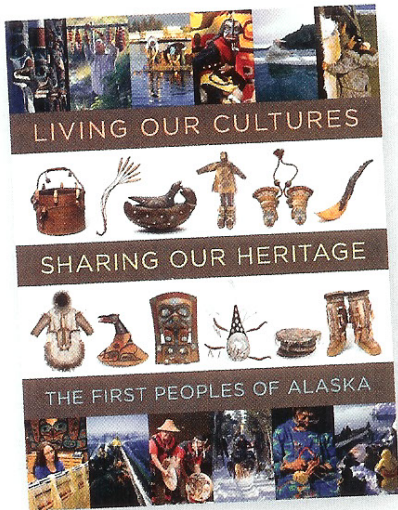


In April 2010, Smithsonian Books published the exhibition catalog "Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska"

PHOTO COURTESY SMITHSONIAN BOOKS



## Breaking Convention

How the Smithsonian's Arctic Studies Center makes a difference in the community

BY LESLIE HSU OH  
FOR FIRST ALASKANS

**Kayak builder, bentwood hat maker and carver extraordinaire,** Andrew Abyo (Alutiiq/Sugpiaq) cradled a copy of "Crossroads of Continents" the way I handle my oldest stuffed animal, holding it in the palms of my hands so its stitching would not finally surrender to overuse. He tells me that he keeps another copy of this book in a three ring binder at home as "an invaluable research tool" for dimension, paint design, historical information or inspiration.

"This is my next project," he confides in me. He taps an image of a Koniag or Chugach painted chest that was collected in the early 19th century. This writing box is now housed in the National Museum of Finland, making it difficult for me to ever see it in person. Fortunately, Abyo is renowned for reengineering art pieces that are rarely seen by the public.

His crafting process begins with researching a piece in a publication like "Crossroads of Continents," written by Dr. William Fitzhugh, the director and curator of the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History's Arctic Studies Center, and Dr. Aron Crowell, the director of the Arctic Studies Center's Alaska

office; then he tries to examine the piece in person.

"For example, a conical visor at the Anchorage Museum, from the pictures, seemed like it must be flat inside, but when I got to handle it, I found a ridge inside and there was a drill hole from here over to there," he illustrates on a visor he's painting. "There was a sinew coming across to help support it on your head. You just can't gather that from a single picture."

Sometimes, as in the case of the writing box, a friend who had access to the piece at the museum would send him detailed photographs.

Published in 1988, the same year the Arctic Studies Center was founded, this exhibit catalogue "Crossroads of Continents" is one of many produced specifically for this reason: to offer a dynamic extension to the Arctic Studies Center's award-winning exhibits, which apart from the one based permanently at the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center are available to the public for a limited time. The catalogue and an online version of some of these exhibits are still available at [mnh.si.edu/arctic](http://mnh.si.edu/arctic).

Fitzhugh, who gave up a Fulbright Fellowship in 1970 to begin his long career at the National Museum of Natural History, gives me a tour of his humble office, located one floor above the publically accessible areas of the museum. It's a tight space, honeycombed with desks, computers and swollen bookshelves.

A bunch of ties swaying from a peg on the corner of the window above Fitzhugh's desk adds a breath of levity to the critical and innovative programs around the world that are inspired and managed by this minimally staffed office. Besides curating exhibits throughout the Smithsonian campus, the Arctic Studies Center also contributes to cutting-edge research, fieldwork, outreach, education, and policymaking on a national and international level. A free annual newsletter, field reports, staff publications, a series on circumpolar anthropology series, teacher tools, and a blog available on the Arctic Studies Center website demonstrate the high productivity level of this office.

There are archeology field studies being conducted in Alaska's Yakutat Bay, Quebec, Canada, and in Mongolia, along with research studies in Canada's Labrador and the Bering







PHOTO COURTESY CHUCK CHOI / ANCHORAGE MUSEUM

An overview of the Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center, taken from the center's southwest corner. The center opened in May 2010 and features more than 600 artifacts on long-term loan from the Smithsonian Institution.

Strait. This year, Stephen Loring, museum anthropologist at the Arctic Studies Center, won a Peer Recognition Award from the National Museum of Natural History for facilitating educational opportunities and mentoring young Inuit and Innu people. The awards states, "In the past, indigenous communities were often treated as sources of information and specimens. Thanks to the innovative work and collaborative approach of Stephen Loring, the Innu in Northern Labrador not only have an excellent archaeologist in their midst, but also an advocate who values their input into his research and who gives back to these communities through workshops, camps and field schools."

Noel Broadbent, archaeologist at Arctic Studies Center, won the 2011 Smithsonian Secretary's Research Prize for his publication "Lapps and Labyrinths: Saami Prehistory, Colonization and Cultural Resilience." Fitzhugh says this book "is a model of archaeological and anthropological analysis and a wake-up call illustrating how socially aware archaeology can inform our understanding of the past and open new doors for minority groups. I think this is one of

the most important pieces of archaeological literature published by the Smithsonian since 1960s."

Fitzhugh and Igor Krupnik, curator and ethnologist at the Arctic Studies Center, also led the development of the U.S. Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee's new Arctic Research Plan and contributed to the State Department's Arctic Policy Group.

On the day I visited, there were three interns pounding away on laptops tasked with coordinating various aspects of the first Inuit Studies Conference ever to be held in the Lower 48. The program is ambitious, with scholarly sessions, special exhibits, Arctic films, dance groups, literary events, and access to Smithsonian collections and archives.

Conference coordinator Laura Fleming, a graduate from University of Guelph who works closely with Lauren Marr, the research assistant and conference manager, says that at the conference they will also be "testing an innovative model of pairing Elders and youth of Inuit and Yup'ik communities in Northern Alaska, Canada and Greenland to exchange responses and reflections on the ideas, resources and content discussed

throughout the plenary talks, collections tours and individual presentations with their mentors; and to test the most effective methods for recording and disseminating their conversations to hundreds of their peers in the North – through social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Flickr), audio podcasts, social video (e.g., YouTube), or written blogs."

According to Fitzhugh, the Arctic Studies Center is once again breaking ground on "the re-connection of museum collections with descendant communities." My first taste of how the Arctic Studies Center "breaks conventional museum barriers and establishes new methodologies for community collaboration to reestablish cultural contexts" (as articulated by James Pepper Henry, the director of the Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center) was through the first-of-its-kind exhibit called "Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska," which opened at the Anchorage museum May 22, 2010. Crowell led the research, design and production of the exhibition over a 10-year period.

This 8,000-square-foot carefully planned space on the second level of the Anchorage Museum displays a \$14 million exhibition of





During secret society performances, chiefs carried raven-shaped rattles that portrayed the transfer of spiritual power from animal beings to people. On this intricately carved Tsimshian rattle a crested bird on the back of a raven holds a frog in its extended beak. Through its tongue the halacyt of the frog enters and transforms a person or spirit into human form.

IMAGE CREDIT: DONALD E. HURLBERT, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IMAGING

These child-sized Sugpiaq boots have uppers made of caribou leg skin and are encircled at the top with seal fur. Embroidered bands are narrow strips of sea lion esophagus, both natural color and dyed, which has been cross-stitched with caribou hair. IMAGE CREDIT: DONALD E. HURLBERT, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IMAGING



600 Alaska Native cultural treasures loaned from extensive 19th and 20th century Alaska ethnographic collections at the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian. It is a place I call "home."

As Paul Ongtooguk (Inupiaq) says, "Many of these objects are like our great-grandparents that are being brought home. It's a chance for their younger relations to get to know them again, and for those pieces, those parts of the family, to get reacquainted as well."

Because I'm acutely aware that my children do not have the luxury of gathering after dinner at the foot of an Elder to learn indigenous knowledge, I am grateful that Arctic Studies Center staff worked hard to make these treasured cultural materials accessible.

Daily, my young children can easily digest 13-minute vignettes of Elders and youth, representing 10 Alaska Native cultural groups, responding to the question of "Who we Are," projected upon seven flat screen monitors that cycle with no more than two or three non-adjacent monitors active at a time. They can zoom in or zoom out to a 360-degree view of objects with an interactive touch screen or surf

the Sharing Knowledge website (<http://alaska.si.edu>) in the Gottstein Learning Center, which offers, according to Crowell, "much more than the exhibit. It includes interviews with Elders, all the photos and about 150 additional objects. There are pieces we worked with that didn't make it into the gallery for one reason or another, often having to do with space or conservation issues that came up. For example, a drum that we couldn't borrow because it had a little crack in the skin and we were afraid that the crack would get bigger while on exhibit. There were all these micro decisions about the health of the objects that went into the selection process, in addition to knowledge content or cultural importance."

Indeed, the elaborate undertaking to put together this exhibit included flying Alaska Native Elders and representatives from each region to Washington, D.C., to select pieces from the vast archives of the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian that best represent their heritage. Film and photographs were made of their oral discussions of each object, followed by a long conservation and documentation procedure. In 2017, 15 percent

of this exhibit will be rolled over due to conservation concerns. So Crowell and his staff are already in early planning stages of reengaging community members to serve as co-curators.

Besides marveling at the careful deliberation behind this monumental effort to facilitate a progressive exchange of knowledge between Alaska Native communities and scientists, I am also impressed that a museum can foster a "sense of belonging" that is so hard to achieve in this mobile world. Alaska's Arctic Studies Center is one of the main reasons why I want to raise my children in Anchorage.

Fitzhugh affectionately calls Alaska's office the "megaphone." Being where Crowell is, Fitzhugh says that "he can do things that we can't do here. Crowell has access to speakers and artists and that's exactly the reason why we opened the Alaska office so this could be done. It kind of leads us to the peculiar position of being the mother of this whole operation, but not being able to take advantage of a lot of its outcomes or potentialities because we don't have a Native community here and it's unwieldy to work in the context of the huge Smithsonian. So what we needed were flexible,

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During potlatch and spirit-possession ceremonies, a high-ranking Haida woman or man would wear a magnificent headdress with a carved wooden frontlet, a crown of sea lion whiskers, and a floor-length train of white ermine pelts. The frontlets resembled masks but stood above the forehead. Some depicted crest beings, and others were portraits of individual persons. Before a dance the whisker crown was filled with swan or eagle down, which drifted out during the performance and fell onto the spectators like snow. IMAGE CREDIT: DONALD E. HURLBERT, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IMAGING, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

small, light paratroopers in Anchorage.”

Crowell and his staff have certainly paratrooped model programs, such as Alaska’s Living Cultural Treasures co-developed with the Alaska State Council on the Arts, where the public and middle school students are invited to an immersive experience of witnessing master artists and their apprentices craft endangered art forms, such as Athabascan snowshoes or Aleut/Unangax traditional bentwood hats, in the Arctic Studies Center’s Gillam Archeology Lab, during a week-long residency, twice a year.

Language workshops, such as the recent St. Lawrence Island Yupik Language Workshop, also take place in their Community Consultation Room, where the Arctic Studies Center recorded more than 20 hours of fluent Yupik language commentaries stimulated from examining St. Lawrence Island objects that were taken out of the floor-to-ceiling glass cases dominating the “Living our Cultures” exhibit space. Chris Koonooka, Yupik language educator of the Bering Strait School District, and Dawn Biddison, assistant curator at the Arctic Studies Center Alaska office, are producing edited digital files and transcripts.

Crowell plays a sample for me in storyboard form. “Our model is a group of fluent speakers talking about objects from the collection. They decide who will give the individual presentation or several individual presentations that are a summary of their discussions, and that becomes the specific language lesson. The lesson is presented in film, first with English translation and Yupik transcription, then repeats with Yupik transcription, then repeats a third time with no text so that the audience can focus on listening.”

This footage is currently being distilled into two video series for use in K-12 language education. Crowell hopes to expand this program for all indigenous languages in Alaska.

Fitzhugh credits the Alaska office for inspiring the National Museum of Natural History’s new initiative, Recovering Voices, which will help to document and revitalize the world’s endangered languages and the knowledge preserved in them. “We stimulated the idea by showing how much can be learned from reflexive anthropology, when you get back in touch with people whose stuff you’ve had for hundreds of years.”

Footage of these language and cultural heritage workshops and Smithsonian Spotlight talks are posted on the National Museum of Natural History’s YouTube channel (<http://www.youtube.com/user/smithsonianNMNH>) or the National Museum of Natural History’s iTunesU or Recovering Voices iTunesU page.

My favorite ones record the stories and reconstructed memories sparked around the custom-made cart, which allows Crowell and his staff to mobilize the objects housed in the glass cases. I think that’s what makes the Arctic Studies Center successful: the creative ways museum pieces are made accessible to the community.

At the end of Crowell’s interview, he offered me a special treat. He unlocked the Gillam Archeology Lab, which had been completely transformed into an artist studio during the Aleut/Unangax traditional bentwood hat maker’s residency, with yellow cedar and spruce shavings coating the table and floor.

Crowell’s shoes squeaked across the shiny floor until he reached the far end of the table, where someone had stacked a dozen wooden trays stamped with “ARCHEOLOGY.”

Selecting one of the trays, he sifted through





Yup'ik hunters of the Bering Sea coast wore wooden visors to protect their eyes from glare and to spiritually assist with the hunt. Artist Chuna McIntyre said the visors were "beautified to attract and honor the animals." Animal carvings were added as hunting charms, such as the walrus and seagull heads on this visor. IMAGE CREDIT: DONALD E. HURLBERT, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IMAGING

This Tlingit war helmet collected in Taku, Alaska in 1893 is one of the more than 600 objects exhibited in the new Smithsonian Arctic Studies Center. Tlingit warriors wore battle helmets depicting crest animals or ancestors. This helmet, depicting a wrinkled human face, was once embellished with bear fur, whiskers and shocks of human hair. Helmets were carved from hard, dense spruce burls, so that "sha wduxeeji tlal kuwal'x (when the head is clubbed, it doesn't break)," according to Elder Peter Jack. IMAGE CREDIT: DONALD E. HURLBERT, NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY IMAGING, SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION



an assortment of plastic bags marked Nuka Bay and gave me a closer look at some of his favorite finds. He handled each like a diamond, allowing me to enjoy each facet of the artifact in the palm of his hand while he told me stories like this:

"It was very exciting to find this blade from a whaling harpoon because we don't know a lot about whaling in the Sugpiaq region, except for the kind of whaling they did with poison. They used darts that were coated with poison made of aconite, from the roots of the monkshood flower. They killed the whales by paralysis, a very unusual form of whale hunting. This seems to be an artifact more like the kind used in North Alaskan whaling with the big harpoons, the floats and hunting from open boats with a crew. We knew that the Sugpiaq people did this type of whaling because an Elder talked about it in the 1930s, but this is the first archeological evidence we have."

When he was done, I asked him whether he has any artifacts from the traditional ice floe sealing camps on Yakutat Bay. I often hear about this project from Judith Ramos (Tlingit), a University of Alaska Fairbanks

graduate student, who along with her mother, Elaine Abraham (Tlingit), a highly respected Elder, is on the research team. Ramos had said, "This research will benefit our community by documenting our people's long-term ecological/cultural relationship to our environment and a very important subsistence resource — seals. Our people have been using this resource for the past 800 or 900 years. We have adapted our hunting technology and special terms for hunting in the ice. This research will combine two ways of knowing: traditional knowledge and science."

Crowell opened up a cabinet and pulled down some more wooden trays with plastic bags marked with Yakutat.

He pulled out a rifle cartridge from one of the bags. "These items are from an 1890s seal hunting camp. We've been talking to Elders about how they used to hunt the seals. The most amazing thing is that if you ever read about the Harriman expedition, they actually visited this sealing camp. Edward Curtis, the famous photographer, was on board. So we have photographs of this sealing camp in 1899, and here you can see the traditional bark-covered houses and some

canvas tents in a line on the beach. Hundreds of people were camping there, not just from Yakutat but other communities. We can find the places that were photographed and excavate them. So we're learning about these places from Elders, combining that with the photographs, and now these artifacts from the campsites."

He showed me iron nails, tools and hundreds of glass trade beads. "It's very evocative. Elaine was so excited to find these things." His enthusiasm was so infectious that I wished I had chosen a career in anthropology.

Or maybe I've simply got a crush on the Arctic Studies Center and its ability to ignite dynamic exchange between scientists, indigenous communities and their ancestors, from collaborative fieldwork to a catalogue from an exhibit 24 years ago that still challenges artists like Abyo to stretch the limits of their craft. ■

*Leslie Hsu Oh (lesliehsuoh.com) is a frequent contributor. Her essay "Between the Lines" was listed as a Notable Essay in The Best American Essays 2010. She can be reached at lhsu@post.harvard.edu.*

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