

# Eskimo

## Arctic Peoples of the Ice and Snow

This thematic exhibit explores the indigenous human culture of the Arctic polar region, the Eskimo, using a variety of postal materials.

The frozen northern climes of earth are both remote and forbidding when considering human habitation to say nothing of survival. In this environment, there's very little room for error as the ambient temperatures and geologic conditions are ruthless. Amid such harsh extremes, Eskimo cultures have developed, survived, endured and flourished for over five thousand years.

Their philosophy and way of life are grounded in the realities of their surroundings. Within the mysteries of their beliefs, they celebrate the triumph of the human spirit in the land of their forefathers.

Shown at right are the cultures and areas, recognized by language families, comprising the Arctic Eskimo: *Yupik* (Siberia, Russia); *Yupik* and *Inupiat* (Alaska, U.S.); *Inuit* sub-groups - *Inuvialuit*, *Nunavut*, *Nunavit* and *Nunatsiavut* (Canada) and *Kalaallit* (Greenland).

The *Aleut* are cousins of the Eskimo and not included in this study.



Arctic geography



Arctic landscape

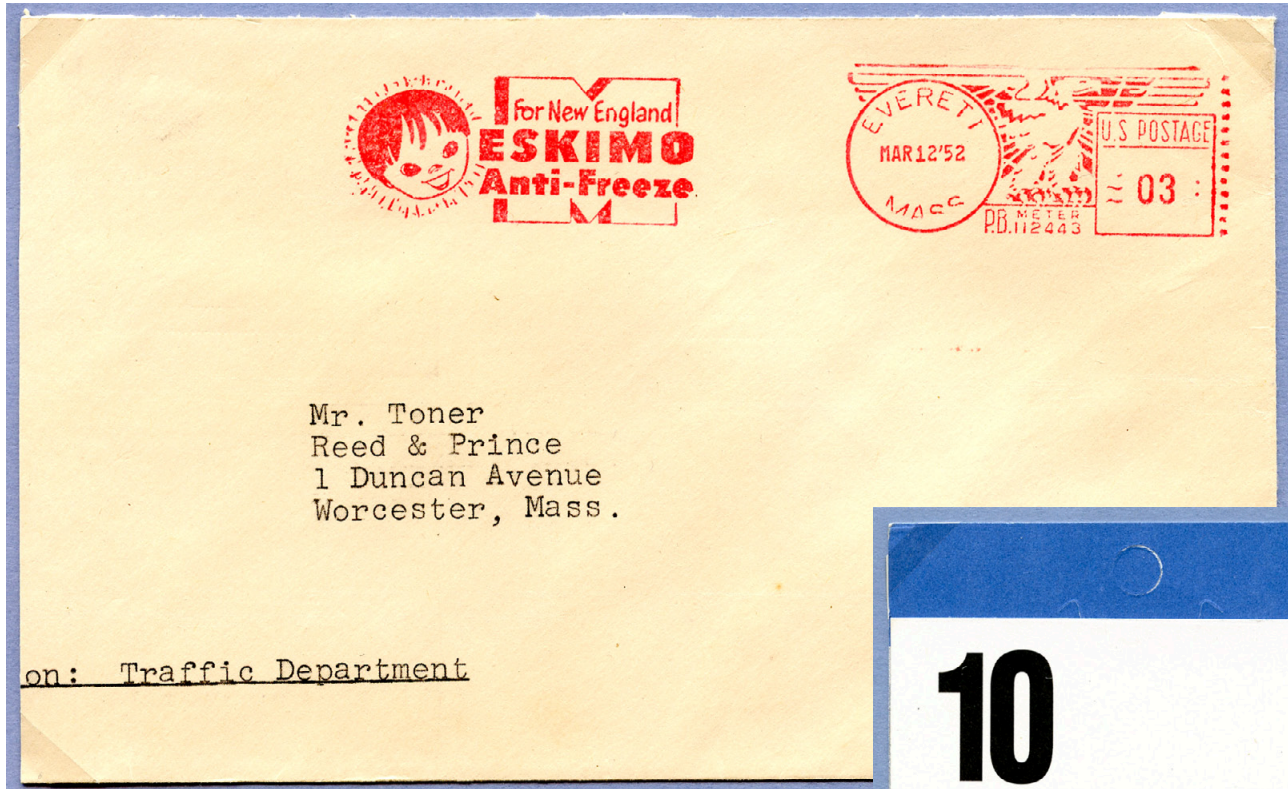
## Exhibit Plan and Chapter Descriptions

- The Eskimo and their Origins
- World of the Eskimo, a Hidden Culture
- Transportation by Foot, Overland Sleds and Seafaring Boats
- Hunting and Fishing for Food and Raw Materials
- Implements, Tools, Clothing and Shelter for Survival
- A Culture of Myth, the Spirit World, Art, Music and Dance
- Explorers, Museums and Research
- Modern Eskimo Life

**NOTE:**  
Items presenting greater difficulty of acquisition are double matted with dark blue

# The Eskimo

The word 'Eskimo' is thought to originate from one of two sources. The first is a Montagnais word 'assime-w' meaning "she laces a snowshoe". It's also suggested the original Algonquian Cree Indian word 'askamiciw', meaning "he eats it raw", became corrupted.



3¢ domestic first class rate, Pitney Bowes postage meter no. 112443

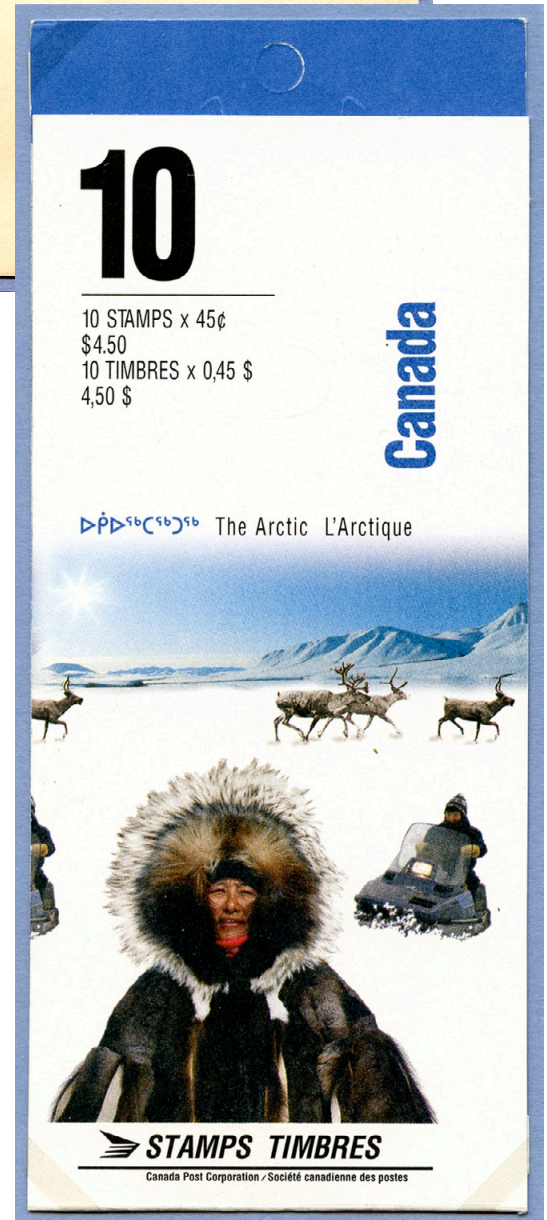
The Eskimo descends from a mongoloid lineage and is usually short, stocky with a barrel type chest. Their physical form allows them to retain body heat much better than other humans.



Families rely on each other in a world of ice.



Eskimo family



First class postage stamp booklet cover

# Origins



Migrating prehistoric hunter

Siberian (mongoloid) hunters, migrated to North America in waves beginning nearly 20,000 years ago. They crossed the Bering Sea over an ancient land bridge now submerged.



Land bridge outlined



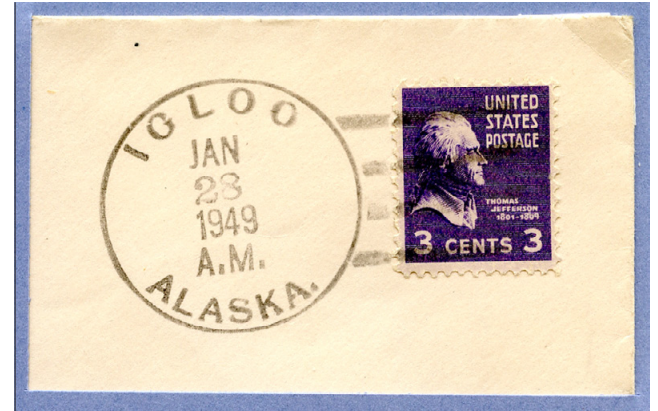
Siberian hunters

Research indicates the last wave of Siberian migrants to Alaska, approximately 10 to 12 thousand years ago, were the most likely ancestors of the modern Eskimos.



Mummified child

Campsites over four thousand years old found in Alaska contain the earliest Eskimo remains. Mummified remains are also found in Greenland.



Hand cancel device



Dorset hunters

The first Pan-Arctic Eskimo culture, the Dorset, appeared over 3 thousand years ago and spread eastward from Alaska with succeeding generations. Many hunting methods, implements, cultural mores and beliefs of modern Eskimos were invented by or handed down from these early Dorset peoples.



Stone Ulo (woman's knife)



Dorset long house (photograph by CambridgeWayWeather)



Thule stone site (photograph by Ansgar Walk)



Thule landscape

Approximately 1000 A.D., another group of hunters, the Thule, moved eastward from Alaska replacing or absorbing the Dorset. They are the ancestors of the Inuit. Although from Alaska, Thule were named for the culture's discovery site in Greenland.

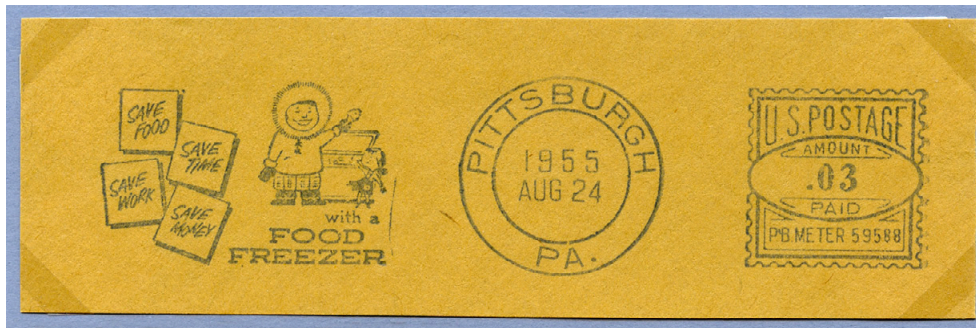


Thule stone tent ring

# World of the Eskimo



Treeless, white and barren, with eight months of howling winds, snowstorms and treacherous ice make the arctic a forlorn landscape. Little sustenance is to be eked from the land and inhabitants rely on sea life in coastal waters for food nearly all year.



3¢ domestic first class rate, Pitney Bowes postage meter no. 59588 with illustrated advertising slug

Summer brings welcome respite from winter as vegetation in southerly areas provides variety of diet. It's a time to prepare for another winter.



Definitive issue



Tundra and aurora



Child with Aurora Borealis



Inuksuk (stone marker)

The Aurora Borealis is a phenomenon the Eskimo enjoy. Energized particles react in the atmosphere to produce these lighting effects.



Hunter killed by bear

Inuksuk are man made stone piles used, as well as maps carved from wood or ivory, as location identifiers.



Inuksuk (stone marker)



Carved wooden map

The environment is dangerous enough, but the polar bear is a fierce predator and may kill an unwary hunter.

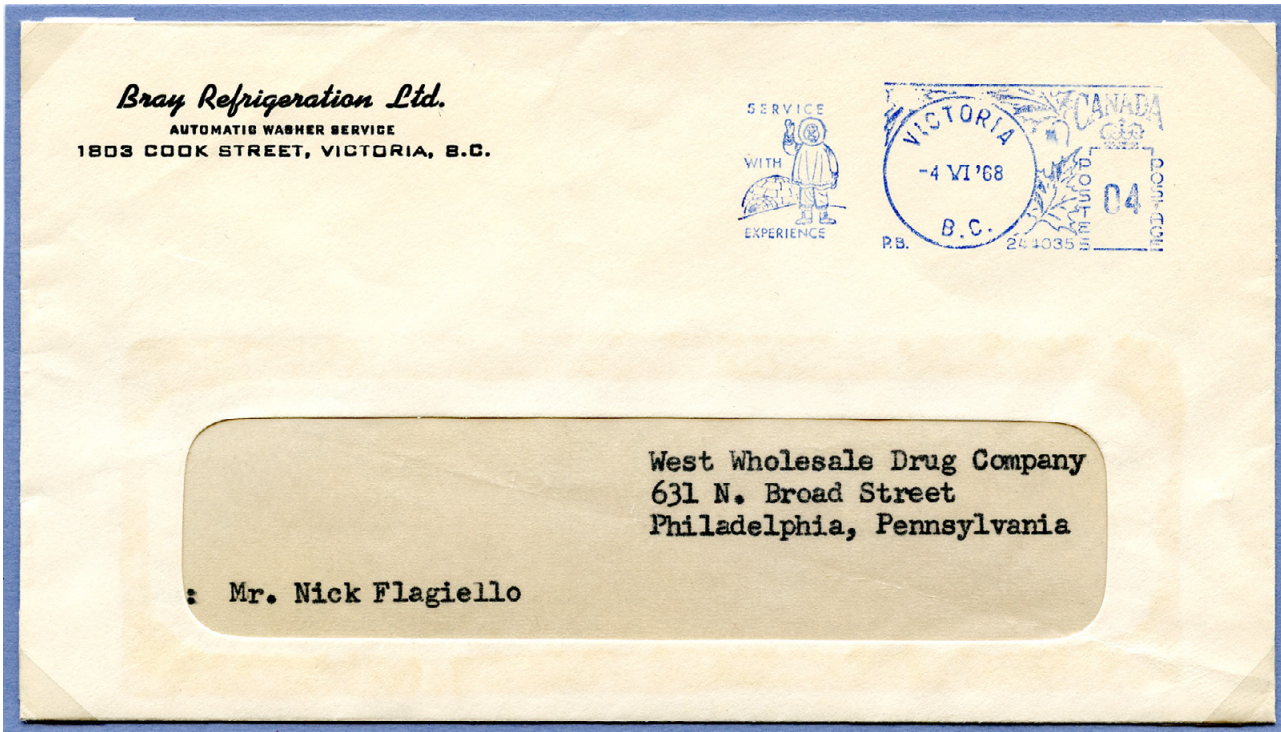
# A Hidden Culture



Due to the Arctic's enormity and remoteness, Eskimos were the first and last North American indigenous culture to contact Europeans. Eskimos first encountered the Vikings in Newfoundland during the late 900s, long before Columbus and discovery of other cultures in North America. Not until the 1800s was contact made again.



Vikings landed in Greenland and called the natives 'Skrællings'



4¢ first class rate, Victoria, B.C., Canada to Philadelphia, PA., 4 June 1968, Pitney Bowes postage meter no. 241035

Eskimo populations are small and the greatest authority typically falls to the ablest hunter.



Cooperation of community members works to their advantage and to a large extent, a man's reputation is dependant on his generosity. Get-togethers are frequent for stories and compliments on the food served by the host.



*Semi-postal*



*Semi-postal*



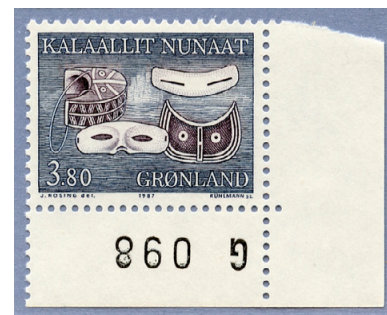
Eskimos are a very physical people and that trait is reflected in the sports and games they participate in. Games such as arm pulling, water float riding and footraces are all very popular.

# Transportation



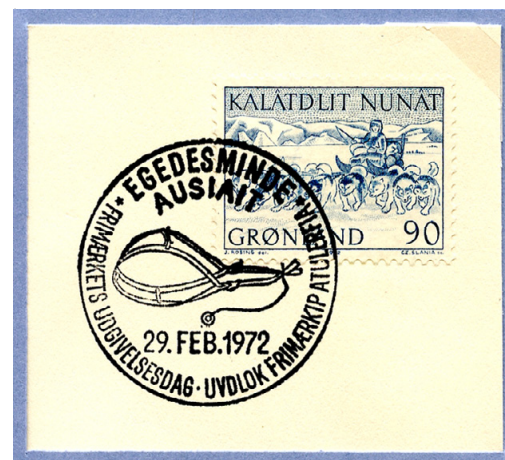
Female nomad

Eskimos wandered in spring and summer seeking areas with abundant fish and game. A backpack consisting of a caribou hide tent with poles, and extra mukluks suspended on pole ends was common. To protect against snowblindness, a pair of goggles with narrow eyeslits was a necessity.



Large, hairy paws prevent sinking into snow.

Overland transport utilized dog-pulled sleds made of driftwood, bone and hide.



Dogsled harness made of seal skin and bone

Two main watercraft were used by the Eskimo, the kayak and the umiak. The kayak carried a single person and was fast, light and silent. The umiak was a large open boat used as a transport for larger numbers of people, typically families or hunting parties, or to take a season's worth of hides to the local trading post.



There are more than ten types of kayak.



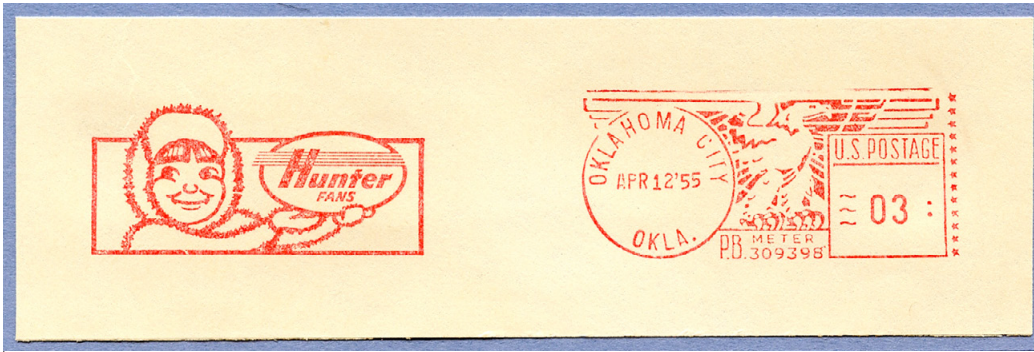
Perforation shifted down 6.5 mm (Only recorded example)



Umiaks are called women's boats.



# Hunting and Fishing



3¢ domestic first class rate  
with illustrated advertising slug



Caribou skin

Hunting is the principle activity and generations of nomadic life give the Eskimo a deep respect for prey. Caribou are stalked from blinds or while the animals swim. Polar bear are a great food source, but very dangerous.



Hunters lurked near breathing holes in the ice, harpooning a seal when it came up for air. Lines tied to detachable harpoon heads kept the seal from escaping. Heavier spears were used to hunt walrus on land or from a kayak. Whales are hunted with a harpoon from an open boat.



Whale hunters in umiak



Local post issue



Walrus are often hunted from silent kayaks



Drums are made from walrus stomachs



Tri-pronged spears are ideal for fishing in pool traps in spring or summer, smoking the fish afterwards.



Tri-pronged spear



Fish pool trap



Ice fishing



Smoked fish

# Implements and Tools



Coil



Utilitarian objects such as ladles, lamps, combs, buckets and containers were carved from various materials. Oil lamps provided light and melted snow for drinking water.



Choppers, harpoon points and knives were made from flint or slate, ivory and antler using animal sinew to bind points to bone shafts or handles. Trade goods usually had metal blades.



KALAALLIT NUNAAAT



Fedstensfigur  
Foto: Nationalmuseet ©



*G. Madsen Tøllbo*

Commemorative First Day Cancel of slate blade attached with bone handle, signed by cachet designer



# Clothing

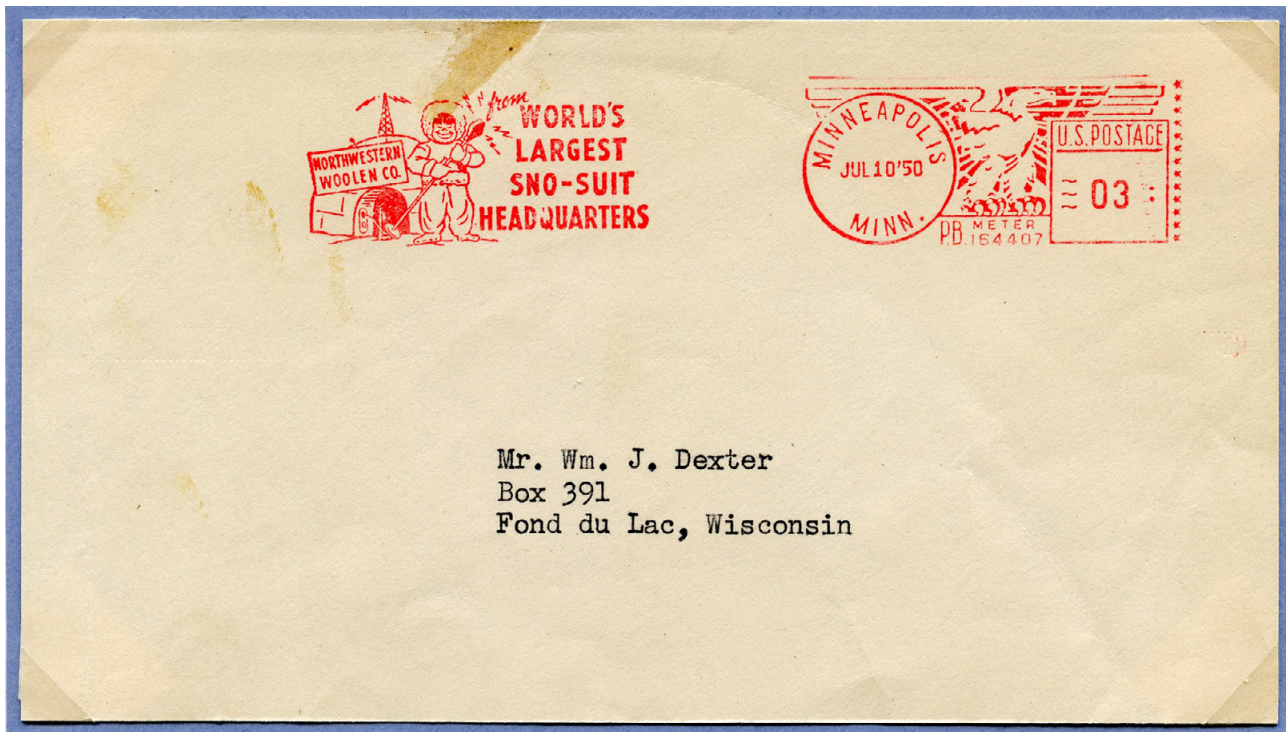


Dickey and mukluks (boots)

Clothing is made from tanned hides sewn with bone or ivory needles and thread of twisted beluga or caribou sinew. Two sets were worn, an inner with the fur turned inward and an outer parka with the fur turned outwards. The hood had ruffs of wolf fur to protect the face.



Mukluks (boots) and hat

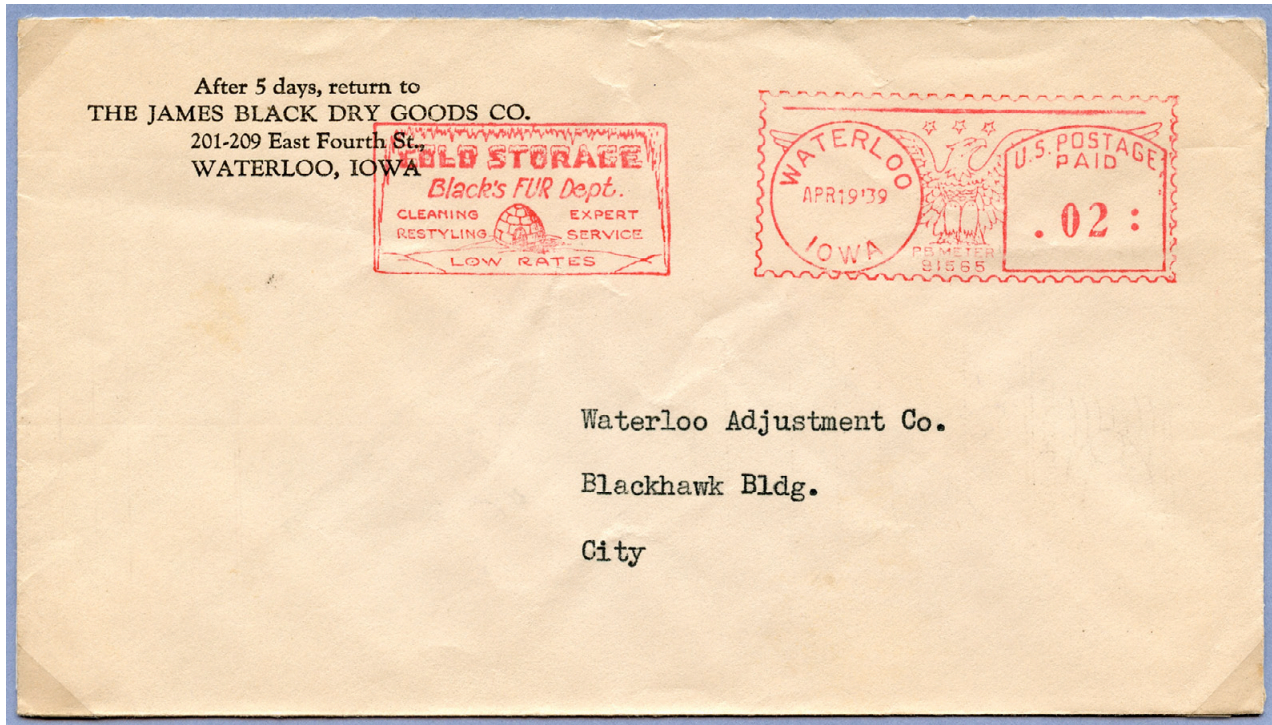


3¢ domestic first class rate, Pitney Bowes postage meter no. 164407 with illustrated advertising slug of Northwestern Woolen Co.



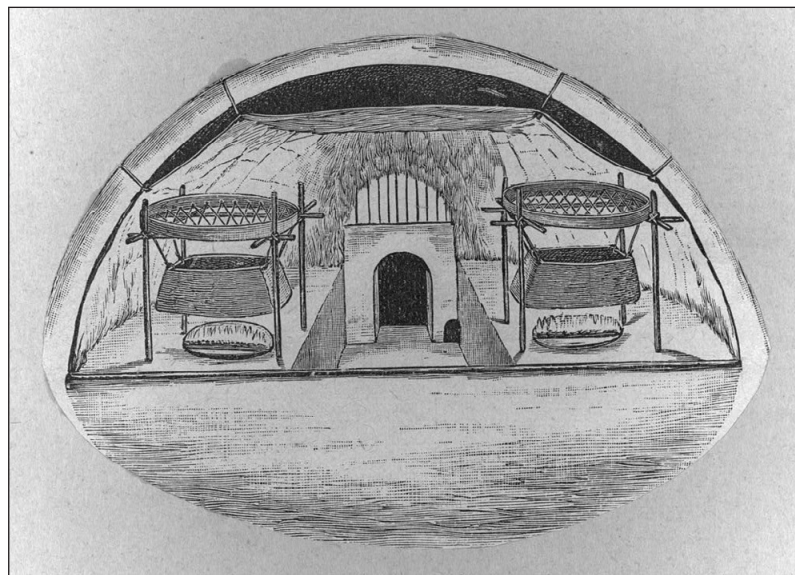
Depending on local custom, a father might dress his daughter as a lowly pauper regardless of his wealth. This is meant to not spoil her so that she is impressed by her future husband's riches.

# Shelters



2¢ local rate within city of Waterloo, Iowa, Pitney Bowes meter no. 91565 with illustrated advertising slug (standing eagle design)

Winter igloos, mainly in Canada, are built from cut snow blocks forming a dome. A clear ice block in the roof offers light with a low entryway. A caribou hide liner and furs help retain heat.



Summer camp scene



In temperate zones or summer, caribou tents or permanent structures of walrus hide covered whale bone were used.

# A Culture of Myth

## *Sedna, the Old Woman of the Sea*

A beautiful girl married a man who promised her everything but gave her nothing. Her father tried to rescue her but the husband became a gull and angrily pursued them generating a violent storm at sea. The father threw the daughter into the sea to save himself and chopped off her fingers when she returned to the boat. Her fingers became whales, seals and fish. Her body sank to the ocean floor and she became the mother of all sea creatures, and protected the gates to the world of the dead.



Sedna & sealife



Ugly boy & the fox

## *The Inuit Boy and the Fox*

A small boy was not very handsome and was relegated sitting away from the other people behind a ledge and was only lifted from there by his nostrils. One day he cried for a spirit to help him become strong and the fox spirit appeared, and knocked the midget bones from his body. As he exercised, he became strong and when the ice was frozen, he killed three bears. The villagers wished to be friends, but he killed those who were mean to him and enjoyed his strength thereafter.

## *Three Rabbits*

A grandmother instructed a young Inuit boy to hunt for rabbits. He was to return with three for their meal. When the boy returned, he had four rabbits, not three. His grandmother then lectured him on the practice of nature providing for the people and that they should never take more than what they need.



Two of the 4 rabbits



Loon & Raven

## *Tale of the Great Northern Diver (Loon) and the Raven*

When birds were getting their colors and the pattern in their coats, the raven and the loon happened to meet, and they agreed to paint each other. The raven began, and painted the other black, with a nice white pattern showing between. The loon thought that very fine indeed, and began to paint the raven exactly the same. But the raven fell into a rage, declaring the pattern was ugly. The loon, offended, simply splashed the raven black all over. And now you know why the raven is black.

## *The Inuit Girl and the Eagle*

A girl playing with eagle bones decided she should marry an eagle. When an eagle took her for his wife, he put her in a nest far up a cliff. He fed her small birds and she collected the bones and sinews and made a rope out of them. A kayak came by and she asked to be saved. The kayak came close and the girl went down the rope to her parents. When the eagle returned, he looked for his bride. Her family asked him to spread his wings if he was her husband. When he did so, they shot him.



Girl & eagle



Polar bear & hunters

## *The Polar Bear Son*

A woman found a polar bear and having no children, adopted him as her son. As the bear grew stronger and larger, he brought the woman food and kept her company. When jealous men threatened the bear, she sent it away to save its life. The bear however continued to take care of her even afterwards.

# The Spirit World



The 'Angakok' (Inuit shaman) are the central figure in Eskimo spiritualism. Shaman mediate between the world of man and the realm of spirits and the 'spirit mask' is a key part of that task.



Masks are made from animal hide, bone, pigments and ivory.



They often have distorted human features for the spirit realm.



893 Holsteinsborg HBG		ADRESSEKO: adressekorte - nagsiússat agd		KALATDLIT NUNAT 9	
Toldpligtig i Danmark		10. DEK 1982		10.-11.-1982	
Afsenderens navn og adresse: nagsiússissup arka najugálo: Lundsgaard Box 1001 3911 Klbq. Grønland		Modtagerens navn og adresse: nagsitítup arka najugálo: Fam. Lundsgaard Strandtoften 7 5600 Faaborg Danmark		Husk POSTKVITTERING der bedes udfyldt forin- den afleveringen erkaimajuk nagsiússanut ugpernarsaut pörtugkap nagsiutíngínera- ne ínersugagssak	
Antal pakker: pörtugkat amerdláussiat 1		Vægt: okimáíssusia 0.4		Rekommanderet pakke Beløb i hele kroner 14.12.82-0700	
KGH 2136 100.000-7-76 BARFOD & ICP		Værdipakke		SVENDBO	

Package delivery card, Holsteinsborg, Greenland to Faaborg, Denmark, 11 November 1982



While wearing the 'spirit mask', the local shaman performs a sacred ceremony. Beating a drum while chanting induces a trance-like state and allows the shaman to communicate and interact in the supernatural realm, invoking good spirits on behalf of his people.



# Art, Music and Dance



Amber beads



Tuplac figure

Beads and carvings (face charms) were made from amber, ivory, bone, walrus tooth or driftwood. A tupilaq is a supernatural presence composed of animal parts which could dispatch an adversary.



Sculptures are made from serpentine (green stone) and steatite (soapstone) found in outcroppings below the ice. Art is shaped with flint knives, bone saws, and bow drills, polished with stone dust and soaked in seal oil. Paintings reflect daily events, myth and animals of the Eskimo's world.



Artist Pitseolak Ashoona  
(ca. 1904-1983)



Eskimo face with images from hunt



Drums play a major role, often the only musical instrument, in many activities or accompanying singers. Successful hunts result in ceremonial dances; the Polar Bear dance is the most glorious.



Walrus stomach drum



Drum dance



Polar bear dance pose

# Explorers and Museums



Local post issue



Explorer and ethnographer Knud Johan Victor Rasmussen (1879-1933) explored the Arctic and recorded insightful descriptions of cultures, life and thought of the region.



Jorgen Bronlund (1877-1907) was the first West Greenland Inuit to meet Thule Eskimos of north-western Greenland. He froze to death in a 1907 expedition to northeastern Greenland.

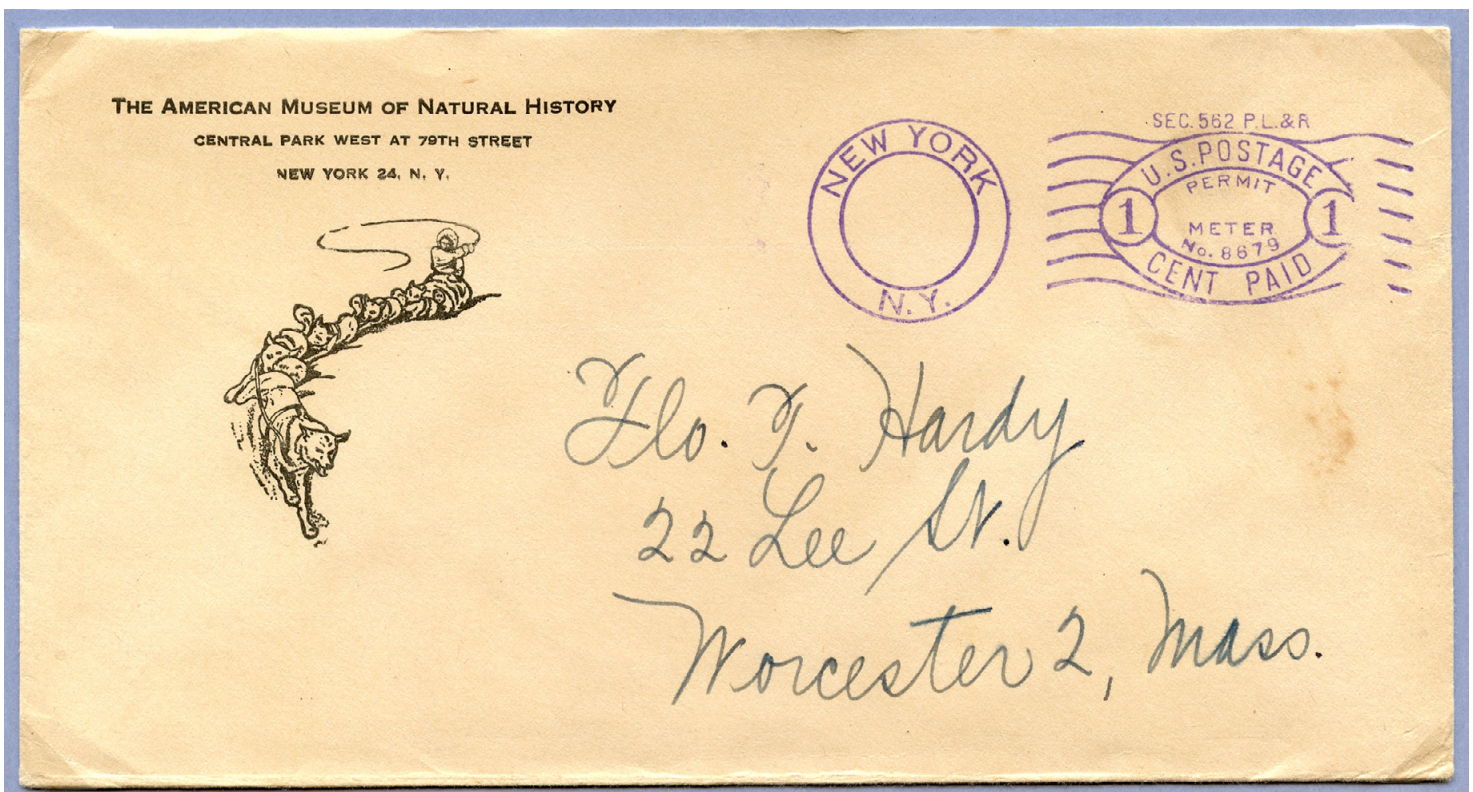


Arnarulunguaq (1896-1933) was an Eskimo woman and member of the Thule expedition.



Missing color

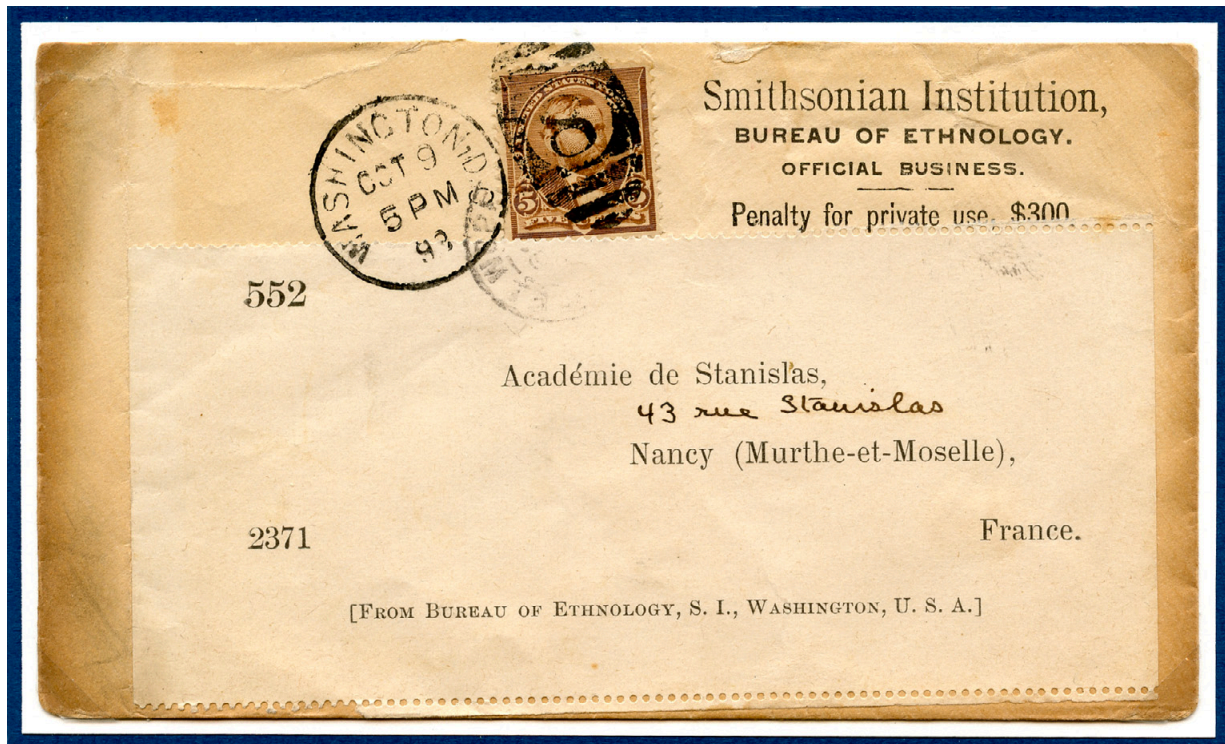
Museums in North America maintain artifacts and sponsor research expeditions studying Eskimo cultures. The most comprehensive museums concentrate on the archaeology and ethnology of the cultures using indigenous members to build factual resources for study.



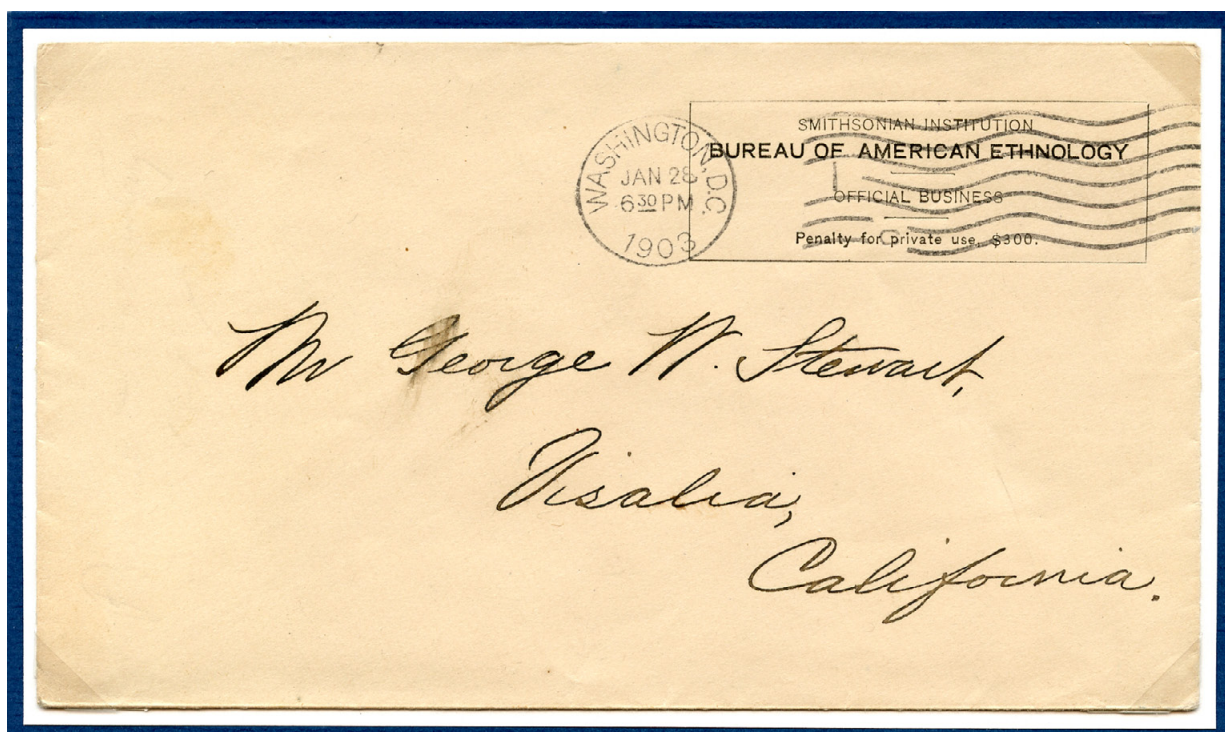
1¢ third class regular bulk rate (Sec. 562 P.L.&R.), circa 1950, using museum's NPM permit meter no. 8679 (on special stationery)

## Research

The Bureau of Ethnology was established in 1879 to transfer archives and materials related to the indigenous peoples of North America from the Interior Department to the Smithsonian Institution in order to organize anthropological research in America. The bureau also sponsored ethnographic, archaeological and linguistic field research among the Eskimos of Alaska. In 1897, the Bureau of Ethnology's name changed to the Bureau of American Ethnology to emphasize its geographic limit, and in 1965, merged with the Smithsonian's Department of Anthropology, National Museum of Natural History, Washington, D.C.



*Penalty clause not valid for international mail, 5¢ postage added, Washington, D.C. to Nancy, France, 9 October 1893*



*Scarce penalty mail clause on pre-printed stationery paying 1st class rate, Washington, D.C. to Visalia, CA, 28 January 1903*

## Modern Eskimo Life



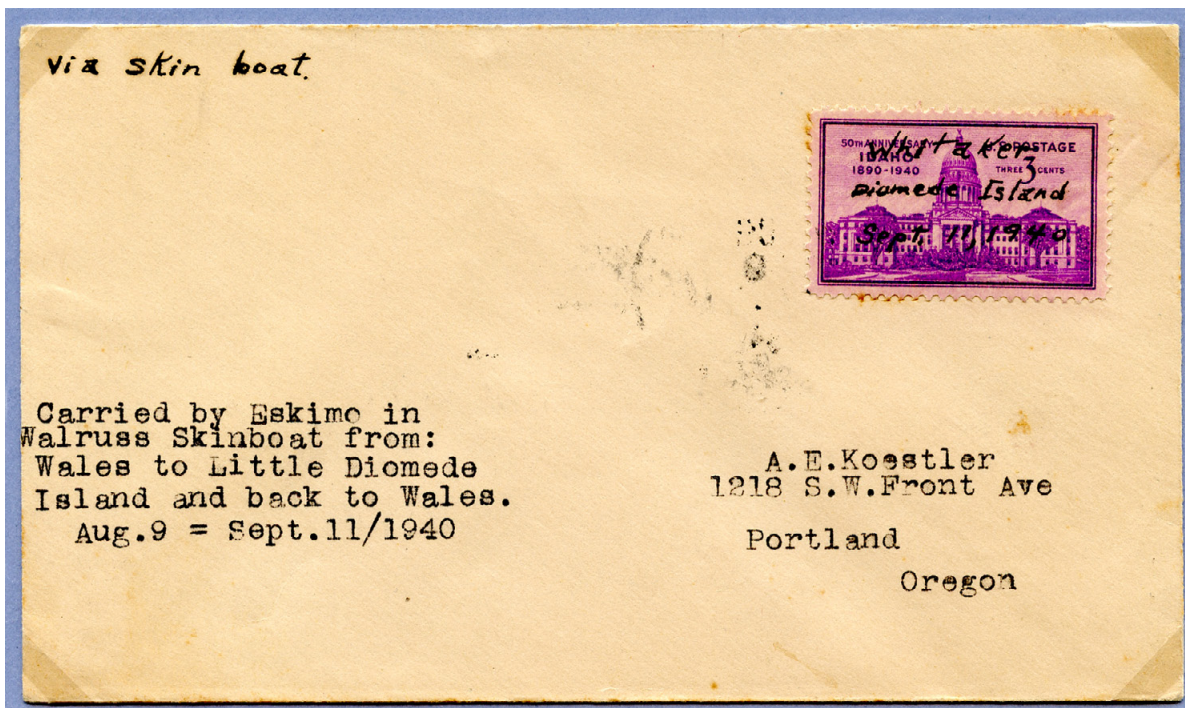
Contact with outside influences brought updated technology and ideas. Trading furs and hand-crafts improved their material goods and social interactivity but at a high price. Exposure to drugs and alcohol resulted in abuse and loss of some of their age old values and customs.



Motor-powered vehicles have replaced traditional transportation and hunting with high-powered rifles is common as global warming takes its toll on the icy habitat.



Although modern mail delivery uses aircraft, sparsely populated outlying areas may still receive mail service via traditional methods of transportation - dogsled and kayak.



Carried in a Walrus skin boat by Eskimo from Wales to Little Diomed Island where U.S. government teacher Mr. Whitaker cancelled the stamp with his name, location and date. Little Diomed had no official post office and mail was delivered to the school. The island is two miles from Big Diomed which belongs to Russia and the International Dateline lies between the two islands. Population in 1940 was 120 Eskimos and one white teacher.