



*Yaaruin* (Story Knife)  
Unknown Yup'ik artist  
ca. 1880-1910  
Ht: 1 5/8"; L: 13 1/4"; W: 1/4"  
T0598

<https://collections.fenimoreart.org/objects/1296/knife?ctx=21a2973f0371c6e3f3652f78dc46c0c7805c4a94&idx=0>

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Over the course of the 2015 Otsego Institute Workshop, I was confronted with a diversity of objects, materials and knowledges that urged me to pause and reflect on my own position as a researcher of contemporary Greenlandic performance and media art. In a similar capacity to how contemporary art leads us to reflect on the ways performance and information technologies mediate relations between the individual and the collective-historical, the Otsego Institute emphasized the fluid social lives of materials and objects that themselves activate and shape history. The Thaw Collection's exceptional artworks from diverse nations across North America demand attention to not only how materials circulate within given social and historical circumstances, but also how materials *act* in ways that affect, transform or recompose social relations. By analyzing the capacities for objects to act in assemblage with human and nonhuman agencies, memory, space and time, the faculty and my fellow students imparted on me a deep appreciation for the veritable dynamism of material. Not least, these analyses point to how vital it is that we as researchers reflexively position ourselves and register how we come to know the objects we study and the peoples with whom we collaborate. By framing ourselves within a chain of relations connected to the object's capacity to actively shape knowledge, we can approach the writing of art history in a manner more faithful to the multiplicity of histories within and beyond conventional art historical narratives.

An object of limited provenance, this *yaaruin*, or Yup'ik story knife, defies complete historicization. In 1989 it was donated to the Thaw Collection by Larry Frank of Aroyo Hondo, New Mexico, a collector of Mexican art, and its date has been assigned with the rather large timeline of 1880-1910. Likely carved from bone, the engravings on this knife are distinctive to Yup'ik design. The *ellanguat* ("pretend or model cosmos"), or "ring and center" etchings, are typical to Yup'ik visual culture across the western Seward Peninsula.<sup>1</sup> Ann Fienup-Riordan suggests that these designs evoke connections between the various levels of Yup'ik society and the levels of the universe, with the Earth at the center.<sup>2</sup> Story knives such as this were common yet deeply personal objects for Yup'ik families, often created by a father for his daughter.<sup>3</sup> Given the intimate nature of this relationship it is likely impossible to determine the full journey this object took from its original owner to the museum. Far from the monumental masterworks comprising the core of the Thaw Collection, precisely because of their murky histories and uncertain journeys, small yet beautiful objects like this can turn our attention as researchers back to the fundamental dilemmas of historicization.

Young girls used story knives to carve out such imaginative journeys. In the various accounts I reference here, a number of Yup'ik elders testify that young girls used these knives by 'drawing' on the snow or mud to narrate stories (Fig. 1). The drawings would be left or washed away after the story was over, illustrating the direct relationship between this representational drawing practice and storytelling. In this case the knife mediates the narrative from story into

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Fienup-Riordan, *Eskimo Essays: Yup'ik Lives and How We See Them* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1990), 59.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 62; Aron Crowell, Rosita Worl, Paul C. Ongtooguk, and Dawn Biddison (eds), *Living Our Cultures, Sharing Our Heritage: The First Peoples of Alaska* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2010), 115.

representation, both equally temporal (Fig. 2). However one elder, Annie Cungauyar Blue from Togiak, notes that she used her story knife to draw the parts of a parka to learn sewing.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the varied content of yaaruin-stories, the relationship between the knife itself and the act of storytelling opens up to further ambiguity. Though knives such as this were used specifically for this purpose, storyknifing as a practice is not contingent upon the decorated object itself. Several accounts note that in more recent times young girls have used objects like butter knives to tell stories in the same way.<sup>5</sup>

Across these practices, storyknifing proposes a necessarily fluid and ephemeral narrative that moves between object and representation, oral narrative, memory and embodied practice, a narrative which continues to open new connections between its user and other objects or stories – and in this way storyknifing can perhaps pose a model for a more nuanced, reflexive art history as well.

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Figure 1: George A. Morlander, “Hooper Bay story knife,” 1949-50, University of Alaska Fairbanks, George A. Morlander Collection, UAF-1997-108-434.

<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cdmg11/id/12242/rec/1>

Figure 2: Hans Himmelheber, “A girl uses a story knife for drawing pictures in the ground to illustrate a story, Bethel,” 1936, Eberhard Fischer and Anchorage Museum, HH28.

[http://alaska.si.edu/media.asp?id=345&object\\_id=551](http://alaska.si.edu/media.asp?id=345&object_id=551)

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<sup>4</sup> Marie Meade and Ann Fienup-Riordan (eds), *Ciuliamta Akluit, Things of Our Ancestors: Yup’ik Elders Explore the Jacobsen Collection at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press in Association with Calista Elders Council, Bethel, AK, 2005), 319.

<sup>5</sup> Fienup-Riordan, 236n14; Meade and Fienup-Riordan, 319.