

Book Review—

"Eskimo Art" is a "Must"

By WALLACE M. OLSON

Juneau-Douglas Community College

ESKIMO ART: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska
by Dorothy Jean Ray. University of Washington Press, Seattle

Dorothy Jean Ray's latest book, like her earlier works, is another example of superb scholarship and research, but presented in a most readable fashion. The book is divided into two parts. The first section is an excellent summary of traditional Eskimo art and the changes that have taken place since the arrival of the first European explorers. She puts "art" in its proper perspective in traditional Eskimo culture and then shows how the demand for "art" objects led to a whole new industry which she calls "market art."

In some ways it is sad that many artists have had to produce what sells rather than what they consider better works of art. But at the same time, she shows that Eskimo artists have evolved new art styles, use new media and are producing modern works that are the equal of any other culture. The second half of the book consists of black-and-white photographs and illustrations. The illustrations were selected to give the reader a first-hand idea of what has happened in the history of Eskimo art.

It is a fascinating book to read because Dorothy Jean doesn't hesitate to use her own personal experiences and interpretations to show where Eskimo art has come from and where it is going. Not everyone may agree with her interpretations or with her predictions about the future of Eskimo art, but no one is more qualified to make such statements. She has spent more than twenty years studying, collecting and researching Eskimo art and her expertise is evident at the turn of every page.

In preparing the text, the author went back to the earliest collections and worked right down to today. School libraries, collectors of Eskimo art and students of Eskimo culture will find this book to be a "must" on their list. Historians, social scientists and anyone interested in things Alaskan will now have to list "Eskimo Art" by Dorothy Jean Ray as a standard reference in the years ahead.

This reviewer recommends it as one of the finest books of the year on Alaskan cultural heritage.