

Inua exhibit to be in Fairbanks

The spiritually and artistically rich 19th century Bering Sea Eskimo culture is revealed in an exhibit coming to the University of Alaska-Fairbanks Museum.

"Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo" will be on temporary exhibit at the museum July 10 to August 28. The exhibit is being organized by the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. It is a major exhibit by the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History/National Museum of Man.

On display will be more than 200 of the most significant works from the Smithsonian's Edward W. Nelson collection. The collection is considered the world's largest and best single collection of 19th century Eskimo material. Most are on display for the first time.

"Bringing this collection back to Alaska, even for such a short time, is a major event. The work on exhibit represents the work of the Eskimos of the region just before the major influxes of American and European miners and traders," said Terry Dickey, coordinator for education and public service. "Nelson collected his work

at a crucial time in the development of the region's artistic work."

Taking time off from his work in Alaska as a weather observer, the 22-year-old Nelson collected and shipped back to the Smithsonian more than 10,000 ethnological artifacts.

Work crafted by Bering Sea Eskimos had a useful purpose—usually hunting equipment, household implements, toys or ceremonial objects. At the same time, everything was attractively made not for art's sake, but to please the "inuas" or spirits, whom the Bering Sea Eskimo believed pervaded the world. Every artifact was embellished with geometric designs or engraved or carved images. Images are of birds, fish, animals or humanlike faces of inuas. Every artifact thus is endowed with a spiritual nature.

The exhibit stresses the artistic beauty of the artifacts. At the same time, items are placed in a cultural context. Nelson's photographs — many of them enlarged to mural size — are used as a tackdrop to depict the Eskimo world of the 1880s. Cultural and environmental contrasts are emphasized, such as the crowded

cooperative nature of the Eskimo social world set against the stark vastness of the Arctic tundra and sea.

From the earliest times, Bering Sea Eskimos decorated and carved ivory and bone. A few historic artifacts on exhibit from Smithsonian collections, trace the cultural evolution back 2,000 years. The exhibit brings the evolution into the 20th century with contemporary works by 18 noted modern Eskimo artists. Modern ivory works were loaned by several major Alaskan museums, including the University of Alaska Museum.