

Article

"Introduction"

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Introduction

Molly Lee*

The genesis of this issue was a double panel, “Circumpolar Art and Identity,” convened during the 13th Inuit Studies conference¹ held in Anchorage, Alaska, August 1-3, 2002. Over the previous year or so, as a result of my ongoing fieldwork on Yup’ik Eskimo coiled grass basketry, I had become sensitized to images of Yup’ik baskets. All of a sudden they seemed to jump out at me from every medium: a Yup’ik basket adorned an invoice from a bookstore in Bethel, and was featured on the cover of a Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta telephone book; one had been selected as the new logo of a non-Yup’ik Native Corporation in Anchorage, where it was emblazoned on the side of corporation vehicles; and a poster advertising an upcoming conference on traditional healing in Bethel featured a Yup’ik basket as its centerpiece. Since Yup’ik coiled basketry had been made for over a century, it seemed puzzling that the images would converge at this particular time in history.

Mulling over possible explanations, I speculated that it might be the convergence of two factors: (1) the reduction in the number of more spectacular art forms such as ivory carving in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, which might once have taken precedence over a lowly basket for such purposes and (2) the intensification of the subsistence debate in Alaskan politics as the years wore on with no break in the stalemate between the Alaska State Legislature and Alaska Natives over the issue of Alaska Native priority for subsistence rights on public lands. After all, I reasoned, Yup’ik baskets are made of beach (rye) grass and are often decorated with brightly dyed sea-mammal intestine, both subsistence products if there ever were any. Furthermore, with the decline in Yup’ik ivory carvings, the Yup’ik basket was probably the biggest seller of any Delta art form today. So, if a visible symbol of Alaska Native life on the land was needed, what better one to choose than the lowly coiled basket?

As I thought the matter over, it also occurred to me that though there had been numerous investigations of the non-Native appropriation of Native imagery for use as symbols, I wasn’t aware of any studies of indigenous people appropriating their own art forms for comparable purposes. I knew that Nelson Graburn had been planning research on a similar topic (the inuksuk) in the eastern Arctic, and when I contacted him he agreed that it would be worthwhile to “run up a flag and see who salutes,” especially given the upcoming Inuit Studies meetings; I decided to do just that.

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¹ The original panel consisted of Dawn Biddison, Aron Crowell, Nelson Graburn, Molly Lee, Amber Lincoln, Arthur Mason, and Gordon Pullar. Chase Hensel served as discussant.

Each paper included in this volume takes up the issue of art and representation in its own way. Using data from his extended work with Alutiiq people in the exhibition “Looking Both Ways,” Crowell makes the important point that identity is not necessarily monolithic. There are often at least two conceptions of an ethnic group’s identity, he argues, that of the group itself and the externally held view of outsiders such as anthropologists. Dawn Biddison takes a different approach to the perception of Native identity in her study of the representation of Alaska Native cultures in museum and public art venues, many of which continue to be plagued by stereotyping.

Graburn comments on the paradoxical relationship of the inuksuk as symbol with the original anthropomorphic piles of stone. The former are seen everywhere, from icons of international expositions to miniaturized tie tacks and refrigerator magnets whereas the original stone inuksuk is rarely made today. Graburn’s case study contrasts markedly with mine. For him, the symbol seems to be moving toward a replacement form of the original inuksuk, whereas the Yup’ik coiled grass basket is still thriving as an art form, and its use as an icon may still be in its infancy.

In their consideration of East Greenlandic clothing as ethnic marker, Buijs and Petersen point out that the clothing does not evolve in a logical manner, with one form following another. Frequently, the history doubles back on itself in the form of invention and reinvention through the centuries. Furthermore, they suggest that even today, East Greenlanders who have adopted European clothing for daily life continue to use their national costume as an important symbolic medium of communication on ceremonial occasions.

This volume which includes a number of different approaches to questions of indigenous identity through the medium of imagery is intended as a first consideration of this important topic. We hope that it will be joined by other such studies in the future.