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Roger Lang talks about a possible Institute for Native Arts

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

Fairbanks, Alaska

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Series: Potlatch series

Jeff Kennedy said on May 18th Roger Lang addressed the conference of Alaska Native Arts Institute. Various delegates discussed whether to start such an institute. Roger addressed the group on some of the issues they should consider in their decision.

Roger Lang said the individual work of artists needs to be preserved as well as everything else, but they feel there is a need to create a method to preserve the talent that is exemplified at the conference. They need to create a system where it is passed on again to others. There needs to be a recognition of Alaska Native art from the crafts field to the true status.

Felicity by Fred Neal

Roger Lang said basically the form called Alaska art is recognizable by anyone who sees it. The traditional art is something else. The basis of establishing that traditional art and preserving it is part of the concern of the committee. He wouldn't want to restrict the artist. Once they know the basic traditional methods, whatever you think that is, once it is learned he wouldn't want to restrict their imagination. He thinks they need to talk about it. It needs to be identified. It varies from different regions.

Along the way by Bert Jansen and John Renborn

Jeff Kennedy said Roger Lang stressed that he was not an artist and could not decide if an institute was feasible.

Roger Lang said if there is a creation of an Alaska Native Art Institute he wonders if it has to be tied to an existing system hung up on credits or pieces of paper. This is something that needs to be talked about. He said they establish their own standards. If they establish something they feel is necessary he is sure they can find a vehicle to create it. The vehicle doesn't have to lie in recognizing institutes that now do that. Several have spun off like the visual art center. Those are necessary for survival for artists. If you want accreditation for the products that are put out then they have to set parameters about who is going to give that accreditation on their art institute. He finds there is great latitude within the delivery systems of the university as conceived by the

legislature. There is no holy grail about education. It is easy to part and easy to be a part of providing you use the proper means and methods for getting into it including teacher certificates.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said it is very easy cloistered from the world to say let's start an institute. It will be bothering other people. Their greatest trauma to people is introducing change into their lives. You will be bothering the University of Alaska, the current art council, and the visual art center. He said when you talk about these kinds of topics you should talk about how to get all these people together and say we have a plan and how can you be part of it. He doesn't want them to just go in and say hey we are going to do it.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said the delivery systems have changed for the education systems in Alaska. He is part of a GED program that is now being conducted solely by television. He is the cheerleader for the program. About once a month he goes up to the University of Alaska and cuts a tape which gets distributed throughout the state to over 100 villages. There is a new media for teaching. You don't have to address forty students sitting in chairs, but you teach a camera how good you are.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said we tend to forget that feathers and furs are a part of the art form. It needs to be as elevated as everything else. There is a tradition of bead work. Other than a recognized need he doesn't have anything else except a vehicle to begin to do something about it. It is just one tool that he can offer them. It is a tool that will have an executive director and a functioning board. They will do things but they need to know what they want to do.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said in their quest to define traditional art it is like his fight with Congress and the state of Alaska to define a subsistence use that fits all Natives. To equate a subsistence use in Barrow with something from Saxman or Unalaska doesn't fit for the whole area of the state and he is sure that is true about art. Tradition in some areas of the states is 99 percent pure. In other areas it is 1978 and things are happening. The feeling he has is every song they sing in the Tlingit tradition is probably 400 years old. They don't have any song rights. Nobody is writing about being a Tlingit in 1978. They have a strange sense of authorship. They have a strange jealousy of disclosing this kind of stuff. That is why he has difficulty with "tradition." There are areas and pockets in this state that would say because the conference is in English the tradition and culture has been screwed up already.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said when he was going to high school in 1947-48 the primary goal for Roger Lang was to be the best Caucasian. He wanted to assimilate completely. He said when you create a

system you better create what you want out of that system. It had better not be anything that you don't hold dear. The problem with cashing in on this resurgence of pride is that it also has to be relevant to the student you will be teaching. It has to mean something to that student.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said his main theme about education is that Alaska needs to develop their own avenues of escape from the system – Alaska Natives do. A means of escape a lot of times are the drug and alcohol problems. Maybe an escape would be to bring in a seal and process it. He thinks in those terms about the avenue of escape for the people you collect into the institute will be.

Song identified at the end of the program

Roger Lang said the primary responsibility for being Native in 1978 is to manage change. There is change in art. There is a change in everything that is happening to them. The other responsibility is to preserve what they hold dear to them and nobody else in any form they think is necessary. How best to do that in their particular field as artists is what this conference is all about. He said the only limits are their imagination. The recognition is there and the field is there. How best to enhance their product in marketing, in preservation and teaching, and how to expand to make it relevant to the Alaska Native student and non-Native student in the year 1978 is where they are at. Other than that they have no problems.

Jeff Kennedy said the songs heard on this program were a Navajo song on Folkways records, David Christman quintet, the Savoonga dancers, Mary McCaslin, Myra Robert, Grinn, and Chet Atkins.

Institute of Alaska Native Arts (Alaska)