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Alutiiq Ancestors Featured in New Watercolor Portraits

KODIAK, Alaska—The Alutiiq Museum has added 11 watercolor portraits of 19th-century Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people to its collections. Created by Sugpiaq artist Cheryl Lacy, the set reinterprets watercolor paintings made by Mikhail Tikhanov, a Russian artist from Saint Petersburg who visited Kodiak in 1818. It is titled *Our Ancestors*. Lacy's paintings capture the faces and clothing of Kodiak's Native people and add scenic backgrounds. Her work transforms scientific illustrations painted on blue backgrounds into images that bring Alutiiq ancestors to life. A \$15,500 grant from the Alaska Art Fund, administered by Museums Alaska with support from Rasmuson Foundation, paid for the commission.

"Tikhanov's portraits are some of the oldest images of our ancestors," said Alutiiq Museum Executive Director April Laktonen Counciller. "He painted individuals in great detail, capturing their facial features, clothing, hairstyles, tattoos, jewelry, and tools. He even recorded some of the people's names and the places they were from. Unfortunately, many of his paintings show the same person from two perspectives—a front view and a side view—as if they were scientific specimens. They are an artifact of the colonial era."

To remove the colonial perspective but preserve the faces of Alutiiq ancestors, the museum commissioned Lacy to create new paintings. Staff members provided her with photographs of landscapes tied to the homes of Tikhanov's subjects. It took Lacy just five months to create the set. She restyled each portrait, combining front and side views of the same person into a three-quarter view.

Tikhanov's paintings show the growing influence of Russian customs on Alutiiq people as expressed in their clothing and names. However, they also demonstrate the persistence of an Alutiiq way of life in traditions like tattooing, nose piercing, and personal adornment. They are a trove of information. The Alutiiq Museum plans to show the paintings in its new living culture gallery next May. A selection of the portraits will also be included in a book on contemporary Alutiiq art currently in development.

"These paintings will help us share the faces of actual ancestors in many ways," said Counciller. "Cheryl is talented at capturing people and she used bright colors, living landscapes, and large canvases to bring our relatives to life. Her portraits are stunning."

The Alutiiq Museum is a non-profit organization dedicated to preserving and sharing the history and culture of the Alutiiq/Sugpiaq, an Alaska Native tribal people. Representatives of Kodiak Alutiiq organizations govern the museum with funding from charitable contributions, memberships, grants, contracts, and sales. #