

The Art of Eskimo Skin Sewing

Editor's Note: This article was prepared for the State of Alaska, Crafts Identification Program by Kristbaum A.P., Anchorage.

By STEVE KIRSHBAUM

Skin sewing is an Alaskan Native art which began to die out with the coming of white civilization. Traditionally, as village boys were taught to hunt, fish and carve, girls were taught food preparation and skin sewing. Village elders taught the young, renewing cultures that had been passed down for thousands of years.

As "civilization" influenced village life, material goods became more important. Sod huts were replaced by clapboard housing. Seal and whale oil was inadequate to heat "modern" housing and was replaced by kerosene. All-terrain vehicles and snow machines replaced dog teams and required gasoline. Store bought clothing replaced hand sewn garments. Civilization became expensive.

When traders found markets for native handicrafts, skin sewing and ivory carving became major sources of revenue for many villages. The young now learned skin sewing and carving to supplement family incomes. Today, as inflation pushes up the cost of civilized survival, more and more women are turning from skin sewing to ivory carving to earn a subsistence living. In another generation, skin sewing may disappear completely.

Many women in Gambell know the art of skin sewing, but very few have the patience or artistic ability of Josephine Ungott. She learned skin sewing from her mother many years ago and has since taught many village girls. Josephine specializes in Eskimo dolls made from seal skin.

To begin, Josephine removes the skin from the seal and the blubber is scraped off. The skin is then placed in a tub and taken indoors where it is warm. The blubber is placed on top of the skin to



Josephine Ungott sews with thread made from whale sinu.

Photographs by CHRIS AREND



After the skinning, the seal skin is taken indoors to age.

keep it from drying out, and it is aged for about a week.

When the aging process is complete, the inner skin easily separates from the outer skin. The inner skin is odorless, however the fur side of the outer skin has a strong odor and must be washed in soap and water repeatedly to remove it. A correctly treated outer skin will be odorless.

In winter months, skins are dried outside in the chilly Arctic winds. This is called "wind-bleach-

ing" and turns the skin pure white. Once dried, the skins are made pliable by stretching and scraping. White, wind-bleached skins are used for faces and feet on Josephine's dolls. Color is added to the face from tree bark and crepe paper which is boiled in water along with the piece of skin to be dyed.

The skin is then carefully stitched together from thread made of dried, split whale sinu, and an outer garment is added. The outer garment is either a traditional Eskimo parka or Eskimo rain gear made from Bearded Seal gut. For the rain gear, the seal gut is scraped inside and out to remove any fat and skin. It is then blown up like a balloon and dried outdoors.

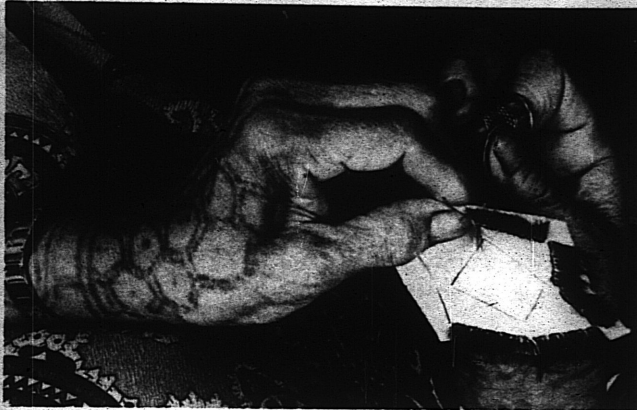
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Handcrafted doll by Josephine Ungott. The face and feet are wind-bleached seal skin. The Parka is seal gut with tufts of dyed seal hair.



Scraping and stretching seal skin to make it pliable for sewing.



Anna Okhtokiyuk stitches dyed seal hair on a section of a ball. Note the ornamental tattoos on her hands.

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Josephine Ungott is extremely versatile and makes balls, mukluks and parkas which are available for purchase in gift shops in Nome, Fairbanks and Anchorage.

Anna Okhtokiyuk is also one of Gambell's leading skin sewers. Like Josephine, she learned from her mother and has taught her daughter and other village girls the craft. Anna sews skin balls and prepares Bearded Seal skins in much the same traditional manner as Josephine. She begins with pasteboard patterns, cutting the skins to size.

Color is added to sections of the ball by wrapping the skin and tufts of fur in different colored crepe paper and boiling them in water. Before the ball is sewn together, intricate beadwork designs are sewn to the sections, and the final product is stitched together.

Aside from skin sewing, Anna Okhtokiyuk and Josephine Ungott also share another aspect of the

Eskimo culture which has disappeared with civilization - tattoos. Both have tattooed faces and wrists which according to Josephine, "It's the same as makeup, but this makeup stays on."

Amy Eningvwuk is a skin sewer in Nome. Originally from Shishmaref, a small village near Kotzebue, she now lives in a modest housing development with her sister. Unlike Josephine and Anna, Amy has no family to support her and to supply skins for her craft. Amy must walk the mile from her home to Nome's gift shop to get pre-tanned rabbit peltz and fur seal skins. She limits her sewing to small parkas of seal and rabbit, trimmed with wolverine ruff around the hood.

Once a doll is completed, it is taken back and sold to the gift shop, less the cost of the skins. As with most of the crafts people of the Bering Sea, Amy's artistic ability helps her to survive a basic, subsistence lifestyle.