

STORYTELLING ACROSS TIME AND PLACE:

Sewing Art of the Siberian Yupik
on St. Lawrence Island, Alaska

Herminia Din

Introduction

Jokela and Coutts (2014) write that “One may not ordinarily connect art and design with the North.” However, they observe that Art in the North “has always been about individual creativity, problem solving and encouraging alternative ways of seeing the world.” The purpose of this bilingual project is to document a personal journey with two remarkable individuals Ruthelle and Elaine Kingeekuk from Savoonga, Alaska on St. Lawrence Island. This journey tells the story of their sewing, art, culture, creativity, stories, and way of life.

The literature chronicling women sewing on St Lawrence Island is limited (Jones, 1982; Dickey & Lee, 1999). In 1982, Jones edited a book entitled *Eskimos Dolls* that combines an essay by Susan W. Fair and photographs by Rob Stapleton and Chris Arend. This definitive text documents the doll-making styles of the Inupiaq, Siberian Yup'ik, and Yup'ik cultural regions of Alaska. The book offers exquisite photography of dolls made by twenty different doll makers as well as photos of the doll makers themselves. Dickey and Lee (1999) also surveyed the many uses of dolls and human figurines in Alaska native cultures. Searching the *Alaska Digital Archives* provided historical photos of objects from the region of two villages (Savoonga and Gambell) on St. Lawrence Island. Despite these excellent contributions to the literature, more critical studies of sewing stories would be useful.

About St. Lawrence Island and Sewing Art

St. Lawrence Island is located west of mainland Alaska in the Bering Sea, just south of the Bering Strait. The island is part of Alaska but closer to the Chukchi Peninsula in the Russian Far East. It is inhabited by Siberian Yupiks who engage in hunting, fishing, and reindeer herding in order to survive. Sewing and doll making plays an important role in women's daily activities. Different sewing styles and techniques are used to create clothes, objects, toys, and dolls. The process first begins with the preparation of raw materials (skins, guts, sinews, furs) including dyeing those materials with organic or commercial substances. Once completed, sewing begins using a variety of stitches for different purposes. Waterproof stitches are used primarily for boots, guts raincoat, and skin-boat. Decorative stitches are used for embellishments and appliqués are used on balls, dolls, ornaments, gut baskets, hunting or tobacco bags, gloves, and clothes. Each sewer develops their unique pattern of designs that is passed on to the next generation.

Beginning of A Learning Journey

My own story began fifteen years ago in 2003 when I first met Elaine Kingeekuk at the Alaska Native Heritage Center during that year's Holiday Bazaar. I acquired two beautiful ornaments made of bleached sealskins and polar bear furs. Elaine used an embroidery technique to illustrate a hunter's head with a traditional Siberian Eskimo head dressing and tattoo on the face. These ornaments represented an ancestor who was a great hunter specializing in spear throwing. The detailed crafting of the ornaments is stunning and the story behind the objects was even more riveting. Later, I had the opportunity to get to know her mother Ruthelle who died in 2007. With her passing, one of the few remaining women from Savoonga who had first-hand knowledge of sewing the traditional skin boat was lost.

This project provides a significant firsthand account of women's sewing art. Stories are presented both in English and Siberian Yupik. This bilingual format is helpful because many cultural elements (and stories) are rooted in the local language which cannot be fully translated into another language.

Objects That Tells Stories

To honor Ruthelle's wisdom, inspiration, and commitment to her people and culture, Elaine and I began this journey together. Consequently, this project is neither anthropological research nor a linguistic exercise. Rather, it documents personal interactions and friendships with a native family by exploring the beauty of their work.



I want to begin the project with a photo of Elaine with tools and materials she used for her sewing. Through the years, I felt privileged to learn their way of living and especially their connection to the land and the animals. I remember Elaine told me once how respectful they are to the materials because it was a sacrifice from animal to human. One of the examples is collecting ivory dust during the carving and finding a way of using it. Looking at the sea ice on the baleen base it was made out of the ivory dust. If they cannot find further ways of using the materials, they would dig a hole, bury the land animal, and take the sea animal back to the ocean.

Tools and Materials

Pelluk	Seal Scraper
Ughvik	Gut Scraper
Sikuq	Ivory Needle
Tekeq	Thimble
Ugtinghaq	Dyed Sealskin
Uygaaq	Bleached Sealskin
Ivaalu	Sinew
Nateghaq	Mukluk Sole
Imlaa	Unborn Sealskin (inside out)
Ayveghem ighneghllugi	Walrus Gut
Nanum ighneghllugi	Polar Bear Gut
Maklagut	Seal Gut
Siighnaq	Walrus Stomach

Qiipaghaapiwasqughhaat



Qiipaghaapiwasqughhaat /
Tiny Little Kaspuk (2005)
Left: 6 ½ (H) x 7 (W) |
Right: 7 (H) x 7 ¼ (W)
Printed Fabric

Qiipaghaapiwasqughhaat taghnughhaghwaasqughhaastun tamaakustun angkalghiit, Barbiestun ulimaaqegkangi eltughaghminun. Taawa kingulighpigaq kuusmenaqaqeftuq whangkunni, tunqughiinkung whangkutungllu aghnaghteghlakaaghngaamtung whangkutungllu. Taghnughhaqnalutung. Kuusmenghan agaghtiiraghqaaluki pagitaghaameng pilgusqellutung eltughaghminun maligullutung. Esgha tamaakenllu aatkighluku taghaghwangllaghnaaluni pimayalghii. Ayumightastun ayuqenghilngughmeng. Tawaaten 1920s-tun pilugugngalghiistun.

She used to make tiny Barbie-doll sized qiipaghaqs (cloth parka covers, kaspuks) for her granddaughters. On her last Christmas with us, she gave both Herminia and I those little qiipaghaqs like the ones she made for her granddaughters. I think she wanted us to be her little girls again. Then we would have something to treasure and use them for Christmas decorations to remember her. She had also planned to make dolls with cloth clothing, not like the old style but more like in the 1920s.

Herminia's Reflection

It was a nice visit with Ruthelle during a very cold evening in December 2005. At that point she was undergoing a medical treatment for her kidney disease. She was not feeling well because of her medication and hardly was able to sleep. She wanted to do something to keep her mind occupied. The night before my visit, she finished several full size St. Lawrence Island style kaspuks, and at least 6 tiny little Barbie-doll sized kaspuks. We were chatting about the design and she told me how much she missed her granddaughters back home. She was giggling about how popular her Barbie-doll sized traditional kaspuks were among little girls, and then she said, "Why don't you keep two as my gift to you, and some for Elaine." I was speechless. I gave her a big hug and told her I would put them on my "Christmas tree," and cherish them in my heart. Suddenly, I saw myself as one of those little girls in the village standing and cheering for her little kaspuks.



Taqughutaq

Taqughutaq /
Kayaker Barrette (2004)
2 ½ (H) x 4 ¼ (W)
Leather, Sealskin,
Sinew, Beads



Esgha ilanga taana naama taqughutangllaqaa. Qayaghtughhaq yuuk esnegrakegtakun leatherkun kelengestaaq. Uygaghmeng qayaquq, ayapghataquq, akmagtaquq, unghaquq, nekrekucq, angwaaghutkuq. Tapghaqluni qiipameng, atkugluni amiirameng, puvisighluni amiraghghameng. Awataghpihluni amirameng. Uzimun kakingestaghngaaq sungamqiighghameng kelukluni. Aamnanga nuyamun atestfigmeng kakivikngaaq. Whaten taqughutangllaqaameng esghaatepagigaatunga. Una taqughutaq ulimakaqaa esghaghuyugnaghluku. Tawaatenlu asiingllaqayuguyalghiillu, uygurangllaqayuklu kamegmun.

This is another way my mother made hair barrettes like this man on kayak. She sewed the kayaker with small stitches on blue leather, used bleached sealskin to make the kayak, mitten, hunting bag, harpoon, hook, and paddle, and sinew thread for the rope. He has sealskin parka with sealskin ruff, and his seal pole was made out of sealskin as well. All around the barrette, she used threads and beads to sew on the back, and added the hairclip there, too. I never have seen another one like this she made. She always had brilliant ideas to make things different for people so they would be attracted to these ideas. Just like the one here. She made this type of design similar to when she made parkas or boot trims.

Herminia's Reflection

When I acquired this piece, I was stunned by its artistic presentation. Ruthelle used two different blue color leathers to create the horizon line for the water. It is very clever. The realistic details of the kayaker were even more impressive. Somehow you feel you are there with him searching for seals.

Qayaghtughhaq



Qayaghtughhaq /
Kayaker (2004)
2 (H) x 4 ¼ (W) x 1 (D)
Walrus Ivory,
Bleached Sealskin

Qavngaghnguq amsakluta naaka qayaghtungllaqayuguyalghii ilangakun tugutmeng yungllaghluki taatun igaqegkatun. Puvisighluki amiraghaghmeng awataghpihluki ayapghaatighluki amalleqa amirameng. Uunghaqluni tugutmeng ivalumeng tapghighluni. Uygaghmeng qayaqluni. Ilanganikun yugiinguuq aanataqayuguluki ulimaaqii. Ilangakun'nguq uygaghmeng gginaqluki qalighluki, aghsughtaghluki kevighluki. Yugusingllaqat aatkighluku, kamegluku, temkighluku. Ilangakun amiraperewaaghmeng tawaaten aatkighluku ulimaaqsaghii qayaghtughhaat.

Long ago, when we were kids, my mother told us that she used to make kayaker like you see in the picture. Sometime she would make the body out of ivory with sealskin rug, sealskin mittens, and seal pole. She used ivory for this harpoon and sinew for his ropes. His kayak was made of bleached sealskin. Sometimes, she would make the kayaker that would go in and out of the kayak with stuffed body, sealskin face, clothes with gut parka, sealskin pants, and boots. Other times, she would make the kayaker with all sealskin clothing.

Herminia's Reflection

When I was first getting to know Ruthelle, I did not know she was also a carver. Look at this piece, the intricate details, and three-dimensional approach. I now know where she got the inspiration that you will find in the next story.



Aqeftaghaaq

*Aqeftaghaaq /
Walrus Stomach Basket (2006)
3 ¼ (H) x 5 ½ (W)
Walrus Stomach, Seal Gut,
Polar Bear Fur, Seal Fur,
Dyed Seal Gut*



Sighnameng ulimaaghuuq una kakiyaghqalghutak. Sungaghyugmeng kavilngugmeng iqeghtaqameng esnelaaghutkuq. Igaqraghluni angqaperukegtameng, kavilngughmengllu sungaghyukegtamengllu.

This sewing basket was made out of walrus stomach. It has red and blue dyed seal gut for the trim. It also has red and blue dyed seal gut circles for the design.

*Aqeftaghaaq /
Polar Bear Gut Basket (2006)
3 ½ (H) x 3 ¾ (W)
Polar Bear Gut, Polar Bear Fur,
Dyed Seal Gut*



Nanum ighneghluganeng uliimaaq kavilngughmeng payelighluni. Sungaghyukeqtameng qiipighluku kaleftaqaq. Nanaghmeng igaqraquq qukanilnguq kavightekaguq taagken taakuk angqaperukegtak sungaghyukegtak ighneghlugek, sungaghyukegtameng qiipighlukek kakitkaaguk. Naama Akumutaam taana tanemlleqa.

This basket is made of polar bear gut with red trim that was sewn together with blue thread. It has polar bear designs on it. The polar bear in the middle has a red dyed design and the two on the sides are circle designs that are dyed in blue. My mother also made this gut basket.

Agaghtiiraaq



*Agaghtiiraaq / Hanging
Ornament: Hunter (2003)
1 7/8 (H) x 1 1/2 (W)
Bleached Sealskin, Polar
Bear Fur, Black Thread*



*Agaghtiiraaq / Hanging Orna-
ment: Woman (2004)
2 (H) x 1 3/4 (W)
Bleached Sealskin, Polar Bear
Fur, Black and Color Thread*

Taakut agaghtiiraghet akituut qayughllak qepghaqaghlagulghiiit. Terugiluki uygaaghqun sivukluki, taagken enkaam kakingestaghaqanka terugilghet, tagneqegtameng qiipaqlunga. Esgha taakut ayumiim yugistun ayuqelghiiit agaghtiiraget nanaaghmeng uzimun kakivikngalghiiit. Nengyughma asaghlagma naama asagan atngwaaghutangi tagtalmi kakiyaguutanka agaghtiiraghteggun, taghnughhaghwaaghqun. Ellnganguq esgha atngwaghutangisaghqaayaghii. Ramkengita atngwaghusi q taaqsugumakangat inqun aghnaaghneghata ayumiq atngwaghusi qhaqsangit. Atngwaghusiilnguut yugtaasiniqegkanginnguq. Ellnga asaghlaka, nengyuqa avangisaghqaayalghii. Asagegkenka atngwaghusiimakangak atngwaghusihtuq teghignalkepigtekangak. Elkegnug yugusiik igaghlbagek. Ellmetegneng naliqinaallukek igaghtughllakak. Arekul qavatghutnguluki ilateng igamakangat nengyuqa. ligenginaghaghtaqiingnuq iivenllu aqnighpenaani meghnum qavam qiyamalghii taghtughquhluni. Esghanguq iiggan inglungi taaqelghilnguut. Salutengllunguq angayuqii pilit igaaghwagluni.



*Agaghtiiraaq / Hanging
Ornament: Woman (2004)
2 1/8 (H) x 1 1/4 (W)
Bleached Sealskin, Polar
Bear Fur, Black and Color
Thread*



*Agaghtiiraaq / Hanging
Ornament: Hunter (2003)
2 (H) x 1 1/2 (W)
Bleached Sealskin,
Polar Bear Fur, Black and
Color Thread*

These hanging ornaments were more expensive because it takes a lot more work to make them. First, I drew a picture on the bleached sealskin. Then with black threads I embroidered the pictures. The pictures were like people from a long ago. They have polar bear sewn on them. Later on, I started sewing my great aunt's face tattoos on my ornaments and doll faces.

My great-aunt said that she was not supposed to have any face tattoos because her clan did not want to carry on the tradition of women being tattooed. This was because long ago when girls became of age, they used to put tattoos on their faces. Girls with no tattoos used to be called tomboys. My great-aunt was not supposed to have any tattoos. Her two aunts gave her tattoos because putting on tattoos was a joy for them. Both her aunts had a lot of writings (tattoos) on themselves and they both gave each other tattoos all over their bodies. When everybody was sleeping, her two aunts gave her tattoos. When they were down to the one side of her hand, my aunt cried and woke up everybody because she was tired and sleepy, but she was not hurt. So her one hand was not completely done. There was nothing her parents could do as she already had the tattoos.

Agaghtiiraaq



*Agaghtiiraaq / Hanging Ornament:
Crab Medallion (2002)
2 1/8 (H) x 3 1/2 (W)
Bleached Sealskin, Polar Bear Fur,
Black Thread*

Naama Akumutaam naalkutaaqaa taana Punguugneng tepnaghuluku. Tanemleqa uugfigestun ayumightutkalghii. Tamaani 1970s-eni nalkutaaqaa. Pelaasim nanevgam aapqaa sangutanga. Yugemnguq urang pinighikam manumiga. Tawaaten neghnastun anguyani kayalqiiraqangatni pegasaghqaqenghilkeni kenlanga avaghqaghhighutellghanun. Enkaamnguq esghaghiinaq manumiga, tawaaten elngatun pinighimangiskuyeng taawa qinuyugsaghqaqenghilkangat. Amalleqa nuliighha tawantekalghuutug manungani

My mother found this Okvik artifact in Punuk Island on the beach around the 1970s. Old man Pelaasim told us this artifact once belonged to a very athletic man who wore it as a medallion. The medallion shows that he fights like a crab and will not let go of his opponent until it become useless and not able to fight anymore. When his opponents saw the medallion, they would not bother him because the image on the medallion showed everything about this person. This picture also symbolized his wife being right there with him.

Taghnughhaghwaag



Taghnughhaghwaag / Doll (2004)
13 ½ (H) x 4 ¼ (W)
Sealskin, Walrus Gut, Rabbit Fur,
Synthetic Hair, Reindeer Fawns,
Leather, Beads, Black and Red Thread



Aghnaq taghnughhaghwaag
uygaghmeng gginangllaqaguq.
Meteghyii iiskek, atngwaghutangi
tagneqegtameng qiiipighluku
kakikaguq. Qezikek enkaam
kavilngughmeng qiiapaqluku
tanemlleqa tawaten.
Nuyangllaqameng nuyiqaguq.
Taagken taqughlluku qupiqaguq
qupagmeng. Taqughutaquq
ugtinghaghghameng ayumighestun.
liggaghii tugutllugmeng
ulimaghhuut. Tugumiquq
ayveghem ighneghlluganeng.
Amalka ighneghllugmeng
tugumiqelghiiistun. Sughughluni
ayuuquq, qallevagluni nughaghmeng,
kamegluni, quyillegtaameng,
neghsameng ugtinghaghmeng
ulimaaghek. Sungaameng
kavilngughmeng inglugtun
igaqrighlutek. Ugtinghaghghameng
singiqhlutek. Saghyamsulighluni
aghnam sanqutanganeng ayuquq.
Ighneghllugmeng maklagmeng
kakilghutaqluni, sikqwa tugutluggaq
ivalumeng qiiipighluni, sikulghutaalek
ayumighestun ulimaaghuk
tugutlugment, uumgalek, iqallugem
satanganeng ulimaghmeng.
Ulaagha savigtaa uyghagmeng
ulimaag, tugutllumeng
nuqneghutekluni, nanilek,
kelevengestaqameng ugtinghaq,
uygaaq, nanaaq, ighneghlluk, imlaa
iqeghtaqaawaqluku igaqraghqamsuk.

My mother and I worked on this doll together. She has bleached sealskin for her face. Her eyebrows, eyelashes, and tattoos were stitched with black thread. Also, her lips were embroidered with red thread. We used a wig for her hair, and braided her hair with traditional styled hair bead. She has bleached dyed sealskin for her hair ties. Her little hands were made out of ivory. She is holding a walrus gut strip, and wearing a woman's formal walrus gut regalia. Her jumper suit was made out of reindeer fawns. She is wearing a traditional style reindeer boots. Her boots and the laces were made out of sealskin and bleached dyed sealskin. On both sides of her boots, there are red tiny beads for design.

She has a set of woman's tools and belongings. It includes a sewing kit that was made out of ribbon seal gut. An ivory needle that has sinew on the end for thread, and an ivory needle case like it was traditionally made. She also has another container that was made out of fish skin. Her little lady's knife has a slate blade with ivory handle. She also has a seal-oil lamp. In her basket, she has strips of bleached dyed sealskin, polar bear skin, seal gut, walrus gut, unborn sealskin, and other dyed skins in different colors to be used in her designs.

Herminia's Reflection

I was so honored to acquire this woman doll. It is not about the great details, craftsmanship, or the accessories of this doll, but the combination of two generations of sewing wisdom that went into it.

Taughutaq



Taughutaq / Baby Bell
Barrette (2007)
6 ½ (H) x 4 (W)
Leather, Sealskin, Polar
Bear Skin, Beads, Bell

Taughutaq mategraghvikegkaq laloramket uyuangllaqiitneng ugtinghitneng mategraaq piitsighaq, kapuquulluni tagneqegtameng qiipighluku. Sungamqiighaghhaq qukaakun kakiilluni ayuquq. Kakingestaghngaq nighurakegtameng qipaqluni. Piiknangakun nanaaq esneghegkaq kakitngaaq sungamqiighaghmeng kelukluni. Saamnangallu tawatengwaaq. Enkaam purqistun nuvughvikngaaq sungaghmeng. Paniliiskanganguq Herminia enkaam aghnaghtekaaghngan taghnughaghghaghestun purqiliqaaq wanilighluku qukaakun taughutaq. Whangalu ugliinaq taughutangllaqaagung elnganeng liiskanga. Iwernga sumeghtaghaallek. Piitsighaghhinaghmeng mategriigatuq ilanganengllu legan mategraghvikakii. Teghikusameng, salghiingiiighaghmeng tawaaten.

This hair barrette is made with a western style of bleached skin type leather with dyed red/orange materials. It is made with white calf leather and in the center of the barrette is a flower design cutout. It is tagged with black threads in the center of the flower as petals. Right in the center of the flower, there is a bead sewn on to hold it. On the outer part of the flower, it is sewn with red threads to hold the flower around as stitches. On the top of the flower there is a blue dyed polar bear skin piece on it. Ruthelle also used beaded stitches here as well as the bottom.

There are beads stranded together like they do with baby coveralls or baby belts. They are stranded and sewn on the bottom, and in the center, there is a bell as they used it to make things like this. She saw Herminia as one of her adopted daughters though she is a grown-up woman. My mother put a baby bell design on the barrette to express her feelings and herself. I have made many barrettes like my mother did because she taught me how to make barrettes. She was always wiser and smarter and with many ideas to make barrettes. She not only used flowers as designs, but she designed them with animals and people who are doing something.



Herminia's Reflection

When Ruthelle gave me this barrette few years ago, I was intrigued by the design, and the dyed purple color of the polar bear. She told me it had a baby belt design on it. I did not fully understand the true meaning behind the gift until much later on my second trip to Savoonga in September 2009. It was at the high school gym during a dance performance when I saw Elaine's grandson come in with a traditional baby belt, made by Elaine, wrapped around his baby cover-all. I was in tears when I realized how special this barrette was for her then and for me now.

Up-close and Personal

Through the years, I received several gifts from Ruthelle and Elaine. Each one has a special story, and each has touched my heart. These objects introduced me to their way of life and culture. Their connection to the land and animals was always to the forefront of all that I observed. It gave me an opportunity to learn the essence embodied in their way of life, and in time gain understanding.

I remember Elaine once told me how respectful they are of animals. They honor the sacrifice from animals to humans. One example is collecting ivory dust during the carving and finding a way of using it. If they cannot find further ways of using the materials, they would dig a hole, bury the land animal, and take the sea animal back to the ocean.

In 2004, I learned the traditional method of measuring for making clothes. Ruthelle offered to make me a personal qqipaghaq (kuspuk) in traditional St. Lawrence Island style. The way she took measurements was something of wonder. She used no tape measure—only a ball of yarn. She took the width of my shoulder, the length of my arm, and the length from my shoulder to knees with several strings of yarn. Then, she rolled them into a small ball, and put it in her pocket. Those were my measurements! I was amazed that she could remember which string belonged to which part. Well, she surely knew because the kuspuk was beautiful and fitted perfectly!

Later, Ruthelle gave me a barrette, also known as a hair clip, made from dyed polar bear fur. I was intrigued by the design and a metal bell at the end of the string. She told me it had a “baby belt” design on it. I did not fully understand the true meaning behind the design until much later. During my second trip to Savoonga in 2009 and at a traditional dance performance, I saw Elaine’s grandson wearing a traditional baby belt that she had made. It was wrapped around his baby coveralls. I finally realized the true meaning of the “baby belt” design on the barrette—so she can hear the sound of the bell and know where I am. So meaningful and special was this barrette for her then, and for me now.

Conclusion

This project describes the relationships Elaine had with her mother and grandmother and how she learned traditional techniques of using sewing tools, and other techniques to become such a skilled sewer.

The sewing art of the Siberian Yupik is indeed distinctive, both in its artistic merit and in its adherence to the time-honored traditions of their culture. Each object tells a story and reflects intricate craftsmanship. These artworks come from the land, through the hands of the artisan, and finally to us—a unique representation of Art in the North—both contemporary and traditional.

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BIO

Herminia Din is professor of art education at University of Alaska Anchorage. She specializes in museum technology and community-based art education. She received the 2013 UAA Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Sustainability for her efforts to raise awareness of the "reduce" and "reuse" methods of dealing with waste products. Currently, her work focuses on *Plastic Pollution in the Arctic* by using community art as an action for change. Grounded in educational theory and practice, she engages students in hands-on learning on a theme of global significance.