Old whalebone preservation reveals the story of Eskimo past

The development of whalebone carving in Canadian Arctic communities during the past five years has added another quality to the Eskimo arts and crafts industry. In a relatively short time, a growing number of native craftsmen have emerged together with an increasing number of art buyers who wish to add whalebone pieces to their collections of stone and ivory carvings.

The expanding market, however, has endangered the study of Eskimo history, since the whalebones used for recent carvings are being gathered from ancient Eskimo ruins that contain almost all the information known about ancestors living about 1,000 years ago.

Conservation project

The Archaeological Survey of Canada (National Museum of Man) and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs are jointly sponsoring the Thule Archaeology Conservation Project, under the direction of Dr. Allen P. McCartney.

The program, which will last from 1975 to 1979, is designed to mitigate the impact of disturbance by today's Eskimos at ancient (Thule culture) village sites. It will attempt to survey the sites, especially those adjoining modern Eskimo settlements where whalebone sculpting has developed, to determine the amount of damage, to excavate whalebones, to collect, analyze and report on the anthropological, zoological and other relevant data and to provide whalebones to Eskimo communities for the use of carvers.

Pile of whalebones at Spence Bay to be used for carving.

Photos courtesy National Museums of Canada.

Dr. Allen McCartney, director of the Thule Archaeology Conservation Project, examines the remains of whalebone houses at Resolute Bay.

Reports will be published in Inuit (Eskimo) language publications and excavated material will be exhibited in Inuit communities. Native participation is invited in the project.

Thule culture

Thule Eskimo peoples and culture were so named and first studied by Danish archaeologist Therkel Mathiassen in the 1920s; the term "Thule" came from the trading station at Thule, northwestern Greenland.

Unlike the Dorset Eskimos, who occupied much of Canada's northern shores prior to about A.D. 900, the Thule Eskimos especially adopted a whale-hunting culture during A.D. 900-1200. Besides eating the blubber and meat of large bowhead and possibly other whale species, Thule people used various whalebones in the construction of their large winter houses. Long jaw bones and other skull pieces plus ribs, shoulder blades and vertebrae were used to support sod roofs or were used as part of walls. When the large sod-covered igloos eventually collapsed into jumbled heaps of bones, boulders and sod, the whalebones were exposed and over time were bleached by weathering. Besides the bones used in house construction, Thule sites have whalebones scattered around the house depressions. These are the remains of whale carcass pieces taken to the communities for food and as a source of bone for making tools, sled runners and other equipment.

Eskimos today look to these ancient settlement ruins as sources of whale bones to carve. The aged bones carve easily and their mottled brown, grey and white surface colours are appealing to the artistic eye. By disturbing these bones, however, modern Eskimos at the same time remove forever the possibility of making these bones "speak" about the past. In rooting out bones from collapsed houses, damage is done to the walls in which they are set and the arrangement of fallen roofs that can tell the archaeologist how the house was built. Removing bones still buried in the ruins also disturbs the natural order of implements and household articles used or stored in the original house. Taking the bones from the ground surface outside the houses prevents scientists and today's Eskimos from learning about the kinds and ages of whales hunted in the past.

Impact on industry

The transitional period covered by the conservation project is one which will