



Keligcipet – CARVING TRADITIONS

Carving was once a daily act. Alutiiq/Sugpiaq craftsmen made throwing boards and shafts to propel their harpoons, split timbers for houses and boats, and chiseled images into wood. Through woodworking, they produced many of the tools essential for everyday life and designed beautiful works of art that recorded their spiritual beliefs.

RAW MATERIAL

Today artists search Kodiak's beaches, forests and lumberyards for the perfect grain, but in the old days, before spruce trees colonized Kodiak, most wood came from the beach. Carvers gathered drift logs of Pacific yew, cedar, hemlock, and spruce from Kodiak's shores, and collected alder, dwarf birch, and cottonwood from hillside thickets.

CARVING TOOLS

Artifacts reveal traditional carving techniques. Woodworkers split driftwood logs open with the help of resilient bone and wooden wedges, pounded with weighty granite mauls. They cut and shaped the resulting planks with a variety of stone adzes tied to flexible alder handles. Handheld carving implements, wooden handles fitted with beaver, marmot, or porcupine incisors traded from the mainland, permitted finer carving.



*Jon Pestrikoff carves fire starters.
Photo by Priscilla Russell, KANA Collection.*

Carvers sanded the narrow gouges created by these tools with gritty abraders of pumice and sandstone and then applied finishing touches with a burnishing stone, a waterworn pebble rubbed over the carving to create a polished, splinter-free surface.

DECORATION

In addition to wood, carvers used feathers, fur, animal hair, baleen, grass, teeth, and pigments to enhance their works. Decoration was an essential part of carving, as finely made objects demonstrated respect for the spirit world.

MODERN CARVERS

Today, most carvers are self-taught. They learned woodworking by repairing boats, building smokehouses, cutting firewood, and making toys. Their inspiration comes from many places. They combine information from traditional objects with their own vision to create unique works that express both ancient and contemporary themes and share their skills with the next generation.

LEARN MORE:

Kal'unek from Karluk, by Amy Steffian, Marnie Leist, Sven Haakanson, and Patrick Saltonstall, 2015. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.