

Labrets, and Nose Pins, and Ear Feathers, Oh My!

by Moki Kokoris

“One man had a piece of bone three inches long struck through crosswise above the chin just under the lower lip. Still another had a bone like it fastened in the forehead, and another, finally, had a similar one in each of the wings of the nose.” – Georg Wilhelm Steller, writing of the Aleut people in 1741

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Tattoos. Nose pins. Ear ornaments. Indigenous peoples throughout the Aleutian archipelago – a windswept chain of islands that stretches for over 1,500 miles from Kamchatka, Russia, to the Alaska peninsula – embraced body art centuries before it became commonplace with modern youth.

Culturally speaking, the Aleuts viewed body adornment as tangible manifestation of human existence that integrated the customs of living individuals in the community with the supernatural. In conjunction with tattooing, the various forms of Aleut piercing such as nose pins, ear ornaments, and labrets represented natural symbols that figuratively linked nature, society, and spirituality into one organic whole.

When Russians first made contact with the peoples of the Aleutian archipelago, the one custom that intrigued them most was the insertion of various types of labrets into the lower lip and cheek. In the 1770s, British explorer Captain Cook noted: *“...what the men have thrust through the hole in the underlip has the resemblance of two boar tusks: two pieces of bone about one and a half inches long joining in the middle of the lip. And separating, by means of the tongue, they can move these bones and make them point up and down. Others have a single polished bone the shape and size of a large stud.”*



Men perforated the lip by placing several studs of walrus ivory into separate holes that to Captain Cook appeared to represent *“another row of teeth immediately under their own.”* This style was common on the Turnagain River of mainland Alaska and on Kodiak Island where *“men wear up to ten garnets – white in back, blue in front – underneath their lower lip.”*

Nose pins were worn by both genders of all indigenous groups of the Aleutian chain, with the incision made shortly after birth. Pierced horizontally through the lower septum portion of the nose, the ornament might be the shaft of an eagle’s feather, a seal whisker, a piece of bark, a small bone, or a thin strip of leather decorated with tiny tusk shells. Sometimes, women strung beads of coral and amber from the nose pin, and let them hang down to the point of their chin.

Ear ornaments were another common form of adornment. Oftentimes, there were multiple holes pierced all around the rim of the ear, with shells, beads, bones, and amber inserted into each of them. Before an Aleut woman was to be married, each of her ears was pierced with ten sea lion whiskers. Sea lion whiskers were considered to be very valuable and were regarded as trophies that indicated a good hunter, or the wife of a good hunter. Because each sea lion has only four suitable whiskers, *“any number of them together must be testimony of having captured a great many.”* A visitor to the Andreanof Islands within the Aleutian chain noted, *“instead of earrings put into their ears, the women wear eagle and goose feathers...”*



To the inhabitants of this Arctic archipelago, body adornment not only fulfilled the need for display of social status; it also celebrated the spiritual relationships between humans, animals, and the deities who controlled human destiny and their surrounding world. According to Aleut beliefs, their tattoos and piercings also cloaked or camouflaged the physical body from supernatural forces that inhabited their maritime environment. This view, widely held by many indigenous societies around the world, falls into the longstanding tradition of “preventative magic,” which was used to ward off potential possession by *khougkh* [evil entities] that targeted vulnerable facial orifices. By piercing the nose, lips, and ears, those entryways would be blocked. With these traditions, the Aleuts envisioned control over the supernatural and ultimately ensured immortality of the human bodies they manipulated.

So, the next time you walk past a group of similarly “adorned” teenagers, just know that the Aleuts did it first!

