

# Melvin Olanna Stressing UA's Village Art Upgrade Program

COLLEGE — Alaska native craftsmen must develop new art forms, learn to use power tools, and stress quality if they are to successfully market their products in the future.

This is the advice being given craftsmen of the Alaska Northwest by a traveling artist who speaks their language—under an innovative University of Alaska program now going into its second year.

Melvin Olanna, an Eskimo from Shishmaref on the Bering Sea who went out into the world to develop his natural skills in sculpture and carving, is now going back to the villages to help them perpetuate their unique culture and at the same time turn a profit—become the principal beneficiaries from the commercialization of their art.

This Village Art Upgrade Program is sponsored by the university's Division of Statewide Services and coordinated by Dr. Mildred Matthews. The State Department of Education's Division of Vocational Education is paying the bill.

An advisory committee comprised of persons knowledgeable on Alaskan art and the market for it has been appointed by Dr. Charles W. Lafferty, director of the Division of Statewide Services, to give direction to the program and plan its expansion in the future.

Last year—first year of the program—Olanna visited 19 villages in the Northwest to learn what crafts, if any, were being practiced and to offer his assistance.

This year he will go beyond this exploratory phase, will begin a regular schedule of instruction in eight selected villages.

Dr. Lafferty is optimistic about this year's program.

"Olanna has won wide acceptance among the Eskimos," he said.

The artist himself is convinced that now is the time for the village craftsmen to make a new start, and he is confident he can help them to meet this challenge.

"Many of the people are not aware of the different ways of doing things," he says. "They stop carving when they're out of ivory and I tell them they can work with wood and bone too, which they can find in their backyard. And I tell them they can do their traditional art as contemporary art. The only way they can come out ahead is to do something new."

"Now there are power tools, new designs, new materials. We live in a different world so why not use them? The rifle came in and they took it up, and when snow machines came in they discharged their dogs."

The rapid growth of world population and attendant concern for the environment are bound to have an effect on native arts and crafts, adds Olanna.

"The village carvers believe ivory is the true Alaska material—which it is—but they'll be forced to change. Walrus won't always be available."

The native craftsmen "must develop new things—things never seen before," the Eskimo artist says. "I once made an abstract ptarmigan out of whale bone and then a village carver made one too, one he thought was better. They are competitive. I aroused something he never was aware of before. I have to more or less challenge them in this way."

Olanna indicated he feels new marketing methods must also be developed if the natives are to benefit fully from their art.

"I would like to see the people bringing more stuff to

the cities—new things, not just billikins. Now, for example, the commercial companies order a thousand billikins, and this just keeps the people where they are."

Over and over, Olanna stresses that inferior native products earn little income and work against expansion of the crafts industry.

"I mainly discuss quality over quantity and I urge them to put their names on their work," he says. "I pass on to them the things I've learned from personal experience."

The Eskimo received his initial formal training in art at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Later he spent a year working in a native arts and crafts workshop at Sitka. And then he came to the University of Alaska to study under famed Eskimo artist Ronald Senungetuk.

Recently he taught one of Senungetuk's classes for a week, instructing students in the arts of silver welding, sculpture, carving and print making.

One of his lesson plans included the following bits of information:

—"Walrus ivory is best when it has been dried for at least one year; when ivory is too freshly carved it cracks and checks a lot."

—"An active craftsman is aware of what is going to sell in different seasons of the year; sometimes pendants, pins, rings and bracelets will go but animal carvings are always in demand when they are well made."

And Olanna sometimes resorts to similes to make a point:

"Soapstone is like a woman. It has to be worked with care; treat it rough and it cracks up and falls apart. This little statement is well understood by people who have worked with soapstone, I'm sure."

As he makes his rounds of the villages, Olanna will be attempting to give new direction to craftsmen as well as help them upgrade their skills. For example, he will attempt to persuade a number of craftsmen to try to reproduce the artistic old etchings found on tools and weapons on skins through the block printing method. And to make baskets from baleen, with ivory lids.

"I would like to take the old traditional art and reproduce it with new materials," he says. "It would be the same subject matter but changing it around to make it original."

The etchings he mentioned are found on such things as bow drills and harpoon heads and shafts.

"They were for a purpose—to tell stories—not just for decoration purposes," he says. "The best hunters usually had the best designed weapons and decorated clothing, like a good architect would have a beautiful house."

One of the difficulties in promoting block printing among the natives is that "they don't understand what these things are used for," Olanna points out. "I have to explain how Caucasians live, how they put things like this on the walls and on coffee tables."

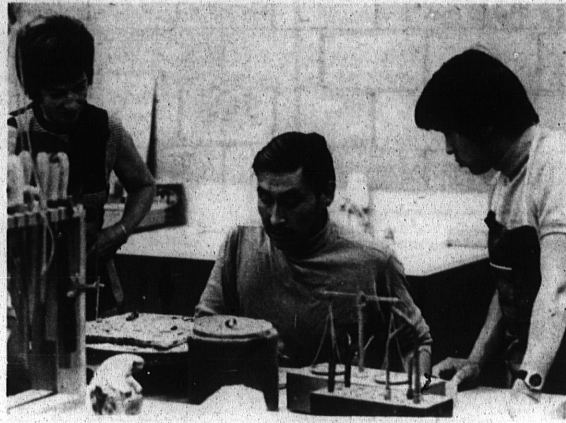
In traveling through the Northwest last year, the artist learned that not all villages can benefit from the Village Art Upgrade Program.

"Some of them are too westernized and have forgotten their cultural background," he comments.

Often in the past, persons have gone out to the villages to help the natives and often it is a one-stop thing. Olanna will be going back again and again.

"I think I have something good going here," he says.

"Their experience is that people come and go. But I surprised them by going back. I'm sincere."



ESKIMO ARTIST MELVIN OLANNA, center, demonstrates jewelry making to University of Alaska art student Vincent Pikonganna of Nome. At left is Dr. Mildred Matthews, coordinator of the Village Art Upgrade Program in which Olanna is the principal traveling instructor. (UA Photo)



VILLAGE ART UPGRADE PROGRAM advisory committee meets at University of Alaska's College campus to plan 1971-72 instructional schedule and consider future course of program. At left is Dr. Charles Lafferty, director of the university's Division of Statewide Services, sponsor of the program. Seated around the table, clockwise: Mrs. Mary Hale of the Alaska State Council on the Arts; Dr. Mildred Matthews, program coordinator; Dr. Don Daffoe, the university's vice president for public service; Mrs. Sally Hudson of the Fairbanks Native Community Center; Mrs. Georgina Lincoln of the Native Arts and Crafts Center, Fairbanks; Melvin Olanna, instructor in the art upgrade program; Judith Strohmaier, administrative assistant in the Division of Statewide Services; university art instructors Stanley Zielinski and Ronald Senungetuk; Tundra Times editor Howard Rock; Tundra Times reporter Madelyn Shulman. Committee members not shown: Mrs. Laura Bergt, Fairbanks, member of the National Council on Indian Opportunity; Mrs. Mary Jane Fate, Fairbanks Native Community Center; UA provost Earl Beistline; and Gerald Hiley State Department of Education. (UA Photo)