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Ron Senungetuk, Robert Wangetillin on Alaska Native art

Jeff Kennedy, moderator

Series: Potlatch tapes

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Ann Nicolai interviews Ron Senungetuk. Ron said when he was about fourteen years old he became involved with ivory carving. He grew up in Wales and it was encouraged to carve ivory. Ann asked him what materials he carved in. Ron said in his line of art he may carve wood, but his main education work has been silversmithing. He works in jewelry craft. Levi Lott asked about some of the places he has traveled studying art. Ron said first it was Wales, then Mt. Edgecumbe School, then Rochester New York studying at the Rochester Institute of Technology, then Oslo Norway on a Fulbright Scholarship and studied at the National Arts and Crafts School at Norway. He spent time in the Scandinavian countries and studied crafts. He talked about the silversmithing craft. He designs silver jewelry. He uses Alaskan materials with the silver. Ann asked if Native artists are born or developed. Ron said not all Native people are artists. Many Native people are adaptable to hand work. He thinks artists are happiest if he is free and doesn't have to stick to a certain line of work because he is Eskimo. The artist doesn't have to make all of his work Eskimo. He should be able to explore other possibilities. Individual style should be explored. There are nice things about doing Eskimo art. You can put good identity to your work. It is a sort of security. For some artists it becomes a crutch. The artist may be stuck to a certain style. He is going to treat himself as Ron Senungetuk who wants to do his art. People tell him he must confine his work to ivory because it is traditionally Eskimo work. He disagrees with this. He must be free to do whatever he wants to do.

Buffy Sainte Marie song.

Public service announcement from the Cooperative Extension Service about peanut butter consumption.

Ann Nicolai asked Ron Senungetuk what Eskimo masks were used for. Ron said they aren't too prevalent today in Alaska. Some dance groups for tourists are using them. It is primarily for entertainment now. Dancers generally do not use masks anymore. At the time they were used they were used for ceremonies for invitational dances. Some wore comical masks others wore more serious types relating to religion or magic. Some masks were used for whale ceremonies after a successful hunt. The captain might use dance masks that were strictly for the whale captain. A simpler mask was used as a lid of a wood dish. Levi Lott asked Robert what kind of art he does. Robert said right now he carves a lot of ivory. He likes to work with silver and ivory. He also works with gold. He likes the feel of the gold. Ron said Robert was an ivory carver that was a traditional carver when he first worked with him. His work hasn't drastically changed, but he is now working with silver and marble. His work is enlarging from just ivory. His silver with ivory is along the lines of St. Lawrence Island from a long time ago. Ann Nicolai asked if Alaskan Native art is functional. Ron said it was mostly functional a long time ago. It has become

purely decorative since commercialism, since the western man came on the scene. It became a commercial product. This period is now primarily decorative. The artist may do his own work for other reasons – art for art. Levi Lott asked Robert why he decided to come to the University of Alaska. Robert said Melvin Onnano was from his island and talked to him. Levi Lott asked Ron what he tells people who are interested in studying art at the university. Ron said it has happened by reputation. The present group of students returns home at the end of the school year and tells others about the program. This is a slow way of relating the information about the program. They may need to write letters to superintendents of schools with information about the program. They plan to make a brochure about the art program. Levi Lott said the brochure should be sent out to the various corporations. Ron said they are searching for a good way to set up communication. It is almost like a one-man operation. Hopefully they will become better at communications. Ann Nicolai asked about the cost of Eskimo art. Ron said that is like asking why does the pipeline cost so much. He talked about why there are high markups on some things. They may not be costly at the beginning but they may be costly by the time they get to Anchorage. For more individual at he doesn't think there is any guideline for pricing. A piece of his work may cost 500 dollars. He talked about the trinket market compared to the fine art market. Levi Lott asked how old Robert was when he first started carving. Robert said he was about sixteen or seventeen. He learned from his father. Ann Nicolai asked about where the money for a piece of work goes. Ron said some goes to the trader or dealer. Ann asked if the Eskimo artist gets a fair share of the price. Ron said not always. It is a very difficult situation because in the past it has been a retailing market or the middleman market. A person who lives in Fairbanks or Anchorage may go to St. Lawrence Island and buy a large amount of artwork. He may then go to the gift shop and wheel and deal. That type of sales at gift shops virtually controls the market. Native artists and craftsmen themselves need to be the controlling entity. They should set the prices. They would become like an art guild. He thinks there would be a more equal situation. Craftsmen in Alaska can't make a good living with ivory carving now because they don't get the proper market share. The situation needs to be turned around. Levi Lott commented about a guild. Ron said there would have to be a tremendous amount of education about this. He thinks the corporation movement in Alaska will make it easier to look into the art trade activity. Ann Nicolai asked if there was an economic future for Eskimo artists. Ron said he thought so. It will not be wide scale success. The individuals who recognize themselves as artists and craftsmen will be able to do this as a business. He said there is a lot of demand for real work. Ann Nicolai said when we think of Eskimo art we think of sculpture and music and asked about painting and pottery. Ron said the pottery hasn't been terribly important. There is activity in Bethel. It is at the early stages right now. He thinks painting would be more like printmaking and graphic art. Oil painting would not be large scale but at the individual level. He thinks printmaking would have more regional appeal. He thinks the ivory making could widen into other crafts. He thinks Robert could be a new kind of specialist as an art teacher. Levi Lott asked if he wanted to make any other remarks. Ron said he hopes that he can be very independent doing his art work. He doesn't like to be told to confine his work to ethnic work. He said living art has to be creative and changing.

The moderator said Potlatch is produced in the KUAC studios in College in cooperation with KTOO Juneau, KOTC Kotzebue and KYUK Bethel under Title One of the Higher Education Act.