



# NEWS

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:**

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## **Arctic Masks at SFO**

*Exhibition exploring carved masks of the Nunivak Island Eskimos on display at the San Francisco Airport Museums*

**SAN FRANCISCO** -- *Spirits into Seabirds: Arctic Masks*, an exhibition that explores past and present creativity among the Nunivak Island Eskimos of southwestern Alaska, is currently on display at the San Francisco Airport Museums.

The exhibition presents approximately 60 objects from the collections of the University of Alaska Museum, Fairbanks, and the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, University of Washington, Seattle, to tell the story of how and why these unique bird masks were developed on Nunivak Island, an island located forty miles off the Bering Sea Coast in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta.

Since their earliest contact with nonnative outsiders in the late nineteenth century, the Nunivak Islanders, or Nuniwarmiut, have been celebrated for their imaginative masks, superlative ivory carvings, and finely crafted baskets. Traditional Nunivak Island masks depicted humans and animals, separately or in combination. In 1920, Paul Ivanoff, an Inupiaq-speaking Eskimo trader from farther north, introduced Christian Coventry Christianity to the island. This newly adopted religion discouraged the carving of the human image. This led Peter Smith, the first Nunivak Islander trained as a Covenant minister, to develop a new mask type based on bird imagery. Soon other carvers followed suit. In reality, the new bird masks were more like wall sculptures, but, since masks were popular with nonnative buyers, the Nuniwarmiut continued to refer to them as masks. This represented a compromise between the Nunivak Islanders' need to create objects for sale and their wish to honor the conventions of their adopted religion.

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The exhibition is located in Gallery G-2, International North Cases, on Level 3 of the International Terminal at SFO. The exhibition is free of charge and accessible to the public twenty-four hours a day.

The San Francisco Airport Museums program was established by the Airport Commission in 1980 for the purposes of humanizing the Airport environment, providing visibility for the unique cultural life of San Francisco, and providing educational services for the traveling public. Today, the San Francisco Airport Museums features twenty-one galleries throughout the Airport terminals displaying a rotating schedule of art, history, science, and cultural exhibitions. A permanent collection dedicated to the history of commercial aviation is located in the San Francisco Airport Commission Aviation Library and Louis A. Turpen Aviation Museum.

For more information about the San Francisco Airport Museums, please contact Jane Sullivan at (650) 821-5123.

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