

Native Heritage Highlights Art & Culture

These are the first of a series of interviews: At least fifteen artists attended the Alaska Native Heritage Festival at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art. The festival began Thursday, March 20 and continued until the weekend. First is an interview with Athabascan contemporary artist, Kathleen Carlo. Other interviews here cover the skills of Athapaskan birch basket maker, Belle Deacon and sled making Athabascan artist, Howard Luke.

by Jim Benedetto
Tundra Times

Kathleen Carlo-Wood Mask Carver
Tundra Times: What kind of wood is this first of all?

Kathleen: This is black walnut. The piece that I'm working on now is teak and that piece is bass-wood. Bass-wood is real soft wood. I like using it but, it's real soft and it's cheaper wood. Black walnut is my favorite wood.

Tundra Times: How long did it take

to complete a mask in black walnut?
Kathleen: Well this one is five weeks — (laughter) still working on it! But, a mask can take anywhere from two weeks to a month.

Tundra Times: When you choose a piece of wood do you see the design, or the mask in the grain of the wood that you want?

Kathleen: Sometimes I look at a piece of wood that way. But most of the time I just get a piece of wood and start hacking away on it. And usually the grain comes out. You have high points in the wood like this cheek right here. So that the grain can go around that way and if you carve down into it, the grain will basically go the way your carving. Any which way you go, it's with the grain, or follow the shape.

Tundra Times: So that adds an entirely new dimension really, a new kind of depth because, not only are you concerned about the third dimension, about how high, but also the way the grain goes.

Kathleen: Yes.
Tundra Times: That's interesting! So what's the first thing you do, give it the basic shape?

Kathleen: Yes! Cut it out in the band-saw and leave a little stock on the end to put it in the vice, and, start chiseling away. I really don't have any ideas of how, sometimes I do, but most of the time I just start working it. I should draw, but I don't — I don't sketch at all — I should do more of that.

Tundra Times: What's the title of this work here?

Kathleen: This one has no title, and most of my works do not have titles. Some of them I've titled, like the one with 357 magnum shells around it, the title of it is *357 Magnum Special*. This one has got a title — *Moon Talks to Sun*. But most of them are just untitled pieces. My bigger panels, the panels that I'm working on now, I have been titling most of those.

Tundra Times: Tell me a little bit about the history behind the mask-making.

Kathleen: Well, as far as Athapaskan masks, there's hardly anything. There's only about 2 or 3 Athapaskan masks. One of them, this piece called *Halfman*, he lived in the far north. But you'll see a mask that's about 2 or 3 hundred years old and it's also called *Halfman*. So this is my impression of *Halfman* which I did in black walnut sculptor form.

Tundra Times: Do you think that mask making might have been something that Athapaskans borrowed from the Yupik?

Kathleen: Well, the only evidence of Athapaskan masks comes from the Lower Yukon areas right where the cross is between Eskimo and Athapaskan country. So that's probably an influence there. I'm not sure if Interior Athapaskans got into too much mask making, because there's no evidence that they did.



Dee Olin-Hoffman here looks at a near completed sled. photo by Jim Benedetto.

by Steve Kakaruk
Tundra Times

Howard Luke, Sled-Maker

Howard: For sleds like this you have to get a certain kind of birch to bend. See how I bend them? And you've got to get the certain kind of birch, you have to test them. Because I don't steam my birch, I don't believe in

dry it too fast — you got to dry it slow, you know. Takes about a week for it to dry. Otherwise if you dry it too fast, it could break. So it takes me that long to dry them. For every one of these steps I gotta form them. This has gotta form the runners. And those red one's over there is the hard ones and it shows you where my work is. So it takes, oh — I could finish this in

they're going to use. This one here is for setting up — just displaying and stuff like that. But these sleds are a lot harder to make because there so small, you know. Finishing (detailing) is kind of hard for me! I was doing alright in my younger days but now, now I'm shaking a little bit. But that's my way of making sleds-cause everything like this I gotta form for. I look on the side



Athapaskan Howard Luke has used for the last 30 years a single root stem to create the natural curve in the runners of these miniature sleds. photo by Steve Kakaruk

steaming my birch, therefore you see how its bending? It's got no break in them. So you've got to get the right kind. So I test them! Sometimes it takes me three or four days to find one like that. And then you don't want to

about three hours if I want to.

Tundra Times: This is a model, do you also make the large sleds?

Howard: Yes, I make large sleds. I'm going to Holy Cross. I'm going to make a bigger sled. So that's what

of a hill, and I find a root that will be turned up like this, you know. And that's what I do, I cut it that shape. And I tie it here then I put a stick across here and tie them and then bend it. And that's the shape it's supposed

by Steve Kakaruk
Tundra Times

Belle Deacon-Birch Basket Maker

Tundra Times: Belle would you talk about your birch bark basket making?

Belle: Yes! I've been doing this when my Grandmother was doing this when I was little. I looked at her doing it. And I know all kinds of ways-different stitches-old style stitches. This is not what I invent. That's what long time ago-they used to this. Fancy things! Only what your going to use for the sewing stitches. Then now I'm teaching my daughter how to do it!

Tundra Times: Your daughter, Daisy Demientieff?

Belle: My daughter Daisy Demientieff, and she's doing pretty good. But she never start lace-edge yet. But she'll soon learn how to do it too, because I'm going to teach her to! Because ah-when we're, just like I mentioned, when we're old, we have to teach our own daughter, our grandchild only! That's the old style way. But, if your smart you look at somebody doing it, you can pick it up. That's how mostly I pick up. My Grandmother never tell me what to do — I just watch and I pick it up myself. All you have to do is sit around and watch and then you can pick it up.

Tundra Times: Do you have many of students that learn this?

Belle: Well I don't teach — because nobody ask me. I teach down in Ketchikan. But different kind baskets, different than these! I taught in there. But they were nice to me. I've been back to Ketchikan twice and there, the people were so good. I was glad to teach them!

Tundra Times: When did you start your basket making?

Belle: I was about ten years old. My

grandma had this scrap long time ago-we have "harrd" time to get birch bark. Because mosquitoes were so thick! It's not like up to this day if we

had Off (repellent) and everything. Long time ago, mosquitoes just chew us up! Nothing to put on our face, when we come out of the woods our

faces just shut with mosquitoes! They put old-oil on it but it wouldn't help (Belle laughs).



Athapaskan Belle Deacon first learned to make birch bark baskets watching her grandmother. Her birch baskets are a "10", the age that she also learned to make them. photo by Steve Kakaruk

to be. I got one that there I been using for the last 30 years now. And its gettin' all dried out but I just don't want to do away with it. I don't intend to make more sleds so all I want to do just see if I can teach kids — you know, how to do these things. I could be making money selling sleds if I wanted to, but I dont. You know, I don't like to ask people how much I want for them. They sell them for six, seven hundred dollars a piece.

Tundra Times: How much do you get for yours?

Howard: Like the here?

Tundra Times: yes!

Howard: Oh I dont sell them. I'll probably just leave them here for display and give to someone, I guess. Because see, I'm gettin' paid for my job and I don't believe in turning around and selling this stuff. I don't do that, I don't believe in that! If I'm getting paid, why should try to make money on the side? I don't know, that's dishonest is what I say!

Tundra Times: You said that you don't steam them, then do you soak them?

Howard: No, I just bend them.

Tundra Times: You learn this and have been doing this since you were very young?

Howard: Yes! My Mother was my teacher. That's why I say, I follow her you know! And she's the one, because my Dad, I lost my Dad when I was really young. So she's the one that taught me all this stuff here, you see.