

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

[11-1972]  
NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

## ADVANCE FACT SHEET

EXHIBITION: Native Art of the American Arctic

DATES: March 3 through May 15, 1973

SCOPE: This major international loan exhibition will be the first devoted solely to the indigenous arts of the Alaskan lands from prehistoric times to the beginning of the modern period. A terminal date in the late 19th century has been established by the desire to focus on discoveries of the early navigators and explorers. The objects in the collections of these sailors and scientists, mostly retained by the European government which commissioned their travels, substantially precede western influence and allow viewers to realize fully the inherent beauty of the art of the region through more than twenty centuries. Loans to the exhibition are being made from state collections in eight nations abroad, including the Soviet Union, and twenty-four institutions in the Western Hemisphere. Following its premiere at the National Gallery, the exhibition will be seen in three more museums in the United States, in Alaska, Oregon, and Texas. (See itinerary below)

CONTENT: The more than 350 pieces have been chosen from work of the four principal cultures of the Alaskan land mass: the Eskimos and Aleuts, principal representatives of the earlier periods, and the later art of the Tlingit-Haida and Athapascan Indians. Presentation of the objects will concentrate on their role as art treasures, but will also encourage an understanding of the chronological, ceremonial and utilitarian aspects of the material as a whole. Among the works included will be:

- polychromed and feathered masks and helmets carved into human, animal, bird, sea life and abstract forms
- rare painted and beaded fishing hats richly adorned with ivory carvings

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- ceremonial headdresses with original ermine cascades
- carved and painted chests, boxes, and several varieties of colored, split-willow baskets
- a giant ceremonial frog, loaned by an existing clan
- stone lamps and inlaid grease dishes
- bone implements such as decorated harpoon rests, a halibut hook, and a snow knife
- ceremonial gowns of puffin and cormorant skins
- ivory needlecases, figured boxes, and powder flasks
- beaded "octopus bags" and quillwork boxes, bracelets, and belts
- sealskin and walrus-gut parkas
- a prehistoric ivory burial mask
- beaded and quillwork buckskin costumes
- quivers and shields with painted geometric decorations
- a salmon-skin hood
- early ivory carvings of bears, birds, and fantastic creatures
- delicately worked iron daggers, and an iron hair ornament, with abalone inlay

The earliest objects are from the Okvik phase of prehistoric Eskimo culture, and include some of the famous ivory "madonnas", considered to be among the most beautiful figures in indigenous art. The most recent pieces, collected during the last U. S. explorations and missionary work at the end of the 19th century, mark the final phase of indigenous cultures in "Russian America".

LENDERS: The objects from abroad are being lent from collections in the Soviet Union, Finland, Denmark, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Scotland and Ireland. Within its broad chronological range, the exhibition will concentrate on the 18th and 19th century Age of Discovery, during which the exploration of the Alaskan coasts and river basins was carried out mostly by Finnish, Danish, and

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Russian naval officers, many of whose original collections will be represented in the exhibition. The objects from the Soviet Union (one of the largest loans) are among the finest pieces extant, and have never before been exhibited outside Russia.

From the Western Hemisphere, the largest single loan will be made by the Smithsonian Institution, which holds most of the material collected by various agencies of the United States Government after the American purchase of the Alaskan peninsula. Outstanding loans are also being made by two institutions in Canada and twenty public and private institutions in the United States.

CREDITS AND CATALOG: The exhibition has been organized in conjunction with the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art in Fort Worth. It was originally suggested by the late René d'Harnoncourt of the Museum of Modern Art, and has been in active preparation since 1968 by Mitchell Wilder, director of the Amon Carter Museum of Western Art and his principal consultant, Dr. Erna Gunther of Seattle. Final selections were made by Mr. Wilder, Dr. Douglas Lewis, Curator of Sculpture at the National Gallery, and Dr. Henry B. Collins, Archaeologist Emeritus at the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. Dr. Collins, also a distinguished author in this field, has written one of the primary essays for the catalog. Additional entries have been written by Professor Frederica de Laguna of Bryn Mawr College, and Professor Edmund Carpenter of New York, who also served as consultant for the exhibition.

ITINERARY:

National Gallery of Art, March 3, 1973 through  
May 15, 1973

Anchorage Historical Society and Fine Arts Museum,  
June 10, 1973 through September 9, 1973

Portland Museum of Art, September 23, 1973  
through November 18, 1973

Amon Carter Museum of Western Art, Fort Worth,  
December 10, 1973 through February 25, 1974

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 224.