

## *Natchiq | Onkeehq | Isuwiq: Indigenous Artists Honor the Seal*

April 4, 2026 - October 25, 2026

Seals are the sleekest of beings, gleaming on seaweed-covered rocks, sheltering on ice, and surfacing alongside canoes and kayaks. All seafaring peoples have relationships with these wild relatives, including the many Indigenous peoples living along the coasts and waters of Arctic and Subarctic North America.

This exhibition centers contemporary Native perspectives from the North, honoring deep ancestral connections and all that seals give us. **Natchiq** (pronounced NAH-chick), **Onkeehq** (OHN-keek), and **Isuwiq** (EE-shoe-wick) are the words for seal in Iñupiaq, Aquinnah Wampanoag, and Alutiiq. We use Native words in this space to underscore the direct relationships between reclaiming Indigenous languages and continuing Indigenous cultural practices.

*Natchiq | Onkeehq | Isuwiq* brings together works by Alaska Native and Canadian Inuit artists that highlight the seal as material, food, and muse. This exhibition is guest curated by Nadia Jackinsky-Sethi (Alutiiq; author of texts marked NJS), Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich (Koyukon Dené and Iñupiaq), and Elizabeth James-Perry (Aquinnah Wampanoag; EJP).

Other contributors include RISD Museum curators María Fernanda Mancera (MFM), Conor Moynihan (CM), Kate Irvin, and Dominic Molon. The exhibition was first conceived by RISD faculty member and former curator Laurie Brewer.

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### **Land Acknowledgment**

Rhode Island School of Design is built on what is now called College Hill, part of the ancestral homelands of the Narragansett Indian Tribe. Indigenous people from many tribes and nations, near and far, live, study, and work in Providence today. The amplification of Native voices and histories is crucial to rectifying the many violent legacies of colonialism, and we gratefully acknowledge the ongoing critical contributions of Indigenous people across our state, region, and nation.

Land acknowledgments are not confined to the past; they are a living, ongoing responsibility. As an institution dedicated to art and design, we recognize the power of creative expression in illuminating histories and imagining more equitable futures. Together, we will work to foster Indigenous visibility by reflecting critically and centering the voices and lived experiences of Indigenous people in our learning and making.

In presenting the perspectives of Native curators and artists from Noepe (Martha's Vineyard) and Inuit Nunaat (Inuit homelands spanning Arctic regions across Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Russia), this exhibition also recognizes the continued importance of Indigenous knowledge in the sustainable care of land, waters, and animals.

## CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

William Bradford  
American, 1823-1892  
*Arctic Sunset*, 1874  
Oil on canvas  
Gift of Mrs. George H. Davenport **18.192**



*Arctic Sunset* captures a sublime scene of towering icebergs alongside a sailing ship in northeast Canada. A lone seal rests on an ice floe in the foreground. William Bradford was an American painter who completed several expeditions to the Arctic.

NJS

Passa Mangiuk  
Inuk; b. 1955 in Ivujivik, Quebec, Canada; works in Ivujivik  
*Stretched Seal Skin*, 2020  
Colored pencil  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund **2022.30.2**



This drawing depicts a sealskin stretched along a wooden frame with even lashings. It is common to see sealskins stretched like this outside of homes in northern Alaska and Canada.

NJS

Kananginak Pootoogook  
Inuk; 1935–2010; b. in Ikerrasak, Nunavut, Canada; worked in Kinngait,  
Nunavut, Canada  
*Sealskin Used for Mitts*, 1991  
Lithograph  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2022.30.3



Kananginak Pootoogook's lithograph shows the shapes of mittens cut from a seal hide. A seamstress has carefully positioned patterns on the hide, then used an **ulu** to cut from its flesh side, preserving the fur. There is little waste, as leftover scraps can be used to make smaller accessories. Sealskin mitts are warm and durable, often lasting for several seasons.

NJS

Maureen Gruben  
Canadian Inuvialuk; b. 1963 in Tuktoyaktuk, Northwest Territories,  
Canada; works in Tuktoyaktuk  
*Stitching My Landscape*, 2017  
Video with sound (6:10 min.)  
Curated by Tania Willard; Commissioned by Partners in Art  
Courtesy of the artist



Maureen Gruben created this work in response to a memory of her brother harvesting a seal. While processing the animal, he pulled a long red string of fresh gut against the white snow. *Stitching My Landscape* was filmed near Tuktoyaktuk in Northern Canada, on an expanse of frozen ocean. Consisting of 111 ice holes connected with red broadcloth, it extends nearly a thousand feet.

NJS

Eldred Allen  
Inuk; b. 1978 in Rigolet, Labrador, Canada; works in Rigolet  
*Skull of Harps*, 2018  
Pigment print on archival paper  
© Eldred Allen / Courtesy Stephen Bulger Gallery



In Eldred Allen's aerial photograph, more than a dozen harp seals float with bellies up, sunbathing in the waters of the Labrador Sea in northeastern Canada. Allen uses a drone camera "to capture the landscape and the people and the culture we live in." He shares, "A skull of harp seals swimming on their backs is a common sight where I live, but revealing their patterns and movement from an aerial perspective provides an entirely new level of intrigue and appreciation."

NJS

Couzyn van Heuvelen  
Canadian Inuk; b. 1987 in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada; works in Southern Ontario, Canada  
*Sealskin Used for Mitts after Kanangiak Pootoogook*, 2025  
Wool; tufted  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund



Couzyn van Heuvelen  
Canadian Inuk; b. 1987 in Iqaluit, Nunavut, Canada; works in Southern Ontario, Canada  
*Pair of Sealskin Mitts*, 2025  
Wool; tufted  
Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund



"We use sealskin for comfort and for clothing," explains artist Couzyn van Heuvelen. *Sealskin Used for Mitts after Kanangiak Pootoogook* is part of his series of large-scale rugs that mimic the look of sealskin. Van Heuvelen grew up watching family members sew garments from sealskin, and this work celebrates the memory of family traditions and life in the North. It also playfully recalls Kananginak Pootoogook's lithograph, which Van Heuvelen looked at for inspiration.

NJS

Indigenous Arctic maker once known

*Seal Scratcher*, ca. 1800–1900

Claws, wood, and twine

Loan courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum 00.200.320



Indigenous Arctic maker once known

*Seal Scratcher*, ca. 1800–1900

Claws, wood, and twine

Loan courtesy of the New Bedford Whaling Museum 00.200.387



Ice seals use their teeth and claws to maintain breathing holes in the ice, and they are attracted to scratching noises made by other seals. In some communities across Alaska and the Canadian provinces of Nunavik and Nunavut, hunters use ice scratchers to lure seals as close as possible, to allow their harvest.

NJS

## Seal as Muse

Stories across the North highlight our relationships with seals as sentient beings that respond to human action. Some oral traditions explain that they live in sod homes under the water, observing how people act on land. Said to give themselves to those who are generous and resourceful and follow correct ways of being, seals are honored in ceremony and dance. Culture bearer Kunaq Tahbone explains, “Seal is basically a center of our lives. . . . We’ve made songs for them. We’ve made prayers around these animals that give us clothing, that give us nourishment, that give us heat, that give us light.”

Shuvinai Ashoona

Inuk; b. 1961 in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada; works in Kinngait

*Bluenose Sedna*, 2019

Colored pencil, graphite, and ink

Georgianna Sayles Aldrich Fund 2022.30.1



In this colorful drawing, Shuvinai Ashoona depicts the sea goddess Sedna with a seal tail, accompanied by a whale and a seal. A third-generation Inuk artist, Ashoona often references traditional Inuit iconography and mythic figures, including Sedna, but shapes them from her own unique perspective. She explains, “I saw the *Bluenose* [replica ship] when I was in Halifax. This is a Bluenose Sedna. Her finger is pointing at the bowhead whale. The seal is hiding in the kelp and the Sedna is hiding in the *Bluenose* ship.”

CM

Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich  
Koyukon Dené and Iñupiaq; b. 1990 in Fairbanks, Alaska; works  
between Anchorage and Cohoe, Alaska  
*Ugruk (Bearded Seal)*, 2023  
Hand-carved basswood, acrylic paint, hand-beaded strands, and nylon  
filament  
Edgar J. Lownes Fund **2023.38.1**



**Ugruk** is the Iñupiaq word for the bearded seal, a species that provides Alaska Native people with food, oil, and skin for clothing and boats. The largest seals in Alaskan waters, **ugruks** are typically seen basking on the ice during the summer. Their Latin species name, *erignathus barbatus*, alludes to their deep jaw and long whiskers. Hand-carved from basswood and finished with hand-beaded strands, this mask represents the gift of the seal, honoring a species that, as noted by artist Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich, “has historical preference as a favored material resource for Indigenous peoples of the Arctic.”

MFM

Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich  
Koyukon Dené and Iñupiaq, b. 1990 in Fairbanks, Alaska; works  
between Anchorage and Cohoe, Alaska  
*Natchiq (Ringed Seal)*, 2023  
Hand-carved basswood, acrylic paint, and hand-beaded strands  
Edgar J. Lownes Fund **2023.38.2**



**Natchiq** is the Iñupiaq word for the most common seal species in the Arctic, the ringed seal. They depend on sea ice for feeding, resting, giving birth, and raising their young. Non-Indigenous commercial hunters have long targeted ringed seals for their beautifully patterned coats. Their characteristic ringed spots are visible across the forehead of this hand-carved mask. It presents the ringed seal as one of the artist’s revered wild relatives and acknowledges its contributions and presence as worthy of respect and care.

MFM

Qavavau Manumie

Inuk; b. 1958 in Brandon, Manitoba, Canada; works in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada

*Untitled (Sedna Being Swallowed by a Fish)*, 1990–1991

Graphite colored pencil and ink on paper

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund **2024.36.1**



While many images of Sedna are reverent, Qavavau Manumie takes a more humorous approach here, depicting the sea goddess in her seal form, swimming away as a fish swallows her tail. Manumie is known for drawings that depict contemporary Inuit life, like the works on view in the adjacent gallery, as well as playful takes on Inuit legends and mythology, as seen in this example.

CM

Ningiukulu Teevee

Inuk; b. 1963 in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada; works in Kinngait

*Where She Lives*, 2017

Lithograph on black paper

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund **2024.36.4**



The story of Sedna, or Nuliajuk, is widely known across the North. In some versions, she is a young woman who flees an unhappy marriage and is transformed into a powerful sea goddess. While clinging to a boat during her escape from her husband, her fingers are severed by her father, and from them grow fish, seals, walruses, and whales. In Ningiukulu Teevee's lithograph, we see Sedna's fingerless hands among the seaweed.

Sedna lives at the bottom of the sea. When she is happy, she allows animals to be harvested. She withholds them when she is upset.

NJS

Elizabeth James-Perry  
Aquinnah Wampanoag; b. 1973 in New Bedford, Massachusetts; works  
in Dartmouth, Massachusetts  
*Lunar Knife Pendant, 2024*  
Purple wampum shell, dyed milkweed, and bone bead  
Courtesy of the artist Elizabeth James-Perry, Aquinnah Wampanoag



Elizabeth James-Perry  
Aquinnah Wampanoag; b. 1973 in New Bedford, Massachusetts; works  
in Dartmouth, Massachusetts  
*Harp Seal Collar, 2025*  
White wampum, blue tile beads, moosehide, and wampum pendant  
Courtesy of the artist Elizabeth James-Perry, Aquinnah Wampanoag



The contemporary Wampanoag pendant on the left was cut from a large ocean quahog shell and polished to achieve a smooth, cool surface. A single bone bead brings out light patterning echoed in the tan color that runs through the braided-rope necklace. The knife's elegant design recalls skillful self-reliance. Stone or copper lunar knives are an important part of every Wampanoag woman's toolkit, and used for scraping hides, chopping, and filleting. This tool has made a comeback in the modern kitchen.

At right, the abstract pattern in blue tile beads and white-shell wampum mimics the dark patterning in the coat of a harp seal. The collar's graceful drape comes from a technique distinct to the Northeast Coastal / Woodlands tribal artisans. I picture the seal hauled up on the fine sand of a Cape Cod beach. Quahogs are slow-growing cold-water clams whose layers hold knowledge of all the ocean beings that swim around them through long decades. A large quahog such as this has "seen" the return of seals in good numbers here in the western Atlantic.

EJP

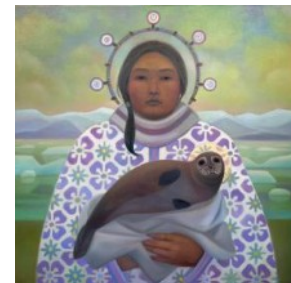
Sonya Kelliher-Combs  
Iñupiaq-Athabascan; b. 1969 in Bethel, Alaska; works in Anchorage,  
Alaska  
*Ringed Seal Skin Pore, 24, 2026*  
Ringed seal skin and acrylic paint  
Courtesy of the artist



In many of my works I use a circular form, the pore. The pore is metaphorical, symbolizing release or representing a passageway or opening. Our people are connected to the natural world; our relationship is one of mutual respect and interdependence. The pore allows the spirit of those whom we have harvested to return to the spirit world.

–Sonya Kelliher-Combs

Linda Infante Lyons  
Alutiiq/Sugpiaq; b. 1959 in Karluk, Kodiak Island, Alaska; works in  
Anchorage, Alaska  
*Isuwiq, Guardian of the Sea, 2025*  
Oil on canvas  
Courtesy of the Alaska Native Museum Sovereignty Collection



In *Isuwiq, Guardian of the Sea*, a woman protects a seal, an animal that has long been honored in the Alutiiq communities of coastal Alaska as a source of food and inspiration. Artist Linda Infante Lyons shares that her intention is to make connections to the environment and “to create contemporary Indigenous icon imagery, to recover and elevate the beliefs of Alaska Native people as equal to those of the Western world.”

NJS

Germaine Arnaktauyok  
Inuk; b. 1946 in Maniitsoq, Greenland; works in Yellowknife, Northwest Territories, Canada  
*Sedna—Sea Goddess*, 1998  
Etching on paper  
Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, acquired with funds from The Winnipeg Art Gallery Foundation, Inc., G-98-370



In Germaine Arnaktauyok's *Sedna*, the goddess is pictured underwater with half her hair braided and the other half tangled among creatures of the sea—narwhal, seal, walrus, and beluga whale. She is dressed in an amauti, a hooded garment worn by Inuit women.

NJS

Eric Hamar  
Haida; b. 1991 in Ketchikan, Alaska; works in Kasaan, Alaska  
*Kiihlgaay (dishwasher safe)*, 2025  
Epoxy resin  
Courtesy of the Alaska Native Museum Sovereignty Collection



“How many hours have been spent trying to remove oil?” I thought as I watched museum staff wipe down the floor of a cabinet housing ancient seal-oil bowls, their wooden pores still dripping hundreds of years after they were last used. Since the Spanish remarked that we were the cleanest savages on the coast, I’ve aligned my success with my cleanliness. But when I serve oil to my family in a porcelain dish I feel like I’ve robbed them the chance to be part of history. . . . What is a seal-oil dish without the patina that defines it?

–Eric Hamar

## Seal as Food

Seal is an important source of nourishment in many parts of the Arctic and has been harvested there for thousands of years. Rich in Omega-3 fats, iron, and other nutrients, seal meat and liver can be dried, stewed, fermented, or eaten raw. Oil rendered from seal blubber is a treasured condiment drizzled on or stirred into other foods. Historically, seal oil was also burned in lamps to produce light—a practice that is still active today in many parts of the North.

Subsistence practices—sustainable lifeways sometimes characterized as “living off the land”—connect us to our culture, the natural world, and each other. Harvesting seal is often a group activity that takes place according to annual subsistence cycles. When a young community member catches their first seal, they typically give it away, an act that reinforces the value of sharing. In the United States, the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1972) allows coastal-dwelling Alaska Native people to harvest marine mammals as a subsistence resource. In Canada, Section 35 of the Constitution Act (1982) protects the right for Indigenous peoples (First Nations, Inuit, and Métis) to hunt seals for food and social and ceremonial practices.

Inuk maker once known  
Grenfell Labrador Industries, now International Grenfell Association  
Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; 1892–present  
*Woodcarving (Seal)*, ca. 1900–1944  
Wood and paint  
Museum Works of Art Fund **44.221**



Inuk maker once known  
Grenfell Labrador Industries, now International Grenfell Association  
Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada; 1892–present  
*Man, Woman, Dog, and Pack*, ca. 1890s  
Ivory and paint  
Gift of New England Grenfell Association **44.223.1–.2**



Inuk maker once known  
*Seal (Netsik)*, 1968  
Stone  
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Houston **77.152**



For centuries, Arctic people have carved miniature animals, like these seal figurines, for trade. Called **sanaugangit**, meaning “small things” or “replicas,” they often depict local animals and scenes from everyday life. Common materials include ivory, wood, and stone.

NJS

Josephie Pootoogook

Inuk; 1887–1958; b. in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada; worked in Kinngait  
Lukta Qiatsuk, printer

Inuk; 1928–2004; b. in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada; worked in Kinngait  
*Seal Hunter*, ca. 1957–1959

Stonecut on white paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Houston 77.148.1

This print by Josephie Pootoogook depicts a seal hunter before an **aglu**, or breathing hole. The hunter patiently waits, his harpoon across his lap, as a seal emerges to take a breath.

Members of the Kinngait community in Nunavut, Canada, began making prints in the late 1950s and early 1960s. *Seal Hunter* is a stonecut print—a technique developed by Kinngait artists. An image is carved in relief into stone, then the stone is inked and printed by hand.

CM



Kiakshuk

Inuk; 1886–1966; b. in Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada; worked in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada

*Summer Camp, Cape Dorset, 1957*

Graphite on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Houston 77.149.1



In this drawing, Kiakshuk captures a scene of everyday life in the northeastern Canadian community of Kinngait, formerly known as Cape Dorset. The man at the right of the image is either hanging up or retrieving his **avataq**, or seal float. Two harvested seals and his hunting gear lie on the ground before him.

Kiakshuk was an early member of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative (WBEC), a group that produced and sold Inuit art. At the WBEC, drawings like this one were often translated into prints. Kiakshuk's son, Lukta Qiatsuk, printed drawings by his father and Josephie Pootoogook. They were all members of the WBEC.

CM

Inuk maker once known

*Woman's Knife (Ulu)*, ca. 1900

Horn, copper, and iron

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Houston 77.161



In the North, women's work includes processing animals into food and transforming their skin, sinew, and other parts not eaten into materials used for making clothing and other necessities. One important and widely used tool is the **ulu**, a versatile knife with a rounded blade. Women cut meat and clean skins with large **ulus**. Smaller **ulus** are used for trimming and making small holes.

NJS

Kovinatilliak Parr

Inuk; 1930–1998; b. in Kinngait, Nunavut, Canada; worked in Kinngait  
*Fishing Scene*, 1963

Engraving on paper

Gift of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Houston **78.190.5**



In this fishing scene, multiple perspectives unfold at the same time. The top register depicts fishing with a net, and below that is a hunting scene with a sled. The largest part of the composition, at the bottom, presents what appears to be a hybrid animal that combines a walrus and a seal with seabird feet.

Note the white band around the creature's middle, which seems to divide its walrus and seal portions. The artist's father, Parr (1893–1969), also an important Inuk artist, used a similar band to depict the waterline. Kovinatilliak Parr might be showing us a seal as it is pulled out of the waters and harvested.

CM

Qavavau Manumie

Inuk; b. 1958 in Brandon, Manitoba, Canada; works in Kinngait,  
Nunavut, Canada

*Untitled (Seal with Avataq)*, 1994–1995

Graphite, colored pencil, and ink on paper

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund **2024.36.2**



This drawing depicts a seal on an ice floe with an **avataq**, or sealskin float. Made from a whole sealskin filled with air, the inflated **avataq** is attached to a harpoon. When the harpoon hits an animal, the float keeps the hunter's catch from sinking, and helps the hunter to keep track of it.

NJS

Qavavau Manumie

Inuk; b. 1958 in Brandon, Manitoba, Canada; works in Kinngait,  
Nunavut, Canada

*Untitled (Hunter Making Offering to Seal)*, 1989–1990

Graphite, colored pencil, and ink on paper

Helen M. Danforth Acquisition Fund **2024.36.3**



In Qavavau Manumie's drawing, a hunter gives a seal a drink of fresh water from his own mouth. This offering, made immediately after harvest, is considered an act of respect and a way of welcoming the seal to the land.

Many kinds of seals rely on sea ice as places to feed, rest, and raise their young, fishing from holes in the surface. Hunters also rely on solid sea ice for safe travel. During summer and in ice-free waters, they hunt seals from boats.

NJS

## Seal as Arctic Fashion

Arctic peoples have long used the hides of seals to create boots (**kamiit**), mittens, parkas, pants, and bags. Sealskin is lightweight, warm, water resistant, and beautiful, making it an ideal material for clothing and accessories worn in the cold weather of the North. Today, sealskin is also fashioned into evening gowns, bowties, and other designer garments. Iñupiaq designer Bobby Brower shares, "I've always loved how beautiful sealskin is. It is a prized material here in Alaska. It is super warm and protects us. It is part of who we are."

Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich  
Koyukon Dené and Iñupiaq; b. 1990 in Fairbanks, Alaska; works  
between Anchorage and Coho, Alaska  
*Kuspuk (Alaska Native Snowshirt)*, 2023  
Digitally printed textile, hand- and machine-sewn  
Edgar J. Lownes Fund **2023.39**



**Kuspuk** is an English word derived from the Yup'ik word **qaspeq**, meaning "cloth over parka." Originally made from gut skin or animal hides, these garments keep the wearer warm and dry. Today, **kuspuks** are made from colorful or patterned cotton. This custom-made example features a seal-mask pattern in various shades of blue. Artist Erin Ggaadimits Ivalu Gingrich explains, "The seals of the North provided so much for my ancestors; their representation in my work honors the ancient relationships that my forebearers had with these beautiful beings."

MFM

Golga Oscar  
Yup'ik; b. 1997 in Kasigluk, Alaska; works in Bethel, Alaska  
*Bag*, 2022–2023  
Intarsia and appliqué on home-tanned seal fur and leather, porcupine quillwork, and applied beadwork. Lined in plain-woven printed cotton  
Mary B. Jackson Fund **2023.117**



Golga Oscar is a Yup'ik designer and art instructor whose work frequently features seals. He embellished this sealskin bag with porcupine quillwork outlined in brightly colored beads. He explains:

*The bag's significant colors are related to the Yup'ik number and color system. . . . The color red symbolizes our ancestral blood, while blue represents water and happiness, and black represents nighttime and the underworld. White represents daytime, where the Raven went out to the galaxy to search for the sun.*

NJS

Bobby Brower  
Iñupiaq; b. 1985 in Utqiagvik, Alaska; works in Anchorage, Alaska  
*Siima*, 2023  
Spotted sealskin, cotton velveteen, satin, and polyester  
Courtesy of Bobby Brower



I created this dress—titled *Siima*, the Iñupiaq word meaning “to be strong”—in honor of missing and murdered Indigenous women, girls, and two-spirits, to bring more awareness to an issue affecting all Indigenous communities and me. In 2002, my 15-year-old sister was murdered. This dress represents her and all our stolen sisters, girls, and two-spirits taken from us. The spotted sealskin symbolizes uniqueness, as no two sealskin hides are the same—just like every human being is unique. Red signifies life, just as this seal gifted its life for this piece. We stand strong in solidarity to battle this issue and protect the sacred. We are still here.

–Bobby Brower

*Pelt of a Harbor Seal, late 1800s*  
Stretched skin of a harbor seal  
Courtesy of The Edna W. Lawrence Nature Lab at Rhode Island School  
of Design



Seal pelts are durable, warm, and waterproof. After harvesting and fleshing the seal with an **ulu**, the preparer cleans, dries, stretches, and softens the animal's skin to ensure the pelt is pliable enough for sewing. The beautiful brown, black, and silver hues and patterns on this pelt are typical of harbor seals. Found along the northern coasts of North America, Europe, and Asia, harbor seals historically have served as a vital food source and cultural connector for many Native communities.

MFM

Ilegvak  
Yup'ik; b. in Akiak, Alaska; works in Sitka, Alaska  
*Pencil Skirt, 2015*  
Sealskin, cotton, and metal  
Courtesy of the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, Bowdoin College,  
Museum Purchase



A culture bearer, artist, designer, filmmaker, and writer, Ilegvak hand-sews garments from animal skins that he harvests through subsistence practices. He explains that his work is rooted in his community's values: "Yup'ik culture embodies reciprocity between human, plant, animal, and spiritual worlds. I assume responsibility for this by practicing an endangered art form disrupted by colonization: sewing the skins of mammals and fish."

NJS

Inuk maker once known

*Child's Sealskin Parka*, ca. 1929

Sealskin

Courtesy of the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, Bowdoin College, Gift of Donald and Miriam MacMillan



Parkas have been worn in the North for thousands of years. Because a parka's design and materials could indicate where its wearer was from, these garments also served as symbols of personal identity and tribal sovereignty. This example was made for a child. In some communities, a child was gifted a new parka every year.

Making a parka is an act of love, an embodied practice that uses hands and heart. It requires care, patience, and time to make stitches even, straight, and waterproof, as well as specialized techniques for sewing fur and creating patterns. Even today, many parka-makers use their own hands as their measuring tool.

NJS

Unangaŋ maker once known

*Gutskin Parka*, ca. 1865

Seal intestine, sinew, feathers, and silk

Courtesy of the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, Bowdoin College, Gift of Mr. Rawson L. Wood



Waterproof, windproof, warm, and durable, gut parkas are made by Northern women from the intestines of mammals, often seal or bear. Gut parkas provide protection while kayaking or working by the water, and in some parts of the North they are also worn during ceremony. Historically, gut material was also used to cover windows and make watertight bags.

Making a gutskin parka is a lengthy process. The animal intestine must be washed, scraped, dried, and split down the middle before it is ready to sew.

NJS

Kunaq Tahbone

Iñupiaq; b. 1988; from Nome, Alaska

*Qapsraq—taking the blubber off Ugruk at Cape Nome, 2021*

Video (8:19 min.)

Courtesy of the artist



Kunaq Tahbone grew up in Nome, Alaska, learning how to process seal and seal meat for her family. She feels responsible for learning and sharing traditional skills so that future generations will have this knowledge. She explains,

*In the Arctic it is essential to subsist in order to live sustainably and have a healthy diet. Today I **qapsraq** an Ugruk hide. In this process I separate the blubber from the hide. The blubber is cut into small strips or chunks to render in buckets for several weeks. This becomes the oil that we use to store our dried meat and plants from the land. The hide will be stretched and made into soles of traditional boots.*

NJS