Humanities

The Song of a Lifetime

Mrs. Portia Washington Pittman gazed into the tree-filtered sunlight from her nursing home and recalled a childhood conversation with her strict father. She mimicked her father, Booker T. Washington: " 'Now, Portia, I want you to get your arithmetic lessons,' " she said in a deep and gentle voice. "I said, 'Daddy, I don't like arithmetic,' " she answered like a small pouting girl. "And he said, 'If you don't study your arithmetic, I'm not going to let you practice your music lessons!' And I said, 'I'll do my best.' " She moved her head closer to the interviewer and continued in a low, secretive voice, "I didn't get it, 'cause I hated it. And he said, 'You just don't like to think. You'll wish someday that you had known that arithmetic.' "

Mrs. Pittman, now 93 and the only living child of the famous black educator, Washington, giggled at the end of this light-hearted insight into her youth. "I had to get my lessons, he made me stand up and recite them," she added. Washington recognized his daughter's talent and interest in music, but he made his beloved daughter, like the other students, learn a trade—dressmaking, which she also hated. Much more to Mrs. Pittman's own fancy, she excelled as a concert pianist and teacher.

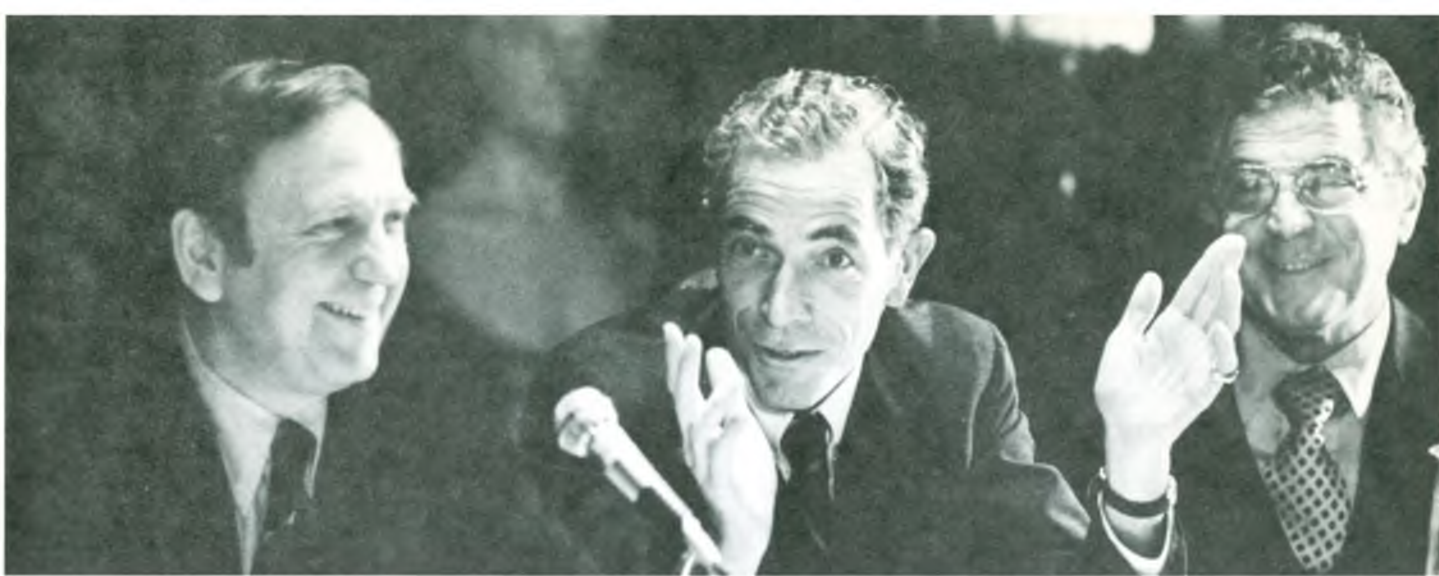
Washington, who founded Tuskegee Institute in Alabama in 1881, made all three of his children study their lessons. A former slave, Washington knew blacks were fortunate to be able to study, a privilege they were denied during slavery. Under his direction Tuskegee began as a vocational and technical institute to train young blacks for the employment that was available to them at the time—artisans, farmers, food service positions and teachers.

As part of a program to reorganize and strengthen its humanities department being carried out with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, Tuskegee has started a teaching fellowship for the fall term of 1977. The Portia Washington Pittman Fellowship in the Humanities was so named because of Mrs. Pittman's "long and productive career in the field of music," wrote the school's president, L. H. Foster, in an announcement letter. The position will be filled by outstanding humanities teachers and scholars in America and Africa. The first fellow, Dr. Blyden Jackson, is professor of English in the Graduate School of the University of North Carolina and an authority on the development of the novel about black American life.

"Music just drove me wild," said Mrs. Pittman, letting the "L" roll off her tongue more like a young hip musician than an elderly woman. This was the enthusiasm that propelled her through her studies and career. After studying in a "model school" at Tuskegee, Washington's princess-like daughter was sent off to a private boarding school in Massachusetts—Framingham State Normal School. Mrs. Pittman remembers the year she went to Framingham as "the same year that my father made the great speech in Atlanta that attracted so much attention. He told the Negroes to cast their buckets down where they were," she recalled her father saying at the Cotton States and International Exposition in Atlanta in 1895. "Not to try to be like white people until they were ready; to get their education and culture. It's going to take time. We must be patient. . . . They had never heard a Negro talk that way before." After the speech, Mrs. Pittman remembered boarding a train bound for New England, where she studied music and Latin at Framingham for four years until 1899. She returned to Tuskegee for one year and graduated in 1900. After

(Continued on back page)

Mrs. Portia Washington Pittman in photo by Marie A. Bradby



Rep. Brademas, Sen. Pell, and Rep. Mario Biaggi in joint hearings held at the New York Public Library on December 16

Humanities Hearings Cover the Country

"I was born and grew to manhood in Texas, in an isolated part of it; country which my colleague Willie Morris has described as a land full of gut-jangling country tunes and secret poetry . . ." said Larry L. King in a statement he prepared for the first of the series of regional hearings on the humanities held at Dallas last November.

Hearings were held in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago and Miami in response to legislation introduced in Congress calling for White House Conferences on both the humanities and the arts by 1979.

The thrust of the hearings, according to NEH Chairman Joseph D. Duffey, was to gather views from sections of the country on humanities programs and needs.

"My intention," Mr. Duffey said at Dallas, "is that the National Endowment for the Humanities should respect the worth and taste of people in every section of the country."

The witnesses spoke to the need for humanities strength in schools and colleges and communities, in spite of an increasing tendency toward technical and job-related education.

Hearing rooms at the Dallas Public Library overflowed with spectators. Witnesses included Southwestern scholars, educators, representatives of labor, and other humanities specialists, as well as members of the Dallas community. Among them were Lillian Bradshaw, director of the Dallas Public Library; Bryce Jordan, president of the University of Texas at Dallas; Joe Bob Rushing, President of Tarrant County Community College; Ruth Ellinger, Texas AFL-CIO official; and Preston Jones, Texas playwright and author of the *Texas Trilogy*.

Robert L. Hardesty, Vice President, University of Texas System, recalled standing beside the late President Lyndon B. Johnson at the signing of the Arts and Humanities Act which gave birth to NEH and its sister endowment in 1965:

"If I live to be a hundred, I don't think I will ever forget his (Johnson's) remarks on that occasion. 'We in America,' he said, 'have not always been kind to the artists and the scholars who are the creators and the keepers of our vision. Somehow, the scientists always seem to get the penthouse, while the arts and the humanities get the basement.' "

The joint resolution calling for the White House Conferences was introduced in the House by Rep. John Brademas (D-Ind.) and in the Senate by Sen. Claiborne Pell (D-R.I.). Brademas chaired the Dallas hearing.

The conference is intended to "encourage maximum participation by citizens; state and local agencies, institutions and organizations in the humanities; representatives of labor, industry and business; educators; and scholars in all fields of the humanities in the process of insuring needed support for the humanities among all parties concerned at Federal, state and local levels . . ." according to the joint resolution.

Brademas, chairman of the Select Education Subcommittee of the House Education and Labor Committee, and NEH, assembled witnesses from a seven-state area for the lead-off hearing. Congressional host at Dallas was Rep. Jim Mattox (D-Tex.).

The New York hearing, held at the New York Public Library Central Building December 16, was a joint hearing presided over by Sen. Pell and Rep. Brademas. Witnesses included Douglas Dillon, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Metropolitan Museum of Art; Irving Howe, author and historian; and Dr. John Sawhill, President of New York University.

Having completed the six-city regional circuit in two months, the bills will be sent to committee for markup, and, on subcommittee approval, to the floor of the House and Senate.

Before the White House Conference, each state will organize and conduct humanities conferences with Federal grants to insure full participation from every part of the nation. □

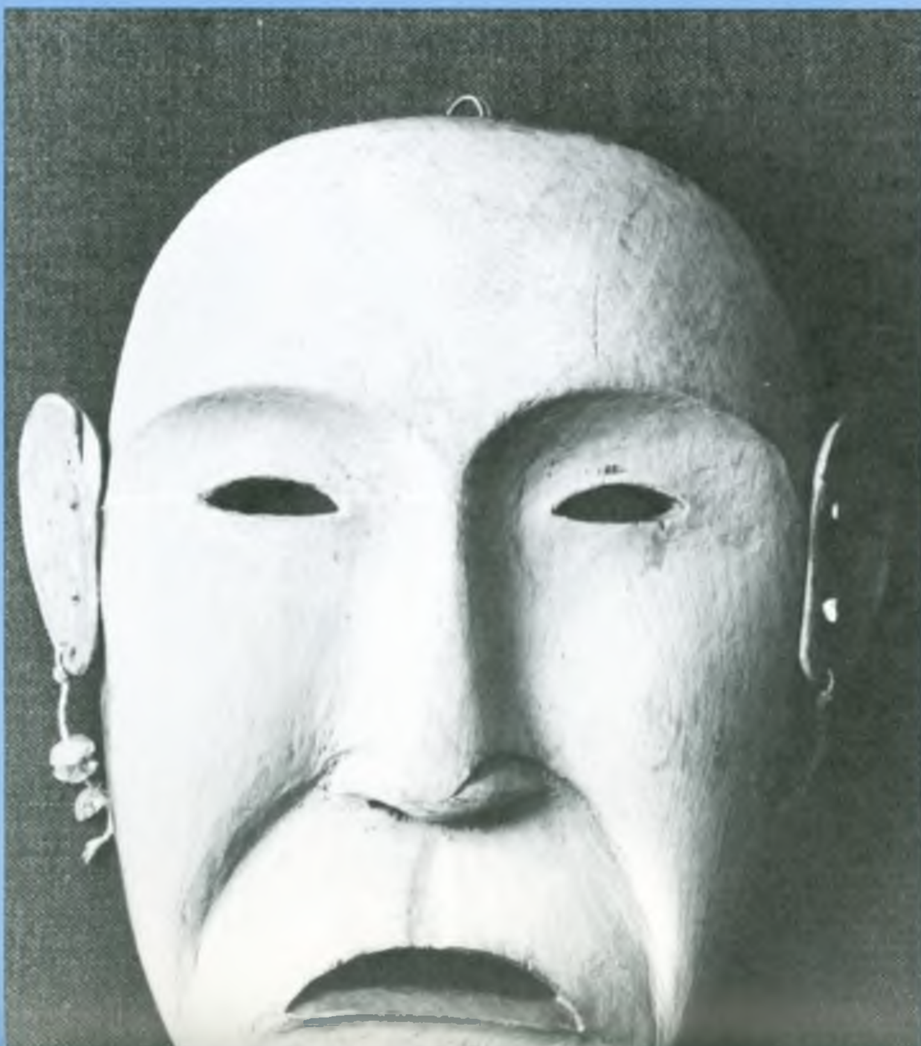
Survival

Life and Art of the Alaskan Eskimo

Supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities
Sponsored by the Newark Museum and the American Federation of Arts

Killer whale by Peter Mayac (1973)

"Shaman Turning Into Seal"—ivory and sterling silver sculpture by Alaskan Eskimo artist Lawrence Ahvakana (1975)



The word "Eskimo" may conjure up snowy visions of ice-packed igloos, blubber-chewing natives and snarling dog teams. Fur-clad figures, clubs in hand, silently stalking a portly walrus. White Fang, Seward's Folly, Nanook of the North.

Such misconceptions are quickly dispelled when one views "Survival: Life and Art of the Alaskan Eskimo." Organized by Barbara Lipton with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, this exhibition of Eskimo art and artifacts, accompanied by photographs and an audio-visual show, serves to document 2,000 years of Eskimo culture.

One of the main determinants of this culture has been the environment. Faced with sub-zero temperatures and seemingly sunless winters, the early Eskimos developed a survival pattern that remained relatively unchanged until the coming of the white man. As cooperation was essential to survival, society was structured around the extended family. Burrowed in subterranean dwellings during the winter months, they embarked on semi-nomadic food searches in the summer. Although dwellings varied according to locale, they were usually built of sod, skins, driftwood, whale bones or stone. Igloos, never used for permanent dwellings, were rarely used for temporary shelter.

These summer hunters posited a mystical relationship with the animals they sought. Just as wolverines, caribou and the like could assume human form, an Eskimo could assume their form. Masks, fantastic and eerie, played a large part in these transactions. One of the most striking objects in the exhibition is a wildly painted and assembled wooden figure, its human visage framed by feathered flippers and tail-like appendages. Representing the "mother of the mukluk seals," the shaman wore this mask to appease the souls of these animals, thereby assuring a plentiful supply of meat, oil and skins.

The nineteenth century marked the change of Eskimo traditions. Trappers and explorers, priests and prospectors—the arrival of white people was soon followed by the arrival of white civilization. Sunken homes were no longer necessary when wooden ones could be heated. Why hunt for skins and labor over sewing them when store-bought clothing was available? The traditional diet was tastier when supplemented with tea, coffee, sugar and flour. And travel by snowmobile was much faster than travel by dog sled.

Implicit in these material acquisitions was the introduction of a money-based economy. The Eskimo learned to ascribe a monetary as well as a ceremonial and functional value to his exquisitely wrought artifacts. Although their language contained no word for "art," it was soon available for export.

But adapting to change was a way to ensure continuity. The Eskimo, in altering the purpose of his art, had found a way to retain its form. This synthesis is especially evident in a contemporary sculpture by Larry Ahvakana. An ivory shaman, crouched inside a silver disk, is surrounded by the two seals into which he is being transmuted. Reflecting this balance, the artist explained to Barbara Lipton that he is able to "relate to certain things that are basic to the culture, (even though he) cannot visualize (himself) living like they did a hundred years ago."

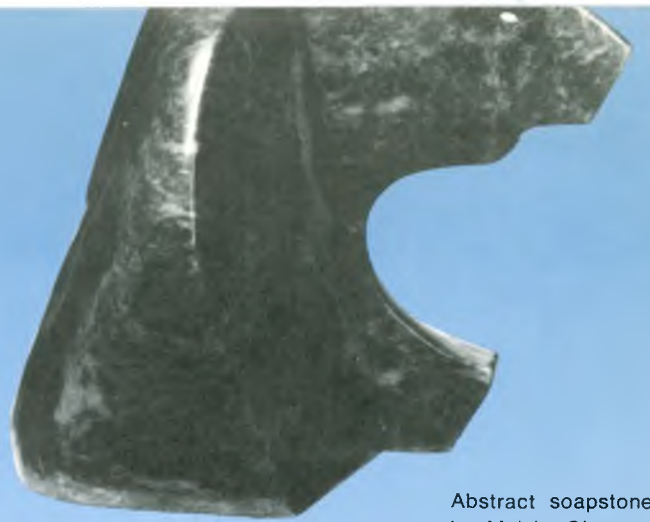
Much of Eskimo life today is characterized by this synthesis. Whales are still hunted in skin-covered canoes, even if exploding guns are used to kill them. While on the way to a Christian church, an Eskimo might speak of his animal spirit. A native child, dressed in blue jeans and sneakers, may be prevailed upon to sing and dance to the traditional music of his people.

This synthesis has been challenged by recent developments. The discovery of North Slope oil and the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act, which provided land and cash awards for Eskimos, increased the momentum of cultural change. The outcome of this challenge has yet to be seen.

Although it is futile to predict the future of Eskimo culture, it is possible to study the past. After closing in Santa Ana on November 6, the NEH-supported exhibition may be viewed at the Heard Museum of Anthropology in Phoenix, Arizona (December 1977-January 1978); the Huntington Art Galleries in Huntington, West Virginia (February-April 1978); the Illinois State Museum in Springfield, Illinois (April-June 1978); the Anchorage Historical and Fine Arts Museum in Anchorage, Alaska (July-August 1978); and the Witte Memorial Museum in San Antonio, Texas (September-October 1978).

—Deborah Jean Carr

Painted-wood mask worn symbolically by a shaman in religious ceremonies



Abstract soapstone bear by Melvin Olanna (1976)

Male loon, left, and eagle, right, of walrus ivory with black engraving, by Peter Mayac (1973)

Photographs courtesy of The Newark Museum

brief study at Wellesley College and a degree in 1905 from Bradford Academy (later Bradford Junior College) in Massachusetts, she sailed for Europe to continue her passionate romance with the piano. For two years, Mrs. Pittman studied concert piano in Berlin under Martin Krause, a former pupil of Franz Liszt.

Mrs. Pittman has preferred classical music and Negro spirituals. Her favorite composer is Chopin. "I loved his work . . . the sonatas," she said. One day as a dedication to her teacher, Krause, she said she started playing the Negro spiritual, "Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child," her favorite song. Krause was intrigued, she said, and asked in German, "What sort of music is that?" She answered in her fluent German, "That is Negro music. It was written during slavery which was a very, very sad time." Mrs. Pittmann was drawn to that song because her mother, Fannie Smith Washington, had died when she was two years old.

Then a dark-haired beauty, 24-year-old Portia returned from Europe in 1907 to marry William Sidney Pittman, a Washington, D. C., architect who designed many now-historic buildings around the capital city. The couple had three children—William Sidney, Jr., Booker T., and Fannie Virginia. Mrs. Pittman taught everywhere she went. She taught in Dallas where the family moved in 1913 so her husband could take a building project. For 15 years she was the music instructor there at Booker T. Washington High School. Mrs. Pittman trained her students the German way—"every voice knew its part," she explained. "And you could hear clearly. They said they had never heard Negro spirituals sung the way they were under the direction of Portia Washington (Pittman)."

Her marriage soured, she divorced her husband and returned to Tuskegee by 1928 to teach piano and direct the choir. She also set up her own "conservatory" and gave private lessons. "I made them all get that technique. It made all my students stand out," she remarked.

In 1955 at the age of 72, Mrs. Pittman retired after a long career and returned to Washington, D. C. Since then her three children have died and Mrs. Pittman resides in a nursing home where she had been known to sing and play the piano. Like her educator father, Mrs. Pittman was dedicated to music and to training black students. She has had three heart attacks and several heart pacers. Her movements are slower and her memory fading. Yet, she still yearns to teach.

The strains of elderly voices and a piano permeated the parlor where the now silver-haired Mrs. Pittman sat. She momentarily pondered the name of the song, then resigned herself to humming along. It was a familiar old song to a grand and gracefully aging musician.

—*Marie A. Bradby*

NOTICE: Use of funds for printing this publication approved by the Director of the Office of Management and Budget on June 17, 1976.

National Endowment for the Humanities
Washington, D. C. 20506

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