

Nunivak Arts & Crafts

Nunivak Arts & Crafts is an art workshop and studio that creates and sells Native Alaskan Art. Located in Mekoryuk on Nunivak Island, the workshop was established and is managed by John Oscar, an accomplished, professional Native artist. In addition to Oscar, who works full-time, the workshop is staffed by eight part-time employees. Each employee works on parts of a piece of art designed by John, so that each end product is the result of the work and skill of many hands.

Community

Mekoryuk is a village of 220 people on Nunivak Island, which lies 30 miles off the southwest coast of Alaska and about 150 miles west of Bethel. The economy consists mainly of fishing, reindeer processing, and guided fall hunts for musk ox.

John Oscar is the artist and the developer of Nunivak Arts and Crafts. Growing up in Tununak, he learned the traditional art forms of the Cup'ik and Yup'ik people. He has also lived in Anchorage and Bethel, where he supported his family through the sale of his art.

In 2000, he decided to raise his children in a more traditional way and moved to his wife's village of Mekoryuk. There he took advantage of the abundance of discarded reindeer beards, hides, hoofs, and horns from the processing plant to expand his art to two and three dimensional paintings in shadow boxes, as well as masks, soapstone figurines, and jewelry. More importantly, he developed a plan to involve the community in his art production.

In 2004, Oscar developed an art workshop out of a 32 x 28 feet abandoned building. He refurbished and renovated the space using discarded building supplies, such as windows, two-by-fours, and a stove, donated by the city, the tribe and the school district. In 2006, Oscar won a \$21,000 award from the Alaska Federation of Natives (AFN) Alaska Marketplace competition, which advanced the studio's development significantly.

This competition, modeled after a World Bank program, is designed to support entrepreneurial activities that create employment opportunities in rural Alaska.



Mekoryuk, Alaska

Population:	220
Major Employers:	Commercial fishing, reindeer processing
Location:	Island 150 miles west of Bethel
Ethnicity:	90% Cup'ik Eskimo
Median Income:	\$30,833

Matching the award with money earned from selling his own art allowed John to hire three craftsmen from the village to complete building's transformation into an art studio. The city government and the village corporation approved this use of the land, and the tribal government and the city support summer youth interns at the studio.

After completion of the facility, Oscar hired six part-time adult employees and two students to help him in the studio. These employees perform a variety of tasks, including carving driftwood into small masks and other symbols, painting designs Oscar has created, assembling frames, and etching walrus ivory or reindeer antler. Three to five workers are involved in each piece produced. He also employs a part-time bookkeeper to manage billing and payroll using QuickBooks software. Six days a week, from nine to five, the studio is a beehive of chatter, painting, carving, and internet-provided music.

Economic and Community Impact

Nunivak Arts & Crafts has eight part-time employees, who earn between \$10 and \$15 an hour. Two high school students make \$7.50 an hour as part of the summer youth program sponsored by the city and the tribe. The average payroll is \$600 per week, which increases to \$1,000 per week in the fall with the preparations for the AFN Convention and the Christmas season.

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Employment:	One full-time, 8 part-time
Percent Local:	100%
Percent Native:	100%
Ownership:	John Oscar
Legal Status:	Sole proprietorship
Years in Operation:	2004 to present

Employees consistently arrive at work on time and have reliable attendance. This can be attributed to the part-time work schedule, which allows them to work at the studio and still have time to participate in subsistence and village activities. The village interest in the studio has made it an exciting place to work, which has enhanced employee retention. Also, the jobs are very different than the seasonal fish processing and reindeer processing jobs, or working in the store or the school.

Community members take pride in the workshop and regularly stop by to see what people are working on and to comment on new designs. The coffee pot is always on.

Oscar notes that jobs in Mekoryuk are hard to come by:

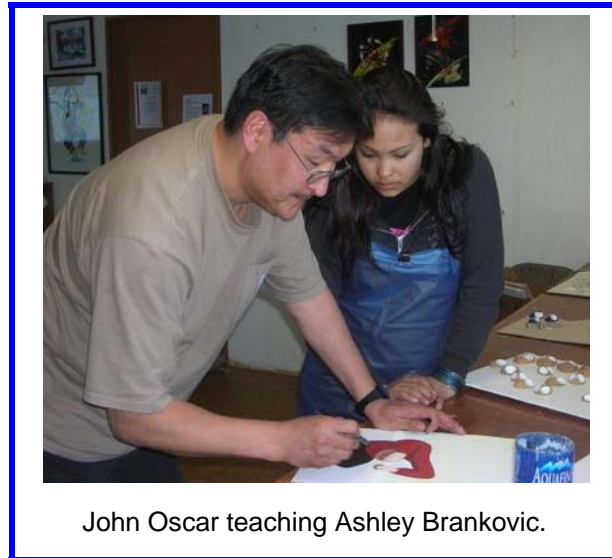
The studio has created an exponential benefit to the community, because when people walk in and see that their own kind have some income, which is much needed, they walk out satisfied.

Business Management

Oscar emphasized the commitment to hard work involved in building and maintaining his studio. The business has occupied his time six days a week, year round, for the last three years. He no longer has time in the summer to fish or participate in other subsistence activities; however, he says it's worth it. He is grateful to family members who take his children to fish camp and teach them how to fish and hunt.

John trains each person in their specialized area and oversees production of the artwork. The combination of traditional apprenticeship learning with the multi-person production has proven successful. A part-time bookkeeper manages the accounts.

Funding. Oscar funded the construction of the art studio through a combination of \$25,000 of his own funds from selling his art and the \$21,000 award from the Alaska Marketplace competition. He also received support from village members and the village corporation, and the tribal government donated supplies to the workshop.



John Oscar teaching Ashley Brankovic.

Marketing. Last year Nunivak Arts & Crafts sold approximately 300 pieces of art, some of them via their the website (www.oscaroriginals.com.) Oscar also sells pieces in Bethel at the Saturday market, to the Alaska Native Heritage Center in Anchorage, and at statewide Native gatherings, such as the annual AFN Convention. He hopes to open a gallery in Bethel and wants to market art and jewelry to additional outlets in Anchorage. He would also like to expand internet sales to the Lower 48 and Canada.

Oscar feels that the Silver Hand program, developed to identify products made by Alaska Natives, is not effective. He is especially concerned by the open competition of “knock off” Native art and crafts produced in Asia. He worries that the presence of “knockoffs” is increasing, and that U.S. copyright laws do not adequately protect Native artists from the theft of their ideas.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Oscar hopes that other Native communities across Alaska will adopt the Nunivak Arts & Crafts model in their own villages, and believes they can be successful. He also wishes that banks, village corporations, or programs designed to promote economic development would provide startup funds in the form of grants or low-income loans to village artists to develop their own studios. He said he would be pleased to provide consulting services to any village that wants to develop a plan or strategy for a community-based art studio. He stressed the importance of developing community trust to building success.

Oscar is optimistic that the creation of Native art has and will continue to make the village stronger. He believes the development of self confidence and pride in one’s culture occurs gradually, one person at a time. He tells the story of one of his employees, who used to walk down the street with his head hung low. Then, he came to work at the studio as a carver. “Now,” John said,

I’ve got a great carver on board who finds it exhilarating to be working regularly. He walks down the road with his head held high. That is not something you can put a price tag on.