

# CONCEPTS

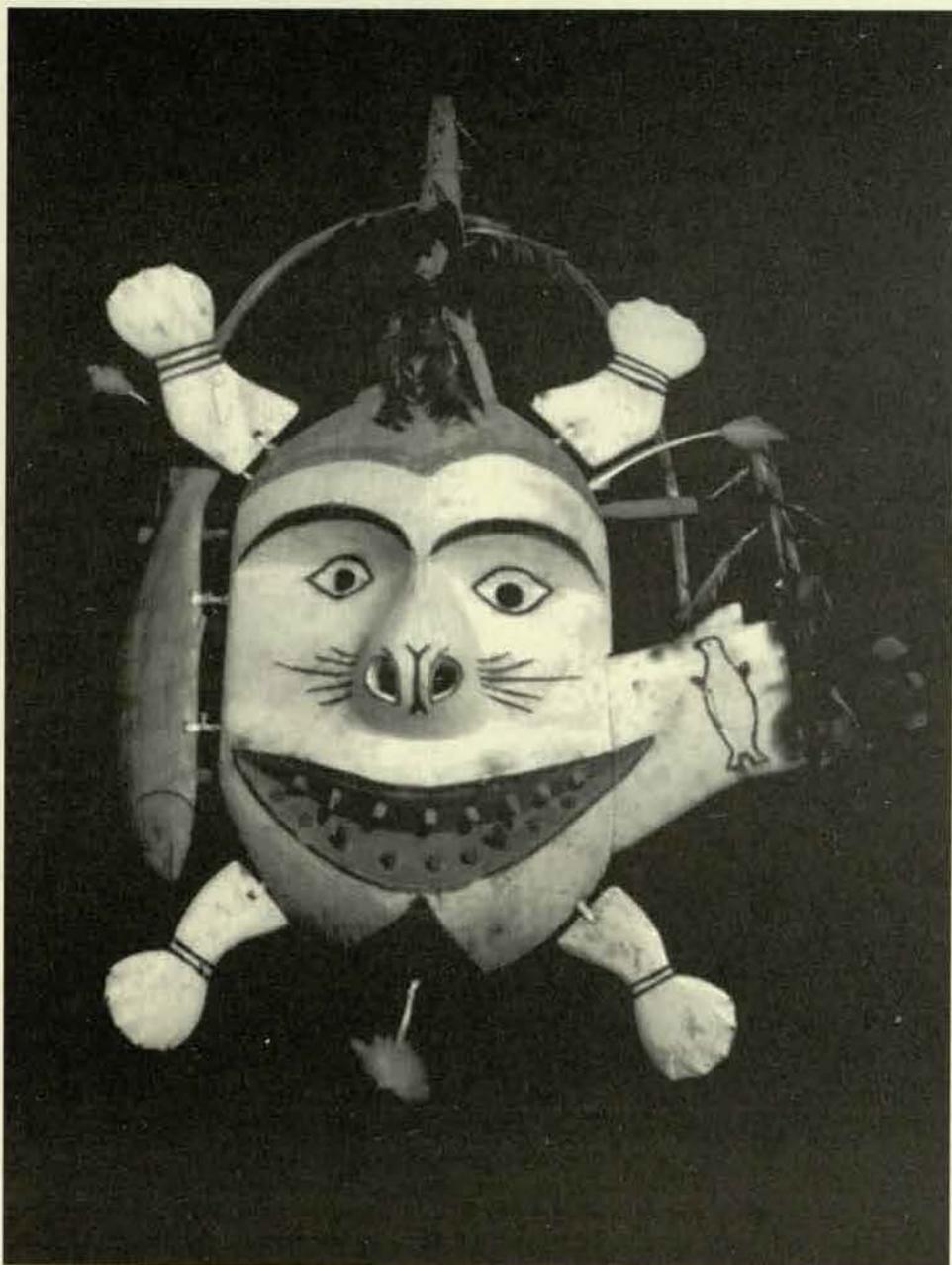
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## THE MILOTTE MASK COLLECTION

Lynn Ager Wallen, Ph.D.

**T**he Central Yup'ik Eskimos of Southwestern Alaska created masks of astonishing variety. Masks ranged in size from those that barely covered the face to those too large to wear, so the dancer stood behind them as they hung from supports overhead. The subjects portrayed were also varied and included humans, animals and a pantheon of spirits in styles ranging from very realistic to highly abstract. Some masks were secular and comic, but most were made for dances that were an integral part of religious ceremonies. Those masks were usually the visual representation of a shaman's supernatural experience. During trances, the shaman



Spirit mask carved by George Bunyan. II-A-5395

saw beings from the spirit world; it was their faces which were portrayed in the masks. The shaman either carved the masks himself or directed their carving. The spiritual qualities of Yup'ik masks are unmistakable, and their impact is still felt today, even by people who do not understand their meaning, and even in a museum showcase, far removed from the beat of drums and movement of dancers that once brought the masks to life.

The Milotte Collection of twenty-five masks from Hooper Bay is among the most interesting of the Alaska State Museum's collections. When they went to Hooper Bay in March of 1946, filmmakers Elma and Alfred Milotte were under contract with the Walt Disney Studios to make a documentary about Eskimo life. What they did not know until they arrived was that their visit would stimulate a remarkable creative effort on the part of the residents of Hooper Bay.

For over two decades, under the influence of the missionaries, mask making had been discontinued, but it had not been forgotten. Anticipating the Milotte visit, the villagers decided to hold a traditional masked dance. Within a period of six weeks, over 25 masks were carved under the direction of a former shaman, then in his seventies. The dance was held in April, and the Milottes were so enchanted that they asked to have it repeated for the film. A brief segment appears in their movie *The Alaska Eskimo*, (however the Disney Studios inserted their own Hollywood-style tom-tom soundtrack in place of the Eskimo drum rhythms, thus missing the beat literally and figuratively). A few days after the dance, the Milottes saw one of the masks discarded on an



Photo by Elma and Alfred Milotte

Dancers using masks during filming of *The Alaskan Eskimo*

old burn pile. They asked the local store-keeper to assist them in buying it along with other masks made for the dance, and he was able to collect twenty-five of them for the Milottes to purchase. They were shipped home and stored for twenty-seven years, until they were exhibited at the Frye Museum in Seattle. In 1979 they were purchased by the Alaska State Museum.

Our understanding of individual Yup'ik masks is limited. Few well documented collections exist, and even these lack detailed information

about the occasion for which a mask was made or the meaning of its symbolism. Our most solid information is limited to the location and date the mask was collected. From this information, however, it is possible, with large enough collections, to do an analysis of the stylistic and structural features of Yup'ik masks to learn more about the parameters of Yup'ik mask making and geographic variation in style. Using this kind of approach, the Milotte masks were examined and compared to masks from other Yup'ik areas and to nineteenth

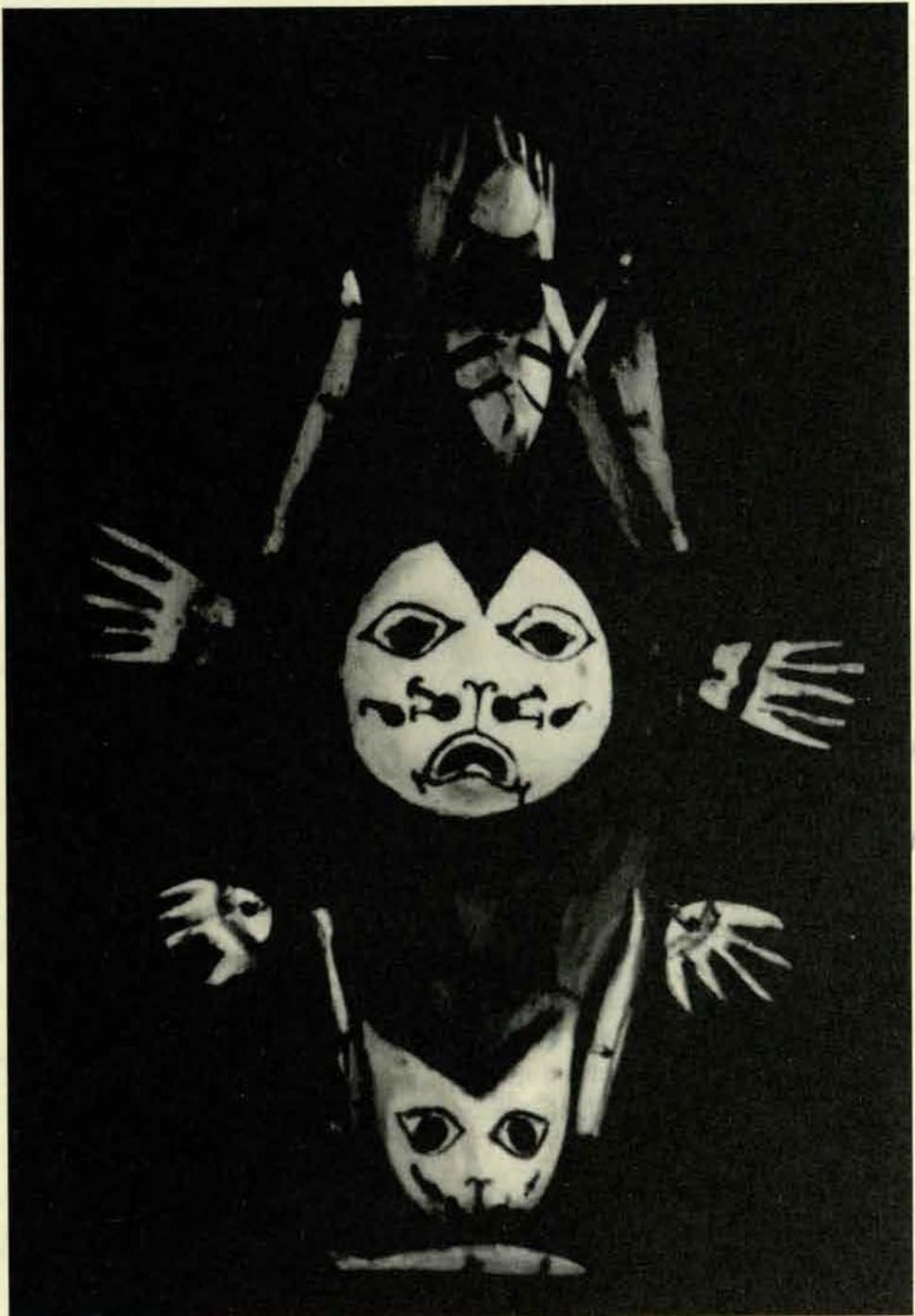
century masks from the Hooper Bay area. (It is important to note that this is not an attempt at symbolic analysis and therefore will not lead to an understanding of the meaning of Yup'ik masks; it can assist us with provenience, however.) All Yup'ik masks have both sculptural and painted components. The major distinguishing features of Yup'ik masks are listed below, and the Milotte masks from Hooper Bay are discussed in those terms.

#### SCULPTURAL COMPONENTS

**1. Encircling hoops** of driftwood are round or oval. They either loop completely around the central mask figure or surround only the top half and join the sides of the body. Twenty of the twenty-four masks in the Milotte Collection have full or partial hoops (the twenty-fifth mask is a small maskette and was not included in the analysis).

**2. Appendages** consist of a variety of objects attached to the mask. They can be carved wooden pieces or natural objects joined to the body of the mask, held in the mouth of the mask figure or, most often, inserted into the hoop. Natural objects commonly attached to masks are pieces of fur, hair, feathers and strips of sea mammal intestine. Carved pieces consist of small birds, seals, fish, kayaks (sometimes with small human figures in them), tails, feet, flippers, paws, square or rectangular plaques with painted figures on them, and hands. Thumbless hands are a characteristic motif of Yup'ik Eskimo masks, as are hands with a hole in the palm.

**3. Backboards** are an integral part of some masks and form a frame for human and humanlike faces.



Seal mask carved by Andy Gump II-A-5406

Backboard masks constitute a distinctive mask category of the Yukon-Kuskokwim region of south-western Alaska. None of the Milotte masks have a backboard.

**4. Yua** (*inua* in the Inupiaq language of the Northern Eskimo) is a possessive form of the word meaning "person". In a discussion of masks, it refers to either the spirit

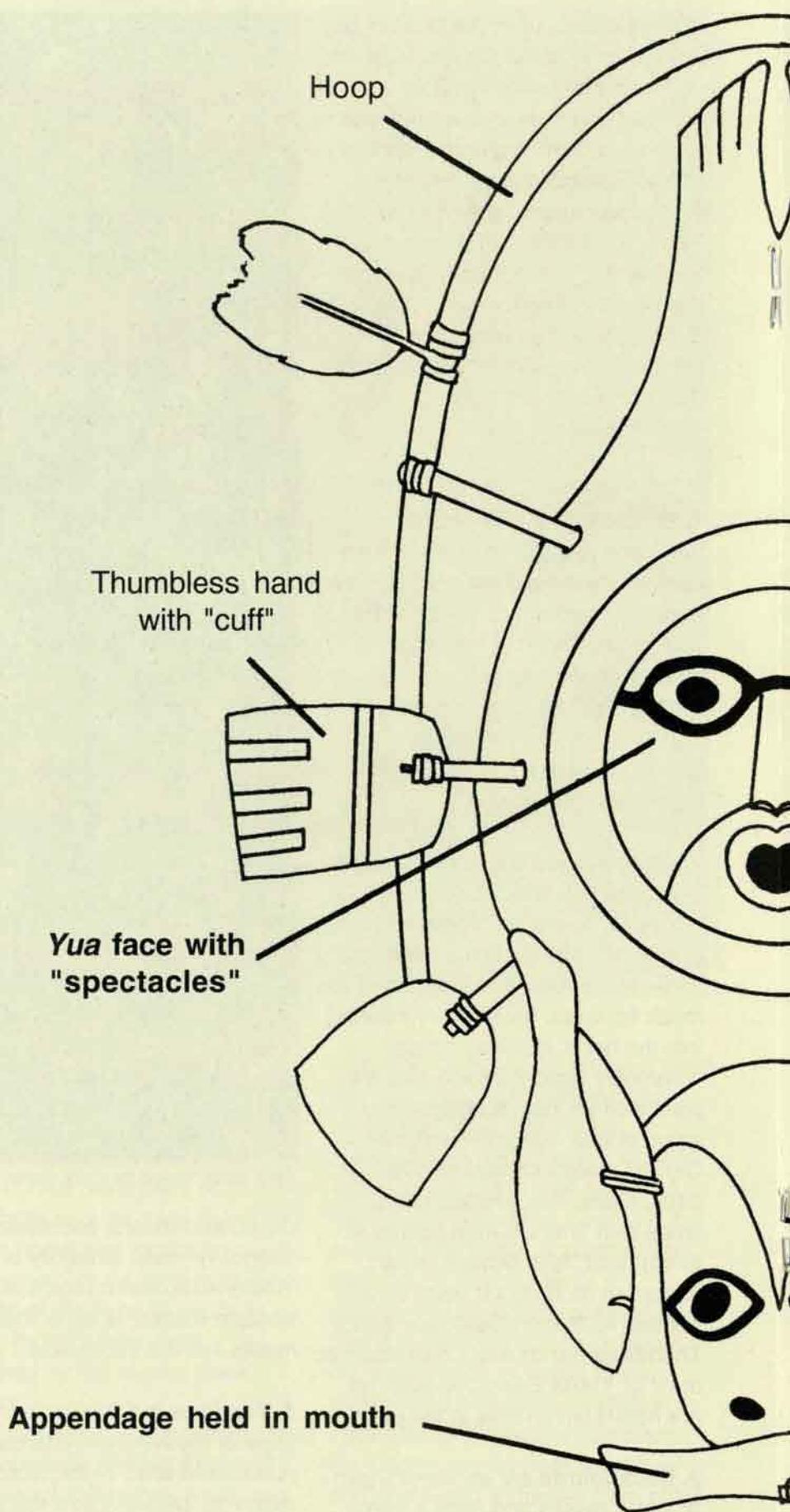
of the mask itself or to the spirit or soul of the subject being depicted in the mask ("the person of," or "personage," or "the personification of"). The *yua* of an animal or bird could make itself seen on occasion by peering out from the body of the creature to whom it belonged. It was usually depicted in art as a small human face on the back, chest or face of an animal. Portrayal of the

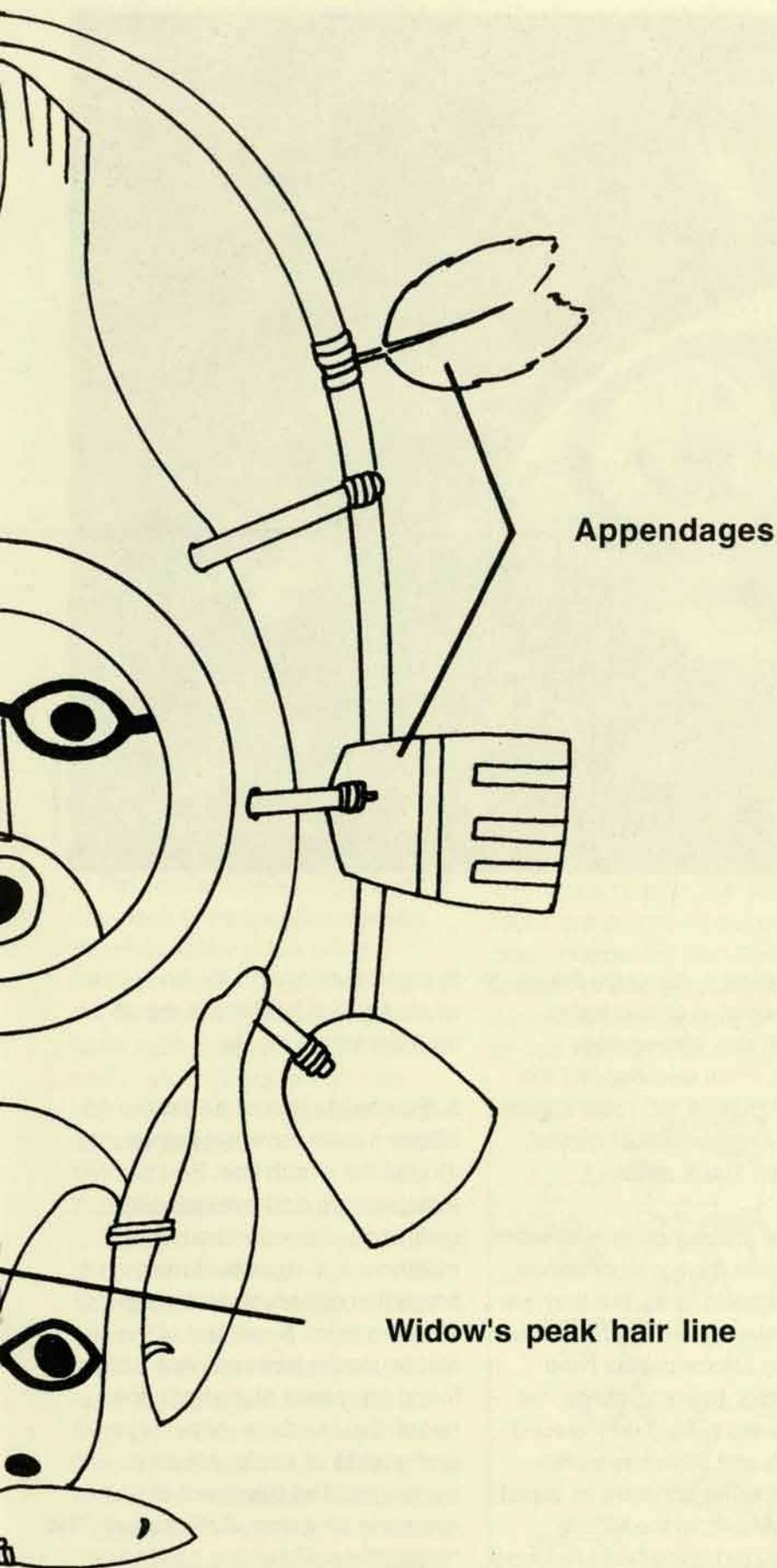
*yua* often gave Yup'ik masks a surrealistic quality, as for example when a tiny human face appeared in place of an eye on an animal or spirit mask. A small face on the body or face of a mask is a characteristic motif of Yup'ik masks and is one of the few sculptural components that also has a particular meaning known to us.

**5. Distortion & asymmetry** are stylistic features of many Yup'ik masks. Distortion usually takes the form of exaggerated facial features—an extremely large mouth, for example, or huge teeth. Bilateral asymmetry is an imbalance found in some masks, as when the left and right sides of a mask are not alike. In some cases this is the result of an appendage on one side that does not have a counterpart on the other side of the mask; in other cases, the face (body) of the mask may be split in half vertically, with each side having an entirely different character. Minimal distortion is found in one of the Milotte masks, and only slight asymmetry is present in five other masks, mostly in the arrangement of appendages. The rest of the masks are symmetrical.

**6. Transformation masks** with movable parts that change the appearance of the mask are made among Yup'ik Eskimo. The Milotte Collection contains only one mask with this feature, and it is carried out rather crudely. Instead of doors that open to reveal a face within, a carved piece of wood in the shape of a clam shell can be manually lifted to uncover the *yua* face beneath.

**7. Facial features** can be motifs as well. Crescent-shaped eyes, listed in Fitzhugh and Kaplan's *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo* as





Appendages

Widow's peak hair line

a mask motif, are absent in the Milotte collection. Milotte mask eyes are mostly circular cut outs, possibly the product of modern drills, although many are outlined in paint as almond shapes. Peg teeth, common features of Yup'ik masks from the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, occur in eight of the Milotte masks. The upturned and downturned mouths, interpreted by some scholars as an indication of gender, (the upturned mouth on males and the downturned mouth on females), are both present. Eleven of the Milotte masks have upturned mouths, while six have downturned mouths, and five of the twenty-four masks have both—one on each of two *yua* faces.

**8. Complexity** is common in Yup'ik masks. While some simple animal or human face masks were produced, the masks with many parts are more common. The inclusion of many of the components such as appendages, hoops and multiple faces is typical of Yup'ik masks. The Milotte Collection has both simple countenance masks and complex masks, but the overwhelming majority are complex.

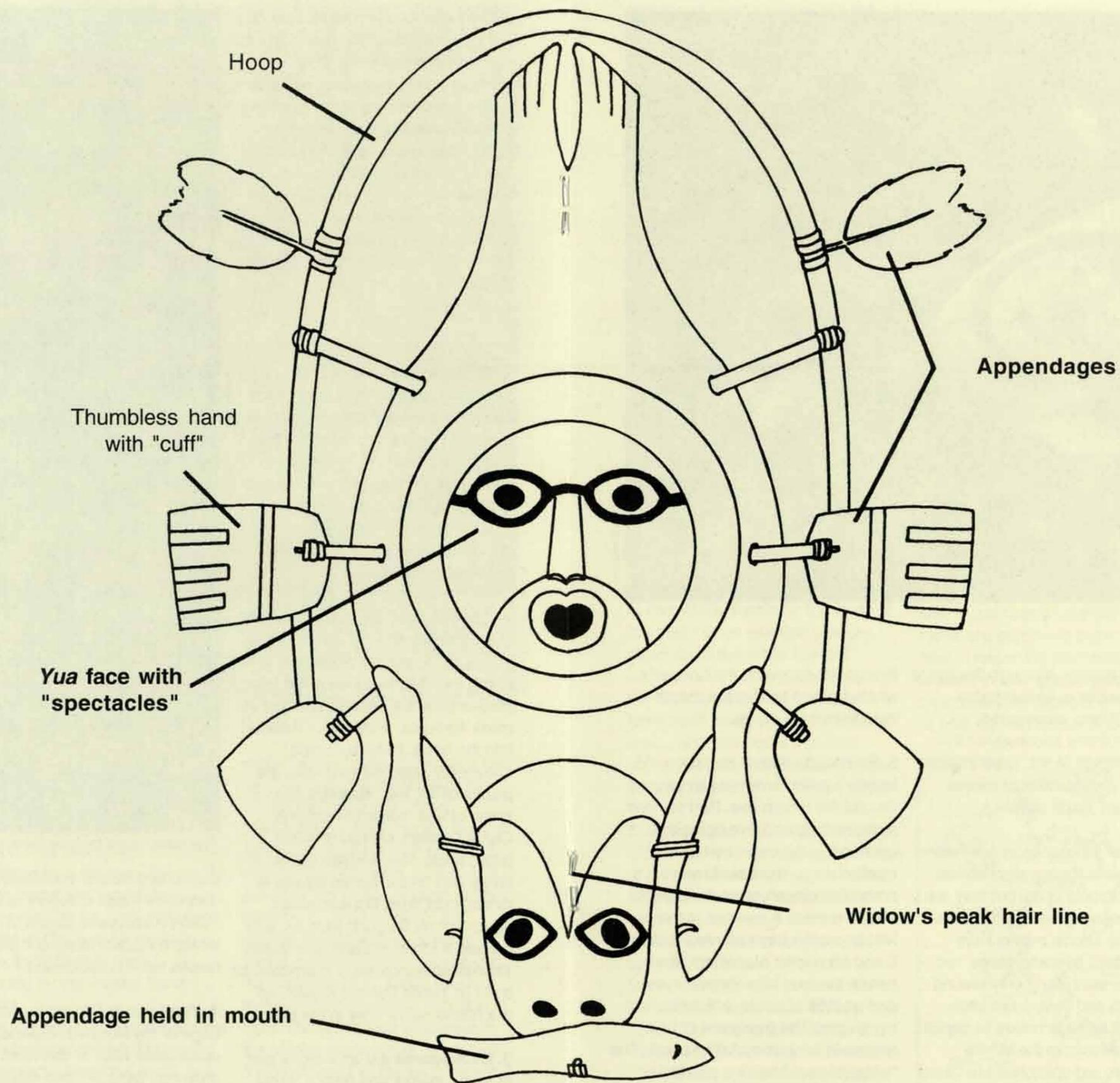
**9. Robustness** is a characteristic that is most difficult to pin down, not only because it is a "feeling" rather than an identifiable motif, but also because it is a quality that differs from region to region. That is a quality I would define as "thickness" or "heaviness" or "robustness." In some parts of southwestern Alaska, masks have a lightness or delicacy in appearance. The wood seems fragile and thin, the features graceful and refined. The masks of Nunivak Island come to mind most readily. At the other end of the continuum are the masks from the Hooper Bay area. These have a solid, massive

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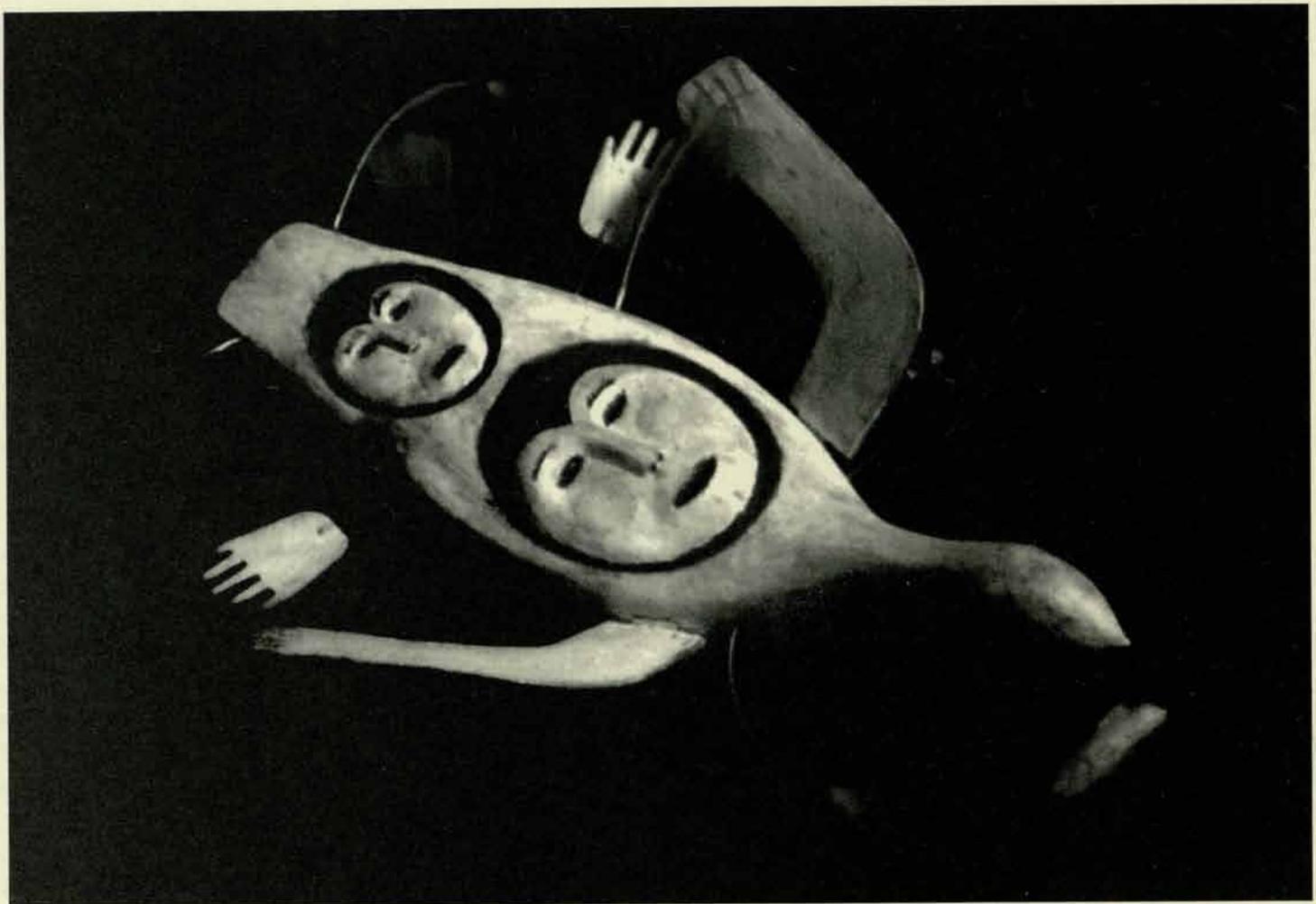


Photo by David Galante

Gull mask carved by Sam Hunter. II-A-5402

appearance regardless of the size of the individual mask. The masks seem thicker, heavier, and the carving less precise. The Milotte masks definitely have this robust quality.

#### PAINTED COMPONENTS

**1. Goggles or spectacles.** Black lines around eyes that resemble eyeglasses are a common painted motif in Yup'ik masks; eight of the twenty-four Milotte masks have them. In addition, many eyes themselves are outlined in black without the connecting link between them. (The spectacled eider, native to southwestern Alaska, has black circles around its eyes that are remarkably similar in appearance to

those on masks. Although the range of this species is limited today, possibly it was widespread in ancient times and inspired this particular motif in art. (See Wallen 1990 for a discussion of natural imagery in Yup'ik masks.)

**2. Dots or splotches** in a different color of paint have a significance as yet unknown to us, but they are found frequently on Yup'ik masks. Five of the Milotte masks have painted dots. In some cases, red splotches are placed only around the mouth and have been interpreted by some scholars to depict a bloody mouth; in the Milotte Collection, red splotches are found on only one mask, and in that case

the splotches are on the body of a whale figurine held in the mouth of the killer whale mask.

**3. Painted features on faces.** All Milotte masks have red paint in or around the mouth line. Red painted eyes, nostrils and eye holes are common in the collection. Black mustaches to represent males are present in eleven of the twenty-four Milotte masks. A number of the Milotte masks have painted features found on masks elsewhere: the beard, the teardrop-shaped eyes and nostrils of seals, whiskers, and eyelashes. The treatment of hair seems to be somewhat unusual. The "widow's peak" hairline painted on seven of the Milotte masks does not

appear on masks pictured in the major published references on Yup'ik masks. A similar shape, however, can be found on masks where the hairline doubles as the definition of brow ridges. Another hairline that may be limited to masks of the Hooper Bay area is the triangle, found on four of the Milotte masks. Absent entirely from this collection is the single red eye motif.

**4. Lifelines and grooves**, painted on masks from other areas, are entirely absent from the Milotte masks of Hooper Bay.

**5. Cuffs and collars**, indicated as lines around wrists and neck, appear on figures in many Yup'ik masks. In the Milotte collection, thirteen masks have hand-like appendages with "cuffs," in some cases as double rather than single lines.

**6. Painted animals** on the body of the mask or on wooden plaques attached to the mask are not uncommon from this region. Within the Milotte Collection, five masks have such images: one fish, three seals, and one figure that may represent a mythical animal such as a *palrai yuk*.

**7. Color** used in the Milotte masks is a departure from the typical range of color in traditional Yup'ik masks. Colors traditionally were derived from minerals found in southwest Alaska and were limited to white, rust-red, black and blue-green or blue. Normally, only two or three of these colors were used on any one mask. The source of color for the Milotte mask, however, is broader. Some local pigments were used, but commercial paint, crayon and

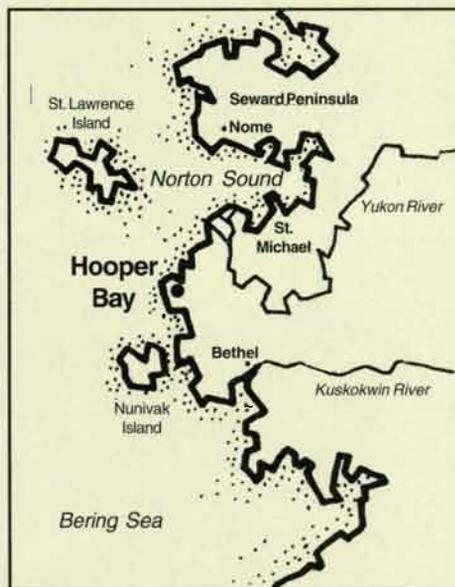
possibly even nail polish were also used. The traditional colors (white, blue-green, black and rust-red) are common in the Milotte masks, but innovation is apparent in the cherry red, purple, yellow and gray colors on some masks. As in traditional masks, some areas have been left unpainted. The use of light and dark in symbolic combination is found in only one mask from the Milotte Collection.

#### CONCLUSION

In studying the Milotte Collection of 1946 Hooper Bay masks in terms of the components listed above, and in comparing them with masks of the nineteenth and early twentieth century from the Yukon-Kuskokwim region, we find that the majority of the masks (75 percent, or 18 of 24) fall into a distinctive category within the range of Yup'ik mask types. This category is the mammal, bird or fish body with a *yua* face (in this area two *yua* faces are common) carved into its back. Hoops and appendages are present in this type; distortion and asymmetry are absent or minimal. In both subject matter and in style,

the Milotte masks appear to be continuations of traditional mask making in this area, although they are severely limited in their variety compared to the range of traditional masks. The consistency of much of this collection may be due to the fact that one man directed their making within a short time period. The innovations present in the Milotte masks are mainly the result of the availability of new materials: new colors of paint and imported feathers not native to the region.

Why were the Milotte masks limited in their type? Why were there not examples of other types of masks traditionally made in the Hooper Bay area, with their extreme distortion and asymmetry, their toothy grins, their pantheon of spirit beings portrayed, their fearsome countenances, their powerful abstraction? We do not know, but my guess is that the former shaman who directed the carving of this collection was playing it safe. For twenty years, the church missionaries had discouraged mask making because of its close association with ancient spiritual beliefs. In making masks for a film, the shaman and his carvers perhaps decided to select only those types portraying natural forms, identifiable and therefore non-threatening. They left some spiritual motifs, such as the *yua* faces, intact, but these are cheerful, happy countenances with none of the aura of mystery and power we find in earlier masks depicting *yua*. Even the type of mask traditionally carved to portray dangerous spirits with their toothy grins and fearsome appearances has been transformed. The only two of this type in the Milotte collection were carved by the former shaman himself, and he made them look like friendly seals (*see photo on page one*)



These masks do not represent all the carvers knew or remembered as they called up images and skills that had lain dormant for two decades. They represent what they and the former shaman selected to portray, what they chose to make visible from their collective memory.

Their similarities to and differences from Hooper Bay area masks of earlier times therefore are very likely deliberate and carefully thought out. Their stylistic connection to the past is clear; in their feeling of massiveness, in the thickness of the wood, in the

complexity of form, and in many of their components, they are still part of the Hooper Bay tradition.

**Lynn Ager Wallen** is the former Curator of Collections at the Alaska State Museum.

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## ADDITIONAL READING

Fitzhugh, William W. and Susan A Kaplan

1982 *Inua: The Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*, Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington.

Provides an excellent discussion of the concept of the *inua (yua)* or spiritual component of masks and other objects of Yup'ik material culture.

Morrow, Phyllis

1984 "It Is Time For Drumming: A Summary of Recent Research on Yup'ik Ceremonialism." In *The Central Yup'ik Eskimos. Etudes/Inuit/Studies* 8: 113-140.

Presents a thorough analysis of Yup'ik ceremonialism, which is the context of masked dances.

Nelson, Edward W.

1899 "The Eskimo About Bering Strait." In *18th Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Smithsonian Institution, 1983 Washington.

The premier ethnography of Yup'ik culture, with discussion of masks and their meaning.

Ray, Dorothy Jean

1967 *Eskimo Masks: Art and Ceremony*. University of Washington Press, Seattle.

The only book to date devoted exclusively to Yup'ik and Inupiaq masks. Includes descriptions of mask-making, the role of the shamans, and the ceremonial role of masks.

Wallen, Lynn Ager

1009 *The Face of Dance: Yup'ik Eskimo Masks from Alaska*. Glenbow Museum, Calgary.

To date the only book focusing on Yup'ik dance and the relationship of dance and masks within the Yup'ik ceremonial complex. Introduces the theory of natural imagery as the origin of many design features of in Yup'ik masks.

*The Concepts series publishes information on the preservation of Alaska's material heritage and recent research on the collections of the Alaska State Museum, Juneau, and Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka.*

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