

Interview With Peter Smith: Mekoryuk Mask Maker

Peter Smith is a well known mask maker who lives in the village of Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island. He was interviewed shortly before Christmas, 1980, in his workshop that adjoins his store. Institute of Alaska Native Arts Executive Director Karen McPherson did the interview, which was transcribed by Public Information Assistant Bernice Titus.

Q: How did you learn to make masks?

A: When I was a little boy, my Daddy told me I'm not a good hunter like the other men. When I reached manhood, he tell me I have to learn how to carve on ivory or other wood. Then he give me a piece of ivory and he says, "Today you'll make a tooth pick." Then I try to make a little fish in ivory all day long, and when I finished it he told me to split it in the middle. I split it in the middle and I put another small piece of ivory, a thin one, and nailed it in the end of the fish on the head. I made a pin and opening like a pocket knife to put it back inside the belly. He says, "You finish the tooth pick today, Boy?" My Daddy, he was very surprised! Then I sold that tooth pick for 50 cents. My money I give to my dad and after that I try to study carving on ivory and wood.

When I was married I need the money, and I made a mask, a wooden mask, and I sold it for \$3.50. Then I made about 25 masks in two months—all human faces, only I added half animal. I sold them for about \$14.00. I give up because it's too cheap, you know. I give up and wait for another couple years, and then somehow they join artists through a Native store. They want masks for \$15.00 a mask, and then I made another one. This time I made a bird mask. I made it and brought it over to the store and I sold it. The store manager, he look at it, he say, "Very nice mask." He says he can buy it for \$30.00.

I made another one again, and I made another one again, and I made another one. I finished it, and I took it over to the store and I sold it again. He said, "This time it's \$35.00." When I go home I told my wife, "Wow, boy! I sold my mask and this time for \$35.00." I made another mask again. This time I



Mask maker Peter Smith in his studio at Mekoryuk.

made a double walrus. When I finished it the white man came and he says he can buy it for \$70.00. I was very surprised and I made another double walrus and I told him I wouldn't sell this time for less than \$100.00. Then I finished one and then a white man came in and he asked me, "Are your masks finished yet? Can I buy it?" I told him \$100.00. He said, "Ok, I'll give you \$100.00." Then I finished two of them and hung them on the wall and worked on a third one. Another man came in. "I heard you got another

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extra mask." And he says, "Well, can I give you \$100.00?" "Yes, yes, you can give me \$100.00," and I gave these two masks for \$100.00. The third one, before I finish it, the white man from Anchorage came and he says he can buy it for \$150.00 and then he gave me \$150.00. I made another one and another man came, and he says he can buy a couple of masks for \$235.00, something like that. I was very surprised and made a couple of masks and I mailed them to him. This way the price going up, you know. They sell for \$600.00 to \$700.00 now.

Q: Do you remember when you started making masks?

A: I was first making masks around 19 hundred and 48, I think.

Q: Were the masks that you made at first

the same size as the masks you make now?

A: Long time ago when I was first making masks, it's different kind of sizes. Some big ones, some small
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ones. Even I try to make them the same size, it's different all the time. Today I got patterns; all of my masks have patterns.

Q: What are the patterns made out of?

A: The patterns are made out of cardboard boxes, the good stiff ones. I like to teach somebody, you know, for my masks to be copies. Today all of my masks have patterns. If I mailed my masks to somebody, somebody look at it, they like it and they want the same kind of mask, I use my patterns to make another one the same right size.

Q: What are the different kinds of patterns that you have?

A: I make a bird mask, and a double walrus and a puffin face. Half way, half animal face and half puffin face or human face.

Q: After you put the pattern on the wood, what do you do next?

A: Cut it on outside, cut it on outside with a big chisel, you know? Cut it on outside and all the way smooth it and then after you cut it all perfect, then make it round.

Q: Where do you get your ideas for all these kinds of masks?

A: This one is half wolf and half human face. That's the story from long time ago.

NOTE:

This transcript is incomplete. The second reel of the interview was on a Nagra E tape recorder that was recently stolen from the I.A.N.A. office. The Nagra was on loan from the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress.