

# INTRODUCTION: MAKING IT: CREATING ARTIFACTS IN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SETTING

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*“Yesterday evening and today I have been in a state of excitement, caused by my success in making combs. I have an artistic intoxication, it’s a little like writing verse.”*

So wrote the father of participant observation, Bronislaw Malinowski, in 1914 (Malinowski 1967:125). Malinowski was in the field at the time, “creating artifacts in the anthropological setting.” He purchased the tortoise shell for the combs (at a bargain price, he adds), and drew the designs for them. By his own account he spent many enjoyable hours working on combs, but not without some guilt: “In the morning wasted some time on tortoise shell” and, “I went back home intending to write retrospect[ive] Diary, and to work on tortoise shell only a little while. I started at 9 and was at it until 1...” In successive pages of his famous diary the entry, “tortoise shell” becomes a gloss for time spent designing and making combs. Malinowski’s combs were the tall curved tortoise shell variety made famous in O. Henry’s “The Gift,” and they were destined for his fiancée, Elsie, who waited out his long stint of fieldwork in Australia.

Perhaps Malinowski’s comb designs drew upon the native art he saw about him, for at one point he comments—maybe facetiously, maybe not— *“we planned to launch a new Papuan style.”* It’s worthy of note that his mentor in comb-making, the other half of this “we” was not a native, but a white ex-patriate on the Melanesian island of Samarai, identified in the diary only as “Smith.” Why, one wonders, would Malinowski have been spending so much time with a non-Native? Was it the lure of companionship of someone from his own culture, a temptation we anthropologists are urged to forego in the field? Or was it, perhaps, a tradeoff? Had Smith set up a cottage industry and willingly traded companionship for another pair of hands?

Unlike the authors whose papers follow, Malinowski’s artistic efforts had no ethnographic purpose, though they clearly might have had. They were simply

diversionary, a welcome respite from the loneliness and frustration of fieldwork. Malinowski obviously enjoyed working with his hands, appeared to be good at it, and waxed far more euphoric about his accomplishments in artifact making than in ethnography.

For many anthropologists in the field making artifacts as Malinowski did continues to be a welcome diversion from the stresses of field research and a milestone of self-accomplishment in a foreign culture. At the same time, it can also be an important form of participant observation, a way of joining in, expressing a willingness to learn, and earning approval. Research methods textbooks and manuals don’t mention making artifacts as a participant observation strategy (e.g., Jackson 1987; Russell 2002; Wolcott 1995) perhaps because such activity is assumed too inconsequential, or perhaps because it might blur the separation between observer and observed that such texts are often at pains to emphasize.

Making objects in the context of fieldwork is more apt to come from the toolkit of the aesthetic anthropologist or the art historian studying the art of a particular culture than from that of the ethnographer. At the very least the former have more reason to confess that they have made or attempted to make the objects that are the subjects of their study. Making ethnographic artifacts—“artifaking”—to use a term coined by art historian Bill Holm—has even led former hobbyists, such as Holm, into academe. Their careful attention to process and style has resulted in the identification and articulation of the formal rules underlying art styles (e.g., Bennett 1997; Holm 1965). Whatever else, few would disagree that, having made it, one can explain the process in ways that those without such first hand knowledge cannot.

In the course of his decades long studies of Inuit art Nelson Graburn tried his hand at carving Inuit stone sculpture and he included one of his artifacts in a serious research experiment. In an effort to resolve an ongoing debate about the aesthetic evaluation of Inuit art, Graburn subjected 25 pieces of Inuit sculpture exhibiting a range of styles and workmanship to two different audiences for evaluation. The first comprised Canadian Inuit in several northern communities (Graburn 1977). The second included White collectors, critics, and exhibit selectors, along with intelligent others not so familiar with Inuit art history (Graburn 2001 [1986]). The collection both groups evaluated included two non-Inuit—though not identified as such—sculptures, one of which was a snail carved by Graburn. Commenting on the results of this experiment, Graburn stated that, for neither audience of raters were there any clear-cut “winners” among the sculptures. His snail, a very non-Arctic creature, received a lower rating (C-) from Inuit than from Whites (who gave it a B), and he concluded, as any anthropologist might expect, that White and Inuit evaluations of Inuit sculpture differed markedly.<sup>1</sup>

Making artifacts in the anthropological setting may be uncommon among ethnographers, but it is the very stuff of ethno-archaeology. Doing so allows the archaeologist to put the made object to use to better understand its attributes, its performance, and its contribution to a past way of life. Lisa Frink, Brian Hoffman and Robert Shaw (2003), for example, replicated prehistoric slate-bladed ulus (the curve-bladed women’s knives common to Eskimo/Inuit groups) and gave them to modern Yup’ik Eskimo women for cutting fish to see if the slate ulus performed differently than modern steel-bladed ulus, and, if so, what these differences meant in Yup’ik lives. Ethnoarcheologists, then, are interested in the information about objects and their uses that can be extrapolated from “artifaking,” whereas ethnologists, making artifacts in the context of fieldwork, are more likely to be creating an occasion for open ended social interaction.

The papers that follow began as a discussion between the authors of this introduction. Blackman argues the merits of “making it” and shares Malinowski’s euphoria. She clearly enjoys humanizing the descriptive sterility that often pervades object studying and believes “making it” offers unique insight into understanding objects. Lee points to the drawbacks of “making it,” espe-

cially the narrowing effects that a focus on the purely technical aspects of an art form can have on its study. “Making it,” in her view, may limit understanding by confining one’s interpretation of ethnographic objects to the very formal rules of their construction and style. Given our divergent views, we thought the topic worthy of a symposium at the Alaska Anthropological Association meetings. Accordingly, Lee recruited several panelists and a discussant to join in the exchange, which took place in March of 2003.

“Making it” raises the issue of what it is about artifacts/art that we should be attending to in seeking to understand them. The contributors brought a range of perspectives, expertise, and Alaskan field experiences to the discussion. Hensel uses his efforts as an occasion for reflecting on the differences between Yup’ik and non-Native learning styles. He thinks of “making it” in respect to the rules of learning the process, the developmental issues of child/adult competence and in the significance of the reproduction of ancient artifacts.

Alix and Brewster, archaeologist and oral historian respectively, document how Alaska Natives choose raw materials from which to “make it.” In doing so, they provide valuable background for future investigators with interests in processual approaches to the study of artifacts. Their study of driftwood and its uses focuses on the raw material for artifact making and the importance of following its natural life cycle from forest to river to sea.

Linn ponders the weighty ethical issues of re-making ethnographic objects in museum collections, when the institutions where they are housed historically oppose such practices. Her case study of a kayak-recovering project in an Alaskan village touches on the question of authenticity and community involvement in the process of “re-making it.”

These five contributed papers and commentary broaden the discussion and expand the applications of making artifacts in the anthropological setting. We hope that they are only the first in an ongoing consideration of this under-investigated topic.

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<sup>1</sup>Graburn made the snail out of local stone as part of his ethno-aesthetic research. After a few weeks of showing photographs and actual sculptures to the people of Puvirnituk, he realized that pretty well all the Inuit comments concerned mimesis, the faithfulness to the original subject, e.g. Inuk, animal, bird, etc. So he made the snail so that Inuit would not know how faithfully it reproduced the original, and then showed it to many Inuit for comment. Only then did he get more formal comments: it should be placed more centrally on the base, the lightened (scratched) part of the surface should show better contrast with the polished stripe at the back, or material comments, e.g. the line on the top which looks like a crack should not appear there as white men might think it will break, and so on.

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