

REVIEW

LIVING OUR CULTURES, SHARING OUR HERITAGE: THE FIRST PEOPLES OF ALASKA

Edited by Aron L. Crowell, Rosita Worl, Paul C. Ongtooguk, and Dawn D. Biddison, 2010, Smithsonian Books, Washington, D.C.

hardcover \$50, paperback \$29.95, 312 pages, color figures, ; ISBN 978-1588342706

Reviewed by Amy Steffian

Alutiiq Museum and Archaeological Repository, 215 Mission Rd., Suite 101, Kodiak, AK 99615; amy@alutiiqmuseum.org

It is almost possible to smell salmon smoking, to feel an Aleutian Island breeze, or to hear the beat of a skin drum as you turn the pages of *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska*. This beautifully illustrated volume is literally overflowing with Native Alaska. From the voices of Native people to objects that document the ingenuity of ancestors and photos that capture the vibrant, living traditions of today's Native communities, *Living Our Cultures* is a celebration of Alaska's first peoples.

At the core of the volume are 200 ethnographic objects from the Smithsonian Institution's Alaska collections, most procured over a century ago and cared for in Washington, D.C. In partnership with the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center worked to bring the objects home on extended loan and create opportunities for exhibition and exploration. Published in 2010 by Smithsonian Books, *Living Our Cultures* is one piece of this impressive effort at reconnection. Many of the items in the book are currently displayed or available for study at the Anchorage Museum.

To frame the historic objects, volume editors offer essays on nine Alaska Native cultures written by contemporary cultural leaders. Each essay considers themes of (1) sea, land, and rivers; (2) family and community; and (3) ceremony and celebration, to present a personal view of Native experience. The editors have carefully woven museum object photos and provenance throughout these essays. A complete set of Athabascan summer ceremonial regalia ca. 1926 appears amid Eliza Jones' description of a

Koyukon memorial potlatch (pp. 193–194). Nineteenth-century Sugpiaq hunting gear follows Gordon Pullar's discussion of the pressures felt by today's fishermen (pp. 151–156). The effect is a sense of timelessness. Western, linear notions of past and present are suspended in favor of a more fluid sense of time where ancestors' objects contribute to the broad, complicated landscape of contemporary life.

The chapters also include short topical essays by culture bearers, adding a chorus of voices to the presentation. Aaron Leggett writes about being a Native person from Alaska's urban center, Anchorage. Ricardo Worl discusses the challenges of learning clan knowledge and becoming a Tlingit leader in the modern world. Karla Booth explores her connections to Metlakatla and the wild foods that provide physical and spiritual sustenance. While tensions brought by increasing globalization are evident, the presentation is celebratory. A sense of cultural pride pervades the book and, like the title, reminds readers that Alaska's Native cultures are living cultures. Photographs that highlight the Alaska landscape and the work of Native peoples also capture this spirit, filling the book with color and activity.

Chapters on the larger Living Our Cultures Project (by Aron Crowell), Alaska Native history (by Paul Ongtooguk and Claudia Dybdahl), and Alaska Native self-determination (by Rosita Worl) introduce the culture-specific essays. These essays frame the discussion, providing a broader context for understanding current perspectives on material culture, heritage preservation, collaboration with museums, and issues of identity.

Importantly, *Living Our Cultures* is the first survey of Alaska Native cultures primarily written by Alaska Native peoples. Although it is one of a growing number of publications that reflect collaborations between Alaska Natives and anthropologists around the interpretations of collections (e.g., Crowell et al. 2001; Fienup-Riordan 1996, 2007; Haakanson and Steffian 2009), it is the first to tackle a statewide presentation.

Like previous works, this book reflects a commitment to collaborative anthropology. Signs of this collaboration, and of a truly respectful engagement of multiple perspectives, appear in the details throughout the work. For example, *Living Our Cultures* represents each Alaska culture independently—as related yet unique societies. The Tlingit, Haida, and Tsimshian cultures, so often lumped in summaries, are considered individually, as are the Sugpiaq and Unangā. Similarly, the book ends with a chapter on collaborative conservation (by Landis Smith, Michele Austin-Dennehy, and Kelly McHugh), discussing the ways that partnership can extend beyond interpretation to the physical care of objects.

A number of the objects in this book have been published before. Some of the same ethnographic items can be found in *Inua* (Fitzhugh and Kaplan 1982), *Crossroads of Continents* (Fitzhugh and Crowell 1988), and *Looking Both Ways* (Crowell et al. 2001). However, the current presentation is unique. Showing collections from multiple cultures illustrates the breathtaking diversity of Native Alaska. It allows readers to contrast pieces with those from neighboring groups. The book offers an opportunity to study both the broad similarities and subtle differences between cultures and to consider their sources.

Another benefit of the presentation is that the object photographs are large and in color. *Living Our Cultures* shares 200 objects, each with a three-quarter page portrait. The objects are skillfully imaged on a white background. Although each is only pictured once, from one angle, it is possible to see fine details of constructions on many—to count stitches, to see how decorations were at-

tached or inlaid, and to examine graphic designs. This will please contemporary artists.

Beneath each object, readers find its Native and English names with size and provenance data. This is paired with a detailed caption that provides information on materials represented, a photo of the object in use, oral history information about the object, and a quote about object function. For example, we learn that a 14-cm-long *aangqaaq*, or ball, from St. Lawrence Island is made of bleached sealskin and stuffed with reindeer hair (p. 95). Yupik people used the ball in a game that celebrated the first whale harvested each season. Men played against women, and a fair amount of flirtation was involved. This level of detail is one of the work's strengths. The authors have developed a rich context for understanding every object and interpreting the Smithsonian's Alaska collections far into the future. The object captions weave the material, social, and spiritual significance of each object together, providing a deeper, more holistic understanding. Editor Aron Crowell says it well: "Behind every object is a story about people and relationships" (p. 13).

The construction of the book also pays homage to its contents. Though just over 300 pages, the hardcover volume weighs nearly five pounds due to its thick, glossy paper. This and the use of rich colors—earthy brown, ice blue, salmon pink, wildflower yellow—give the publication a luxurious feeling. This is not a quick read, but a book meant to be revisited for years.

Living Our Cultures is a warm, lively introduction to Alaska's Native people and a valuable reference to Alaska Native material culture. It will appeal to both public and scholarly audiences. Anthropologists and museum professionals will find its multivocal presentation and rich contextual details on material culture valuable for interpreting related archaeological, ethnographic, and contemporary objects. This book belongs on your shelf between volumes of the *Handbook of North American Indians* and *Alaska Native Art* (Fair 2006). It will be an enduring reference.

REFERENCES

- Crowell, Aron L., Amy F. Steffian, and Gordon L. Pullar (eds.)
2001 *Looking Both Ways: Heritage and Identity of the Alutiiq People*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.
- Fair, Susan
2006 *Alaska Native Art*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.
- Fienup-Riordan, Ann
2007 *Yuungnaqpiallerput/The Way We Genuinely Live: Masterworks of Yup'ik Science and Survival*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
1996 *The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks: Agayuliyararput /Our Way of Making Prayer*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.
- Fitzhugh, William, and Aron Crowell (eds.)
1988 *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.
- Fitzhugh, William, and Susan Kaplan
1982 *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.
- Haakanson, Sven D., and Amy F. Steffian
2009 *Giinaquq/Like a Face: Sugpiaq Masks of the Kodiak Archipelago*. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.

