

# 'Bending Tradition' saves bentwood art

by Jeffrey Richardson

for the Tundra Times

FAIRBANKS — Bentwood is the name given to a vanishing technology of steaming wood for various purposes.

Long prevalent among many Native cultures for making utensils and weapons as well as artistic objects, bentwood is making a comeback, thanks to the latest efforts of the Institute of Alaska Native Arts.

An exhibition of bentwood objects, "Bending Tradition," opened Aug. 18 at the University of Alaska Museum in Fairbanks and runs to Oct. 14.

According to IANA's executive director, Jean Flanagan Carlo, bentwood technology was traditionally used by Alaska Natives for everything from bows, bowls and drum rims to Aleut hats, Yupik masks and Tlingit boxes.

"Very little of that has been done in the last few years," Carlo said.

Carlo said one of IANA's board members suggested four years ago that the organization develop a project to save bentwood from extinction. The result was a 1988 symposium attended by 15 Alaskan artists in Fairbanks and another held last year.

"Bending Tradition" has been in the works for almost a year and features not only work by the symposia artists, but pieces from the University of Alaska Museum and other collections.

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for the first time in many, many years. We had bentwood bowls being carved and formed. Some really important things were happening through these gatherings," Carlo said.

The exhibition features works by Andrew Gronholdt, Bert Ryan, Fred Anderson, Frank Perez, Glen Simpson, Gertrude Svarny, Harry Calkins, Harvey Pootogooluk, John Bartlett, James Grant, John Hoover, Joseph Senungetuk, Kathleen Carlo, Larry Ullaaq Ahvakana, Lisa Rogers, Nathan Jackson, Rose Atuk Fosdick and Ronald W. Senungetuk.

Although the opening of "Bending Tradition" was intended to coincide with the 7th Inuit Studies Conference at the university to give it a higher academic profile, the exhibit is open to the public. Viewers will not only see bentwood objects on display, both old and new, but also the process at work.

"We've brought some of the artists back to Fairbanks to actually demonstrate bending while the object is here," Carlo explained.

After its Fairbanks run, "Bending Tradition" will travel to a number of Alaskan cities, including Anchorage, Juneau, Valdez, Dillingham, Bethel, Sitka, Ketchikan and possibly museums in Seattle and Ottawa, Canada.

"Bending Tradition" is just the latest in IANA's 14-year history of service to the Alaska Native artistic community. Among the institute's highly visible efforts are the Athabaskan Old Time Fiddling Festival, held every year in Fairbanks and a wide variety of other exhibitions, including ALASKEMEUT '86 and last year's "A Treasured Heritage."

Carlo is especially proud of the new storefront gallery the institute opened on Third Avenue this summer, just

downstairs from their offices in a historic Fairbanks building. The gallery is part of ongoing efforts at "providing an opportunity for an artist to show in a professional gallery."

But, according to Carlo, some of IANA's most important work is done one-to-one with Native artists, those with acclaimed reputations and those just starting out.

The institute maintains a current computer data bank of scores of artists with information that allows IANA to match artists with educational offerings, exhibits, commissions and technical assistance, such as help in completing resumes or applying for grants and scholarships.

"We're working really hard not only to help artists with development of their careers but also to assist them in their livelihoods, get some cash in their hands. We help artists learn about the business of being an artist," Carlo said.

Constantly updated, the computer bank provides the automation to bring artists and opportunities together in a way that is fast, efficient and respectful of the artists' privacy.

"We go to the artist first. We act kind of like a broker. . . It's a really good data base. You could, if you wanted to before you left, get a list of basketmakers who worked in traditional basketry forms, that were from Southeast Alaska, that wanted to teach and were bilingual," Carlo said.

For more information about IANA, write to them at Box 80583, Fairbanks 99503; or call them at 456-7491.