

Award-winning artist returns to newspaper founded by his cousin

By Bill Hess
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Whales, polar bears, the Arctic environment and his Inupiat people; these are the subjects which 26-year-old Simon Koonook has captured in his artwork since childhood days. Now, in coming to the Tundra Times, the paper founded by his father's cousin, Howard Rock, Koonook is trying his hand at commercial and layout art.

"I enjoy the hell out of it," Koonook says of his work on the Tundra Times. It is a good feeling, he says, to be working on the paper founded by his close relative, who was himself a noted artist. Although Koonook did not have a lot of contact with Rock, he was familiar with the man and his work. "I thought he was the greatest!" Koonook emphasizes.

Koonook has studied painting and sculpture at both the University of Alaska at Fairbanks, and the University of Washington. He has one year of college left before he earns his degree, and expects to be taking classes at the University of Alaska at Anchorage soon.

Koonook, who describes his non-commercial work as being mostly in the fine arts, was born in Point Hope. It was not long after that event that he first began to take designs from his head and place them on paper. He did his first painting at the age of six.

"My father used to do oil paintings," Koonook recalls. "I used to draw pencil sketches of dogs. Finally, I bugged my father into giving canvas to my brother and me. We did an oil painting each. I did my first one on a polar bear. I've still got that painting." His brother, Henry, now 28, has also developed into an artist, doing a great deal of baleen scrimshaw work. A younger brother, 19-year-old Luke, is also showing signs of talent. "It kind of looks like he can top both myself and Henry," notes Koonook. "He's got a real unique style. I think that style will have a great influence on the world."

Although Koonook was raised in many different areas of Alaska, the Arctic has remained his primary subject matter. He feels a strong commitment to the issues to which his Inupiat people are bound.

When Nova produced a program for public television in 1979, telling about the Eskimo Whaling Commission and the importance of whaling in Eskimo life, Koonook was shown with some of his political artwork in favor of the commis-

sion. "We did the work on location," Koonook emphasizes. "Two miles out on the ice, near Point Hope."

The film also highlighted his father, who is a whaling captain. Koonook himself has been on many whale hunts, and has a special interest in these sea-bound mammals.

"I have studied whales for going on seven years now," he explains. "The majority of my studies have been on the anatomy of the bowhead whale." These studies have not taken place in the classroom, but rather on the ice at Barrow, Point Hope, and those places where whales are taken. "I am self-taught," Koonook explains. He has also paid special attention to the surroundings of the whale hunt; the different ice conditions, types of ice ridges and the equipment needed to take whales.

Koonook feels strongly that whaling is a right of his people which should be preserved. "It has been our tradition for a long time," he explains. "Something like that shouldn't die. Right now, we're losing a lot of our culture. Whaling is a major part of our culture. We've developed whale boats, designed especially for whaling. We have whale feasts. Every year we celebrate the coming of the whale. We thank the whale for coming."

"If we lost this right, well, we'd lose a lot of nutritional value. That in itself would kill the culture. Kiana, Selawick, the other Eskimos in the Interior, they come and get a share; a piece of the catch. It would not only hurt our culture, but would hurt every other culture (of the Eskimo Arctic) because of our unity we have in whaling. It's just the thought of sharing."

Koonook has also studied polar bears, and has made it a point to be on hand when they have been taken. This past spring, while working with the Eskimo Whaling Commission on a whale count, Koonook took his first two polar bears. "Well, the first one, it's hard to say who actually bears. Well, the first one, it's hard to say who actually caught it," he says. "Doug Edwardson and I were both shooting at it."

The second one was all Koonook's. "We were talking about polar bears," he recalls, "and this one just happened to come by."

Although wood is a scarce commodity on the Arctic coasts, Koonook fell in love with wood sculpture during his college days, and now describes himself as a journeyman sculptor. His favorite woods are teak and walnut. "I get realistic in my scul-



PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Simon Koonook with his whaling painting which is part of the permanent collection of the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum.

ture a lot of times. I do representational type sculptures, often of animals."

Koonook expresses admiration for those of his people who have become skilled in tool making, whether the tools be for the hunt or other purposes. Koonook makes his own sculpting tools, going so far as to temper the steel himself.

Although Koonook admits there are a few excellent ivory carvers, he has chosen not to work in the media himself. "It's just gotten to the point where it's a stereotype of Native art," he explains.

In fact, much of the Native craft work being sold in Alaska today is a disappointment to Koonook. "It doesn't make me happy," he explains. "I just don't like what they're doing. It doesn't look like they're enjoying it. It looks like they're just going after the money, to pay the rent, like they're not really interested in how good it is." There are exceptions among the finer craft workers, Koonook stresses, adding that he truly loves much of the basket work.

Since coming to work for the Tundra Times, Simon has also gotten into cartoon work, which he sees as a new challenge. "My ideas come from Johnson Long, a cousin of mine," Koonook says. A recent cartoon came about from a duck hunting trip Koonook took with Long. They got to joking around, about seemingly silly things, like what would happen if the ducks started dropping bombs. The answer was revealed in a Tundra Times cartoon.

Koonook has won awards with his work, including first place in the 1980 Alaska Juried Show for his painting, "Attungaruk the Third's Whale." He illustrated the book, "Shadow of the Hunter" by Richard Nelson, and drew

the cover for the book "Whaling, A Way of Life," by the National Bilingual Children's development center