

## Okvik figures

(Left to right, top to bottom: 11.3, 15.2, 10.8, 11.8 and 9.8 cm)



Bruce White photo

Okvik figures with a face on the chest are very unusual, the only previously published example being that shown at the top right (Menil Collection, No. A7931). Another very unusual (and possibly unique) example is the figure drilled at the bottom so that it can be suspended upside down on a cord, probably for wearing as a pendant. This gives a clue about one possible ceremonial or other function for these iconic objects of prehistoric Eskimo art, about which essentially nothing is known concerning why they were made and how they were used. It is however interesting that they appear to be essentially limited to the St. Lawrence Island/Punuk Island area, but not found only 40 miles away in Chukotka on the western shore of Bering Strait (if one excludes an atypical ivory carving given to the Smithsonian Institution; see below). This striking difference in the distribution of these characteristic human figures may simply be due to the circumstance that most of the prehistoric Eskimo excavations in Chukotka have been of burials, as compared to house ruins and middens on St. Lawrence Island and the Punuk Islands. Such an hypothesis is supported by the fact that almost no “Okvik figures” were found in the approximately 150 burials that Hans-Georg Bandi excavated on St. Lawrence Island during 1963-1974. However, this may be a spurious and misleading correlation, and the carving of classical Okvik figures may indeed be a relatively local art tradition of the Punuk Islands and St. Lawrence Island that did not appear in adjacent Chukotka.



Bruce White photos



OLD BLACK FINELY CARVED FOSSIL IVORY FIGURE, FROM THE NORTH-EASTERN ASIATIC COAST  
(Loan to U.S.N.M. by Mr. Carl Lomen.)

**This 20.3 cm figure from Chukotka was among a group of prehistoric ivory carvings, mostly from St. Lawrence Island and mainland Alaska, collected by Carl Lomen and given to the U.S. National Museum through the physical anthropologist Aleš Hrdlička (1930).**

Carl Lomen (1880-1965) was born in Minnesota and went to Alaska with his father during the Gold Rush of 1900. In the 1920s he and his brother had a reindeer breeding business with 250,000 head of reindeer grazing in the lowlands near Nome. His business began when, as a result of increased immigration, the Gold Rush, and non-Native commercial whaling and hunting practices, food supplies in Alaska were severely depleted and many of the native people had insufficient food. In response to this, the United States government sent Samis from northern Scandinavia to teach them reindeer herding and breeding using reindeer brought from Siberia. The “Reindeer Act” of 1939 later placed the management of all the herds in Alaska under the jurisdiction of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, legally transferring ownership of all reindeer to Native Alaskans. The Alaskan Samis and many others were forced to sell their reindeer very cheaply, and all of the reindeer owned by the Lomen brothers were bought by the U. S. government (Lomen, 1954). However, he maintained his other commercial interests in Alaska until his death, after moving to Seattle, Washington. It was not until 1997 that a court ruling again allowed non-native Alaskans to own reindeer.

Hrdlička, A. (1930): Anthropological Survey in Alaska, in *Forty-Sixth Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology, 1928-1929*, p. 174 and Pl. 26.

Lomen, C. J. (1954): *Fifty Years in Alaska*, David McKay, New York

The cultural importance of the “Okvik style” figures, whatever it may have been, is evident from the fact that they were made in a wide range of sizes (up 23 cm or larger), including small versions (e.g., 10, 7.6 and 5.6 cm, below), and “miniatures” (bottom, tallest is 4.5 cm).



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