

# Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait

Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait, the first comprehensive exhibition devoted to the presentation of ivory carvings from the Bering Strait continues as a featured temporary exhibition at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

The exhibition, which will remain on view through Sept. 7, includes 167 ivories which reveal a unique and sophisticated, yet little-known, art tradition that evolved from the earliest known cultures in the Bering Sea and flourished from the third century B.C. to around 1100 A.D.

Included are fittings such as harpoon heads, foreshafts, counterweights and socket pieces; implements such as scrapers, pail, knife and adze handles; and ornaments and utensils such as toggles, needle cases and snow goggles. Human and animal figures, some perhaps made for ceremonies, are also on display.

The exhibition has been organized by the American Federation of the Arts, under the curatorial direction of Allen Wardwell.

Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait has been made possible by a grant from Exxon Corp. with additional assistance from the National Endowment for the Arts.

The Old Bering Sea people developed a sophisticated maritime culture whose subsistence was based on the hunting of sea mammals. For more than 60 years, archaeologists and amateurs have found numbers of carved ivory objects at sites located on St. Lawrence Island, the East Cape of the

Chukchi Peninsula in Siberia and along the Seward Peninsula at Point Hope and north to Point Barrow in Alaska.

Although the ancient Bering Sea Eskimos had some contact with other cultures from Asia and the Alaska mainland, because of their relative geographic isolation they developed a unique and distinctive art expression.

Old Bering Sea art consists primarily of walrus ivory carvings of such things as animal and human figures and implements.

A distinct progression of carving styles can be identified within ancient Bering Sea ivories which evolved from a stark, minimal approach to form and surface design into a more elaborate, fanciful decoration and complex sculpture.

The exhibition is divided into five sections relating to this ancient carving tradition: Old Bering Sea I, known as the Okvik period, 200 B.C. — 200 A.D.; Old Bering Sea II and III, 200 A.D. — 600 A.D.; Ipiutak, 300 A.D. — 600 A.D.; and Punuk, 600 A.D. — 1100 A.D.

Objects from the Okvik period range from human and animal figures, heads and torsos, to hunting implements, all decorated with simple engraved designs.

One highlight of the exhibition, the *Harpoon counterweight* (winged object) from the Detroit Institute of Arts, was made during the transitional period between Old Bering Sea II and III period. The design on the surface, in the center of the back, is an abstract

face.

The Ipiutak style is characterized by objects made for burial, primarily animal and bird figures, which suggests contact with Asia.

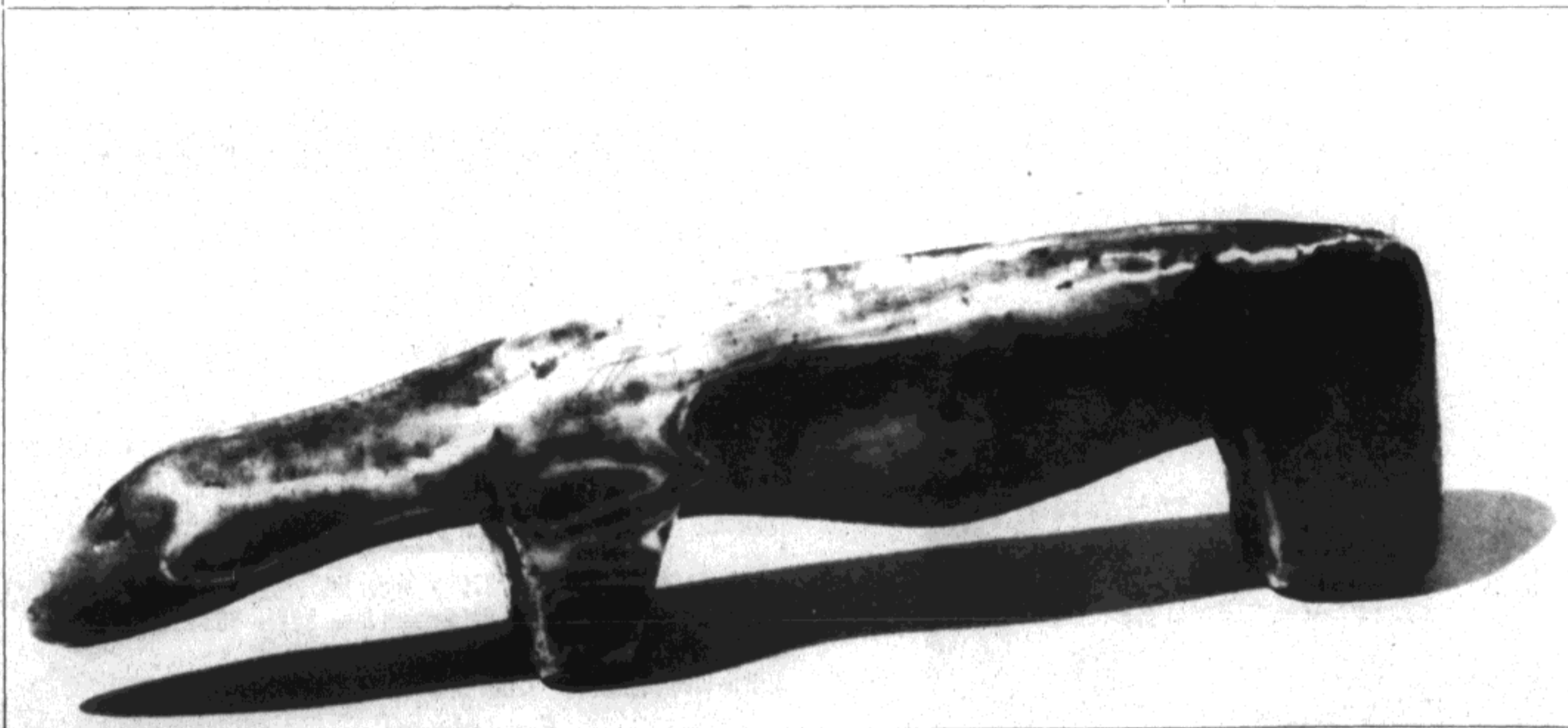
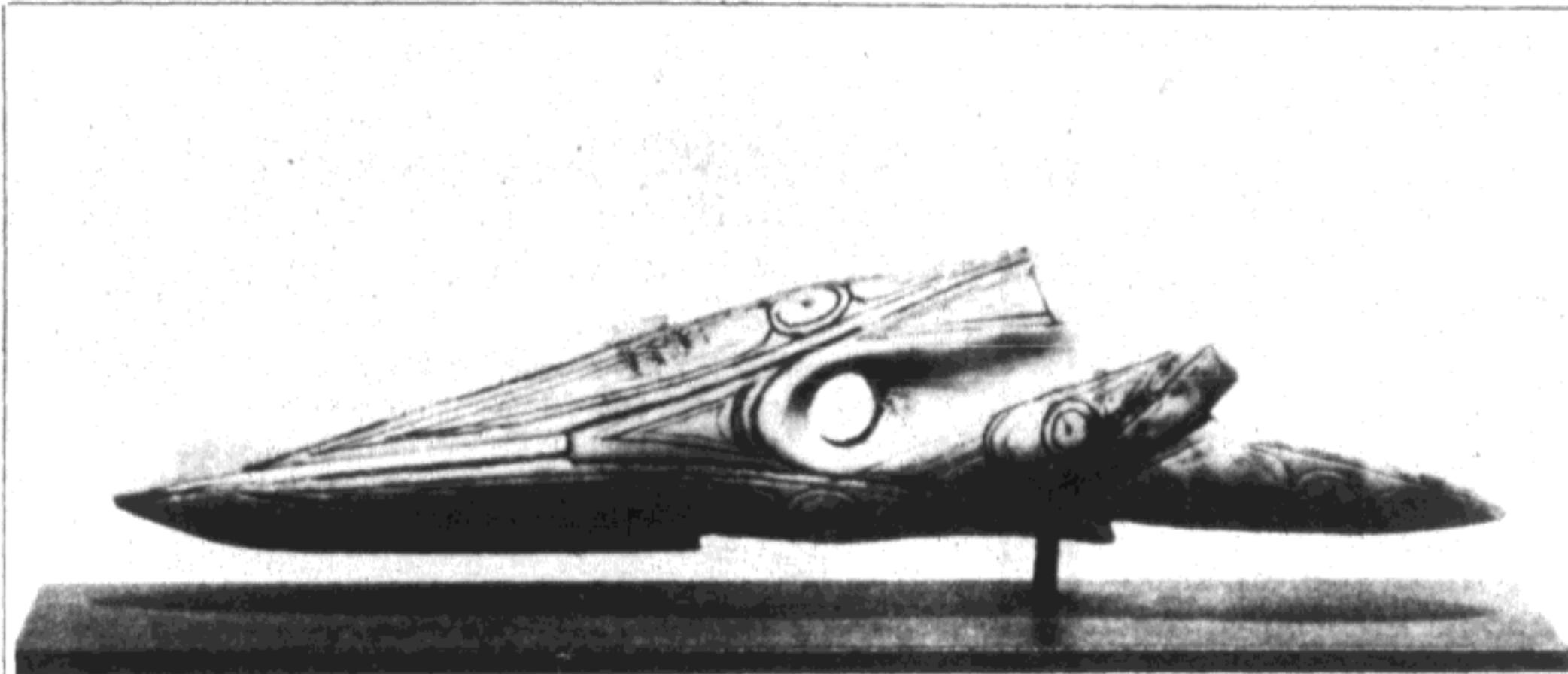
The *Baby Walrus* from the American Museum of Natural History is among the best known of all ancient Eskimo ivories. Its sinuous sculptural form and the inclusion of certain surface engravings show a close relationship to the small bronze objects that were being used in China and Siberia at the same time.

In the Bering Strait region, particularly on St. Lawrence Island, the Old Bering Sea culture gave way to a neo-Eskimo way of life and the resultant Punuk style.

The change was caused by the influx of new materials, implements and beliefs which came to the area during the 6th century from Siberia. Iron was more readily available and used for carving.

The Punuk *Snow goggles* from the Manney Collection, though comparatively simple in design, are graceful and elegant.

A fully illustrated catalogue with black-and-white and color photographs and drawings, co-published by Hudson Hills Press Inc., New York and the American Federation of Arts, is available for purchase in the Museum Shop. The catalogue includes essays by Wardwell on the environment, styles and archaeological history of the ancient Eskimo ivories, and catalogue entries on each of the works.



A 15-inch polar bear carving from walrus ivory is part of the exhibition, "Ancient Eskimo Ivories of the Bering Strait," now on display at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art. Among other artifacts on display is a 5-inch harpoon head, above, and a 5-inch carving of a human head, right.

photos courtesy of the Anchorage Museum of History and Art