

# Sculpture

by Gertrude Svarny





**THIS IS MY SON.** 1989. Alabaster, 12½" high.  
©1990 Gertrude Svarny.

**ALEUT WARRIOR.** 1990. Wall hanging mask of basswood, ivory, baleen, leather, sinew and brachiopod shells with red ochre and acrylic paint, 15" high, 9½" wide.  
©1990 Gertrude Svarny.



**COVER:**  
**CAREFREE.** 1990. Pink alabaster, 11½" high, 13" wide.  
©1990 Gertrude Svarny.



Photo courtesy Max R. Jensen

“...Throughout my life I have had a strong feeling for doing something artistic, but couldn’t seem to discover what I wanted to do. While my children were growing up I would paint with oils (whenever I had time) and loved doing it, but until Sam and I moved back to Unalaska in 1980 I had no idea I would be interested in sculpting. I started with a piece of whale bone I found on the beach and found I could sculpt masks and figures. With encouragement from family and friends I worked with whale bone, ivory and baleen. A scarcity of whale bone forced me to find other materials. I now work mainly with soapstone, alabaster and wood.

In 1978 my daughters decided they wanted to weave our traditional Aleut baskets. Although my mother wove, I always felt that I was not dexterous enough to weave. My daughters couldn’t understand why I didn’t learn, and were very disturbed with me, because I wasn’t able to pass on the art. After watching them struggle for a few days, I decided to try and after working intensely for a couple of weeks, I produced a very rough basket and decided that I could weave after all. I sometimes find that weaving and sculpting are not compatible because sculpting is very rough on my hands, but I do get a certain satisfaction with weaving, especially when I think about my ancestors doing the same thing for so many years.

Since I started so late in life and am self taught, and still learning, I sometimes feel an urgency about my work, like I’ll never be able to complete all I want to do. I do find my work very exciting and satisfying...”

**Gertrude Svarny  
Unalaska, Alaska**



**ALEUT BASKET.** 1989. Rye grass and silk thread, 2½" high.

©1990 Gertrude Svarny.



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An Exhibition, April 29-May 30, 1990

In presenting work by outstanding Native American artists and craftsmen, the Southern Plains Indian Museum and Crafts Center is pleased to introduce its visitors to the artistry of Gertrude Svarny. Gertrude Svarny, Aleut sculptor, carver and basket-weaver, is a highly skilled and versatile artist from Unalaska, Alaska on the Aleutian chain.

"...My early childhood was spent in a small Aleut village in the Aleutian Islands called Unalaska, Alaska. I was born in 1930 to Charles and Alice Hope, the fifth of seven children. My father was originally from England, his parents immigrating to the United States when he was a child. I had an idyllic childhood until World War Two, when the Japanese bombed our village and we were evacuated to South Eastern Alaska in 1942. Returning in 1945, after suffering many hardships the survivors happily settled back in our homeland. In 1946 I returned to South Eastern Alaska to finish high school and returned home in 1948. I married Samuel Svarny in 1950. Sam was from Wisconsin and in the Army, serving in the Alaska Communications System. We have four daughters and seven grandchildren.

In 1980, after spending eighteen years in the lower 48 (continental United States) we decided to sell our home and business and return to Unalaska. Luckily Sam loves it here as much as I do..."

Gertrude D. Svarny graduated from Mt. Edgecombe High School in Mt. Edgecombe, Alaska where she was salutatorian of her class. That same year, she served as Assistant Postmaster in Unalaska, becoming Acting Postmaster in 1949. After her marriage, Svarny worked with her husband first in partnership in a small theater business in Unalaska and later as a salesperson in Frederick and Nelson Department Store in Seattle, Washington. While rearing her children, Svarny took a workshop in oil painting at the University of Washington in Seattle and for awhile thereafter she found painting to be a satisfying outlet for her creative instincts.

In 1978, Gertrude Svarny's daughters inspired her to undertake the art of weaving traditional Aleut baskets. Although her mother was an excellent weaver, Svarny had not previously learned nor practiced this art form so her efforts to gain mastery of Aleut basket weaving were all self-taught. She weaves with rye grass which she gathers and cures in the traditional Aleut fashion.

After Gertrude Svarny returned to Unalaska in 1980, she became in-

terested in sculpting, again developing her skills on a self-taught basis. At first she carved whale bone, later working with ivory, wood, baleen and soapstone. Today, soapstone, alabaster and wood are her preferred media.

Gertrude Svarny began exhibiting her work in 1983 at the Aleut Art Show in Anchorage, Alaska. Since that time her work has been featured in several exhibitions in Anchorage, Fairbanks, and Juneau, Alaska as well as Seattle, Washington and Santa Fe, New Mexico. In 1984 she participated in the Festival of American Folklife presented by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Entering her work in the Trail of Tears Art Show in Tahlequah, Oklahoma in 1986, Svarny received Best Sculpture Award, an achievement which she repeated in 1987. In 1988, she received a Special Merit Award at the 17th Annual Trail of Tears Show. From 1984 through 1989, Svarny has been a participant in the Alaska Native Heritage Festival held at the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

Gertrude Svarny is very active in Alaskan cultural affairs;—having served as Board member of the Aleutian Arts Council; Board member of the Bilingual/Bicultural Program in Unalaska; Board member of the Ounalashka Corporation in Unalaska and Treasurer of the Board of Trustees of the Institute of Alaska Native Arts, a not-for-profit organization headquartered in Fairbanks whose primary purpose is to provide opportunities for the continued development of the arts of Alaska Natives. Other activities include serving on the Board of Regents of the Institute of American Indian Arts, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1985-1987 and a stint as Vice Chairperson of the interim tribal council of the Qualingin tribe, 1988-89.

Gertrude Svarny has participated in several conferences and workshops;—most recently Bentwood II, a symposium on bending wood sponsored by the Institute of Alaska Native Arts in 1989. Svarny utilizes the technique of bending wood using steamheat to create Aleut hunting hats, one of which will be featured in this exhibition.

*Prices of sculpture, baskets and other artwork available for sale during this exhibition may be obtained from the Oklahoma Indian Arts and Crafts Cooperative, P.O. Box 966, Anadarko, Oklahoma 73005, telephone 405/247-3486. After the exhibit closes, please contact Gertrude Svarny, P.O. Box 197, Unalaska, Alaska 99685, telephone 907/581-1597.*