



Engraved Walrus Tusk

Happy Jack (Angokwazhuk)

ca. 1900

Ht: 3 ½"; L: 28 ¼"; D: 2 ¼"

T0713

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1595/engraved-walrus-tusk?ctx=17481dd094363eb850d4db5f30ea75b876f0c853&idx=0>

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This large walrus ivory was engraved by one of the great Iñupiaq artists of the turn of the twentieth century, Happy Jack (Angokwazhuk or Unquigok). Born in Aya-sayuk, a village in Cape Nome, around 1870, and later moving to Big Diomedede island, Happy Jack made his fame as a commercial ivory carver in Nome during the boom of the gold rush. His engraved pipes, tusks, and cribbage boards depict animals, portraits, and scenes of Arctic life. They were products for a Euro-American tourist audience which could be both exoticizing and revealing of images of contemporary Alaskan life. Happy Jack expanded the long-extant Iñupiaq engraving tradition by making use of the many visual forms which were actively circulating in the network of the Nome trade center. Photographs, scrimshaw, printed material, and indigenous Iñupiaq engravings formed a constellation of visual types which Happy Jack pulled from to create, both for his eager tourist audience and for himself.

Known as a great hunter in his youth, Happy Jack's artistic career began after a bad case of frostbite resulted in a leg amputation, leaving him unable to pursue subsistence-based activities.¹ It was during this time that he developed his craft, learning from the tradition of Iñupiaq engraving, which in the earlier nineteenth century had developed into a system of pictographic figures and scenes primarily appearing on decorated bow drills (Fig. 1). By Happy Jack's time, ivory engraving was a flourishing part of the souvenir trade as the pictographic style was adopted to pipe forms borrowed from Siberian neighbors and tusks, larger-scale mediums which appealed to sailors and whalers looking for exotic objects to bring home (Fig. 2). When Happy Jack arrived in Nome in 1900, he was a well accomplished artist. As the gold rush hit Nome he earned a substantial income creating a variety of engravings for eager gold prospectors and tourists, some of which combined pictographic space-filling scenes of Iñupiaq life and settlements similar to earlier engraving styles and filled-out figures borrowed from playing cards (Fig. 3).²

Prior to his arrival in Nome, he had spent two trips aboard whaling ships in the early 1890s where he no doubt learned the engraving techniques of the Yankee scrimshanders.³ But it was Happy Jack's portrait and photocopying work which contributed to his fame in the Bering Strait region. A keen eye and hand brought many customers to him seeking a portrait done on the recognizably Arctic material of ivory, sometimes accompanied by other printed images such as American flags or even the president (Fig. 4).⁴

It is no surprise that he turned the engraving needle on himself. This tusk features a double portrait of the artist and his first wife, Malinda. The portraits were copied from a photo (Fig. 5), demonstrating his aptitude for photographic reproduction. The oval medallions in which Happy Jack's and Malinda's heads sit are taken from Euro-American portrait conventions, but to copy for Happy Jack was to create. Even the signature between the two portraits was engraved from a

¹ Dorothy Jean Ray, "Happy Jack and Guy Kakarook: Their Art and their Heritage," in Suzi Jones, *Eskimo Drawings* (Anchorage: Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 2003: 16-33.

² *ibid*

³ Dorothy Jean Ray, "Happy Jack and his Artistry," *American Indian Art Magazine*, Vol. 15, No. 1, (Winter 1989): 40-53.

⁴ Dorothy Jean Ray, *A Legacy of Arctic Art* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996).

copy provided to him; Happy Jack was illiterate yet recreated the words and pictures he copied with a personal touch.

Next to the double-portrait is a scene of a summer encampment, its form recognizably influenced by the long Iñupiaq tradition of depicting similar scenes of Arctic life on ivory. Children play with a dog while someone cooks amidst the skin tents, and the landscape's grass and hills are treated with a remarkable atmospheric finesse in the shallow engraving technique. Attention to three-dimensional perspective is visible in the foreshortening of the elevated storage rack, yet there is also an ambiguous treatment of planar space typical to Iñupiaq engraving styles. The combination of photographic, perspectival, and Iñupiaq forms of visual representation on this single object demonstrate that Happy Jack was aware of and making use of the multiplicity of image sources available to him at this center of exchange. This tusk ended up in the Nome shop window of Fred Peterson, illustrated in a *Chicago Daily News* article dated October 13, 1913.⁵ It seems clear that Happy Jack depicted himself in such a photographic style to serve his own self expressive needs—namely, combining traditional forms of his people with a style legible to his purchasing audience.

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Figure 1: Drill bow from Port Clarence depicting activities of men searching for the Franklin expedition at Bering Strait, 1848-54. British Museum #Am1855,1126.227.

Figure 2: Two sides of a fancy ivory pipe with both small sculpture and engraving, Seward Peninsula, 1880s. 39.4 cm long. Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology. In Ray, 2003: 21, fig. 9.

Figure 3: Angokwazhuk (Happy Jack), engraved ivory tusk signed "Hapy Jack," with playing card people, a village on Big Diomed Island, and a rabbit. Private collection. In Ray, 2003: 18, fig. 5.

Figure 4: Angokwazhuk (Happy Jack), two sides of a walrus ivory tusk engraved with the portrait of Theodore Roosevelt and portrait of a prospector, about 1915. 22". In Ray, 1996: 118, fig. 53

Figure 5: Happy Jack and Family, Nome, Alaska. Photo by Otto D. Goetze. O.D. Collection, Anchorage Museum at Rasmuson Center, AMRC B01.41.225

⁵ Fenimore Art Museum , "Happy Jack. Engraved Walrus Tusk," 1900-1904, T0713, <http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/items/show/1261>.(accessed October 8, 2015).