

## Arts conference . . .

artists, others wanted to expound on the crisis of native culture today, still others were waiting to take concrete organizational and political steps to assure future development and growth for the arts.

And of course, there was the wide diversity of art forms represented: fine printing, poetry, sculpture, Chilkat blankets, totem pole carving, jewelry, translation, literature, anthropology, oral tradition, Eskimo dancing and modern jazz.

Andrew Hope introduced the conference by challenging the group to think of what cultural gods were worthy of importing and what the "nativization" of European methodology and values might mean.

He also asked what it meant that native spiritual identity had been so long subjected to modernization and stated that it was time that a spiritual heritage create a consciousness that would build native art into a cultural force in Alaska. He also suggested that the state of the oral tradition signifies the state of native arts.

If that is true, then one good sign of life of that tradition exists in Pt. Hope where David and Dinah Frankson have been teaching Eskimo dancing to young people from first to twelfth grade since last December.

Sponsored by Inupiat University, David, 72, and Dinah, 67, have organized a group of helpers to teach what they learned from their own grandparents. David's whale skin drum has as its handle the same ivory drum handle used by his grandfather who he never knew.

Introducing each member of the group, during the first of many dances they would perform throughout the week, Frankson said at first the students did not want to learn to dance. He laughed. "Now they want to dance all the time, but I am an old man now, and I get tired!"

Robert Callahan began what was loosely called the "New World Seminar" with a reading from his paper "The Migrations." He suggested that "it all comes down to Alaska," and that "precious little time is paid to origins" when studies of culture are done.

He called Alaska a kingdom, at once being born and dying. Pointing to the symbol of the Tlingit warrior, he said it was confusing for an outsider to see that Alaska is both way ahead and way behind the Lower 48, because with colonization there is strong resistance.

Richard Dauenhauer from Southeast presented a discussion of his work with myth in Northwest Coast poetry affirming that a desire for regionalism need not mean provincialism. Within a heady, academic discussion of myth which ensued, Nathaniel Tarn broke in with the reminder that often the native sense of history is of being in one place forever, and the "now" from which indigenous people start is also the "forever."

On the second day, native artists led off with discussions of their work, explaining some of the traditions behind what was often their contemporary re-creations of the old. Ron Senungetuk questioned the validity of trying to preserve the old ways if it is so hard to do. He suggested instead going with movement and change as more fruitful paths for young artists.

Dennis Demmert discussed the difference between curios and art. He challenged the

artists to explore new systems for reproducing their work that would bring market costs down, avoid rip-offs and not force their art to succumb to curio quality. He suggested obtaining copyrights which are not difficult to come by.

Wednesday, the Jim Pepper Quintet led off with the first of several workshops and Richard Grossinger tabled his discussion of the Northeast in favor of discussing the purpose of the conference, which, by this time, was causing concern and restlessness.

Ron Senungetuk presented one of the underlying concrete dreams of the conference, the establishment of a Native Arts Institute. Senungetuk pointed out that a big issue would be whether the institute would be exclusively for natives or not.

A discussion followed of another dream, a Native Arts Journal and fine literature program. Largely the brainchild of Andrew Hope, and form and focus of the program was discussed. There was confusion as to whether printing as craft would be emphasized or the publishing and communication of works of native writers.

In what observer called a "moving" presentation, Thursday began with slide showings of the works of Ron Senungetuk, Larry Ahvakana and Fred Anderson. Senungetuk finally posed what he felt was the central question of the conference:



LARRY AHVAKANA (left), Richard Dauenhauer and Fred Anderson.

"Are we, as native artists, united? Can we unite?"

The tensions of the week had finally surfaced and Thursday was jammed with presentations and discussions. Senungetuk charged that it was time to focus in and that the resource people should realize that they had been asked for direct help because they had struggled with some of the same problems already.

Poet Edward Dorn suggested a leasing program instead of a selling model for expensive native art and that for the sake of self-determination, artists might not always want to take money that is coming in depending on the source.

Nathaniel Tarn became emphatic about the need to take control over the past "as a springboard of the future," and asked that the concept of a museum be considered, to be incorporated within the proposed institute and controlled solely by the native people.

A lengthy discussion of reproducibility, preservation, museums and the potential for fine literature as a support for visual arts ensued. Andrew Hope expressed his urgent concern

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for the state of native "religious" art and Nathan Jackson told of the rip-offs of Outside dealers.

Within the midst of this brass tacks discussion, Cecilia Kunz arose to speak, saying she felt impelled to explain the difference between the white and the Indian ways of art. She movingly related how "Mr. Young Man" from Seattle had painted Indian designs on the IGA store in Juneau, and because he was white, had gotten it all mixed up. "When I look at it I guess I just get peeved," she said.

She asked that older people always be included when Native arts are taught to avoid corrupting the tradition and the spirituality behind it. She told of a totem pole in Southeast depicting Abraham Lincoln. "They didn't tell the story right," she said emphatically. "Besides what does Mr. Abe Lincoln have to do with our past?"

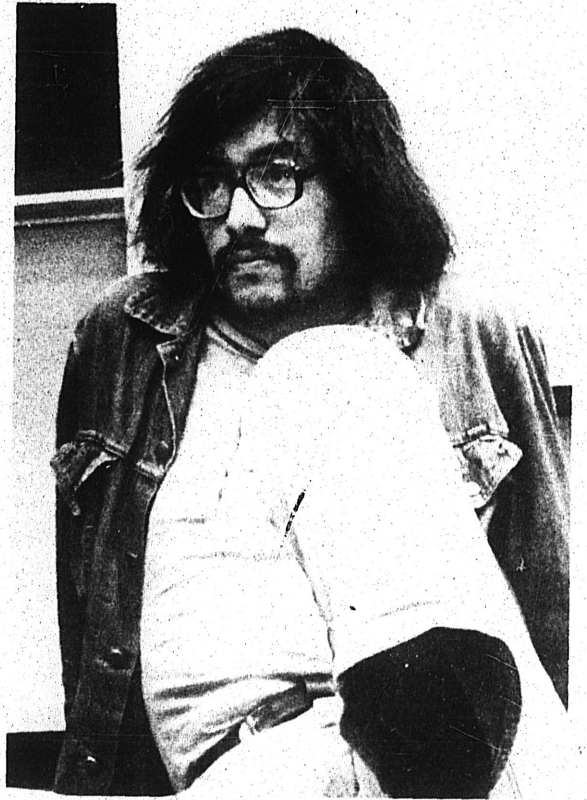
Story teller, Jim McKinley put on his Athabaskan head-dress and beadwork before beginning, asking of the audience, "Why you never wear your own things?" He told of old ways of exchange and travel, days that are long gone, according to Andrew Hope who has seen too much alienation between Alaskan natives.

Nora Dauenhauer told of creating a corporation to print the history and grammar of the

Melvin Ollana had attended in Canada. "There the artists were herded around like exotic people. There was not dialogue between the young and old,

they should not longer offer their opinions to organizations like the council and help determine its decisions.

As a continued effort in



ANDREW HOPE, conference coordinator.

PHOTOS BY BETSY BRENNEMAN

that direction, the artists present decided that current representation on the native task force advising the council was not a fair showing of concerned artists. The group elected new members: Ron Senungetuk, Larry Ahvakana, Fred Anderson, Andrew Hope, and Ron Brower to serve on the task force.

For some, the week was a discouraging failure; for others, an exciting success. Everyone was judging the conference with a different definition. In any case, says Andrew Hope, the collaborative effort will continue. Even if the idea of an Institute is "too tough" and too political, his idea for a native Arts Journal is moving forward and he hopes for funding through the National Endowment for the Arts, which along with the Alaska Humanities Forum and the State Council on the Arts funded the conference.

Hope envisions a yearly educational-type activity such as the conference only with more performing, more creating writing, printing, sculpting and he is determined that young people have better access to their culture through such events.

He says he's ready to utilize what he's got at hand as well as appealing for funding Outside, but for Andy Hope "it's not important whether we get an endorsement from Anchorage society or art people. The main thing is that the resource people are working together and continuing to exchange."

One gets the distinct feeling that a new, important native arts movement is afoot in this state, one that is more powerful than most would suspect. "I'm really serious about this multi-cultural stuff," says Hope. "I'm serious about something concrete being done, not just posturing with militant rhetoric or blustering."

When asked how he resolves the perpetual conflict between traditional and new ways, Andrew Hope gives the hint of a smile, quotes Ezra Pound, and says that eccentricity is most often found within the orbit of tradition.

Tlingit people and the problems of getting the language taught in the schools. She stressed the need for preserving what older native "tradition bearers" had to offer.

Ed Dorn suggested that present day problems for Alaska might be the result of new migrations across an "air bridge" much like the land bridge of long ago. Joe Senungetuk closed the day by repeating that "we have to keep tradition alive and we have to figure out how."

By Friday, some like Nora Dauenhauer felt that discussion got nowhere and that it was time to do things instead of holding conferences. Tarn also said the conference spent too much time figuring out who the people attending were. "We know who we are," he said firmly. "We need to go the next step."

But Robert Callahan reminded everyone that if the days had gotten weaker the nights had gotten stronger and if the poetry hadn't worked, the Eskimo dancing and jazz had. Joe Senungetuk said this was a healthier conference than a 1973 Inuit conference had and

no self-determination."

Ron Senungetuk suggested some political moves might be necessary and that in Alaska, you have to answer other questions, attack on other fronts before you can have art "happening."

The discussion of art vs. politics finally hit full force with Nathaniel Tarn suggesting there were two kinds of politics: one of bureaucracies and systems, the other of sovereignty and self-determination. He said that he had always been talking about the second kind when referring to native arts in Alaska even though it might be segregationist. At least, he said, "you'll be dealing with your own bureaucracy."

Questioning whether there might still be too much dependency on "outside" help, Robert Callahan suggested that it might be time to do without those old support systems, to get strong about it and be willing to make some sacrifices for independence.

Roy Helms of the State Council on the Arts said that because it is a question of survival, native artists are selling themselves short if they think