



Namiutat – GRAPHIC ARTS



Drawing of painted wooden box panel showing an erupting volcano, ca. AD 1550, Koniag Collection, Karluk One site.

In classical Alutiiq/Sugpiaq society, graphic arts had many functions. Careful decoration added beauty to objects, showing respect for the plants and animals that provided for people and ensuring future prosperity. Pictures also preserved history. Like books, they created a physical record of the past, recording events and stories.

Some images were also family symbols. Imagine that a hunter killed two seals with one harpoon strike. This very lucky event might be symbolized

in paintings on his household implements. When people saw the painted tools, they would be reminded of the hunter's skill and good fortune, and know the objects belong to his family. The picture preserved a story, celebrated the hunter's talent, and expressed ownership.

Painted images, including geometric designs, animals, human figures, boats, celestial bodies, and spirits, were the final decorative touches on many objects. People painted pictures on wooden objects—hats, paddles, arrows, bows, boxes, masks, and many other implements. They also pecked pictures on boulders, etched designs into stone and bone weaponry, and created images through weaving and embroidery.

PAINT

Before the availability of commercially made pigments, Kodiak artists created paints from plants and minerals. Artists extracted colors from hemlock bark, grasses, and berries. They also created colorful powders by crushing red shale, iron oxide, copper oxide, charcoal, or even sparkling molybdenite with a mortar and pestle, and mixed the resulting powder with a binder of oil or blood. Artists applied paint to objects with their fingers, a small stick, or possibly a paintbrush made with animal hair.

Painted miniature skin working board showing a swimming otter, AD 1400–1750, Koniag Collection, Karluk One site.



LEARN MORE:

Eskimo Artists, 1993, by Hans Himmelheber. University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks.