

PHOTO ESSAYS

Two Thousand Years of Inuit Art Goes on Display at the Frieze Masters Art Fair

Dozens of objects make up Donald Ellis Gallery's exhibition of art by the indigenous people of North America's arctic region.

Hrag Vartanian | September 22, 2017



Female Figure, Pre-Koniag Culture, Kodiak Island, Alaska, Uyak Lower Level (500–200 BCE), marine mammal ivory, height: 8 1/2 (all images courtesy Donald Ellis Gallery, New York)

The art of indigenous peoples in the arctic is often poorly understood by those who live in warmer climates. There's the mistaken notion that the arctic is a barren region without art, but that misconception is slowly changing. Donald Ellis Gallery is doing its part by mounting an exhibition titled [*Two Thousand Years of Inuit Art*](#) at this fall's [Frieze Masters](#) art fair in [London](#) — the city's biggest commercial art event.

“This exhibition will include the most important group of Yup'ik masks ever offered for sale, several having formerly been in the collections of Surrealist artists [André Breton](#), [Roberto Matta](#), and [Robert Lebel](#),” Donald Ellis told Hyperallergic. “Two absolute highlights will be the extraordinary [Donati](#)

Studio [Yup'ik] mask [from the village of Napaskiak, Alaska], widely considered the most important mask in private hands and the exceptionally rare monumental [Pre-

Koniag Culture] Kodiak Madonna [from Kodiak Island, Alaska], a masterpiece dating to 500 BC. These works will be shown together with works from recognized 20th-century masters [John Pangsark](#), [Andy Miki](#), and [Parr](#), showing the continuing artistic traditions of this remarkable culture.”



Surrealist map of the world, 1929 (via [Imaginary Museum](#))

The presence of art from the arctic region in the collection of Surrealists shouldn't be a surprise to most familiar with the 20th-century modernist art movement. In the group's infamous map of the world, published in 1929, Alaska and the arctic are overrepresented as they dwarf the continents of Africa, South America, and other much larger territories.

The survival of art by indigenous groups in the arctic demonstrates that regardless of European colonization, the Inuit and other nations continued to reflect their world in the objects with which they surrounded themselves, often depicting everything from human figures, hunting events, to animal forms. The elegance of the objects themselves point to the sophistication of the arctic peoples and their ability to fully adapt to the area's harsh climate.



Complex Mask, Yup'ik, Village of Napaskiak, Kuskokwim Region, Alaska c. 1890–1905, wood, paint, sinew, vegetal fiber, cotton thread, replaced feathers, height: 34"

Donald Ellis Gallery's art fair booth exhibition titled Two Thousand Years of Inuit Art will be part of the 2017 Frieze Masters art fair (Regent's Park, London, UK) from October 5–8, 2017.



Complex Mask, Yup'ik, Likely Goodnews Bay, Southwest Alaska, c. 1890-1905, wood, paint, vegetal fiber, height: 34 1/2"



Nepcetaq Mask, Yup'ik, Lower Yukon River, Alaska, c. 1830-60, wood, teeth, width: 23", height: 19"



Mask, Yup'ik, Kuskokwim River, Alaska, c. 1890-1910, wood, feathers (replaced), vegetal fibers, white and red paint, height: 9 1/2"



Seal Mask, Yup'ik, Kuskokwim River, Alaska, c. 1890-1910, wood, paint, height: 8 3/4"



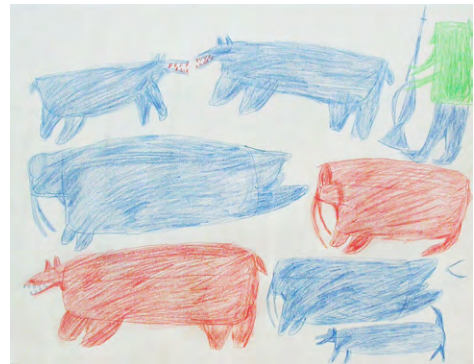
Puppet Head, Thule, Western Alaska, 1200–1700 CE, wood, height: 5"



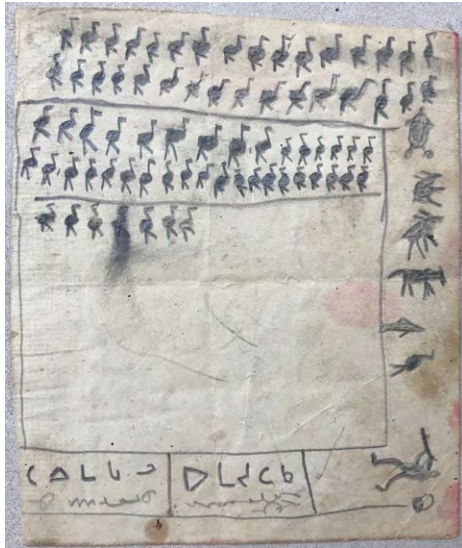
Line Spool, Bering Sea, Alaska, 19th century, wood, paint, marina mammal ivory, vegetal fibres, height: 33"



John Pangnark (1920–1980), "Figure" (late 1960s), Inuit, Arviat, Nunavut, soapstone, height: 7 1/4"



Parr (1893–1969), "Untitled (Walrus, Polar Bears, and Hunter)" (mid 1960s), Inuit, Cape Dorset, Nunavut, coloured pencil on paper, 19 3/4" × 25 1/2"



Hunt Tally, Inupiaq, Western Alaska, 19th century, graphite on paper, 5 3/8" x 4 1/2"