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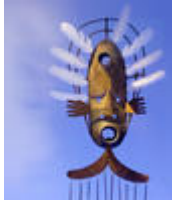
January 4, 2012

Edmund Carpenter, ed.

Upside Down: Arctic Realities

Exh. cat. Houston: Menil Collection, 2011. 232 pp.; 132 color ills.; 62 b/w ills. Cloth \$50.00 (9780300169386)

Exhibition schedule: [Musée du quai Branly](#), Paris, September 30, 2008–January 11, 2009; [Menil Collection](#), Houston, April 15–July 17, 2011



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Yup'ik, Southwest Alaska. "Tomanik" (wind-maker) mask or Summer/Winter mask (late 19th century). Wood, feathers, pigment, fiber. 37 x 16 x 10 in. (94 x 40.6 x 25.4 cm). © Rock Foundation, New York. Photo: Fred Gageneau.

When describing the carved artworks of the Aboriginal people of the Arctic regions, the anthropologist Edmund Snow Carpenter once observed: "A distinctive mark of the traditional art is that many of the ivory carvings, generally of sea mammals, won't stand up, but roll clumsily about. Each lacks a single, favored point of view, hence, a base. Indeed, they aren't intended to be set in place and viewed, but rather to be worn or handled, turned this way and that. The carver himself explains his effort as a token of thanks for food or services received from the animal's spirit" (16).

Much like the individual artworks displayed in *Upside Down: Arctic Realities*, the exhibition itself could be seen as a composite phenomenon that is best approached from multiple perspectives at once and "turned this way and that." In its creative confluences and inversions of Paleolithic and modern motifs, the show simultaneously cultivated the perspectives of ethnographic anthropology and contemporary art criticism, with their attendant conceptions of distanced criticality and aesthetic proximity. This perspectival hybridity revealed as much about aboriginal Arctic cultures as it did about the epistemological structures and aesthetic desires informing contemporary museum collection and curation practices. Curated by Carpenter, with the assistance of Sean Mooney, a version of the show originated at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris, before traveling to the Menil Collection in Houston. In various

ways, *Upside Down* reflected many dimensions of Carpenter's own career and the scholarly project that he pursued for six decades. Carpenter, who died in July of 2011 at age 89 while the show was still at the Menil, was the husband of Adelaide de Menil, the daughter of John and Dominique de Menil, the founders of the Menil Collection. Carpenter was also the primary author of the accompanying exhibition catalogue, which is based in part on his previous study of Canadian Arctic art, culture, and cosmology, *Eskimo Realities* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973).

The exhibition was arranged through five primary cultural and archeological designations, the first of which featured a selection of inverted objects that provided the primary reference points for the enigmatic title, *Upside Down*. The works consisted of highly stylized, fragmented human forms that are thought to represent protective ancestral presences, and which often contain a perforated base indicating their function as suspended pendants. The inverted figures were followed by works from the Old Bering Sea, or Paleo-Eskimo cultures of St. Lawrence Island; Ipiutak artifacts excavated during the late 1930s and early 1940s from dwellings and burial sites in the village of Point Hope, Alaska; and a group of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dance masks of the Yup'ik people. A projector screen displayed restored footage from an unfinished film that Carpenter began in 1957, in which he juxtaposed the artworks of the ancient Dorset people with comparable Inuit examples that the filmmaker Robert Flaherty collected in 1913. Notably, the film project reflects Carpenter's background as an early researcher of visual media, which included collaborations with Marshall McLuhan during the 1950s and 1960s.

Viewed collectively, *Upside Down* might be seen as an extended study in the suggestive expression *and* the creative blending of various categorical boundaries, including interwoven conceptions of simplicity and complexity, the functional and the decorative, human beings and their surrounding environment. The first three sections of the exhibition contained approximately three hundred objects in metal, bone, and ivory dating from 200 BCE to 1400 CE. This material culture base encompassed a range of utilitarian implements including weapons, tools, vessels, and game pieces, as well as shamanic objects associated with rituals for hunting, sustenance, sacrifice, and healing. Many of the artworks featured elegantly designed, highly detailed depictions of bird and animal figures, as well as composite human and creaturely forms that evoke the merger of numerous imaginative presences. As this suggests, the works displayed an intriguing range of naturalistic and symbolic forms that appear to be iconic without necessarily being representational. Such hybrid associations are consistent with the spiritual and cosmological traditions of their makers; as Carpenter notes in the exhibition catalogue, "In Eskimo thought, where spirit is regarded as separable from flesh and each man has many helping spirits, the lines between species and classes, even between man and animal, are lines of fusion, not fission, and nothing has a single, invariable shape" (16).

Further reflecting these composite associations, the Yup'ik masks and headdresses display complex configurations of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic forms. Some of the masks include narrative and kinetic elements associated with ceremonial dancing and traditional storytelling. Much like the Old Bering Sea and Ipiutak artifacts, the Yup'ik masks often appear to express the simultaneous manifestation and dematerialization of material reality. Their complex formal and iconographic associations are, in turn, interwoven within the history of modernist aesthetics. According to the accompanying exhibition map prepared by the Menil, "many dance masks were obtained by curious Westerners and brought to the east coast of the United States. Others made their way to Europe, where their amazing formal qualities influenced the work of modern artists, especially the Surrealists." The dance masks thus instantiate multiple histories that encompass not only the ethnographic traditions of Arctic peoples, but the patterns of individual and institutional collecting, and the subsequent display practices, that underpinned the production of modernism's own canonical genealogies and its often contested histories.

Not surprisingly, these complex associations were also evident in the exhibition display. In the catalogue, Carpenter points out that, in the wintertime, the Arctic landscape contains "no line dividing earth from sky," conditions that create the impression of "a land without bottom or edge" (14). This sense of a continuous melding of figure, ground, and sky shaped the distinctive character of the gallery environment. At the Menil, *Upside Down* was situated in a single large, open room, a continuous white space featuring pristine white walls, floor, and ceiling. Prior to entering the gallery, viewers donned protective foot covering so as to leave no marks on the floor. The installation was designed by Douglas Wheeler, a visual artist associated with the Light and Space movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which is known for using light as a medium of perception and space as a means to construct an environment. Further contributing to the effects of a unified atmosphere, the sound artist Philippe le Goff produced a composition of ambient background sounds interweaving Inuit voices and throat-games with environmental elements such as blowing wind and cracking ice. Approached as a whole, the exhibition space evoked a complicated hybrid typology that blended exoticized connotations of the Arctic igloo with the sanctified associations of the modernist gallery's classic white cube.

Building on these themes, the continuous white expanse of the gallery was not disrupted by any identifying wall or label text. Instead, the museum prepared an accompanying pamphlet and exhibition map that served as portable guides to this unfamiliar territory. The artifacts were displayed in transparent glass cases that were arranged in semi-circular patterns that conveyed a sense of unification and flow. The transparent glass cases contained horizontal white platforms that housed the individual objects, and when placed in

the ambient context of Wheeler's curving vistas of shifting white and colored light, the illuminated white grounds of the cases imaginatively resembled miniature ice sheets and snow banks. Complementing these effects, the curving expanse of the gallery's west wall featured sixteen cutaways that appeared as a row of open windows framing the Yup'ik masks. As the viewer progressed through the show, the background light illuminating the dance masks shifted from bright silver-white to increasingly darker blue-violet tones.

As a multifaceted project, *Upside Down* provided a valuable opportunity not only to view an intriguing range of Arctic artifacts, but to reflect on key issues in contemporary museum curation. At the outset, the show raised important questions such as: On various interrelated levels—including the practical, ideological, philanthropic, artistic, and philosophical—what are the conditions that enable a rare group of ethnographic objects to be made freely available so that they may be openly viewed by the public? And through this undertaking, how is a particular vision of modernism not only represented historically but actively perpetuated as an updated version of its legacy is projected into the postmodern present? Turning this critical inquiry on its head, the show also invited viewers to consider the equally provocative issues of: How do unfamiliar visions of utility and beauty, and intricate conceptions of spirituality, potentially become overshadowed when situated discursively in the often conflicted terrain of deconstructive polemics? The historical and critical literatures on these subjects are extensive, and I raise these issues here as open questions. Viewed in this light, *Upside Down* can be seen as a suggestive case study of how a museum curates these questions when negotiating complex terrain that can be "turned this way and that," as a prehistoric past becomes re-presented in the cultural present and displayed in a ritual space where material objects become invested with the enduring allure of ancient magic.

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