

Vision led him to lifes work: Art

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

Just over one decade ago, Leonard Menka was a young Athabascan law student climbing into bed in a Mormon university town in Utah. Now, thanks to a dream-vision-fantasy he experienced that night, Menka is a struggling Alaskan artist who has just sculpted a 300-pound chunk of alabaster into a work he plans to sell for no less than \$50,000.

Menka is hesitant to go public with the details of what he saw that night; there may be too many people who would scoff and ridicule. Whatever it was, its impact was strong enough on him that although he had done nothing with art since dabbling in it slightly in junior high, he got up the next morning and set to work carving a thunderbird in cedar.

He sold the piece that resulted to the president of a country club in Flagstaff, AR, earning two months rent. Thereafter, he turned to jewelry, working in silver, gold, turquoise and other media. His ambitions for a law career melted.

Menka's art grew to dominate his life. Although the intense spark which never seems to leave his eyes saddens a bit when he talks of his two failed marriages to Mormon girls, and of his children whom he only has part-time, he claims the turbulent changes in his life that led to the divorces were necessary for him to grow as an artist.

But \$50,000? That's a good deal of money; a sum seldom paid for work produced by Alaska Native artists, and even some of his colleagues are skeptical that he can get that much for it. Yet Menka is determined.

"It has exacted a price from me," Menka explains. "I have produced a great work, and I am going to get paid for it!" The artist expresses a great deal of disappointment over the price structure Alaska Native artists must deal with, and believes it is time something was done about it.

Although Menka says he did not know exactly what form



Sculptor Leonard Menka and the stone which he has transformed into a work of art. He is asking \$50,000 for the piece, seen below from three different angles.

the piece would take when he first started to chisel away at the rock, he did know what he wanted to communicate.

"I wanted to carve a beautiful feeling, a feeling of Native pride," he explains enthusiastically. "That's why I began. I wanted to show my pride!"

Although large stone carvings are not that common in Alaska, Menka felt the alabaster was what he wanted to use to make his statement. "Stone," he philosophizes, "it represents the earth. It represents beauty. The stone itself is heavy, full of energy. Energy

equals mass. That was Einstein's thought.

"This stone gives off a great deal of energy. That's one reason why it shines, it's heavy. St. Peter means 'the rock.' So stone must have special qualities. It would have to, for one of the saints to be named after it."

Before making his first cut, Menka leaned back against the rock, and traced himself on it. Then he began "moving back into the stone to create a face." Finally, he had the hard skeletal outlines of an Indian face.

Menka stepped back to contemplate his work, and to try and decide what type of personal features he should now work into that face. A friend, Sylvester Ayak, suggested that as it was, the face was symbolic of much of the hardship in the Indian world. Menka agreed.

The face may have come out abstract, but the eagle headdress worn by Menka's stone man shaped up with exquisite, painstaking detail. Menka calls the method of carving he used to get it, "direct carving."

"You never know what you will get. It's like the stone tells you, 'Carve here.' 'Don't carve here.' Some places in the stone are soft, some have rich grain patterns."

Menka had thought, for example, that he would like a raven headdress, but the stone dictated otherwise, and he wound up with an eagle. "I realized there was not enough stone for a raven's beak," he explains.

"Our people believe the raven and the eagle have great spiritual power," he says.

(Continued on Page Four)



PHOTOS BY BILL HESS

Artist hopes work will help restore Native pride

(Continued from Page Three)

"They have been a great aid to our people over time . . . the eagle represents the pure power of the spirit: the freedom of life and beauty.

"The face is the face of death . . . what you have in this carving is spiritual life and physical death. Eternity . . . red eternity."

Menka speaks of the spiritual life of his people as being a most important matter. "I don't pretend to be a holy man," he says. "I am too young. But I definitely have things to say, and they're going to be said.

"Our spiritual people have to speak out, to take control. You can see what is happening as we move into the space age. You can see the destruction of our race. We are racing time.

"That is why I want to use my art work to do what I can to make my people realize who they are. They are a very special people; people of the land.

"When they see this sculpture, it's going to make them think and ponder it."

Menka says he would like the work to be purchased and displayed where many Native

people could view it. "Like if the Alaska Natives had a spiritual center somewhere in the state, for all the people, it would be a nice adornment there."

"It will probably wind up in a bank, a museum, or a large corporate building, something like that," he sighs.

With its price tag, it could take some time for it to wind up even in one of these places.

"This is the treasure trove of the U.S.," he states his frustration. "As Alaska Natives we come from the seed of the land. It would behoove some of the corporate people to re-

place some of the beauty that they've taken from Alaska.

"People come here to conquer the land, to get rich; they physically trade in their good years for money and then they leave. So art is fairly low on the totem pole in that context. But I have faith. Otherwise, I wouldn't do it."

Although the \$50,000 may sound outrageously high to many, Menka argues otherwise. Two winters, plus the spring, summer and fall seasons together went into the piece. The polishing took two months alone. For a while, Menka kept track of the hours, but gave

up at 1,500.

The time Menka put into the project took away from time he would spend on smaller, revenue-earning projects, and Menka found himself struggling economically.

It was hard to find a place to work. He started at his home, but when he lost that space to work, he moved to Cook Inlet Native Association facilities in Anchorage, and finally finished the work in the garage of King and Dorothy Gillespie of Anchorage.

"I have to sell it. That's the bottom line in this day and age," says Menka.