



Alaska Native Art

Alaska is famous for the rugged beauty of its mountains, rivers, and coastlines, as well as

for the distinctive arts and crafts produced by Alaska Native artists. If you are considering purchasing an Alaska Native-made art or craft item, it's smart to invest a little time learning about the processes and materials Alaska Natives may use to make these unique and beautiful objects.



Identifying Arts and Crafts Made by Alaska Natives

Any item produced after 1935 that is marketed with terms like “Indian,” “Native American,” or “Alaska Native” must have been made by a member of a state or federally-recognized tribe or a certified non-member Indian artisan. That’s the law. A certified Indian artisan is an individual certified by the governing body of the tribe of his or her descent as a non-member Indian artisan.

For example, it would violate the law to advertise products as “Inupiaq Carvings” if the products were produced by someone who isn’t a member of the Inupiaq tribe or certified in writing by the tribal governing body as a non-member Alaska Native artisan of the Inupiaq people.

Qualifiers like “ancestry,” “descent,” and “heritage” — used in connection with the terms “Indian,” “Alaska Native,” or the name of a particular Indian tribe — do not mean that the craftsperson is a member of an Indian tribe or certified by a tribe. For example, “Native American heritage” or “Yupik descent” would mean that the artist is of descent, heritage, or ancestry of the tribe. These terms may be used only if they are truthful.

Buying Tips

Alaska Native arts and crafts are sold through many outlets, including tourist stores, gift shops, art galleries, museums, cultural centers, and the Internet. Here are some tips to help you shop wisely:

- Get written proof of any claims the seller makes for the authenticity of the art or craft item you’re purchasing.
- Ask if your item comes with a certification tag. Not all authentic Alaska Native arts and crafts items carry a state certified tag. Those that do may display a Silver Hand



symbol which features a silver hand and the words, “Authentic Native Handicraft from Alaska.” Items may also carry a “Made in Alaska” emblem. This emblem certifies that the article “was made in Alaska,” though not necessarily by an Alaska Native.

- Get a receipt that includes vital information about your purchase, including any oral representations. For example, if a salesperson explains the basket you’re buying is baleen and ivory and handmade by an Inupiaq artist, insist the information is included on your receipt.

It can be difficult to distinguish arts and crafts produced by Alaska Natives from items that are imitations: Price, materials, appearance, and traditional subsistence materials are important clues to provenance.

- Price — Genuine Alaska Native art or craft items should reflect quality of craftsmanship, harmony of design, and the background of the artist. Genuine pieces produced by skilled Alaska Native artists can be expensive.
- Type of materials — Materials often used by Alaska Native artists include walrus ivory, soapstone, bone, alabaster, animal furs and skin, baleen, and other marine mammal materials.
- Appearance — Try to pick up and examine a piece before purchasing it. Some items that appear to be soapstone carvings may actu-

ally be made of resin. Real stone is cool to the touch; plastic is warm. Stone also tends to be heavier than plastic. A figure that is presented as hand-carved probably isn't if you see or can order 10 more like it that are perfectly uniform or lack surface variations.

Alaska Native Carvings

Sculptures and carvings by Alaska Natives vary in size, and often portray animals or people. Before you buy a carving, learning about mediums commonly used can help you authenticate work.

Marine mammal ivory is a popular and expensive medium used by Alaska Native carvers. New "white" ivory can have "breathing cracks," or thin black lines that occur naturally and should add to the beauty of the piece.

By law, new marine mammal ivory may be carved only by Alaska Natives and sold only after it has been carved. Old ivory can be carved by non-Natives. Fossilized mammoth ivory may be used by Alaska Natives and non-Natives alike. Fossilized ivory is rare and more expensive. Because of the natural variation in fossilized ivory, no two carvings have the same pattern or color.

Soapstone is a soft rock with a soapy feel. Alaska Native artists may use it because it's widely available and easy to carve. Soapstone ranges in color from gray to green, and while it scratches easily, it also resists acids, chemicals, and heat.

Marine mammal bone, from whales and other marine animals, is used to create carvings and masks. Bone masks are made from the vertebrae or disk of whales, and range in color from light tan to dark brown. Bone items are lighter and more porous than ivory, and tend to be less expensive.

Alabaster, a white or translucent stone imported to Alaska, is used as a sculpture medium by some Alaska Natives.

Beyond Carvings

Alaska Native artists also produce baskets, dolls, drums, masks, prints, and etchings.

Baleen, a flexible material from the jaw of baleen whales, is used to make baskets, scrimshaw etchings, miniature ships and dioramas. Scrimshaw etchings often portray stories from the artist's unique culture; and are reminiscent of techniques introduced by Boston whalers in the 1800s.

Alaska dolls, handcrafted by many Alaska Native women, reflect unique styles. Dolls may portray daily activities of the artist's people. Doll clothes and bodies may be made from a variety of materials including calf skin (a caribou/reindeer hide replacement non-native to the area), mink, badger, sea otter, arctic rabbit, seal, or beaver. Sun bleached, dried marine mammal intestine, which is white or slightly yellowed and looks like wax paper, is sometimes used for clothing.

Fur from musk ox, wolverine, and wolf are sometimes used for traditional doll clothing. Some doll makers use baleen or ivory inlay for the eyes.

Alaska Native prints are produced using a variety of techniques. Serigraphy, called screen printing or silk screening, involves printing through a surface, similar to a stencil technique. Relief print making is done from a raised surface, like cut stone, linoleum block, or wood block. Intaglio print making is created using the recessed image from the surface of etchings or engravings on metal plates of copper and tin. Lithography uses an oil-water resistance technique to print a design from stone or metal plates to paper.



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For More Information

To learn more about Alaska Native arts and crafts, contact:

Alaska State Council on the Arts
411 West 4th Avenue, Suite 1E
Anchorage, AK 99501-2343
907-269-6610; fax: 907-269-6601
Toll-free: 1-888-278-7424
www.eed.state.ak.us/aksca

Where to File a Consumer Complaint

The Indian Arts and Crafts Board (IACB) receives and refers valid complaints about violations of the Indian Arts and Crafts Act to the FBI for investigation and to the Department of Justice for legal action. To file a complaint under the Act, or to get free information about the Act, call the Indian Arts and Crafts Board, U.S. Department of the Interior, toll-free at 1-888-ART-FAKE (1-888-278-3253), or use the online complaint form at www.iacb.doi.gov. You also may write to the Indian Arts and Crafts Board at iacb@ios.doi.gov, or 1849 C Street, N.W., MS 2528–MIB, Washington, D.C. 20240.

Complaints to the IACB should include the following information:

- The name, address, and telephone number of the seller.
- A description of the art or craft item.
- How the item was offered for sale.
- What representations were made about the item, including any claims that the item was made by a member of a particular tribe or statements about its authenticity.
- Any other documentation, such as advertisements, catalogs, business cards, photos, or brochures. Include copies (NOT originals) of documents that support your position.



The Alaska Attorney General's Office investigates unfair and deceptive marketing and sales practices in Alaska. To obtain a complaint form, contact the Office of the Attorney General, Consumer Protection Unit, 1031 West 4th Avenue, Suite 200. Anchorage, AK 99501; 907-269-5100; toll-free (outside Anchorage, AK) 1-888-576-2529; or use the complaint form at www.law.state.ak.us/consumer.

The Alaska State Council on the Arts, Federal Trade Commission, U.S. Department of Interior's Indian Arts and Crafts Board, and Alaska Attorney General's Office have prepared this brochure to help enhance your appreciation for Alaska Native arts and crafts.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

Photos by Chris Arend.

