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Ray: Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska

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Ray: Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska

approach to visual studies of society and to studies of visuals.

Nevertheless, the authors have done a service in bringing out a workbook-manual which will orient undergraduates, and instructors who have not yet considered ways of doing such studies, to the possibilities of a visual sociology. Although limited and not strong in its presentation of the potentials for original research using photography, this publication will provide a good introduction for the intended audience.

Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska.
Dorothy Jean Ray. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977. x + 298 pp., 307 black-and-white photographs. \$29.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Nelson H. H. Graburn
University of California, Berkeley

This encyclopedic work is the latest of Dorothy Jean Ray's many works on Alaskan Eskimo arts and may represent the culmination of her decades of research in northern and western Alaska. It is also the latest of a number of recent volumes on the historical and contemporary arts of the Eskimo (Burland 1973; Ritchie 1974; Roch 1975; Swinton 1972) and is a major contribution to the important trend to take seriously the nontraditional arts of native peoples (Graburn 1976). Though the book was published in connection with an exhibition shown at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington, in May 1977, it is more nearly an encyclopedia than a catalog, in that it attempts to describe and comment on the significance of all the genres or arts and crafts of the North Alaskan Eskimo in historical and recent times.

This is a large volume, with an 11 by 8½ inch format, wide margins, and plentiful illustrations, as befits the breadth of the subject matter surveyed. In spite of the imbalance between text (69 pages) and illustrations (176 pages), which is partially redressed by the extensive captions placed next to the photographs, this is not a "coffee table" book as it might first appear. Though the book is adequately illustrated, the photographs are all black and white and not spectacular, nor is the paper on which they are reproduced of high quality. Furthermore, as the author explains in the "Note about the Photographs," many of them were taken purely for the record under "home-made" conditions with ancient equipment. More than a small proportion of the plates lack definition either through having unsuitable backgrounds or through being out of focus. It should be added that a few of the institutionally produced photographs (e.g., #237 from the Smithsonian Institution) also suffer from the same faults, whereas some of the very oldest photographs (e.g., #296 by Lomen, 1903) are superb, as are the line drawings (taken from Choris 1822, and others) which illustrate the oldest material culture.

The book is for the serious collector and scholar interested in all aspects of Alaska Eskimo material culture.

The contents cover the area from St. Michael north around to the Canadian border, roughly the Inupik-speaking area, plus St. Lawrence Island (included because of its historical and stylistic affinities), and the time span is from 1778 to the present. After a short Foreword (by Richard Grove), the very brief Preface and Chapter I cover the historical and cultural contexts of Eskimo art. The bulk of the text comprises Chapter II on Traditional Art and Chapter III on Market Art. These sections are organized by material and genre, in approximately chronological order, allotting a page or so to each type. The breadth of the study will become obvious to the readers from the following lists: (1) Traditional Art includes Wood; Masks, Sculpture; Ivory; Charms, Amulets, Dolls, Decorated Utilitarian Objects; Baleen; Flint; Stone; Jade; Charms; Mythological Creatures: Painting and Engraving; Body and Face Painting, Tattooing, Rock Painting; Modified Engraving; Ice, Frost, Feathers and Decoys: Clay Pots, Mud Decoys, Rock *inuksuks*, Ice Models; Sewing: Ceremonial and Vanity, Traded Skins, Clothing, Ornament, Coiffure, Ptarmigan Quill Work; Weaving, Basketry: Grass, Birchbark. (2) Market Arts comprise Ivory Carvings; Wood Carvings; Other Materials: Bone, Baleen, Whale and Elephant Ivory; Stone; Soapstone Carving, Fakes; The Billiken; New Engraving; Figurines; Ivory Jewelry; Erotic Objects: Walrus Penis; Baleen Baskets; Bentwood Buckets, Horn Ladles and Dolls; Siberian-style Pipes; Caribou Jaw-Model Sleds; Skin Masks; Cloth and Fur Products; Drawings, Clothing, Soft Dolls, Appliqued Skin and Felt Pictures, and Stitchery.

Each of the above is described in an authoritative fashion, with attention to history, outside influences, and materials, in sections ranging in length from a paragraph to two pages. Each section in turn is well illustrated in the many photographs with long explanatory captions; in fact, the plates illustrate well over 600 objects. The last part of Chapter III is devoted to Projects and Programs rather than genres, and is again nearly encyclopedic, including the Indian Arts and Crafts Board; Alaskan Native Arts and Crafts Cooperative; Shungnak Jade Project; Kivalina Caribou Hood Project; Noorvik Projects and Taxco; Canadian Eskimo Art; Designer Craftsmen Training Project; University Projects, Arts Centers and Native Art Shows, and so on—described by the author as a flood of academic and subsidized programs since 1965. The artists themselves and the technical processes employed are partially illustrated in the last thirteen plates of the photographic section, but the bulk of the illustrations is devoted to objects rather than their creation.

As noted by Richard Grove in the Foreword, Dorothy Ray is "thoroughly unsentimental . . . she tells us exactly where we may see fine collections of Eskimo art of the past in museums, and she speaks of young people who are 'in the vanguard of the new Alaskan art'" (p.v.). Dorothy Ray herself stresses the ceaseless ingenuity of the Eskimo craftsmen and the immense variety of their arts; she does not bemoan lost genres but expresses her "gratitude to the nonnative custom of collecting for collecting's sake. . . . Without the white man's compul-

sive dedication . . . most of the objects . . . would not have been saved for future generations—Eskimo and non-Eskimo alike" (p. x.). Throughout the book souvenirs and market art are preponderant; they appeared soon after the earliest voyages of discovery and become very common from the 1870s on. Professor Ray rightly points out that we can understand little of the meaning of traditional arts, for they were already moribund by the time of the first good accounts, but that we can still appreciate them for the goal of perfection and the enjoyment of craftsmanship that the Eskimo creators must have borne in mind.

Market arts, on the other hand, while still demonstrating the Eskimo characteristics of craftsmanship, ingenuity, and humor, are the result of outside demands. The market searches for the twin values that the objects must (1) look "Eskimo" and (2) be handmade by Eskimos. These forces have favored ivory carving over other media, particularly since wood and painting are not automatically deemed "Eskimo." Occasionally this has led to the unfortunate emphasis merely on the "handmade by Eskimos," such as the popularity of Billikens, an introduced form, with little attention given to content and quality. The author sensitively discusses some of the ethical problems of what "handmade," "Eskimo," and other loaded terms mean, and the problems of what the older and younger generations think Eskimo art should be. She forthrightly comes out in favor of artistic quality rather than ethnic purity when discussing contemporary genres. She points out that the "art industry" has long been extremely important to the economy of Eskimo villages, and she estimates that by the 1970s some 1500 or more of about 10,000 adults are active producers and that many of them have chosen their residence on the basis of centers of art production. She concludes the text with a chapter entitled "The Past and the Future," which stresses the inherent limitations of the art market on the Eskimo craftsmen and the relative freedom enjoyed by the new breed of subsidized artists in the burgeoning modern support and training programs. She considers the new arts and artists very important in the emerging redefinitions and sustenance of modern Eskimo ethnicity in contemporary Alaska, with its vast industrial enterprises, higher-education programs, galloping urbanization, and powerful native corporations.

In summary the volume is almost "everything you wanted to know about North Alaskan Eskimo arts and crafts," and it will be sincerely appreciated by collectors and scholars for its comprehensiveness, authoritative data on collections, and bibliography; its glossary; and its useful index. For the reviewer its breadth, sadly, precludes it from having the depth of Professor Ray's *Artists of Tundra and Sea*, and its price precludes a higher quality of photographs and reproduction. In addition to the minor drawbacks mentioned above, one might note that the one small map (p. 4) should be larger and include all of the place names mentioned in the text, and that there should be an explanation of the orthography which appears to stem from a number of lay sources. This is an extremely useful sourcebook that will undoubtedly be treasured for many years by Eskimos and whites alike.

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1974 *The Eskimo and His Art*. New York: St. Martin's.
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Evidence. Mike Mandel and Larry Sultan. Santa Cruz, CA: Clatworthy Colorvues, 1977. 72 pp., photographs. \$12.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by *Drew Moniot*
Temple University

Photographs furnish evidence. Something we hear about, but doubt, seems proven when we're shown a photograph of it. [Sontag, 1977:5]

Susan Sontag's remarks capture the essence of the photographs contained in *Evidence*. Her words provide a unifying theme which permeates what might otherwise appear to be a random potpourri of images:

- A strange configuration of four human footprints, left in the dirt-covered surface of what might be cement patio flats. A pencil placed parallel to one of the prints in the foreground.
- A sizable pile or bank of rocks, retained by a huge net of wire mesh.

Between these opening and closing images in the book, others depict:

- a space-suited figure apparently executing a push-up on a carpeted office floor.
- nine men with I.D. cards attached to their lapels, standing along the crest of a hill, trying to appear casual for their group portrait.
- a white parachute extending horizontally above the ground, its shrouds attached to the top of a utility pole.
- a 1960-model Thunderbird with flames pouring out from its burning interior.
- a towering column of dust created by an explosion just ahead in the dirt road which stretches on into an expanse of Korean-looking terrain.

According to a release which accompanied a review copy of the book, *Evidence* began as an exhibition of 89 photographs retrieved from the files of government and industry offices and displayed at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art last spring. The release goes on to say: "The exhibition and book are the results of Mandel and Sultan's intensive three-year investigation of over 2