

Gely Aids Native Artists--

French Artist Helps Artists 'To Run Own Show'

Canadian artist Gabriel Gely sees his role in Alaska as that of helping Alaskan Indian and Eskimo artists to "run their own show."

Gely, a native of France, was former Arts and Crafts Development Officer with the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development. He is now with the staff of Community Enterprise Development Corporation, the Shismaref Co-

operative.

Gely was in Fairbanks last week to teach Alaska natives how to operate a Native store. This was part of a two-week workshop in marketing and business principles held at the Fairbanks Native Community Center.

For twenty years Gely, who speaks fluent Eskimo, worked in the Canadian Arctic, initiating community-owned arts and crafts projects and acting as mar-

keting and production consultant to arts and crafts co-ops and government enterprises.

During the past ten years, he told RurAL CAP's Village Voice, he "has been reviewing and studying northern artifacts" and found that "the most inspired and exquisite pieces were Alaskan. I just can't believe," he said, "that all this wealth of creativity is lost. I just think it

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Gabriel Gely Helps . . .

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is hidden—dormant.”

Gely has been in Alaska since July and in Shishmaref for the past two months. He will visit villages in Alaska to remotivate Alaskan Indian and Eskimo artists to produce the “high caliber of work they have in the past.”

His approach, he told the Tundra Times, will be to help Alaskans “do for themselves.”

Alaskans must have a shop, he said, and “people who originate basic designs” must get royalties.

“I tell them, ‘this is not my shop, my workshop, or the U.S. government’s workshop,’ ” he said, but it is “their workshop.”

He will handle “the distasteful business of money,” he said, adding, “I am an artist myself, and I have agents to sell my paintings.”

His work sometimes met with criticism in Canada, he said. There were some people, for example, “who think we’re too quality minded. They don’t understand. They want us to reproduce a very large piece of art on a smaller scale at a smaller price. Sometimes you can’t knock off a very good product.” It’s like trying to reproduce a Rolls Royce at a lower price, he said.

Other critics have said some of his projects have turned out assembly line products. This is a valid criticism, he said, but it is not valid for all of the projects.

In some villages, he explained, “people haven’t had the good fortune of getting professional people to help them” and have turned out copies of the same work.

This criticism is not valid for such projects as those he originated in Baker Lake and Eskimo Point—two of his most successful projects.

At Baker Lake, for example, he told the people to write down their tales and legends. The older people who had no knowledge of a written language transferred their work to stones.

They produced “fabulous graphics,” he said.

There is great satisfaction, he said, in helping others to produce their own art. For example, in a Vancouver show of 404 carvings now on tour through Moscow, Leningrad, Paris, London and Tokyo, twenty to forty of these I personally purchased in workshops,” he said.

“I think, By Golly, with all the difficulties and frustrations, at least that does exist—the art of a humble people isolated for two to three thousand years... The government has been a useful vehicle to do something no other party has done.

“It gives a lot of satisfaction to see that after all we didn’t waste our twenty years up North,” he said.