

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

Alaskan Eskimo Life in the 1890s As Sketched by Native Artists. By George Phebus, Jr.

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0rc2q7k0>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 21(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Graburn, Nelson H. H.

Publication Date

1997

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Shirley Hauck, Ph.D.
Folklore North

Alaskan Eskimo Life in the 1890s As Sketched by Native Artists. By George Phebus, Jr. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 1995. [originally published by the Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington DC, 1972]. 168 pages. \$18.95 paper.

This handsome reprint of George Phebus' 1972 book makes available once more the rare collection of 120 Inupiaq (and possibly Yupik) Eskimo drawings from the late 19th century illustrating Native life in Alaska. The drawings were rendered on the unlined side of lined school tablet paper, in pencil, ink, crayon or watercolor, but none is reproduced in color here. The book starts with a brief introduction, which discusses their discovery and their possible origins, along with a commentary on the early Alaskan schools and some other drawings from the same general period. Each section of the book has an introduction which, like the extensive captions, draw upon the appropriate literature to explicate the ethnographic and historical context and contents.

The origin of is somewhat mysterious. Rediscovered in the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology in 1967, they had been deposited there in 1910 when the museum of the Bureau of Education was closed. The drawings were found mounted on cardboard posters, with printed captions, as for display, and the catalogue cards read that they were from Kotzebue Sound. However, Phebus' research found no trace of their former exhibition or publication, and internal evidence, such as written captions, landscape formations, or styles of clothing and kayaks, shows that they might have come from a wider area of the Seward Peninsula and Norton Sound.

These are indubitably drawings saved by Bureau of Education teachers from many made in the newly established village schools. Perhaps the teachers saved those which showed talent, or those which interesting local or historical content. From the detail and sophistication of the renderings, we can surmise that they were done by older children familiar with practices of both prior traditional and then contemporary lives. A century later, the range of content depicted, hunting, trapping, herding and travel scenes, village games and kashim ceremonials, fauna and landscapes, has saved for us a record of the liveliness of Native life.

Unmentioned by the author, however, is my surmise that all or nearly all of the artists were young men. Hardly any scenes show women's ordinary lives, house interiors or clothing patterns, and babies and young children are remarkable for their absence! One doesn't know whether girls did not attend these mission schools, whether they did not draw, or whether the teachers didn't save their artistic efforts.

In his Foreword, the late Henry B. Collins points out that such drawings were "part of a tradition that had its beginnings several centuries earlier in Eskimo pictographs, the last major prehistoric art style of the western arctic." (p. 7). The drawings do indeed resemble in a general way, late 19th century engravings on ivory, portraying stereotypic and contemporary scenes and activities, which the Eskimos made for sale to the whalers, miners and traders. These in turn were related to but did not closely resemble the stick-figure pictographs with which their forebears decorated their own utensils (Dorothy Jean Ray *Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska* 1977.)

To find a published collection of works of art similar in artistic form and cultural content, we have to travel more than 3,000 miles East to consider a collection of Canadian Inuit pencil drawings originally commissioned from the Inuit of North Baffin Island in spring 1994 by Terry Ryan, long time general manager [and artistic director] of the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative at Cape Dorset, later published in an exhibition catalogue (Jean Blodgett *North Baffin Drawings, Collected by Terry Ryan on North Baffin Island in 1964*, 1986). These Inuit, like the Inupiat and Yupiit of the 1890s, had decades of sporadic trading contact with Euro-Americans, but were experiencing their first few years of the imposition of schools. They had some exposure to images and artistic conventions from the outside world (e.g. through religious books and popular magazines) but had little or no experience at drawing themselves. I suggest that the style described here might be characteristic of unselfconscious Native peoples, still living on the land, when first given the chance to depict their lives for eager outsiders. Indeed Blodgett (p. 103) shows that the 1964 North Baffin drawings are almost identical to those collected in the same general area by Knud Rasmussen during the Fifth Thule Expedition of 1922.

We may summarize the similarities. Scenes generally portrayed ordinary contemporary life, probably particular events remembered by the artists, including contemporary imported

items, such as guns, boats and weapons, traders' buildings and (in Alaska) Sami (Lapp) herders and their reindeer. Yet, as Phebus notes, some of the scenes in both books also illustrate "traditional" activities from a past only remembered by the artists, probably to show the whites how things used to be. Unlike some of the contemporary arts of the Eskimos of Alaska and Canada, there was little inhibition against showing "non-Eskimo" elements, and some drawings were made with the aid of straight lines or even tracings.

Stylistically, there are commonalities too. Some drawings show a basic (near, middle, far) perspective, others have varying ground lines or multiple orientations, and yet a few others are figures without a horizon, hanging in white space (rather like an image in a blowing-snow white-out). The figures range from small to large and bold, but always include details significant for identification (of e.g. species, gender, tribal location).

The differences in form and contents are also significant. For instance, the Alaskan drawings illustrate many traditional rituals, whereas by mid-twentieth century these had been replaced by Christian rituals (also illustrated) in northern Canada. Unlike the Alaskan drawings, the Canadian set is equally divided between men and women, with obvious stylistic differences. Furthermore, Terry Ryan made sure artists' names were indicated. Finally, the Canadian drawings are covered with captions or texts written in *inuttitut* Eskimo syllabic script (partly because Ryan's instructions asked for legends) whereas the few words written on the Alaskan drawings are in English.

The 120 Alaskan Eskimo drawings give us an bold and unself-conscious view of the Alaskan Eskimo men's world of the 1890s. This was a time of rapid cultural change, with the advent of schools and the gold rush, and Christian missions which had operated for a few decades. These drawings reflect little sadness or nostalgia, nor the anger which can be characteristic of retrospective views. The Eskimos are full of life, and accept their mixture of traditions and imported tools and customs out of which they made the best life possible. We are lucky to have such a record, relatively unedited by commercial demands or political hindsight, which shows us ethnographic and geographical details with such authenticity. We know that some comparable collections remain unpublished, for instance the set of drawings given to judge James Wickersham by teachers on the Seward Peninsula, now housed at the Alaska Historical Library Juneau. We can only

hope for the eventual publication of these and other such collections remaining to be discovered in archives, public and private.

Nelson H. H. Graburn
Professor of Anthropology
University of California, Berkeley.

A Place Called Grand Canyon: Contested Geographies: Society, Environment, and Place. By Barbara J. Moorehouse. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1996. 202 pages. \$40.00 cloth; \$19.95 paper.

The Grand Canyon is a unique landscape of extraordinary scenic beauty. Accordingly, it is among the world's most popular tourist destinations. Despite its many visitors, few people know much about the larger region that surrounds the Grand Canyon National Park.

The Grand Canyon has been the subject of many books. Some of these carefully examine the Canyon's geologic history, while others simply provide vivid descriptions of the many scenic wonders of the region. Moreover, scholars have published articles on various aspects of the sequent occupancy of northern Arizona and southern Utah. Nevertheless, there are very few truly integrative publications designed to provide a detailed account of the historical geography of the Grand Canyon and the surrounding area. *A Place Called Grand Canyon: Contested Geographies: Society, Environment and Place*, is a well written historical geography that successfully integrates the spatial, physical, cultural, and political characteristics of the greater Grand Canyon region. It is a vast area that includes within its boundaries, five Native American reservations, the Grand Canyon National Park, thousands of acres of public lands, and the communities of Flagstaff and Williams, Arizona.

This manuscript includes a thorough discussion of the impacts of the nineteenth century westward expansion on the greater Grand Canyon region. During that time, and until the early years of the current century, hundreds of pioneers arrived, hoping to turn the West into a bountiful garden.

The author also devotes several chapters to the creation and development of the Grand Canyon National Park. The story she diligently documents includes conflict, greed, lofty idealism, and intrigue.