

THE LIVING TRADITION OF YUP'IK MASKS: AGAYULIYARARPUP, OUR WAY OF MAKING PRAYER. By ANN FIENUP-RIORDAN. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996. 320 p., maps, b&w illus., colour illus., glossary, bib., index. Hardbound. US\$75.00.

I am a great fan of Ann Fienup-Riordan's books on the Alaskan Eskimos and especially of this, her most recent, which describes their masked ceremonies. I recommend it to everyone: Yup'iks, Whites, professionals, laymen, children—no exceptions. There's nothing else like it.

True, it doesn't even come close to exhausting the subject. But it establishes a base camp, points to the right trail, then starts up. Others can follow, perhaps lead.

The author begins by asking what this art meant to those for whom it was originally intended—a question not easily answered. Those who produced it are dead and in life chose a medium alien to us. Yup'ik masks are songs rendered visually.

I'm reminded of Paul Klee, who said his works owed more to Bach and Mozart than to any master of art. He wanted art to *sound* like a fairy tale, to be a world where things fall upward. Like the Yup'ik, he preferred the borderless.

By contrast, neighboring Northwest Coast Indian artists begin with a frame, then lock motifs tightly into place. They focus on containment. Their bias is visual.

Sensory profiles differ. One culture exploits sight, mutes sound. Another favors the opposite. Countless combinations occur. Yup'ik artists, more than any others I know, favored sound in designing masks.

Those masks astonish us in still other ways. Many unite elements opposed in nature. Others divide themselves into paired, complementary opposites. They do so for reasons Aristotle, Hertz, Ogden, Lloyd, Lévi-Strauss, Needham and others tell us are universal. Paired, opposing masks sometimes look alike. This should not mislead us: our two hands look alike, but symbolically play opposing roles.

Western interpretation goes well beyond Yup'ik explanation. Fienup-Riordan ignores this gap. No one escapes cultural blindness. Fish never discovered water and Yup'ik artists never discovered binary opposition. Like all of us, they simply practiced it.

Fienup-Riordan's first duty is to preserve every detail of mind and heart that gave birth to these unparalleled works. Here she serves us well, not just outsiders like me but Yup'ik descendants of those who invented these forms. She acts as a surrogate tribal elder, recording what otherwise might be lost. For this achievement, I honor her.

A section on Surrealism is less successful. She tells how Surrealists collected Yup'ik masks, but not what drew them to these visual puns. Lévi-Strauss explains. His essay on Max Ernst, the Surrealist artist, notes parallels between Ernst's paintings and his own writings (Lévi-Strauss, 1985:243–247). The common feature, he explains, is binary opposition.

In that essay he quotes Ernst extolling “the bringing together of two or more elements apparently opposite in nature, on a level whose nature is the opposite of theirs,” and

illustrates this with Ernst's “chance encounter” of a sewing machine (binder) and umbrella (blocker) on a dissecting table normally reserved for organic objects.

Compare this to a Yup'ik mask of a creature half walrus, half caribou, keeping in mind that animals of the sea and those of the land were traditionally, rigorously, separated in daily life.

Elsewhere Lévi-Strauss (1943:180) writes of “this dithyrambic gift of synthesis, the almost monstrous faculty to perceive as similar what all other men have conceived as different.”

Fienup-Riordan says: “many have commented on the surreal character of Yup'ik masks.... One might better speak of the Yup'ik character of the creations of the Surrealists, who carefully studied the Yup'ik masters and put what they learned to good use” (p. 273). This misses the point. Cubism didn't come out of Africa, and Surrealism never came out of Alaska. The Cubists simply recognized in African art underlying patterns they already favored. “These are my witnesses,” Picasso allegedly said, pointing to African carvings in his studio.

Surrealism existed before any Surrealist ever saw a Yup'ik mask. No Surrealist “borrowed freely from them” (p. 262). What Yup'ik and Surrealist art shared (loosely) wasn't a single origin, but underlying patterns independently conceived. One of those patterns reflected the brain's basic mode of operation. Other parallels rested on roughly analogous sensory profiles.

Fienup-Riordan devotes little time to such thoughts. Instead, she focuses on memory, the right choice. Here she remains cautious, again rightly so. Modern glosses by living descendants are usually no more than rationales designed for strangers. If original meanings can be discovered at all, it is only through a painstaking assembly of evidence, a gathering in of parts, oral and written. For this, Fienup-Riordan needed Yup'ik elders, and they needed her. Their collaboration is a model of success.

Written records helped. Several field-collectors, especially A. H. Twitchell, documented what they collected (p. 249–273). Knud Rasmussen, in 1924, commissioned and annotated twenty Nunivak masks (Sonne, 1988). Weaving these and other data together, Fienup-Riordan offers us, as nearly as we may ever come to it, a convincing account of how these masks were used.

Why revive an abandoned art? “Primitivism,” that fashionable alternative to civilization and progress, seeks a return to nature and to origins regarded by some as more basic, more honest. To this end, we ask Natives to dance for us at lunch and carve souvenirs to decorate our homes. Fienup-Riordan has more in mind. She and her Yup'ik collaborators hope to breathe back into this art the spirit that gave it birth and thereby reawaken traditional Yup'ik identity.

The history of conquest was not always thus. After the Battle of Culloden in 1746, England sought to stamp out Scottish identity. The plaid was proscribed on penalty of death. Tartans were abandoned. But soon England, in need of troops to guard her empire, created a new, controlled Scottish

identity, assisted by Sir Walter Scott. From this ersatz identity descended the pipe bands and Highland dances now favored by the Scottish tourist industry.

In America, Blacks weren't schooled in Western music or asked to perform their own music for Whites. That role was restricted to Whites in burnt-cork. Black music developed on its own and gave the world Spirituals, Blues, Rag, Jazz, Rock, Roll, Rap, and related spin-offs in language and dance.

One can only wonder: how would Yup'ik art have developed if left alone from the beginning? And where will it go from here? A century of ridicule, followed by souvenir exploitation and misguided scholarship, left a shambles of this extraordinary art. Fienup-Riordan helps put it back on its feet.

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#### FREEZE FRAME: ALASKA ESKIMOS IN THE MOVIES.

By ANN FIENUP-RIORDAN. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1995. 234 p., colour and b&w illus., filmography, bib., index. Hardbound. US\$29.95.

*Freeze Frame* studies the role of culture in establishing, maintaining, and perpetuating stereotypes about the “other.” While Fienup-Riordan concentrates on film representations of Alaska Natives from the early 1900s to the 1990s, this work lends itself to a wider analysis of the role of culture and its relationship to imperialism. Around the world, outsiders—using film, painting, novels and other forms of artistic expression—have made representations of indigenous people. In this sense, *Freeze Frame* has scholarly application for comparison to other parts of the world. Despite the significant diversity within their culture, film images of Alaska Natives have been monolithic and exotic. Fienup-Riordan explores the fundamental themes emerging from these images and examines the motivations of those constructing them. Why do producers visit their fantasies of the “Eskimo” on the Alaskan landscape? Often a landscape had to be artificially fabricated in Alaska to suit the “authentic” image producers desired: for instance, the igloo is alien to many aboriginal communities of Alaska. What is the meaning of this search

for the authentic “Eskimo,” purified of any European impact? Both the early ethnographic films and the populist films for movie theatres maintain a rather evangelical devotion to the “pure Eskimo.” Hollywood production companies went to great lengths and cost to manufacture this construct.

This preoccupation tells us more about the American psyche than about the Alaska Natives, who are presented as primitive on the one hand and noble on the other. This representation achieved a dual purpose. First, the American industrial culture saw itself as the pinnacle of civilization, having emerged from primitive roots through the European Enlightenment to find its “manifest destiny” on the North American continent. Self-affirming and self-congratulatory, this view was not sufficient for the American self-image: American culture also had its corrupting influences, and these warts on the self-portrait also had to be acknowledged. Like the modern-day fundamentalists who want to return to some mythical past, the filmmakers did this by going back to a time when society had not yet felt the impact of civilization. Showing life drained of its modern complexity, the films would instruct viewers in the noble qualities of a primitive society. Thus, the second and equally important function of the image of the “Eskimo” was self-criticism of American society. Fienup-Riordan effectively uses frozen frames from films to drive home her written observations. The pictures are a visual testimony to her analysis. One not only reads about the image of the “Eskimo” but sees it.

The intellectual roots of the notion of the “noble primitive” are found in Ancient Greece. More recently, the idea found renewed currency among the thinkers of the French Enlightenment such as Rousseau. In the twentieth century it has gained a strong foothold in North America.

While this fetish with the primitive and noble is relevant to American society, it was pure fantasy with regard to the reality of Alaska Natives. The primitive image is essentially racist, and the noble image is romantic. Indeed, the tragic irony does not go unnoticed by Fienup-Riordan. From the 1920s on, as filmmakers were busily preparing a so-called “authentic” representation of the Eskimo in the “harsh Arctic,” significant changes were occurring in the material culture of the Alaska Natives. For instance, equipment used for hunting changed, reindeer herding was introduced, and communities were being devastated by an epidemic of tuberculosis. None of these events received the attention or consideration of the filmmakers. Should the films have reflected the real condition of Alaska Natives? If we use the criterion of the market, namely, what sells at the box office, the answer is No! It is not the responsibility of the filmmakers to represent the “reality” of Alaska Native life. But if we step away from the criteria of the market system and look at these films from a liberal democratic perspective, we see fundamental challenges to liberal ideals in America. Arguably the 1920s to the 1940s were characterized by separation of races and fascist obsessions with some mythical purity of races. These ideas were ripe not only in Germany, but also in Italy and later in South Africa. They were also alive and well in the United States and the European colonies.