

H85-107

KUAC Chinook Radio Series: Alaskan Mask Exhibit, Sam Fox and workshop instructor Ron Senungetuk

Part 1:
Chinook Profiles

Bear Gallery at Alaskaland, Alaskamuit Exhibit of Native Art. The exhibit traveled to other areas of Alaska after being displayed in Fairbanks and some of the masks which were a focal point of the show will become part of the art bank at Alaska State Council on the Arts. The masks were made by Native artists during a 2 week long workshop at the Native Arts Center at the University of Alaska. Ron Senungetuk was the workshop coordinator and instructor. Participating artists were: Fred Anderson, Henry Bighead, Sam Fox, Rick Seeganna, and Joseph Senungetuk. Also included were a student, Kathleen Carlo, and instructor Glen Simpson. They made the masks based on traditional Native designs, though the masks for this exhibit were not considered traditional pieces. Mask artists were not limited to traditional forms, but were encouraged to let their creativity guide them and past masks inspire them. Masks last used in the 1840s and 50s and 60s. Missionaries came around and phased them out as well as many other traditional cultural festivals, dances, and so on. Sam Fox's masks were rooted in his traditional background of stories though he doesn't think his masks are traditional, Other masks in the exhibit were more contemporary and would probably have caused some conflict if they were being considered by past traditional mask artists. Materials ranged from those that were more traditional to contemporary materials such as copper pipe, acrylic paint and other materials. It was stressed that these masks are not for traditional dances, but for art, so the masks were treated as expressions of art. The artists took this to heart and approached the creation of their masks from that perspective. In older times, masks were also art, but art for the more specific purpose of being used in dances. So the masks were created for these dances—though that did not downplay the artistic quality of the mask itself. The artists were not trying to compete with them by making traditional designs better, but rather gather inspiration from these traditional masks. Ron Senungetuk talks about how when masks were put into museums and assigned ritual significance by academics and anthropologists they were already far removed from the people and the culture. The mask artists need to be with the masks and make them without caring what anthropologists and other people say about the masks. Senungetuk is not interested as much in preserving anything as he is in the art. Art is different from preservation. If you create a mask for the purpose of selling, it becomes a trinket item no longer in the realm of art but rather in the realm of the reality of work and compensation in dollars. When you make masks for art's sake you don't have to worry about what monetary compensation you're going to get for a mask, you can deal with form, the expression of the item, etc. Senungetuk believes that you should be an artist first and not always part of an ethnic group. The pressure for Alaska Natives to create art that looks Eskimo, etc. is great. An artist should be representing himself and not necessarily his heritage unless he wishes it to be. When dealing with students and workshop, Sam Fox lets each decide for themselves whether or not they want to be identified with a specific region or background. People have told Fox before that he should just do ivory carving or call himself an Alaska Native artist. He wants to recognize himself as a person who creates art and happens to be Alaska Native.

Part 2

Chinook Echoes

In this program on masks, the focus is on masks that reside in museums, specifically the University of Alaska Museum. This Chinook program focuses on an interview with the curator of Ethnology Dinah Larsen. When people view masks in museums today they tend to view it only as a mask; as an “Art” object or an object of curiosity. They are not seeing it as an important part of the culture from which it came. Masks have a long tradition of use for various reasons, mainly as a way of communicating with the supernatural. It is only in the past 100 years that masks have been collected by individuals and museums. Many masks presently in museums are those that have been collected without any information, no matter where they have come from. It was often the case that the information relating to these masks was not recorded. This is truest of those masks collected in the early days, when there were problems such as linguistics and communications. They have a lot of accounts and descriptions of ceremonies viewed by an outsider, who wrote down what they saw but didn’t have the cultural knowledge and explanation to strengthen and inform what they were seeing, so they only really saw the tip of the iceberg. Being an ethnologist is like being a detective and sometimes it takes years to fit all the pieces of the puzzle together. One of the most interesting and also problematic things about masks in Alaska is that there aren’t many people left who remember times when masks were indeed an integral part of the culture and used in specific ceremonies. Besides the fact that early missionaries coming to Alaska actively discouraged the use of masks, many ceremonies required the destruction of the mask at the completion of the ceremony, so not only are the reasons gone, but also the masks themselves did not all survive. Quite a few people have tried to find these things; in particular Larsen mentions a book by Dorothy Jean Ray in which she discusses Alaskan masks and their importance to the culture. Generally masks are used in the ceremony in conjunction with a costume. Though the masks tend to be displayed the costume does not. The movie “In the Land of the Headhunters” was put together on Vancouver Island about 60 years ago by photographer Edward Curtis. The film shows a story that involves the use of masks. This film was the first time Larsen had seen Northwest Coast masks used in conjunction with traditional costumes and she says it made a huge difference. The example Larsen gives is that the grizzly bear mask was worn by a man dressed as a bear and everyone else also had on a costume; you didn’t see someone standing around in plain clothes. Larsen generalizes this unique situation by saying that the mask was believed to contain a spirit and when the mask was donned along with the costume and used in a ceremony, you became the earthly embodiment of that spirit. It is comparable to religious ceremonies in our contemporary cultures. A priest takes on another role in ceremonies and rituals. Masks were also used in secular ceremonies for fun as a note of humor. These also had cultural implications as there are certain people you can make fun of and certain people you were not supposed to make fun of. Masks are still used in the world today and retain a powerful meaning, especially when used in a particular way. Even in Alaska the use of masks is regaining popularity as people become more interested in their past and passing it on to younger generations. An example of this new attitude towards traditional culture would be that the number of Alaska native dance groups has multiplied in the last few years. The caribou skin masks coming from Anaktuvuk Pass began as a joke by 3-4 men in the late 50s early 60s. They were familiar with traditional masks as well as Halloween masks. So they decided it would be fun to make some masks and appear at a village function. They did and people thought that was nice and then someone came to the village and thought the masks were interesting and wanted to buy them. It’s gone on from there. Now it’s a cottage industry in the area and they’re very easily

recognizable masks. Masks do not have to be ancient or old to be in a museum. Everyone's definition of old varies. The museum contains several Anaktuvuk Pass Masks. It's also important to find out what people are doing and using today because this will be the past sometime in the future, so museums do not just collect "old stuff", that's only one of the many functions of a museums. It's difficult to bring a mask to life appropriately for museum goers because it is in many ways impossible to recreate the exact experience of a mask. You can use costumes, photos, recordings of music, brief text, etc. to enhance museum goers' experience with the mask. The museum will soon feature its exhibits organized by region of the state and within that flora, fauna, peoples, etc. The current museum layout is presented in chunks such as animals, flowers, peoples, which is not an integrated approach. The museum will be moving towards an integrated approach in hopes that the public will be able to have a better understanding and relationship with the contents.