

GUIDE TO MATERIALS

Wood or driftwood

Wood grows in limited places in the subarctic region; however driftwood is sometimes quite plentiful. As the force of ice and water erodes river banks each spring, the flooded rivers carry pieces of wood downstream; the wood washes up on the beaches and can be gathered. Though driftwood might have been plentiful at various times of the year, it was never taken for granted. The spirit of driftwood (considered to be alive) was addressed by the finders, whose proper actions and gratitude would affect the material's future abundance. This is also true for the spirits of animals, rocks, and stones. Occasionally the pieces on view are made of identifiable types of wood like cedar or spruce; when known, the wood is noted on the object labels.

Skin or hide

Animal skins, with or without fur, from sea and land animals were collected and used (even turned inside out) for a variety of objects necessary for survival. Parkas were made from the skins of animals; rain gear was made from seal intestine. Sometimes the artist would mix together different types of skins on the same object or garment. Foxes or other small fur-bearing animals were considered the warmest for clothing, but one could also use bird skin, squirrel skin, or sealskin. Hides of caribou or seals were tanned and made into tents or garments.

Intestines, keratin, sinew

Many parts of animals were used for survival purposes. The intestines of seals or other animals might be used to create a parka for rain; they were windproof and waterproof and might be as strong as a modern, synthetically made raincoat. Keratin is a tough protein that is found in animal hair, nails, horns, and hooves. Seal whiskers, a very sensitive hair, were used for decorative trim or made into designs. The strong and pliable sinews, or tendons, of sea or land animals were used to make rope.

Baleen

"Baleen" refers to a particular type of whale, but it is also the name of a flexible substance that hangs in fringed plates from the upper jaws of baleen whales. After lengthy preparation, strips of baleen can be used for weaving baskets. Baleen baskets were a form created for the tourist trade after 1918. Baleen was used prehistorically for cups or containers. In Victorian times, it became popular for use in corset stays, fishing rods, umbrella ribs, and other serviceable items.

Bone including antler (modified bone)

Bones of land mammals, sea mammals, or birds might be fabricated into useful objects or carved into sculptures made for sale. Skeletal whale bone (as opposed to baleen, also known as whale-bone) is usually bleached white by the sun on the beach. Fresh whale bone must be seasoned for several years before carving or it will crack. Whale bone carving is usually confined to coastal and island villages that have a good supply of material. A particular bone can dictate the form of a finished representational carving. Large pieces of whale bone might be used as frames for traditional Eskimo structures.

Ivory

Walrus and whale bone were especially prized for carving. Unearthed mastodon or mammoth tusks from prehistoric times were also highly valued for carving, as a result of their size, color, quality, and age. Old walrus ivory can acquire dramatic rays of color due to mineralization. The color varies from region to region because the minerals in the soil are different. Walrus ivory has three different layers: outer enamel, a solid white section, and a slightly yellow core. Ivory must be seasoned before it is carved.

Stone

Stones are not particularly plentiful in this region, although there are areas where slate and shale can be found. Slate was especially useful for fire making. Soapstone carving came about in the 20th century. Soapstone, technically called steatite, comes in beautiful colors ranging from gray to green to white depending on the area where it is found. It is easily carved and has a soft, soapy feel and texture. Serpentine, also called Arctic soapstone, is becoming more difficult to find in sufficient amounts or workable sizes. Different types of stone, used by some modern-day artists, are imported from many parts of the world.

Note: The word ivory is reserved for natural animal tusk or tooth rather than skeletal bone. All materials listed in the labels have been identified by staff conservator Lesley Bone.

YUA Spirit of the Arctic

ESKIMO AND INUIT ART FROM THE COLLECTION OF THOMAS G. FOWLER