

Cape Dorset Printmakers--

Alaskan and Canadian Eskimo Art Compared

In the farthest reaches of Northeastern Canada, the village of Cape Dorset is known throughout Canada and the United States as the Home of renowned Eskimo printmakers.

The Cape Dorset Cooperative employs most of the population of that remote Eskimo village. Some design its distinctive designs. Others work on the mechanics of producing their prints and soapstone carvings.

The founding of the coop traces back to the nine years a white man named James Houston spent in Cape Dorset. Today, Houston is Associate Director of Design for Steuben Glass in New York.

Last week, Houston spent two days in Anchorage, along with three representatives of the Canadian Eskimo arts, to discuss Eskimo art with artists and co-op managers in Alaska.

The "Symposium for Canadian and Alaskan Artists and Co-Op Manager," organized by Professor Saradell Ard Fredericks of Alaska Methodist University, attracted a corps of Eskimo artists and art experts from Alaska to meet with four Canadian representatives.

Against the backdrop of an exclusive showing of works by Eskimo artists, artists from Canada and Alaska argued the definitions of Eskimo art, the ways

to produce it and the methods of making it profitable.

"Talent is in the kindergartens of the schools," James Houston told Alaskans. "Children have a tremendous wealth of ability to create the kind of art they want to create," Eskimo people in places like Cape Dorset, he said, have that same ability.

"They possess the confidence that children possess."

Since Houston introduced the

(Continued on Page 6)

Alaskan, Canadian Art..

(Continued from page 1)

techniques of print making to Cape Dorset, their prints have become known throughout serious art circles. Cape Dorset print series sell for \$500 to \$1000 for each print. Strongly traditional the prints feature the stories and themes of a strongly individualistic people in a land gripped by ice nine months of the year.

In Cape Dorset a woman named Kanoyalak created the well known design of the magical owl. For her many designs, Kanoyalak draws a stipend of \$200 per month from the coop, plans never again to venture into the "outside." While she and the village have profited many fold from her talent, her generation does not seek to venture "outside."

Along with James Houston, who is author of several books, among them the best selling novel "The White Dawn," came Terrence Ryan, manager of the Cape Corset Coop, Jonasie Solomonie of Frobisher Bay, an Eskimo Artist and Eric Mitchell, General Manager of Canadian Art Producers.

"What bothers me about Houston is his idea that Eskimo art can only be produced in the village and using traditional materials," commented one Alaskan Eskimo artist.

Controversy between Alaskan and Canadian artists runs high. Alaskans tend to believe the Canadian approach is somewhat paternalistic, that the less isolated Alaskan villages produce a more outlooking type of person, that in the jet age there is no need for a "resident non-native artist" to stay in a village for

years at a time.

"If an Eskimo artist wants to use tin can as a medium then its a viable medium" commented UA professor Ron Senungetuk after two days of intense discussion at Alaska Methodist University.

One participant at the AMU conference was Joseph Senungetuk, an Eskimo artist living in San Francisco where he has done extensive work and produced a book about his early life.

Senungetuk traveled from San Francisco to attend the AMU conference which displayed several of his works for sale.

Among the serious questions discussed by Alaskans and Canadians was the definition of Eskimo art and the means which could be used to promote it. Cape Dorset art, Alaskans felt, could be an overpromoted product.

When asked if he could recognize a Cape Dorset print among a group of Eskimo prints, Joseph Senungetuk cited such details as quality of paper and ink which differentiate this product. On artistic grounds, he could make no comment.

Developed under a small grant from the Alaska Council on the Arts, the two day symposium at AMU brought together many conflicting views.

"Probably, the important thing at these conferences isn't the stuff that goes on in the sessions but the discussion at the airport, in the restaurants, in the bars. Its a valuable exchange of points of view," commented UA professor Glen Simpson.



AUTHORS DISCUSSION—Canadian James Houston (left), author of books on Eskimo printmaking and **THE WHITE DAWN** confers with Alaskan Eskimo Joseph Senungetuk, author of **GIVE OR TAKE A CENTURY**, a recently released first novel. Houston and Senungetuk were in Anchorage last week for a conference of Canadian and Eskimo artists and coop managers.

—Staff Photo by MADELYN SHULMAN