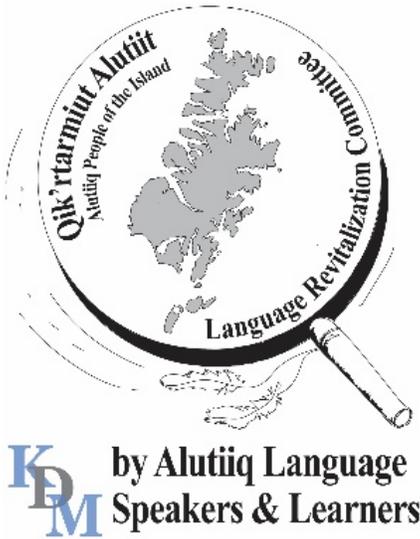


# Arts Inspiration – Integrating Alutiiq into Art

by Hanna Sholl, artist, Alutiiq learner and mother of Alutiiq Language Nest (Alutiiq Language Nest) preschool students

## Erinarpet OUR VOICES



I would like to share a personal story about an experience I had this year, and how Alutiiq art and language played a vital role in helping me to heal through it.

It's important to note that what we often classify as artforms were traditionally considered part of standard daily life in Alutiiq society. Meaning, the decorations and adornments on objects were considered to be an important part of the objects they covered. Additionally, adding designs and embellishments was one of the ways that Alutiiq people showed their respect to the items they were embellishing, as well as the animals they would use them on. The pictures they would paint would tell stories and were used as a way of recording events. Originally the Alutiiq language was an oral language without a written form. Because of this, present day storytelling through Alutiiq art is something that happens naturally for me, and I imagine others as well. Nowadays, we do have Alutiiq



2018 miniature 2"x2" canvases from the "Breaking the Creative Block" collection, paintings and photo courtesy Hanna Sholl.

as a written language that is often seen in contemporary Alutiiq art, and used as descriptive words when explaining traditional and contemporary pieces. This is encouraging to see, both as an artist and as someone who is hopeful that the Alutiiq language will once again be something we all can experience as part of daily life.

Now back to January 2018, the very beginning of a new year; full of hope and anticipation for what was to come. Resolutions are set, many as fleeting as the fireworks that can be seen especially well in this time of year's darkness. This is an exciting time in our household and overall an enjoyable time for many.

However, this year was different. This year I was greeted with the most extensive artist block I have experienced to date.

To fully understand the depth of the disarray that this had on my life I will give you a few lines of background. I am an artist, and I currently makes my living by creating contemporary Alutiiq arts. Additionally, I have a photography business that also requires me to be artistically aligned in order to keep things moving smoothly. And even deeper than both of the businesses, art has always been deeply rooted within me.

Artist block or creative block is explained as a period of time when an artist can no longer access the inspiration needed or manage to bring themselves to create. Little is known about this abstract notion, or what may cause it. However, if you feel the need to Google it, you will come up with a bunch of “solutions” to an issue that many don’t believe is real. For me the creative block seeped into February, and with a scheduled art appearance for the beginning of March I was not able to sit idle and wait for my creative block to pass.

Often when I come across something that I cannot figure out myself, and Google is unable to assist with, I will take my questions to my mom. If I get stuck on an assignment or on a piece she is there to walk me through potential solutions and has played a great role in my successes and headed off many failures throughout my life. Upon posing the question to her of where my creative block may have stemmed from she was plain in her response and pinpointed some less than pleasant life lesson that had recently taken place. With the knowledge of what may be causing my block I felt I was finally armed with the ability to overcome it.

So, I sat down with the intent of creating. Several hours later and multiple attempts I was still stuck in a state of creative block. I felt suppressed, frustrated and a little lost.

While searching “creative block” online I had exhausted all of the ideas I felt feasible and moved onto suggestions for writer’s block, thinking they may be close enough related that I could possibly apply the same principles from one to the other. At this point, I was desperate for a reprieve. One of the suggestions I had

come across for writer’s block was to simply start writing everything that came to mind. So, I thought, what if I used this same technique with painting? As a sort of way to release what was floating around clogging up my creative juices? I decided to start small, 2x2 inch canvases would be my creative releases. Before I knew it, I was spilling out all sorts of emotions, colors, designs and WORDS. Alutiiq words to be exact, finding their way onto my mini canvases. As I said above, I have been an artist my whole life; when I was a teenage I often incorporated words into my pieces, but this was not something I had done for many years.

Before I knew it, I had created close to 20 miniature paintings. Each with their own emotional feel, some were sad, some happy. Some told stories, or had memories attached to them, others were abstract. I painted whatever I felt, Alutiiq drummers danced across these mini canvases. Petroglyph whales lined the edges and faces of ancestors stared back. Words such as *nunapet*, *napaq*, *cuqllik*, *cuuliraq* and *Kasukuaq* were painted into the pieces. I had finally done it. I had broken the creative block!

Just as quickly as my mini canvases had come to my rescue, so did the want or need for me to paint them disappear. However, their style and lessons lived on. This is another one of those moment where I believe I was shown that everything happens for a reason.

Shortly after these paintings were completed I was approached to start work on a project where my mini painting would be used to help spread the Alutiiq culture through clothing and accessories. Talk about an exciting undertaking! Native Village of

Afognak has used several of those tiny paintings to create bags, clothes and other accessories.

Now that the winter and spring months have passed we are knee deep in summer. The seasons have changed, and this season has brought many opportunities for the intertwining of Alutiiq language and art. One of the most exciting endeavors will be the completion of the *Coloring Alutiiq* children’s color book. This color book combines illustrations of traditional Alutiiq clothing beside the animals harvested to make clothing as well as tools used in harvesting those animals. The hope is that this will help young people gain a deeper understanding of Alutiiq technologies. This book will also contain a significant amount of Alutiiq Language and terminology for tools, animals and clothing.

So far this year my artistic journey has been full of surprises, good and challenging. Most importantly I have learned how deeply healing art and language can be. Exploring Alutiiq language through art put back together pieces of myself that had been displaced. This has left me feeling more whole as a person than I have ever felt and put me on vital paths that I otherwise would not have traveled. This is exactly my wish for everyone. I encourage you to explore the Alutiiq language and make it part of your everyday life—however it may look to you. You never know what exciting paths it may lead you down.

---

Learn more about the Alutiiq language at: [www.alutiiqlanguage.org](http://www.alutiiqlanguage.org) or [www.alutiiqmuseum.org](http://www.alutiiqmuseum.org)  
Facebook: Alutiiq Language Speakers & Learners