

Frederica De Laguna

HONORARY
CURATOR,
AMERICAN
SECTION
BY JEAN
ADELMAN

ON OCTOBER 6, 2004, Frederica De Laguna, Honorary Curator in the Museum’s American Section and renowned anthropologist of Alaska’s native peoples, passed away at the age of 98.

Freddy’s affiliation with the Penn Museum began in the early 1930s when she led five expeditions to Alaska’s Cook Inlet, Prince William Sound, and Yukon

Valley as an Assistant in the American Section. Although she remained a Research Associate at the Museum for the rest of her career, Freddy’s real home was Bryn Mawr College, where she received her B.A. in 1927. After studying with Franz Boas and a number of European scholars and completing her Ph.D. in Anthropology at Columbia in 1933, she returned to Bryn Mawr to teach. By the late 1960s, she had founded their anthropology program and served as President of the American Anthropological Association (1966–67). In 1975, she was elected, along with Margaret Mead, to the National Academy of Sciences—the first female anthropologists so honored.

Freddy pursued her lifelong interest in the Arctic and northern peoples through her anthropological research and writing. Her major academic study was the 3-volume *Under Mount Saint Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1972) which documented the archaeology, ethnohistory, and ethnography of the Yakutat Tlingit people. She also wrote two murder mysteries set in Alaska: *The Arrow Points to Murder* (1937) and *Fog on the Mountain* (1938), and used the royalties to fund her fieldwork. Both were reprinted in the 1990s by Kachemak Country Publications (Homer, AK).

In the 1990s the Yakutat Tlingit invited “grandmother Freddy” back to Yakutat for a potlatch to honor her friendship, her sensitivity to their culture, and her work which “has



Frederica De Laguna in Tlingit dress, Angoon, Alaska, 1949. Photo by Edward Malin.

become a priceless record of the past and a source of inspiration for the future.” The warmth of this event is evident in the documentary film *Reunion Under Mount Saint Elias* (1997).

After retiring from Bryn Mawr in 1975, Freddy continued to teach as an Adjunct Professor in Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania and was appointed an Honorary Curator in the Museum’s American Section in 1983. On October 15, 1999, nearly 70 years after she undertook the first of her Museum-sponsored expeditions to the Arctic, Frederica De Laguna was awarded the Museum’s prestigious Lucy Wharton Drexel Medal for Archaeological Achievement. In acknowledging the award, Freddy gave a brief review of her work and her view of the discipline of anthropology. She concluded by presenting to the Museum two fine Northwest Coast artifacts she had collected. The entire event was typical Freddy: focused, appropriate, professional, and personal, with friends, colleagues, and close family there to share the moment.

Freddy was dauntless and as demanding of herself as she was of others. For students and colleagues who met her standards, Freddy was an inspiration and a guide. For generations of students and colleagues she was a bridge to the beginnings of American Anthropology. When teaching the history of anthropology at Penn, she would casually say, “Those of us who sat at the feet of Boas...” She was amazingly productive and of herself said, “I’ve led an extraordinarily happy life.” 🏠

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