hudson Bay area, 1910-22, ROM (EC); **11** G. Sutton, Explorations of Southampton Island; **46-8** K. Rasmussen, Reports of the Fifth Thule Expedition, 1921-24, 7(1):54-6; **49** P. Riesman, "The Eskimo Discovery of Man's Place in the Universe," in Sign Image Symbol, G. Kepes, ed.; **51** Rasmussen 8:321; **52** Riesman op. cit.; **53** Rasmussen 8:16; **54** Rasmussen 7(1):123; **55** Rasmussen 9:53; **60** duck, Aivilik, 1950, baby walrus tooth, 3, AZ (FS); **61** ptarmigan, Aivilik, 1950, baby walrus tooth, 2.5, AZ (FS); **65** G. Mary-Rousseliere, "I Live with the Eskimos," National Geographic 139:203; **66** bear, Thule, Cape Dorset, bear tooth, 3.8, ROM (FB); chisel, Hudson Bay area, antler handle, 12.8, ROM (FB); **69** wolf & man, Hudson Bay area, c. 1910, ivory, 6.3, ROM (FS); **70** goggles, Thule, Maxwell Bay, ivory, 11.5, NMC (EO); **71** buckle, Thule, Igloolik, ivory, 6.7 EM (EO); **72** comb, Thule, bone, 8.4, ROM (EO); **73** ornament, Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 6.5, NMC (EO); **74** bear with

"spirit head," Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 6.5, YU (EO); **76-7** two-headed ermine, Dorset, ivory, 4, EM (EO); **79** animal teeth, Dorset, Alarnerk, ivory, 5.4 & 3.3, NMC (JM); **80** bear head, Dorset, Wolstenholme, ivory, 2.1, NMC (FS); **81** common loon, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 6, NMC (FB); **83** whistling swan, Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 4.8, NMC (MH); **84** whistling swan, Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 4.2, NMC (FS); **85** two whistling swans, Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 5.8, NMC (EO); **87** ptarmigan, Dorset, Wolstenholme, ivory, 1.9, NMC (FS); bear, Dorset, Nuvuk, bone, 1.6, NMC (FS); glaucous gull, Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 3.1, NMC (FS); **88** 1 to r: hawk or falcon, apparently decapitated deliberately, Dorset, Pond Inlet, ivory, 2.6, NMC (FS); bird head, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 2.3, CUMAE (JM); caribou mandible, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 3, CUMAE (JM); walrus head, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 4.7, EM (GS); walrus head, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 5, CUMAE (JM); walrus tusks, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 7.3, CUMAE (JM); **89** web-footed bird, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 5.2, CUMAE (JM); Rasmussen 8:42-3 (edited); **90** caribou hoof, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 5, CUMAE (EO); **91** caribou head, Dorset, Alarnerk, ivory, 3.6, NMC (JM); caribou head, terminal Dorset or Dorset reworked by Thule, Coronation Gulf, bone, 6.3, MAI (MAI); **92-3** snowy owl, Dorset, Mill, bone, 3.2, NMC (FS); **94** falcon, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 2.7, CUMAE (EO); **95** weasel, Dorset, Pingerluk, ivory, 57, NMC (EO); **96-7** bear, Dorset, Alarnerk, ivory, 15.7, NMC, cu & upper: (JM), lower: (EO); **98** W. Taylor, "Found Art—and Frozen," artscanada 162/163; l to r: bear, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 4.5, EM (EO); bear, Dorset, Button, ivory, 5.5, NMC (EO); bear, Dorset, ivory, 6.5, NMC (EO); skeletal bear, Button, ivory, 7.8, NMC (EO); **99** bear, Dorset, Belcher, ivory, 12, NMC, top (EO), side (NMC); **100** three bear heads, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, largest 3.4, CUMAE (JM); three stylized bear heads, late Dorset, Pt aux Choix 2, Newfoundland, bone or ivory, largest 2.7, EH (EO); **101** Meldgaard pers. comm.; bear head, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, CUMAE (JM); **102** bear head, Dorset, Abverdjar, bear tooth, 3.3, CUMAE (EO); **104** falcon, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 4.2, EM (GS); **105** falcon, Dorset, Mansel, ivory, 4.3, NMC (MH); **106** dog-man, late Dorset, Mill, bone, 2.3, NMC (FS); man-harpoon head, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 6, EM (MH); **107** bear-bird-wolverine, Dorset, Mill, ivory, 4.8, NMC (FS); seal-man, Dorset, Nuvuk, bone, 3.5, NMC (FS); **108** comb-man-hand, Dorset, Maxwell Bay, ivory, 6.3, NMC (EO); **109** tube, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 9.3, NMC (EO); **110** tube, Dorset, Button, ivory, 10.5, NMC (EO); **111** amulet, late Dorset, Newfoundland, ivory, 7, MAI (MAI); **112-3** bear & human, Dorset, Naujan, ivory, 4.5, MM (MM); Meldgaard pers, comm.; **113** man, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 3.8, EM (JM); **114-5** man & child, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 5.1, CUMAE (EO); **115** man & child, Dorset, Abverdjar, ivory, 5, CUMAE (JM); **116** man, Dorset, Southampton, ivory, 9.2, PRM (PRM); **117** maskette, early Dorset, Tyara, ivory, 3.5, NMC (EO); maskette, possibly reshaped lance head, Dorset, Wolstenholme, ivory, 5.6, NMC (MH); **118** maskette re-worked lamp fragment, Dorset, Igloolik, stone, 4.5, EM (JM); maskette, Dorset, Mansel,

bone, 5.4, NMC (MH); **119** maskette, Dorset, Abverdjar, caribou scapula, 6.4, CUMAE (EO); maskette, Dorset, Alarnerk, ivory, 3.9, NMC (JM); **120** bear, Dorset, Button, wood, 14.9, NMC (EO); **121** two bears, Dorset, Button, wood, 5.3 & 2.2, NMC (EO); human, Dorset, wood, 7.3, NMC (EO); **122** woman, Dorset, Button, wood, 10.5, NMC (EO); Taylor op. cit.; Rasmussen 8:145; **123** man, Dorset, Button, 12.2, NMC (NMC); **124-5** two masks, Dorset, Button, 18.3 each, NMC (EO); **126** Taylor op. cit. and "Prehistoric Canadian Eskimo Art," Masterpieces of Indian and Eskimo Art from Canada, Musee de l'homme; **127** two females, Thule, Steensby, ivory, 4.4 & 4.3, NMC (FS); **128** duck, Thule, Batty Bay, ivory, 3.9, ROM (EO); red-throated loon, Thule, Pingitkalik, ivory, 4.5, NMC (FS); common loon, Dorset, Igloolik, ivory, 4.6, NMC (FS); **129** four birds, two with human female heads, Thule, Naujan, ivory, 3.6-4.9, DNM (JM); **131** female, Thule, Strathcona, wood, 8.8, NMC (EO); **132** toggle, ivory, 7, ROM (FB); **133** seal, Fullerton, c. 1920, 6.4, ROM (FB); **135** carved tusk, Aivilik, 1950, 22.8 (FB); **136** Rasmussen 8:247; **139** comb, Thule, Igloolik, ivory, 10.3, NMC (EO); **140-1** carved antler, Dorset, Prince of Wales, 14, ROM (EC & FS); **142** carved antler, Dorset, Abverdjar, 21, CUMAE (EO); **143** carved antler, Dorset, Igloolik, 10.8, EM (EO); carved bone, Dorset, Mansel, 8.9, NMC (EO); **145-6** crooked knife, antler handle, Eastern Arctic, c. 1920, ROM (EC); **146** woman, Thule, Resolute, ivory, 4.5, NMC (CS); **146-7** C. Schuster, "Eskimo Pendants in the Form of Inverted Human Figures," unpublished ms.; "Pendants in the Form of Inverted Figures from the Palaeolithic to Modern Times," VII Internat. Congress of Anth. and Ethn. Sci., Moscow; **148** woman, Thule, Levesque, ivory, 5.5, ROM: l (CS), r (EO); **149** woman, Thule, Naujan, ivory, 4.7, DNM (JM); H. Collins pers. comm.; **150** woman, Thule, Steensby, ivory, 4.4, NMC: l (CS), r (EO); **151** woman, Thule, Igloolik, ivory, 5, MH (CS); **152-3** woman, Dorset, Southampton, ivory, 3.8, PRM (CS); **154** Schuster, "Skin and Fur Mosaics in Prehistoric and Modern Times," Festscrift fur Ad. E. Jensen; "Incised Stones from Nevada and elsewhere," Nev. Arch. Survey, Reporter 2, 5:4-23; **155-7** Rasmussen 7(1):64-5; **159** R. Flaherty, Drawings by Enooesweetok of the Sikosilingmint Tribe, Fox Land, Baffin Island; **160** Rasmussen 8:312; **161** Rasmussen 9:269; **163** bow for drill, Thule, Arctic Bay, ivory, 41, NMC (NMC); L. Choris, Voyage pittoresque autour du monde; F. Beechey, Narrative of a Voyage to the Pacific and Beering's Strait; **165** sketch, Hudson Bay area, 1910-22, ROM (EC); **169-71** Flaherty op. cit.; Rasmussen 8:298; **174** Rasmussen 7(1):81; **175** Rasmussen 7(1):113; **177** sketch, Aivilik, 1950; **180** Rasmussen 8:206; **182-9** Rasmussen 7 (1):145, 160-1, 176-7, 192-3; **193** see, for example, the child-like writings of C. Martijn, J. Vastokas, & D. Ray, each of whom starts with, and never escapes from, the souvenir experience, which is the only one they really know; **202** comb, Thule, Pelly Bay, ivory, 11, EM (EO); **205** Rasmussen 7(1):47; **206** Rasmussen 7(1):166; **207** Flaherty op. cit.; **209** Aivilik, 1950; **214** Riesman op. cit.; **215** Rasmussen 7(1): 145; rear end paper, Flaherty op. cit.

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