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High fashion from the high Arctic comes to Calgary

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Eskimo culture and crafts . . .

Spence Bay is a model community of northern cottage industry. Isolated and without the benefit of southern trade and commerce, it has overcome tremendous odds to take its place in the arts and crafts communities of North America and Europe. Its clothing products, for instance, using materials from as far away as Prince Edward Island, are the height of fashion. Spence Bay artists have also won international acclaim. Mary Biner, who visited the Arctic coast community, reports here on how the industry evolved and how the consumer can tell the genuine item from a host of fakes that have flooded the market.

SPENCE BAY — The first link with the outside world for this Arctic coast community of 406 arrived here last week by way of telephone service.

Spence Bay, however, has had no need for conventional communications to make its presence known to the world. It overcame its isolation a few years ago by reputation of its native artists. And ever since patrons from New York, Montreal and Europe have outbid each other for crafts by these Netsilik Eskimos.

Now Calgary's Jubilee Auditorium is to become a showcase for Spence Bay art and handicrafts in a world premiere. An exhibition and sale, sponsored by the Samaritan Club of Calgary and Calgary Galleries Ltd., is to be held Oct. 8 and 9.

Spence Bay, located 850 miles northeast of Hay River, is a model of community ingenuity and industriousness. It has none of the trappings of southern cities — no banks, library, accommodation or mechanized industry — yet its people, using their native skills, have developed an industry that has won it international acclaim from artists and collectors alike. Its products vary from high fashion clothing to carvings and artifacts.

The Calgary show is to be a compendium of the community's products as well as a visual presentation of its way of life. It will include clothing, carvings, artifacts, fossils from the Arctic coast, pictures, films and even Eskimo food — Arctic char, caribou, buffalo and, possibly, Dall sheep.

The Spence Bay success story is one that the Northwest Territorial government points to with considerable pride as a model of self-help, initiative and governmental co-operation.

C. D. Abrahamson, liaison officer of arts and crafts for the Northwest Territories, says the Spence Bay fashion experiment started three years ago when the wife of the area's economic development officer, Mrs. John (Judy) McGrath, a woman with training in the crafts field, realized the opportunity of marketing local products.

"She found the women doing exceptional work in sewing and decided to try and assist them in any way she could to develop cottage industries and use their existing skills," Mr. Abrahamson said.

But there were immense difficulties to overcome in setting up the community industry. There was no workshop nor funds with which to purchase materials or equipment. But a group was struck up by the natives, called the Spence Bay Women's Guild, to not only organize community work efforts, but also to approach governments for financial assistance.

Canada Manpower contributed $30,000, the Canada Council gave $3,000 and, much later, the territorial government made a grant of $5,000.

An old house was renovated as the community's craft shop. But the initial period was spent on experimenting and developing methods of using as many indiginous materials as possible. They experimented for eight weeks extracting dyes from flowers, lichens, leaves and shrubs, finding dyes that were both colorful and permanent.

Freight rates to the North are the most expensive in the country, limiting greatly the availability of materials to the Eskimos. The wool used in their clothing, for instance, is brought all the way from Prince Edward Island.

Wool embroidery decorates many of the garments while small skeins of wool, 15 yards in length, are being offered for crewel work and other forms of wool crafts by women outside the North. The colors are soft and muted, yet strong enough to be assertive.

Following the dye workshop, a sewing course was conducted, resulting in about 40 women being either skilled or semi-skilled in activities ranging from plant gathering and extracting dyes to sewing or other handicrafts.

Communities such as Spence Bay are contributing about $3 million annually to North's economy with cottage industry.

Karoo Ashevak, who has had one-man shows in New York, displays carving similar to those that have won him praise from British sculptor Henry Moore.

Now there are about 18 women permanently employed in the sewing project: skilled seamstresses and, in part, designers, who take the material to their homes and turn out the garments that will be seen in Calgary. Sewing machines and materials are supplied by government funds to get the clothing project into operation.

The clothes themselves are definitely high style: Mother Hubbards adapted for use from toppers to patio-wear; flattering coats of stroud or duffel elaborately decorated with native-dye embroidery and furs; pant suits suitable for apres ski.

Interestingly enough, the cut of the Mother Hubbards is very close to Yves St. Laurent's "naive chemise" line that itself is being adapted by various designers on 7th Avenue.

With a most unusual idea of color, the Eskimo woman will decorate an orange Mother Hubbard with turquoise and navy tapes and braids and her choice will come off. Or she'll choose to join reds and mauves and produce a joyous garment.

Many of the Spence Bay Mother Hubbards, all in easy-care fabrics, are trimmed in Delta braid: layers of bias tape somehow stitched into geometric patterns. Apparently Delta braid originated in the Mackenzie Delta area, but it is used all across the Arctic coast.

For many years the Eskimo women have knotted fish nets. Strong nets to catch the Arctic char could mean food or starvation in the North. When a craft was introduced that meant knotting, the Eskimo women were already skilled.

"They were able, very readily, to see the relationship between the old knot-tying they did on the fish nets and on certain garments and macrame," Mr. Abrahamson said.

And while the white man or woman visualizes macrame hanging from, perhaps a bamboo or brass rod, the Eskimo sees macrame hanging from rods available from the land: a caribou or moose horn that adds to the interest and beauty of the work.

They realize, too, that the written sounds of the Eskimos, the syllabic alphabet, is important and thus they have knotted these gracefully shaped figures into their macrame hangings. The result is most unusual and beautiful.

An older art form in Spence Bay, practised by the men and some of the women, is carving. This was a government project until a year ago when it began to make money.

"Our department, when a project becomes self-supporting, generally offers it back to the people," said Mr. Abrahamson.

"Literally, we say 'here is the depreciated value of the equipment, here is your existing stock, this work is now making money so would you be interested in handling the project yourself as a co-operative or as a private development in taking over and running it?'

"Then we move out of the area. You may be assured, however, that we are very cognizant of costs and are sure that a program is economically viable before it is given to the Eskimos. Otherwise we do the people a great disservice."

One of the younger carvers, Karoo Ashevak, has had one-man shows in New York and is considered by Henry Moore as a great sculptural artist. Another well-known Spence

Cover and inside photos by Boyd Waddell

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. . . to come alive in Calgary

Bay artist is Anaijah, an older man that is not as well known as Karoo but doing fabulous work in his own way.

"To own a Karoo Ashevak or an Anaijah is really a very happy situation," says Mr. Abrahamson. But there are other carvers in the area who also are doing exceptionally fine work.

Many of the carvings out of Spence Bay are of whalebone, gathered from the great piles left in centuries past by both Eskimos and European whalers. A small amount of caribou horn, ivory and soapstone carvings are produced as well.

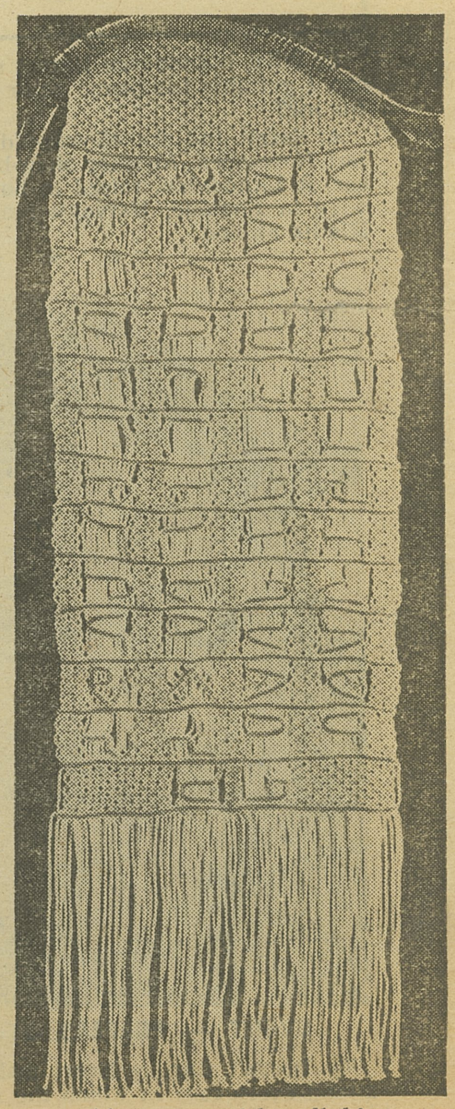
They are also making cottage-type pictures of Arctic flowers and mosses, a program that has every indication of being successful. They are also working to imbed these beautiful plants in clear plastics for desk sets and while they have not managed this yet, they are continuing to experiment.

Another project that seemed to have great potential was tying fish flys of polar bear hair, dyed in a rainbow of colors. For various reasons this work has been suspended temporarily and it is expected it will be resumed when difficulties are ironed out.

This summer, the people of Spence Bay attempted to distil the pure essence of Arctic flowers into perfumes.

There has been great joking about the perfume project with names like Tundra No. 5 thrown in as suggestions, but the important thing, even if the project should fail, is that the Eskimos are using imagination and effort to make themselves self-supporting in a world that is rapidly encroaching on and changing their age-old culture.

Judy McGrath (right) admires intricate design with designer Anaoyok Alookee



Macrame with syllabics

Buyer, beware of fakes

Wherever there is money, the fast-buck operators and con men move in.

In total, Eskimo art added about $3 million to the northern economy during 1973 with sales going the world over.

And, as the importance of this work increases, it must contend not only with the problems of production and export to market but also with the fakes that confuse and confound the uninformed buyer.

The artistic worth of Eskimo sculpture has been reaffirmed many times through international art shows. And, as its worth and popularity increases, so must the buyer beware of imitations that are increasingly coming into shops.

It takes no great research to find these imitations. Walk through a number of stores in Calgary and they can be spotted: but is the buyer or tourist always aware this is not the "real thing?"

Price, for example, is not in itself a criterion, says Norman Hay in North magazine, "Genuine small pieces can be found for as little as $2 or $3. Fakes can be found mostly in the $20 to $30 range, but so can many good genuine pieces.

"Sales people, when selling an imitation, will sometimes acknowledge that the piece is not genuine. They defend this admission with the claim that it is not possible to buy an original carving for $20 or $15. This is demonstratably untrue but it does tend to intimidate the customer."

The places to buy genuine Eskimo art are, of course, the reputable galleries, national retail stores and quality stores.

If the piece is genuine it will have a proper label, the name of the carver will be attached as will the place of origin.

For example, a small carving I purchased in Coppermine has an igloo registered trademark that tells me the piece was "hand-made by a Canadian Eskimo artist. Certified by the government of Canada." The label also tells me the trademark is registered, the carving was done by J. Hokanak and the place of origin is Coppermine Eskimo Co-operative Ltd.

Another piece, with the same label, tells me it was carved by Isacci of Frobisher Bay. Neither of these cost more than $6.

Misleading labels vary in many ways such as "based on original Canadian . . ." or "inspired by an original Canadian . . ." What you will not find is the black and white igloo label that designates the piece as genuine Eskimo work.

Eskimo carvings are made of soapstone which varies in color and markings, granite, serpentine, quartz, bone, ivory, antler and caribou hoofs. Most is made of soapstone.

The fake pieces usually are of some plastic composition, made in a mould. They do not have the weight or feel of stone, there is no variation in color and there are no carving marks. A few fakes are made of stone but these are rare and do not carry the label of authenticity.

As Eskimo art becomes more and more popular in the marketplace it follows there will also be more fakes.

One way to stop the fakes is refusal to buy: if stock does not move, it is not reordered.

Unusual trim adornes stroud evening coat

ARTISTS DEMAND MARKET VALUE

SPENCE BAY — Eskimo art has become one of the major industries of the North.

But the days when missionaries or agents traded trinkets for stone or bone carvings are over. Now the native artists get the biggest slice from their products' retail price.

The federal and territorial governments have set up marketing agencies and distribution systems to protect the interests of the North's artists.

C. D. Abrahamson, arts and crafts liaison officer for the territories, says "the Eskimo and Indian are now aware of prices. They are aware of what is fair market as far as they are concerned — full market value — and they want that. If they don't get it, they really won't sell."

The federal government has established a marketing agency in Ottawa, called the Canadian Arctic Producers, that evaluates items and sets the prices. The territorial government has assisted individual communities in setting up co-operatives through which artists funnel their work.

Project managers decide on specific time of work required for a particular project. Using the embroidery work of a parka as an example, Mr. Abrahamson said if a four-hour time limit is set and the producer does it in two, she still receives the four-hour rate. Conversely,if she takes longer there's no additional pay.

"On piece work, there's no rip-off at all, and, quite frankly, the Eskimo gets everything but 15 per cent which we add to it, to handle our overhead," Mr. Abrahamson says.

The 15 per cent is what keeps the co-ops going, which often also serve as a marketing place for arts and crafts as well as being the community's post office, garbage collection agency, water delivery agent and maintenance centre for airstrips.

The co-ops sell materials to producers at cost. When a producer sells an item to the co-op he receives a cash payment. The co-op may then keep the item for sale to tourists or send it on to the Ottawa agency.

As much as 70 per cent of the arts and crafts produced by the Northern cottage industry are the efforts of women.

"Ordinarily, these women have no earning power at all," Mr. Abrahamson says, but the cottage industry supplements many incomes.

"In many cases, it has taken people off the welfare roles," Mr. Abrahamson says.