

Nunivak Island mask, 17.5 cm



This partially weathered mask was found attached to a post under the debris of an old grave on Nunivak Island. Although the Nunivak Eskimos erected sometimes elaborate structures over their graves, to which possessions of the deceased were attached (Lantis, 1946), masks and memorial figures such as were found in other western Alaskan Eskimo areas (see following pages) are not mentioned by Lantis as a significant part of their burial customs. Nevertheless, certain small, excavated Nunivak masks, such as that shown on the following page (Lantis, Fig. 24), bear some similarity to this Nunivak “grave mask”. Its original purpose remains unclear since although it has two side holes to which a strap might have been attached and a shallow recess for the nose, it was too small to be a full face mask and the recess for the nose is not consistent with a forehead mask. Both masks have indications of labrets, with one large blue trade bead remaining in the mask shown above. The most likely possibilities are therefore that this was originally carved as a small face mask and later placed on a grave, or made specifically as a grave mask, but with the addition of a couple of perfunctory features of actual ceremonial masks.

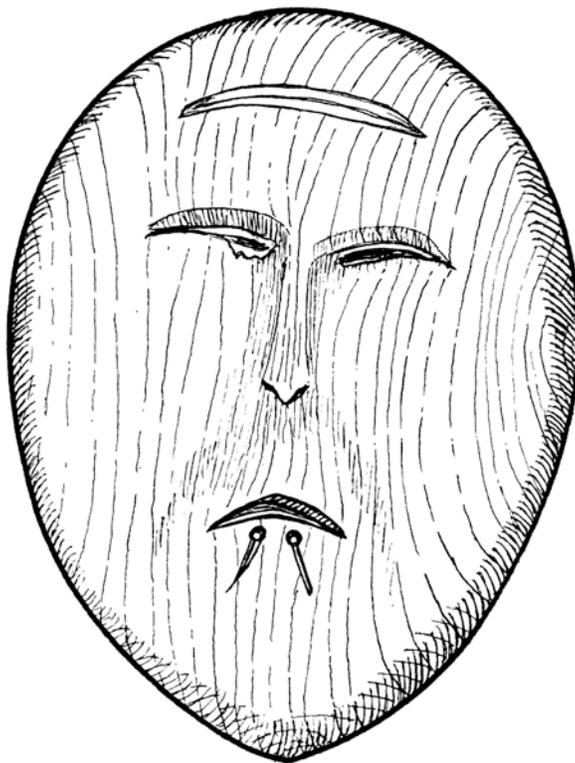
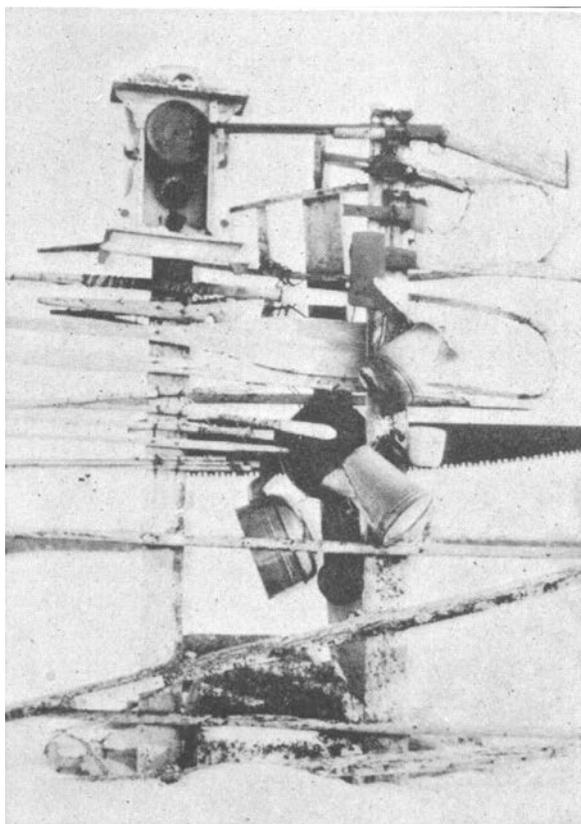


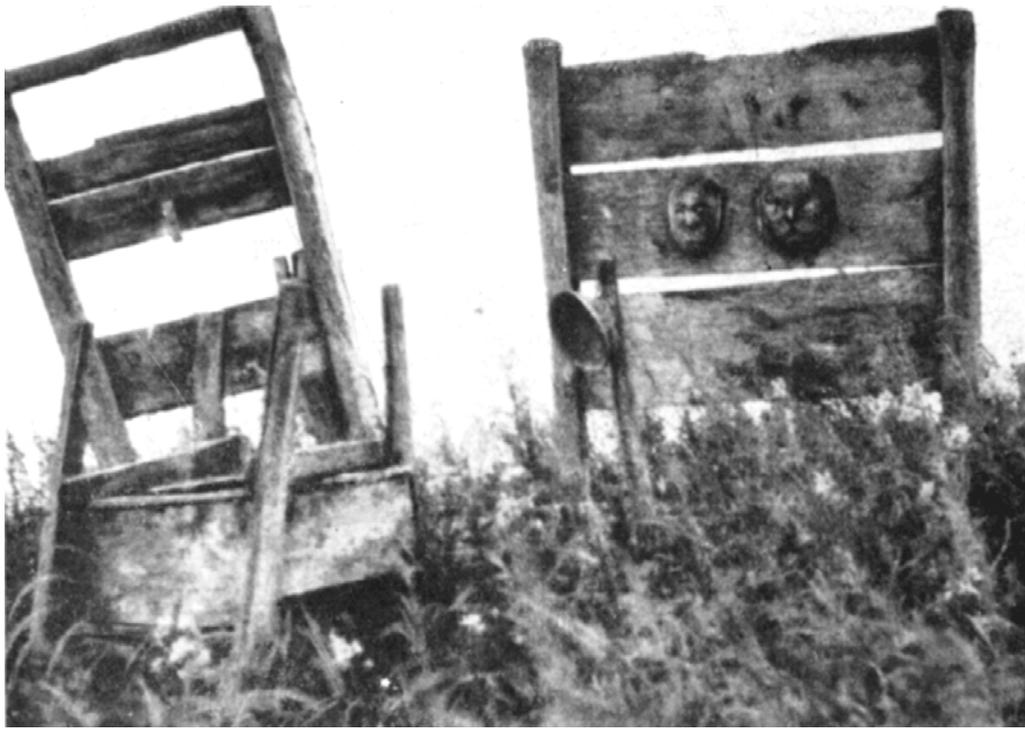
FIG. 24. Mask, excavated in Mekoryuk; wood considerably rotted. Evidences of holes and pegs around the edge indicate that it carried small appendages. The old inherited masks probably were small simple forehead masks like this one. Actual size.

Margaret Lantis: *The Social Culture of the Nunivak Eskimo*, *Trans. Am. Philosophical Soc.*, 35:153-323 (1946). Size of mask as illustrated is 10.6 cm.



An Eskimo burial at the village of Kinagamute on the lower Kuskokwim River. The coffin is placed on the ground between the posts, which support the property of the deceased, including a wood mask (upper left).

From Clark M. Garber: *Some mortuary customs of the Western Alaska Eskimos*, *Scientific Monthly*, 39:203-220 (1934).



Grave masks from near Bethel, Alaska From Hans Himmelheber: *Eskimokünstler – Ergebnisse einer Reise in Alaska*, Erich Röth-Verlag, Eisenach, 1953 (top) and *Eskimo Artists (Fieldwork in Alaska, June 1936 until April 1937)*, Museum Rietberg, Zürich, 1987 (bottom).