

Inua: A must-see when you are



Blumenstein gestures as she explains a small part of her culture to a crowd of spectators, including a young mother with a baby.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

By Bill Hess
Tundra Times

The museum is a busy place this Sunday afternoon, but as Rita Blumenstein sits at a table surrounded by century-old artifacts from her culture being inspected by dozens of modern Alaskans from a culture new to the Great Land, she remembers a special feeling she recently experienced.

"I had a chance to be all by myself in this room," she remembers the time just before the Smithsonian exhibit "Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo," opened at the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum. The artifacts had not yet been put into the dimly-lit display cases where visitors now look at them and wonder about the people who made them.

"I had a different feeling then. It was so spiritual like." She recalls touching a shaman's mask which was still wrapped in plastic. "I had a warm feeling, and then a cold feeling. I felt so peaceful."

Blumenstein's elders had told her of a time when the things that had been would come back. "I felt like this was it," she smiles.

In 1877, a 22-year-old white man by the name of Edward William Nelson, working for the Smithsonian Institution, ventured into the communities of Eskimos living along and near the Bering Sea. Over the next four years, Nelson collected some 10,000 objects of things the people used in their lives; wooden boxes, ear rings, bag handles, spears, ceremonial masks; whatever he could find.

So persistent was he in gathering the artifacts representative of everyday life in the region that the local people nicknamed him "the man who buys good-for-nothing things."

Blumenstein now lives in Palmer but comes originally from the village of Tununak on Nelson Island, which was named after the explorer. Some of the 250 artifacts now on display here could have well been made and used by

her ancestors.

She feels only gratitude to the man who gathered the "good-for-nothing things," for those artifacts now make up the finest collection of 19th century artifacts made by her people in existence today.

Without Nelson's work, much of what is represented here could well have been lost entirely.

"I feel fortunate to be here," says Blumenstein, who is serving as "artist in residence" while the Smithsonian display is in Anchorage. "I was always wishing I could have talked to Mr. Nelson. Now, here's my chance to do something in appreciation for him. That's part of our custom, to do something nice in appreciation for someone who has done something good for you."

Blumenstein, an expert basketmaker, has brought not only her baskets, but also a 27-year-old parka made by her mother, a panful of a clay-like mud in which she uses an ivory

visiting Anchorage

blade to tell stories, drums, fans, and other implements.

During the week, she spends time with classes of elementary, junior high and high school students who have come to the museum, demonstrating the uses of her materials, and encouraging them to participate in traditional song and dance.

Afterward, the young people can see the pieces on display as something more than just forgotten artifacts, but as an important part of a real people's life. Blumenstein has considerable experience at teaching. Not only does she teach classes at the Anchorage Community College, she also instructs young Native students during special classes held at a wide variety of schools.

Although the pieces from the Nelson collection represent hunting weapons, every day implements and ceremonial artifacts, all have been crafted with skilled artistry and beauty. The spirit life lived by the people was manifested in virtually everything in their lives; hunting amulets, wooden serving bowls and ladles, clothing, harpoon points, everything.

All things; man, animal, the natural objects, possessed an Inua, or spirit which was capable of taking on different forms but usually was revealed in a humanlike countenance.

As it was with her ancestors, beauty is important to Blumenstein in the works she creates with her hands. She is a member of the Baha'i faith, yet the spiritual feelings that moved her ancestors are still with her and of prime importance to her.

Once she gets the right feeling with a visitor, she tells him of some of the meanings of the designs used by her family members in sewing, and of memories of shamans and their powers. Those are all things which Blumenstein considers sacred, and not for the printed page. Thus, while told, they do not appear here.

Although the spiritual feelings Blumenstein experienced before the show opened evaporated as her activities at the museum settled into somewhat of a routine, they return from time to time.

Like when the "special kids" came to see the exhibit — children with mental and physical handicaps. "You know, they're very spiritual," she explains. "Very smart in their own ways. (Such people frequently became shamans in the past).

"I usually don't let anyone touch my parka," she adds. "Yet it was my pleasure for them to feel it. One little boy, it didn't seem like he could hardly talk. I gave him the tassels on the parka. He put them up against his face," Blumenstein demonstrates. "Soft, soft!" he said. His teacher went over to him. "Good boy!" she said.

"That was special!"

Another special time came with the visit of a fifth grade class which this reporter happened to be on hand for. In many of the classes which come before Blumenstein, there are a few typical "wise guys," and others who pay little attention and don't seem to care much.

Not with this class. As Blumenstein demonstrated her basket sewing skills, "anything round is spiritual," and told how she makes her different colored dyes, both with the plants and animals parts of the natural world and sometimes with such western artifacts as Hershey bar wrappers, all listened, attentive and respectful.

When Blumenstein got out the drums, fans and headdresses, they eagerly volunteered to try drumming and dancing while she sang. The first drummers beat slightly out of time, and the movements of the dancers were a bit awkward, but they were enjoying themselves, and they were learning.

By the end of the demonstration, the whole class joined in. When it was over, Blumenstein found herself being hugged from both sides by two blond girls wearing Eskimo headdresses. This was followed by a picture-taking session.

"That was the best!" Blumenstein exclaimed as the teacher guided her students out the door. "Oh, I loved it! This group had spirit! I felt it! Did you feel it?"

There is much beauty in the Inua show, where ivory has been carved into fine harpoon points and decorative adornments depicting seals and other animals and objects, and wood has been steamed and bent to form finely crafted boxes which in turn have been decorated with symbolic figures of man, animal and Inua. All have their meaning.

The decorations on Blumenstein's possessions have their meanings, too. The tassels adorning the parka her mother made each represent family members. When one family member dies, a tassel is removed. When another is born to take the former's place, a tassel goes back up.

The most recent tassel removed by Blumenstein was the one for her mother. One of her three children recently had a baby, Blumenstein's second grandson.

"If my daughter would have had a baby girl, I could have put it on," Blumenstein explains. "I'm still saving it. It's in my special box. When my daughter has a girl, then I will put it on."

Although the people of the Bering Sea region still produce many fine crafts and artworks, a good deal of it is now made for the market. Many of the artifacts on display are seldom made now, if at all.

Life has changed. How has the spiritual side of the people fared?

"When I go home, there is still a spirit. But the material is more there now. There are new things like TV, bingo, and the monies. But the people are still close to Mother Earth. They are still dependent on Nature, on the weather."

As for herself, Blumenstein says she will never be 100 percent spiritual. The material side of life will always be there. "I have to have both, to make me balance," she explains.

One of the places Blumenstein turns to find the spiritual side of life is her baskets. "When I'm making baskets, that's when I forget everything. That's when I think about things I'm going to do to be better; spiritual things. That's myself. I don't know how other basketmakers feel."

When she gets into a basket, Blumenstein says it is as if the materials she is working with talk to her. They let her know just how much grass to sew into a coil here, and how much there.

To an observer, it may look easy but it is not. Blumenstein figures that a talented student will take at least five years to begin making baskets which show truly fine craftsmanship.

When baskets are sold, they can bring the sewer into the realm of the material. Sometimes, though, this is harder to do profitably than one might think. Blumenstein recalls a coil work she did for Settlers Bay, a Calista subsidiary.

It is not her way to keep track of the hours she puts into a project, but since this was to be five foot wide, she did. A total of 557 hours, 16 into the outer coil alone, went into the project.

Blumenstein figures she put \$1,500 worth of material into it. The rigors she put herself through to complete the work was damaging to her health. She was paid \$1,500. When she received an offer to do a similar project at a major Anchorage hotel, Blumenstein set a price of \$20,000. The offer was dropped though it would certainly have been worth the money.

She is not anxious to take

new orders for baskets these days. She is very interested in teaching interested students, and has found Athabascans, Aleuts, and a host of mixed bloods who are as eager to learn as any Eskimos.

Blumenstein is not worried that her art form will die out. "It will still be going," she assures. "I don't think our people will forget. But there are not going to be very many people sewing baskets."

In addition to Blumenstein and the Inua show, related films and speakers have been scheduled. "Eskimos: A Changing Culture" will be shown this week at 12:00 noon. On Sunday, show time will be at 2:00 p.m. This film will be replaced with "People of the Yukon Delta" October 25-31.

On Thursday, October 20, state representative Anthony Vasca, a Native from the Bethel region will speak about historical traditions in the Bering Sea region. Nelson Angapak, the Executive Vice President of Calista, will talk on tradition and contemporary spiritual beliefs. Both speeches begin at 8:00 p.m.



A dance mask representing the Inua of the bear by a face within the mask.