Teaching with and about the Ivory Art from Chukotka and the Bering Strait (Research Note)
Enseigner sur et à propos de l’art sur ivoire de morse de Tchoukotka et du Détroit de Béring
Обучение косторезному искусству на Чукотке и в регионе Берингова пролива

Igor Pasternak

Volume 45, Number 1-2, 2021

Tchoukotka : Comprendre le passé, les pratiques contemporaines et les perceptions du présent
Chukotka: Understanding the Past, Contemporary Practices, and Perceptions of the Present

URL: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090326ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1090326ar

See table of contents

Article abstract
This article relates a pedagogical approach to exploring current directions in the art made with walrus ivory in Chukotka, Russia. Noting the unprecedented and rapidly expanding diversity in the forms and techniques documented over the course of recent ethnographic research, the article outlines a set of ideas and contexts helpful in examining contemporary practices in walrus ivory art. These include a present-day ethnography of the buyer market and its influence on artistic production, a chronology of pertinent developments during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and the author's take, as that of a practicing artist, on differentiating between the formal and conceptual functions of the imagery found in Bering Strait archaeological materials and the recontextualization of this imagery within present-day practices in Chukotka.

Cite this note
Teaching with and about the Ivory Art from Chukotka and the Bering Strait (Research Note)

Igor Pasternak

ABSTRACT
This article relates a pedagogical approach to exploring current directions in the art made with walrus ivory in Chukotka, Russia. Noting the unprecedented and rapidly expanding diversity in the forms and techniques documented over the course of recent ethnographic research, the article outlines a set of ideas and contexts helpful in examining contemporary practices in walrus ivory art. These include a present-day ethnography of the buyer market and its influence on artistic production, a chronology of pertinent developments during the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, and the author’s take, as that of a practicing artist, on differentiating between the formal and conceptual functions of the imagery found in Bering Strait archaeological materials and the recontextualization of this imagery within present-day practices in Chukotka.

KEYWORDS
Arctic, Bering Strait, Chukotka, ivory, art, carving

RÉSUMÉ
Enseigner sur et à propos de l’art sur ivoire de morse de Tchoukotka et du Détroit de Béring

As an artist and educator, I much appreciate the multidisciplinary turn captured in a series of edited volumes by Arnd Schneider and Christopher Wright (2006, 2010, 2020). Varying richly in their coverage of projects and ideas, each volume’s contributions converge on the encounters between anthropology and art rather than the anthropology of art. The current article floats along this turn by focusing on the art made of walrus ivory in Chukotka and the Bering Strait region. Written for a Chukotka issue of the journal *Études Inuit Studies*, the article primarily relates my pedagogical view of its main subject while hoping to add to the toolkits of fellow artists, scholars, and educators who are equally captivated or at least intrigued by the promise of anthropology and art.

The University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF), where I work, encourages a classroom environment that reflects the Alaska Native traditions of interacting. It is common at the start of the semester for students and instructors to introduce themselves by talking about their family and ancestors and to relate to the course material through their own lived experiences and family stories. As a person who grew up in Odessa, Ukraine, one of the ways in which I relate personally to the subject of ivory carving is through the scrimshaw art conspicuously popular in my hometown. The historic...
neighborhood where I lived through my mid-twenties was a short walk from a major regional seaport, which was a base for a large whaling fleet. Owning art made by whalers was regarded to be as prestigious among my compatriots as owning fine porcelain or antique furniture. My parents, too, were the proud keepers of two teeth from a sperm whale, engraved with an old sail caravel and a wind rose. That kind of imagery may be common in the scrimshaw collections of the New York City South Street Seaport Museum (Hellman and Brouwer 1992), but in the context of the Black Sea coast of Ukraine, it was considered to be emblematic of Odessa, a city that fashioned itself as a maritime metropolis (King 2012; Richardson 2008; Sylvester 2005).

While of a different history than walrus ivory art from the Bering Strait, the presence of whale teeth in the curio collection of my family in Ukraine tends to incite a revelatory curiosity among my students, especially those who are from Indigenous coastal hunting communities. A firsthand account of a lived experience shared by an immigrant from Ukraine (accent and all) is somewhat of an embodiment of the global routes traveled by many art objects from their home region. When they or their family member sell locally made art, they may know the buyer (perhaps a one-time tourist or a returning art dealer), but not so much the context of the object’s destination as a memento, resalable commodity, or gift. I hope the forthcoming sections will demonstrate the pertinence of making this and other connections outlined in this article.

**Materials and Methods**

I have been an art instructor at UAF since 2009, having previously worked as a student assistant in the Archaeology Collection of the University of Alaska Museum of the North (UAMN). The latter was where, about twenty years prior to the writing of this article, while going about the daily tasks of helping catalog the objects in the collection, I constantly found myself feeling overwhelmed by the intellectual and aesthetic impact of the visual aspects—depictive, descriptive, ornamental, anthropomorphic, and zoomorphic—describing a breathtaking array of objects made from ivory in the Bering Strait region between years zero—1700AD. Among such objects were needle cases, buttons, wrist guards, harpoon heads, kayak-mounted harpoon rests, net gauges, various kinds of figurines, and much more. During my years as an educator, I have regularly engaged the help of the UAMN curatorial staff to facilitate the collections visits for my students. I also had a chance to examine ivory works from the Bering Strait region in the British Museum collections during the time the museum was developing its landmark exhibition *Arctic: Culture and Climate* (Lincoln, Cooper, and Laurens Loovers 2020).
My field research in the Bering Strait spans twenty years. The primary ethnographic insight shared here comes from the Chukotkan communities of Enmelen, Nunligran, Novoe Chaplino, Provideniya, Sireniki, Lorino, and Lavrentiya (where I also had the opportunity to meet artists visiting from Uelen, the location of the famous Uelen Carving Studio (Nypevgi 2009)). Today, these villages are home to the Indigenous Yupik and Chukchi, as well as lifelong and recent settlers coming from other parts of Russia and other ex-Soviet states. Besides the university coursework, much of my learning of the ethnographer's ways over the past quarter-century has taken place while working with my wife Sveta Yamin-Pasternak (Dudarev et al. 2019; Pasternak and Yamin-Pasternak 2019; Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak 2021; Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014, 2017), who is a cultural anthropologist. When “in the field,” I also rely on being able to connect locally as a fellow artist and maker, as well as a hunter, fisher, trapper, and forager of mushrooms and plants, who, just like any person active in these trades, spends a lot of time on processing the gifts of the harvest and fixing and modifying various kinds of equipment and tools; thus, along with our conversations about art, my hosts and I also discuss fishing tackle, ammo, snare sets, and ATV and snowmobile parts, among various other topics. In addition to Chukotka, the numerous stretches of field research that Sveta and I have conducted in the Bering Strait region include stays in the Alaskan communities of Nome, Gambell, Savoonga, Shishmaref, and Little Diomede (for a map, see Yamin-Pasternak and Pasternak, this volume). These, together with visits to the Northwest and Arctic Slope regions of Alaska, provide further context for the understanding I share, because art that involves working with walrus ivory is prolific in all of the aforementioned places (Ray 1982a).

Of the scholarship that focuses on walrus ivory carving in Chukotka, the writings of Tamara Mitlyanskaya (1996) and Mikhail Bronshtein (2009, 2018a and b) have been critical to the understanding I share here. I must note that in their historical and formal analyses of Chukotka ivory art, starting with the early Soviet period, these authors focus entirely on the Uelen Carving Studio. My interactions, on the other hand, have been with artists in a half-dozen Chukotkan communities, including Lorino, which is home to two large carving shops that employ artists of different ages and specializations.

Ethnographic Field Notes on Chukotka’s Ivory Art
Walking into a present-day ivory carving studio in Chukotka, one is likely to see an artist in the midst of producing a work for a specific client. On the Alaskan side of the Bering Strait, artists also take on commissioned work, yet in the vast majority of examples I have encountered in Alaska, the prospective buyer and destination of the piece are open-ended: upon
completion of the work, an artist either sells locally or submits the work to one of the shops in a regional hub or in Anchorage (Alaska’s largest city). In contrast, in Chukotka, it is common for a person who has come to work there on a short-term contract (for example in building construction) and who will soon be departing for their permanent residence to place an order for a custom piece made with walrus ivory. Custom features may include the names of the locations where that person has worked or visited, a map or imagery that is somehow representative of those places, and a cluster of themes and details which the customer wants to look similar to or different from the piece recently purchased by someone else.

One local entrepreneur explained to me that what most of his clients are after is the gratification of owning artwork which they feel is unique yet resembles the high-end pieces owned by others in their social circles. Acting as both a carving shop manager and an art dealer, this longtime resident of Chukotka maintains social networks in Ukraine and mainland Russia that provide a steady source of buyers, in addition to the clientele of the short-term visiting laborers mentioned above. Thus, each completed piece must exhibit a unique custom feature while displaying a range of features that the buyer will recognize as a current trend in ivory art. Among the trends that have been considered desirable in recent years are a hollow space carved in the wider section of the tusk that incorporates a 3D figurine composition (see Figure 1), imagery from the region’s archaeological findings (Figures 2 and 3), and a changed color of the tusk obtained with the help of dyes (Figure 4). As residents of small communities who are often relatives or lifelong friends, many Chukotkan artists have close collegial relationships, sharing insight on ideas and experimental techniques. Still, I have had a number of exchanges where, pointing to a certain detail of the work, an artist would say, “I am the first one who came up with this” or “I am the only one who does this.”

Figure 1. Tusk featuring several place names and a variety of 2D and 3D elements. Made in a privately operated group artist workshop in Lorino, 2017. Photo by Igor Pasternak.
Figure 2. Ivory box featuring abstract prehistoric design patterns amidst realistic carving and drawings. Artist E. V. Nuteventina, Uelen, 2004. Photo by Igor Pasternak.

Figure 3. Ivory vase with abstract prehistoric design patterns framing realistic drawings. Artist V. S. Tegryl’kut, Lorino, 2017. Photo by Igor Pasternak.
While artist-market relationships in Alaska have their own way of influencing continuity and change in the directions of ivory art (Ray 1982a), the Chukotkan model, with artists working predominantly on individually commissioned custom pieces, results in a higher variability in the artwork produced and a notable level of eclecticism encompassed within each individual piece. A single work, be it a full tusk or a section of a tusk turned into a cylindrical container, may include engraved colored pencil drawings featuring realistic depictions of Arctic animals or iconic cultural activities (dog-mushing, marine mammal hunting, reindeer herding, berry picking, etc.) interspersed with the imagery common in Okvik and Old Bering Sea traditions (archaeologically defined material cultures that flourished in the Bering Strait region about 2000 years ago). It may also include place names, map images, calendar year numbers, and 3D sculptural elements. How does someone eager to gain and share larger lessons on the relationships between art and society go about exploring the current world of Chukotka ivory carving? Outlined below are some approaches I have found helpful.

Old Bering Sea and Piet Mondrian’s Grid

In most university curricula, the study of the expressive culture is typically compartmentalized into geographies, traditions, and time periods, often presented to inhabit separate and (most unfortunately, in my view) mutually unintelligible worlds. During my undergraduate and graduate studies, I sat through countless seminars on ancient, historical, modern, and contemporary art that never included a discussion of art from this article’s study region, which was confined mostly to coursework in anthropology. Thanks to the aforementioned turn in anthropology and art, I know that I am not the only artist who has come to decry this approach. Argentinian-born César
Paternostro recounts being taken aback when, seeking literature on the Inca art, he was “directed to the ‘social sciences’ section of the New York Public Library, not to the art or architecture sections” (Paternostro 2006, 161). This author goes on to say:

Soon it became evident that anthropologists, as well as art historians, were bound to evaluate the ancient American forms based on the projection of (classical) Western canon, that is to say, the representation of natural forms... I have no difficulty with this; only that they were writing in the second half of the twentieth century and they were manifestly oblivious of the already established forms of geometric abstraction, whereas I, as a life-long abstractionist, was able to read immediately those geometric reliefs or cubical carvings of the rocks in situ as meaningful sculpture. (ibid.,162)

Collegially empathizing with this perspective, I would like to connect it to the subject of Bering Strait ivory art from the archaeological traditions of Okvik and Old Bering Sea. The two main goals that anthropologists and archaeologists pursue when they examine the visual elements of archaeological objects are to establish the timelines and geographic distribution and interpret the culturally held ideas the objects may reflect (Bronshtein and Dneprovsky 2009; Crowell 2009; Dumond 2009; Fitzhugh 2009; Hill 2019; Qu 2020); they also examine these objects in the context of the regional and global art/artifact trade (Hollowell 2009; Lincoln 2019). Among those attempting to theorize the imagery of ancient Bering Strait ivory art is Feng Qu (2020) who, in delineating the visual means by which Old Bering Sea winged objects project their yua (sentience/person/being) (Figure 5), cites Ingold’s discussion of the images that are “not to represent, but to reveal” and coins the terms “revelatory art” or “Revelatory-Style Art” (Qu 2020, 56, capitalization his). Rather than object to the anthropological postulations on the spiritual functioning of “revelatory art” in the Bering Strait, I encourage the reader to also consider the artist’s process of making, which, in the language of Western modern art, is called abstraction.

When engaging in the process of visual abstraction, artists reshape the reality into a visual format to emphasize the qualities of an object, event, or process that are the most important from the artist’s point of view. In approaching this subject pedagogically, I have found it most effective to have students examine several dozen paintings by Piet Mondrian created between the 1900s and 1940s (see Figure 6 for an abbreviated image selection). Asserting in his writing that “all art has achieved some measure of abstraction” (Mondrian 1992, 391), this artist dedicated his life’s work to a visual journey from painting figurative representation to his easily recognized “Mondrian grids,” some of which were done in black and white, some
Figure 5. Old Bering Sea winged object made from walrus ivory in the 2nd-3rd century AD. This public domain image is available for free reproduction through the Met Open Access Policy. Accessed July 17, 2021. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310002.

Figure 6. Selected images of the works of Piet Mondrian created between 1900 and 1940, arranged by Igor Pasternak. All images are public domain and available for free reproduction through Wikimedia Commons under the Creative Commons CC0 License. Accessed July 17, 2021. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Piet_Mondrian.
consisted of lines and primary colors, and some used only squares of color. For the artist, the process represented by these images was an investigation of the universal within the subjective and personal.

Using the example of the New York Museum of Modern Art 1984 exhibition, which—not without artificial alignment and photographic manipulation—paired selected works of famous Western artists with selected objects made and used in Indigenous societies around the world, Clifford (2003) rightfully cautions us against the construction of likeness in such didactic and superficial ways. Correspondingly, what I suggest here is not to extrapolate Mondrian’s grid as a universal visual expression that would somehow be meaningful in the cultural milieu of the ancient societies of the Bering Strait. What I want to encourage is for us to think using Mondrian’s process by trying to fathom how Bering Strait artists could venture into visual examinations that helped generate the imagery we know from archaeological objects. The fact that Okvik, Old Bering Sea, and other Bering Strait archaeological traditions each come with distinctive visual patterns engraved onto a wide range of objects suggests that these visuals were also embraced as being universal in their cultural milieu (and perhaps achieving the needed degree of universality in the hands of their maker(s) was a factor in an object’s sentient life and spiritual and social function).

We can also think about the wide range of contemporary destinations where we today encounter the imagery inspired by Mondrian’s grids. A reader hungry for good examples can do a web search with the words *dresses, wall, furniture, cake* in combination with the artist’s name, and for those who watch American television, the sets of The Late Show and other programs will provide further examples. Varying prolifically as they are being reimagined and reproduced, Mondrian grids function differently than do the originals resulting from decades of investigation by the artist. Let us take that in as we consider the re-emergence of visual patterns resembling Bering Strait archaeological traditions in present-day ivory art, such as in the examples depicted in Figures 2 and 3. We shall revisit this topic following a brief chronology of events described in the next sections.

**Bering Strait Ivory Art in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries**

In the backdrop of today’s relative abundance of ivory art in the Bering Strait, I like to remind myself that in the past, the people living there were literally surrounded by ivory objects. Some objects were designed for specific tasks and often had to be replaced, while some lived long lives, being passed down from generation to generation. However, as is evident from archaeological materials represented in museum collections, local demand for the production of different kinds of ivory objects has always been high.
(Hill 2019). Until the truly substantive transformations brought about in the twentieth century, ivory carving in the Bering Strait was overwhelmingly a locally influenced art grounded in the Indigenous cultural milieu and based on Indigenous spirituality and traditions.

With the expansion of the art buyer market in the early part of the 20th century, we see a remarkably quick transition, as Bering Strait artists turned to producing the newly marketable work. Documentation on that period shows that the artists were flexible and resourceful; they possessed a high level of mastery in working with the material, and they had an intimate knowledge of the local activities, which typically were the visual subject of the emerging art (Ray 1982b). Gradually, the opportunity to produce commissioned work began expanding beyond the region’s art stars—in the likes of Happy Jack (Ray 1980) to a greater number of talented carvers. Both sides of the Bering Strait saw a proliferation of small sculptures, animal figurines, and utilitarian objects, many of which were copies of archaic objects in the owner’s possession. Tobacco pipes, hairpins, buckles, and various kinds of boxes were part of another category of objects that were being abundantly produced during that period in response to a range of emerging popular fads.

**Early Soviet Chukotka: Neoclassicism Meets Social Realism**

Like everything else, art in the Soviet Union was officially subject to Soviet ideology, as well as its reflection. During the 1920s, as a gesture of the defeat of imperial Russia that had never favored modern art (hence such artists as Mark Chagall, Kazimir Malevich, and Wassily Kandinsky had to achieve their fame outside of Russia), the Soviet state created ample room and support for the avant-garde. Though of a different social and aesthetic realm, ivory carving by Native people of Chukotka was also deemed appealing and worthy of state support. In the eyes of Soviet authorities, this art practice genuinely fit their motto of being “by and for the people.” All that was needed was a viable concept.

Two core steps converged in the conceptual dimension of the state’s support of any regional culturally rooted art of an ethnic minority. The first step mandated a relabeling of all references to spirituality as “folklore:” the former signified the pre-revolutionary backwardness, while the latter was a critical piece of the celebrated, and culturally rich mosaic of the Soviet Union. The second step involved expanding the range of permitted subjects in art to include the prominent themes of the day: liberation from oppressors, collectivization, Soviet civilization building, etc.

The official state endorsement of avant-garde art during the 1920s turned out to be short-lived. In the decades that followed, the only kind of officially permitted and state-supported art was that celebrating the
extraordinary abilities and heroism of the Soviet people making herculean strides toward building a new society. Mitlyanskaya (1996) and Bronshtein (2009, 2018a and b) write about the pedagogical philosophies of such acclaimed instructors as Aleksander Gorbunkov and Igor Lavrov, who taught in Uelen. Their job was to teach the Indigenous artists about proportions, compositions, and realistic depiction of human and animal forms. Functioning as a regional vocational school, the Uelen Carving Workshop was the Chukotkan epicenter for the formal education in visual arts and the production of high-end work in ivory carving and engraving. Today, although many artists are trained to do both, carving and engraving continue to be regarded as distinct occupations, each requiring specialized formal training.

With the Soviet avant-garde quickly out of the way, the 1930s saw the ideologically welcomed theme of the hard-working Native people living in the harsh conditions at the farthest northeast outpost of the Soviet Arctic. “Liberated” from the bounds of ancestral art forms, these members of the new Soviet society were to be “gifted” an opportunity to advance their artistic abilities through state-sponsored training in a newly revamped neoclassical platform. Per this school of thought, the technical training in producing neoclassical forms would grant the Chukotka artists the “freedom” to render realistic visual narratives of Soviet-era housing construction and collectivization, together with stories of supernatural encounters—now regarded as Chukotkan folktales—with didactic and realistic rendering aimed at a clear linear representation of a story that could be easily understood by outsiders. Beyond the use of ivory as the material of choice and the actual activity of carving, this direction had little to do with what Indigenous art in the Bering Strait had been up to that point.

Understanding the developments unfolding in Chukotka ivory art from the 1930s onward warrants examining certain directions in 18th and 19th century European art, particularly the popularity of small- and medium-size bronze sculpture among the members of the privileged classes. Such items served to decorate living quarters, offices, and spaces intended for socializing and entertainment. Among the many experiences captured by these sculptures was hunting, a particularly prominent theme. By that time, hunting was a luxury pastime in Europe. Indeed, the members of the upper social strata who valued the experience elevated it to a level they regarded as high art; hence, well-groomed dogs of bloodhound and pointer breeds, horse riders, horn calls, and fancy weaponry and apparel were a must. And while a celebratory feast was commonly the destination for the harvested game, this was a markedly different relationship than that of the human-animal interactions and social-spiritual values that forever permeate the hunting practices in Indigenous societies.

It is pivotal to grasp the intricately and ironically nuanced crossroads that this type of craftsmanship was allotted within the at-large Soviet theory
of art. Everything about the hunt-themed 18th and 19th century European bronze work—from its principal subject to its destined social and living spaces—wreaked of “bourgeoisie” lifestyle and aesthetics, regarded as ideologically opposite to the Soviet glorification of the proletariat class. At the same time, this art was perceived to be purely decorative, free of ideas that could be taken as a criticism of the Soviet regime. Its only ascribed ideological agency was elevating a “well-mannered” interaction of humans with nature through a refined, highly skilled art of hunting (with teaching the Indigenous people “proper manners” front and center in the Soviet colonial project (Kerttula 2000; Yurchak 2006), without projecting any strong signifiers of a non-Soviet Western culture. Art featuring any element of abstraction was explicitly deemed as countering Soviet ideals with a degree of foreignness, which placed it beyond what was permissible and proper. All while the illustration of a frivolous upper-class entertainment activity, involving an elaborate use of human and animal servants and high-priced fancy gear and weapons, did not strike the chord of an ideological dissonance. The result: a fusion, where the neoclassical formal elements of composition were applied to the surface of social realism. Being Soviet in meaning and neoclassical in appearance were the pillars of the art foundation in Soviet society. This fusion transformed the societal positioning of Chukotka ivory carving from regional ethnic craft to Soviet fine art, read easily by outsiders to the social-cultural world of its makers while serving as a broadly appreciated item of décor.

Ivory Art in the Time of Intensive Sovietization in Chukotka

What we observe between 1950 and the 1980s—the time of rapidly growing newcomer presence in Chukotka and intensive Sovietization permeating nearly every aspect of life (Holzlehner 2011; Kerttula 2000; Yamin-Pasternak et al. 2014)—is not only continuing advancement of the technical aspects and proportional appearance of the figures in ivory art, but also great diversification in how individual artists approached composition. The focus continued to be predominantly on Chukotkan themes, yet each piece was now a unique multi-figure composition reflecting its maker's signature style (as well as the actual signature engraved on the ivory’s surface).

This helped Chukotka ivory art reach a new level of popularity and recognition among collectors and institutions. The seemingly small trade of these delicate objects actually generated hard currency for the state. Carved walrus ivory became a prestigious possession among the Soviet privileged class, such as celebrity musicians, artists, academics, and high-ranking military personnel, as well as the upper echelons of the Communist Party. It was not uncommon to see a large tusk with a carving of a reindeer team pulling a sledge adorning a Kremlin office (e.g., Bronshtein and Shirokov...
(2008) discuss a museum piece once presented to Nikita Khrushchev). Distinctly Chukotkan in its content and Western neoclassical in its form, “made in the USSR” carved walrus ivory was considered an appropriate gift—unique Soviet high art—to present to a visiting foreign dignitary or to be carried by a Soviet delegation on an official visit abroad. Walrus ivory carvings were featured in Soviet Union pavilions at various international expos and were also sold in elite stores designated exclusively for foreign tourists from capitalist countries, where hard currency was the only accepted form of payment.

Modern-Day Recontextualizations of the Ancient Imagery

The pieces by Elena Nuteventina, Uelen, 2004 and Valentina Tegrul’kut, Lorino, 2017, shown in Figures 2 and 3, respectively, both feature designs inspired by Old Bering Sea and Okvik traditions. In terms of composition, the elements of the ancient forms function here as ornamental framing separating the realistically rendered drawings on each side of the tusk. How did the imagery from art made one or two millennia ago—entirely absent from the Bering Strait art of recent centuries—find its way into the pieces produced in very late Soviet and post-Soviet times? In her discussion of works made in the final years of the Soviet Union, Tamara Mitlyanskaya credits Mikhail Bronshtein, who, she says “showed [the artists] items from the Old Bering Sea culture which he had found during his excavations of the nearby prehistoric sites” (Mitlyanskaya 1996, 80). She further relates:

The young artists eagerly worked to master this new, yet traditional, artistic direction. They appreciated the elegance and beauty of the ornamentation. This feeling naturally prevailed in as much as the deep, polysemic content was linked with spiritual conceptions of a world so remote from contemporary artists. Pendants, bracelets, and charms decorated with miniature curvilinear motifs constitute elegant and often exotic ornaments. Naturally, only the carvers who make these objects are aware—though not always—of their ancient essence. As a rule, the buyer (with the exception of art specialists and some museum workers) merely appreciates the beauty of the form of the ornaments and of the material itself, walrus tusk. (ibid.,1996, 80–81)

If, by now, the reader has had a chance to google *Mondrian dress, Mondrian furniture*, etc., let us contemplate the preceding quote vis-à-vis the pertinent results of such image searches.

It is no coincidence that the time when ancient imagery found its way into the work of the modern-day artists corresponds to the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Although the preceding generations of Chukotkan
artists were familiar with the archaeological objects from their home regions outside of the interactions with social scientists, the growth of international collaborations between Soviet, European, and North American archaeologists and the general social environment in the last days of the Soviet Union becoming more open to the fusions of the old and the new, have been important catalysts. We must also note that the research on the traditional knowledge of the Indigenous people of Chukotka—in particular the studies by Indigenous scholars (Zdor et al. 2021)—shows that the spirituality of the animal-human and broader human-environmental connections holds a prominent place in the modern-day hunting culture.

Concluding Remarks

Arguably, no single animal has been as crucial to marine adaptations around Bering Strait as the walrus. Walrus meat, hide, bones, and tusks have been in use along the coasts of Alaska and Chukotka for over two millennia. Objects of walrus ivory are too numerous to list, but are ubiquitous at archaeological sites on the Bering and Chukchi Sea coasts... (Hill 2019, 77)

In the article quoted above, anthropologist Erica Hill aims to capture the essential significance of walrus, which she and others single out as “a key factor in the development of Bering Sea societies” (ibid.). I have included the quote to emphasize the Bering Strait's prolific availability and use of the unique and highly versatile material that is walrus ivory. Although much stronger than wood, ivory can still be carved. It does not chip as easily as various kinds of rocks do. Compared to bone, it is far less vulnerable to decay and breakage (Senungetuk 1973). It is a natural material of superb plastic qualities, which brings us the copious, millennia-old body of knowledge that ancient, historic, and contemporary generations of people living in the Bering Strait region have documented through carving and engraving. Its lasting durability enables a function in the likes of a computer hard drive by preserving the stories inscribed upon its surface.

Alongside the complex intersections of artistic agency and the various social, cultural, and historical turns briefly visited in this article, it is the material properties of walrus ivory itself that we must credit when pondering the opulent diversity in the ivory art created in Chukotka, both today and in the past. My hope is that interested researchers will be compelled to make fruitful comparisons between the kinds of art discussed here and art made of antler, bone, and ivory from other animals, living or extinct, such as narwhal and mastodon, also utilized in contemporary Indigenous communities in the Arctic.
I also hope that my fellow art educators, particularly those who are rightfully critical of making such sweeping simplistic comparisons as the ones decried by Clifford (2003), will become more open toward cautious and constructive discussions of art, its production, and its functioning in seemingly unrelated contexts vis-à-vis one another. Today’s students, be they from an urban environment or a small community on the coast of Bering Sea, live in an interconnected globalized world. Through the Internet, television, mass-produced merchandise, and a multitude of other sources, they are exposed daily to a bewildering volume of imagery, the origins of which are as diverse as human ideas are about the universe’s many realms, both real and imagined. As mentors, we stand to serve them better by jointly contemplating our shared world as one in which Piet Mondrian and the ivory artists of the past and present generations of the Bering Strait can productively meet, at the various turns of anthropology and art, to continue enriching our understanding of society, art, and culture.

Acknowledgements
I sincerely appreciate the efforts of the two anonymous reviewers and the EIS Chukotka issue editors Virginie Vaté and Dmitriy Oparin, all of whom provided extensive and helpful comments on the earlier version of this manuscript. I gratefully acknowledge the Bering Strait ivory artists of the current and previous generations, including the carvers of the ancient and historic times, whose mastery and commitment as makers inspired me to become a life-long pupil of art. The Studio Art MFA Program at the American University in Washington DC was instrumental in helping me grow from being a painter to being an artist. I thank my students for always challenging me to contemplate novel approaches in art education. For the invaluable experience in working with museum collections, I thank Dr. Amber Lincoln, who facilitated the collections visits for Sveta and I during the development of the 2020-2021 exhibition Arctic: Culture and Climate, as well as all the members of the curatorial staff at the University of Alaska Museum of the North who have been helping me since 2000. I would especially like to acknowledge the mentorship and support of Dr. Molly Lee, Professor Emerita at the University of Alaska Fairbanks who served as the Curator of Ethnology and History at the University of Alaska Museum of the North during the years I worked there as a student. I thank my wife Sveta for the editing help and for the intellectual growth enabled by our collaboration. Both of us thank the National Science Foundation Arctic Social Sciences Program, Chukotka Science Support Group, and our many hosts and teachers on the Chukotkan and Alaskan sides of the Bering Strait. Researched and written long before, this article is being finalized for publication in May 2022, well into the third month of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. Living daily in consternation and with...
great concern for our loved ones in the war zone, we deeply appreciate the support of all friends who stand with us in solidarity with the people of Ukraine. Спасибо! Слава Украине!

Références

BRONSHTEIN, Mikhail


BRONSHTEIN, Mikhail, and Kirill DNEPROVSKY

BRONSHTEIN, Mikhail, and Yuri SHIROKOV

CLIFFORD, James

CROWELL, Aaron

DUDAREV, Alexei, Sveta YAMIN-PASTERNAK, Igor PASTERNAK, and Valery CHUPAKHIN
DUMOND, Don

FITZHUGH, William

HELLMAN, Nina, and Norman BROUWER

HILL, Erica

HOLLOWELL, Julie

HOLZLEHNER, Tobias

KERTTULA, Anna

KING, Charles

LINCOLN, Amber

LINCOLN, Amber, Jago COOPER, and Jan Peter LAURENS LOOVERS (eds.)
2020  Arctic: Culture and Climate. London: The Trustees of the British Museum and Thames & Hudson Ltd.

MITLYANSKAYA, Tamara

MONDRIAN, Piet
NYPEVGI, Valeri

PASTERNAK, Igor, and Sveta YAMIN-PASTERNAK

PATERNO, Cesar

QU, Feng

RAY, Dorothy Jean

RICHARDSON, Tanya

SCHNEIDER, Arnd, and Christopher WRIGHT (eds.)

SENUNGETUK, Ronald

SYLVESTER, Roshanna

YAMIN-PASTERNAK, Sveta, Andrew KLISKEY, Lilian ALESSA, Igor PASTERNAK, and Peter SCHWEITZER

YAMIN-PASTERNAK, Sveta, and Igor PASTERNAK
YAMIN-PASTERNAK, Sveta, Peter SCHWEITZER, Igor PASTERNAK, Andrew KLISKEY, and Lilian ALESSA

YURCHAK, Alexei
2006 Everything was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation. Princeton University Press.

ZDOR, Eduard, Lyudmila AINANA, and Lilia ZDOR