Chronological summary of the collection, publication and exhibition of prehistoric Eskimo art from the Bering Strait

1916 First illustration of objects with early Punuk and Old Bering Sea (OBS) style decoration (shown below is an OBS-II harpoon head collected by Vilhjalmur Stefansson at Cape Smythe, near Barrow on the Arctic coast of Alaska).

Fig. 9 (60.1-3571). Three views of an exceptional harpoon head, Cape Smythe. Length, 10.3 cm. (Wissler, 1916)

1926 Diamond Jenness published illustrations of a harpoon head and part of a winged object (both Okvik/OBS-I) and an OBS-II socket piece that he excavated in 1926 on Little Diomede Island.

From Jenness, 1928
1927-1928 First excavations by Otto Geist at Gambell and Kukulik on St. Lawrence Island

1928 First excavations by Henry Collins during 8 weeks in the Punuk Islands

1929 One month excavation by Collins of the mostly Punuk village at Kialegak

1929 Publication of 14 mostly Old Bering Sea culture objects (harpoon heads, socket pieces, winged objects, adze handles) in the collections of the Museum of the American Indian (Heye Foundation) and the National Museum of Denmark (Mathiessen, 1929)

1929 Henry Collins: "Prehistoric Art of the Alaskan Eskimo" (Smithsonian Institution publication)

1930-1931 Excavation by Collins of five OBS, Punuk and modern "type sites" at Gambell, St. Lawrence Island (Collins, 1937; Dumond, 1998)

1931/1934 Excavation by Geist in the Punuk Islands midden (Rainey, 1941)
1931-1935  Excavations by Geist and Rainey (1934-5) at the large village of Kukulik with OBS, Birnik, Punuk and later artifacts (Geist and Rainey, 1936).

August 30, 1934  Geist’s assistant, Ivar Skarlund, finds the 17 cm "Okvik Madonna" 50 cm below the surface on the Punuk Islands.

1937  Excavations by Froelich Rainey at Kukulik, St. Lawrence Island

1939  Louis Giddings excavated one house each at sites in Gambell (Hillside), Kukulik, and Ketgnipaluk on St. Lawrence Island.


1947  4,000 artifacts from St. Lawrence Island were sold for $2,000 to Frederick Douglas at the Denver Art Museum by Norman Potosky, who had spent 3 years on St. Lawrence Island working for the Civil Aeronautics Administration. Some of these were later exchanged with other museums (e.g., Brooklyn), or traded to Altman Antiques in Los Angeles and thence to other dealers and collectors (e.g., Julius Carlebach, John Hewett, Nelson Rockefeller, Robert and Lisa Sainsbury). [Information in this chronology concerning museum purchases of Alaskan artifacts is from Hollowell, 2004.]

1955  Accidental discovery of the Uelen cemetery in Chukotka by Dorian Sergeev

1956, 1958, 1963  Coastal surveys of Chukotka by Nikolai Dikov

Photo: University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks

1960 Museum of Primitive Art (New York) exhibition of objects from the Wielgus Collection

1960 Discovery of the Chini (Sinin) cemetery by Dorian Sergeev

1961-1962 Discovery of the Ekven cemetery by Dorian Sergeev and excavations begun by Sergeev, Levin and Arutiunov

1963 Dikov excavated at Uelen, and at Enmynytnyn and Chini (1963 and 1965, yielding 102 objects). He wrote that he noticed the Chini cemetery from the sea in 1958, but was not able to carry out excavations until he returned in 1963, when he discovered that a burial in the main cemetery had already been excavated by someone (Dikov, 1974, Fig. 1, p. 6).

1963-1967 After the death of Levin in 1963, Ekven excavations were continued by Sergeev and Arutiunov until 1967, by which time they had reached burial 189 (Arutiunov and Sergeev, 1975, illustrating <10% of the objects).

1963 Museum of Primitive Art exhibition of objects from the Sainsbury Collection

1970 Due to poor weather (rain, dense fog, gales), planned 1 month Ekven excavations had to be reduced to only 7 days (July 7-14). During that period, burials 190-193 were excavated (Arutiunov and Sergeev, 1983).

January, 1971 The University of Alaska Museum (Fairbanks) purchased a 17 cm Okvik female figure (The Far North, Collins et al., 1973, No. 4) from Brian Rookok for his $250 asking price (which he refused from a trader, since he preferred to sell it to a museum).

Photo: University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks
1971 Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (under the terms of which St. Lawrence Island Natives acquired ownership of the island and the right to legally excavate and sell any artifacts found there).

February, 1972 The Alaska State Museum (Juneau) purchased an "Ivory Madonna figure" from Carl Pelawook for $200 (+ a "bust, $40, a torso, $10, and other artifacts "recovered from an old village site on Punuk Island", for a total of $420).

August, 1972 The Alaska State Museum purchased ten OBS and Okvik artifacts from Carl Pelawook for $3,000.

October, 1972 The Alaska State Museum purchased other artifacts from Carl Pelawook for $4,100, including $1,500 and $1,200 for two ivory figures.

January, 1973 The Alaska State Museum replied to Melvin Seppilu of Savoonga (St. Lawrence Island) that his asking price of $1,750 for two Eskimo dolls and other artifacts from the Punuk Islands was "unrealistic - much too high". These objects included a 20 cm Okvik female figure (Wardwell, 1986, No. 39).

From Wardwell, 1986, No 39
1971/1972 The Anchorage Museum of History and Art purchased artifacts from Savoonga diggers, and an OBS winged object from the Kialegak site for $650 from Dennis Corrington of Nome's Arctic Trading Post.


1974 From June 30 to July 22, 17 Ekven burials (194-210) were opened, working on both hills that had been substantially excavated during the 1961-1970 seasons (Arutiunov and Sergeev, 1983). From 1976 until his death in 1984, ill health prevented Sergeev from going into the field, and Ekven excavations ceased for almost 15 years after 1974.

1974 Following his viewing of the 1973 Far North exhibition, the New York art dealer Paul Steinhacker made his first visit to St. Lawrence Island. He immediately sold 50 pieces to Edmund Carpenter (on behalf of the Menil Foundation) and then went back in the autumn for more.

1974 First visit of the novice New Mexico art scout Kenneth Pushkin (b. 1952) to St. Lawrence Island, and sale of purchased artifacts to Jonathan and Philip Holstein, art dealers in New York and Aspen, Colorado.

1977 Native American Heritage (Art Institute of Chicago; Evan Maurer) and Sacred Circles (Ted Coe) exhibitions.

1978 First visit to St. Lawrence Island of Jeffrey Myers, New York dealer in Eskimo and North West Coast Indian art.


1986 American Federation of Arts exhibition (New York and Anchorage) of Ancient Eskimo Ivories from the Bering Strait (Wardwell, 1986)

1987 Arutiunov returned to Ekven for a single season with Mikhail Bronshtein as part of the first State Museum of Oriental Art (Moscow) expedition, and burial excavations led by Bronshtein were resumed during the period of 1989-1995.

1988 Crossroads of Continents exhibition included Uelen and Ekven artifacts (Fitzhugh et al., 1988).

May, 1992 Exhibition of Prehistoric Eskimo Ivories at Deadalus Ancient Art (Fred Schultz), New York (Wardwell, 1992)


1995-2002 At Ekven, graves were no longer excavated but rather subterranean house ruins along the eroding shoreline (house H-18 was completely excavated). 1995-1998 was a period of extensive international collaboration on
excavations (Russian-Canadian-Swiss-German-Danish; Yvon Csonka, Reto Blumer, Hansjürgen Müller-Beck, Patrick Plumet, etc.).

1997 Jonathan and Philip Holstein collection of 324 Alaskan Eskimo objects (most of the prehistoric artifacts were collected by Kenneth Pushkin and Paul Steinhacker) was acquired by the Princeton University Art Museum with funds donated by Lloyd Cotsen.


2002-2012 Kirill Dneprovsky excavates late Birnik and early Punuk house ruins at Paipelghak, ~80 km NW of Uelen. (As compared to the mostly shallow Uelen and Ekven burials, house ruin excavations were more difficult and expensive due to permafrost that starts at ~40 cm below the ground surface, with only 5-10 cm of thawing on a favorably warm day; see Dneprovsky and Lopatin, 2012). Dneprovsky and his team visited Ekven annually on the way to Paipelghak but only to collect surface material and samples for radiocarbon analysis.

December, 2007 Extensive exhibition of objects from the post-1987 Ekven excavations, World of Arctic Maritime Hunters: Steps into the Unknown, held at the State Museum of Oriental Art (Moscow) in collaboration with the Department of Culture of the Chukotka Autonomous Region, Anadyr (Bronshtein et al., 2007).

October, 2008 Upside Down - exhibition of prehistoric Eskimo ivory carvings from Chukotka, Alaska and Canada at the Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (Musée du Quai Branly, 2008). A partial exhibition of these objects also took place at The Menil Collection, Houston, April-July, 2011.

October, 2009 Exhibition of Gifts from the Ancestors: Ancient Ivories of Bering Strait at the Princeton University Art Museum (Fitzhugh et al., 2009).

Literature:


