



Edmund Carpenter

By Harald E. L. Prins

When the exhibition *Upside Down: Arctic Realities* opened at The Menil Collection in Houston, its curator, Dr. Edmund Carpenter, was not there. Paradoxically, his absence underscored his creative genius. With this

show, the eighty-eight-year-old anthropologist concluded a sublime performance as an explorer of other realities and imaginaries.

Ever since he first traveled to Southampton Island in northwest Hudson Bay for fieldwork among the Aivilingmiut in 1950, Carpenter had been drawn to the solitude of the Arctic: “In winter the horizon recedes into the immense distance ... there is no line dividing earth from sky. The two are of the same substance What appeared to me as monotonous land was, to [these Inuit,] filled with meaningful reference points”

At the Menil and later at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, aided by light-and-space artist Douglas Wheeler, Carpenter transformed a large gallery into an illusion of boundless white space to experience the magic of hundreds of precious ivory carvings, dozens of stunning masks, and so much more, excavated and collected in the Circumpolar region—all displayed in ice-like glass boxes with rumbling sounds of cracking sea-ice recorded on location in Nunavut.

Who was this anthropologist, so well known, yet so elusive? Born in Rochester, NY, in 1922, “Ted” was the son of an art teacher and became hooked on pre-historic archaeology as a teenager. Soon after enrolling at the University of Pennsylvania in 1940, he began authoring academic articles, the first of which was “Iroquoian Figurines,” published in the prestigious journal *American Antiquity*: Months after Pearl Harbor, the twenty-year-old anthropology student joined the U.S. Marine Corps and fought in the Solomon Islands and at Iwo Jima, ending up in the Marianas.

Discharged as a captain in 1946, he returned to Penn, completed his studies, and began teaching at the University of Toronto. He also produced and hosted a weekly CBC radio show that turned into a television program in the 1950s. Interested in how print, radio, and television transform human relations and perceptions, he teamed up with Marshall McLuhan and became editor of the avant-garde journal *Explorations*.

In 1959, Carpenter published *Eskimo*, left Toronto, and became founding chair of an experimental academic program of art and anthropology in California. Collaborating with colleagues, he made several documentaries before leaving for Fordham University, followed by a year at UC Santa Cruz. Next, the restless scholar took a research professorship in Papua New Guinea, advising its government on introducing mass media into recently contacted tribal communities.

In 1970, Carpenter returned to the U.S. and published *They Became What They Beheld*. This was soon followed by *Eskimo Realities* and his most famous book, *Oh, What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me!* He also consulted on several museum exhibits of Arctic and Northwest Coast tribal art and became a trustee at the Museum of the American Indian, Heye Foundation, soon exposing fraud and corruption.

A popular professor, Carpenter taught at Adelphi, Harvard, New School, and NYU during the next dozen years and completed *Social Symbolism in Ancient & Tribal Art*, a twelve-volume study on the researches of Carl Schuster, followed by *Patterns That Connect* (1996) and other publications.

Beyond articles and books, his legacy can be seen in a permanent installation of remarkable indigenous art objects created in 1999 at The Menil Collection, world famous for its Surrealist art. Included are Eskimo masks and other “visual puns,” admired and collected by the Surrealists who, recognizing them as corroborators to their vision, referred to these objects as “witnesses.” Other than his three sons and wife, Adelaide de Menil, Ted leaves behind scores of witnesses, including former students and admirers across the globe.

Joseph G. Gerena, 1949–2012

By Frederick Schultz

On January 7, 2012, Joe Gerena died from liver disease, ending a singular career as an art dealer distinguished by an astonishing diversity of expertise. He delighted in objects difficult to categorize. When asked to describe what exactly he handled, in typical Joe tongue-in-cheek fashion he would respond, “terrestrial objects,” an answer more forthright than glib. Indeed, for Joe’s unique curiosity there seemed to be no culture too obscure and no artifact too esoteric. He was known as a dealer’s dealer, and his gallery, Joseph G. Gerena Fine Art, a trade hub for finding and placing the unusual and the arcane.



After leaving City College in 1969 he set off to find adventure. His travels took him to every continent. He began in Katmandu buying *thangkas* and objects of Buddhist devotion. In later years he traveled to Alaska and St. Lawrence Island, where he collected Eskimo objects in ivory, wood, bone, and stone.

He counted among his clients most of the world’s collecting museums and most of the world’s dealers and collectors in Asian, tribal, pre-Columbian, and ancient art. His areas of interest were as complex, and sometimes as bewildering, as his extensive library. They included Japanese, Ainu, Siberian, Eskimo, Chinese, Nepalese, Tibetan, Taiwanese, Dong Son, Khmer, Bactrian, Mughal, Burmese, Thai, Vietnamese, Indonesian, Australian Aboriginal, Papua New Guinean, Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander. From South Asia he handled objects from cultures as diverse as Harappan, Mohenjo-daro, Mahajanapad, Gandharan, Kushan, Gupta, Pala, Jain, Gangetic, and Chola. He sold to museums and institutions in Europe and the U.S., including dozens of sales to the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s department of Musical Instruments and department of Arms and Armor.

In recent years he curated exhibits on subjects largely overlooked by museums and scholars: *Central Asian Steppes Metalwork* and *The Enlightenment Idea of the Cabinet of Curiosities*, as well as on more recondite themes such as “waterworks,” “airborne,” “fire,” and “masks.” Exhibited at James Cohan Gallery, New York, *Masks* received glowing reviews in the *New York Times* and the art press. In the 1970s he conceived and produced the two-week-long *Samurai Film Festival* in New York. He also wrote a fictional treatment about scientific inventions at turn-of-the-century Coney Island.

Joe was a polymath who read fiction and non-fiction with equal ardor and who commanded expertise in dozens of subjects. Fluent in Spanish, he developed a working knowledge of French and Italian, and he had a rough command of a dozen more. He had a remarkable ear for dialects and accents, and his wicked mimicry had no equal.

He also had an unequalled ability to form close and lasting friendships. Even with people he hadn’t spoken to or seen for a long time, he was able instantly to reestablish a dialogue sparkling with fun.

Perhaps his greatest passion, fostered by his mother Francia Luban, was music. He played blues guitar with particular affection for American “roots” music. He wrote two musical comedies, one predicting the development of New York’s Soho art scene, the other about the Yeti. (*Soho Promenade* was produced in New York.) His collection of CDs, numbering over a thousand, comprise a history of European music from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century, as well as Latin, jazz, blues, country, African, Indian, and East Asian.

Joe’s last project, a comprehensive collection of Ainu objects, will be exhibited March 21–25 at the Caskey-Lees *Arts of Pacific Asia* show at 7 West 34th St., New York.

He is survived by Marge Levin, his wife and traveling companion of thirty-three years, by stepdaughter, Alexis Katz; grandson, Marcus Mooney; father, Gilberto Gerena; and sisters, Marielia and Gilmar Gerena-Riquelme. There will be a memorial service in mid March in New York City.