

Inuit Art 1950-2000

by Judith Nasby

The exhibition *Inuit Art 1950-2000* provides a 50 year overview through a display of 40 drawings, prints, wall hangings, tapestry and sculpture selected from the Macdonald Stewart Art Centre's extensive Inuit art collection.

The 1950s period is represented by a number of works including an early pencil drawing signed and dated October 1950 by Joe Alikak, an Arctic Quebec artist who had been a patient at the Moose Factory Indian Hospital in the early 1950s. Alikak's drawing is reminiscent of images inscribed on prehistoric ivory and bone implements. His remarkably simple silhouettes convey accurate descriptions of walrus and seal hunting techniques. This drawing and a group of sculptures were donated by Guelph resident, Marie Ridd who worked as a nurse at the Moose Factory hospital in the 1950s (see review by John Ayre of the Gasparski-Ridd donation IAQ, Fall 1999:42). Thirteen sculptures from the Ridd collection and from a grouping donated by Mrs. Marie C. Gasparski are featured in the exhibition. These small carvings are all anonymous with the exception of a sculpture of a hunter above a seal hole which is one of the few documented by Peesee Oshuitoq (1913-1979) of Cape Dorset. This carving was made while the artist was a patient at the Mountain Sanatorium in Hamilton c1955. Another work is an ashtray with a nest filled with ivory eggs and a flying bird mounted on a post. This playful functional piece represents tourist art initiatives during this period. Among the Ridd donations is a wooden model showing a seal hunter positioned behind a portable wooden blind which has a small viewing hole. The hunter is slowly pushing the device forward on its runners towards a seal positioned above a seal hole.

There are two oil paintings dated 1960 by Pierre Nauja (1914-1977) of Rankin Inlet. Nauja was one of only a few Inuit artists who pursued oil painting. He was known as a skilled carver before he began painting using old plywood, discarded house paint and cut-down canoe "brushes". Anthropologist Robert Wilson of Rankin Inlet provided Nauja with oils, brushes and canvas. Of Nauja's two landscapes in the exhibition, one has a vivid green colouration and depicts the islands in the bay in front of Rankin Inlet, and hunters in Peterhead boats and kayaks engaged in a walrus hunt. The second painting has an overall pinkish colouration and depicts a winter caribou hunting scene. This painting is a recent gift from Avrom Isaacs. Also among the works dated 1960 are a drawing and a stonecut both by Kenojuak Ashevak of transforming birds in flight. In comparison to Kenojuak's flowing imagery, a 1960 drawing by Jessie Oonark of a hunter throwing a bolas at birds reveals her characteristic approach of compressing narrative into abstract symbols.

The 1970s period includes works such as a 1976 print stone carved by Joe Talirunili. The stone is richly carved with a densely laid out scene of summer and winter camp activities featuring housing and transportation themes. Talirunili's trademark owl dominates the scene. Another work by a Povungnituk artist is Markusi Nungaq Kuanana's large carving of a hunter in a kayak being upset by a massive walrus. A tranquil drawing by Etidloolie Etidloolie of Cape Dorset shows a winter camp with multi-coloured patterning of skins and fish hung out for drying. Pitseolak Ashoona's fantasy bird in pursuit of a willow branch appears to burst from the page as it beats four sets of polka-dotted wings.

Among the 1980 works is a tapestry by Pangnirtung artist Ekidluak Komoartok depicting twin birds transforming into humans, and a powerful carving by Cape Dorset artist Aoudla Pee of a Sedna figure resting on her hands as her tail changes into a seal head. An elegant drawing by Pitaloose Saila shows a mother and her four children in

a cut-away view of an igloo. This drawing was collected and donated by artist K.M. Graham who made a number of trips to Cape Dorset where she painted and worked with various artists.

The 1990s are represented by artists such as Josiah Nuilaalik's grey stone sculpture *Shaman Evil* in which a seal with extended flippers sprouts horns and two fangs. A miniature bone carving *Seal Spirit* by Nick Sikkuark shows a flying seal with a demonic human face. Also featured from the 1990s is a densely embroidered wall hanging by Elizabeth Angrnaqqaq. Her different textures and colour modulations convey the impression of bird feathers, animal fur, and the tundra in bloom. She uses target forms with circular chain-stitch patterns to represent bird nests holding a single egg.

Fellow Baker Lake artist Myra Kukiiyaut imagines what a mining camp might look like in her work. Her 1998 drawing shows a blue and red plane approaching a landing strip which is surrounded by multi-hued buildings including an outhouse. People are shown looking out the windows as they watch for the plane to arrive while others are waiting with their luggage beside the landing strip.

The exhibition concludes with a brilliant red and yellow wall hanging by Irene Avaalaaqiaq made in 2000. It shows a woman who has become frightened by human heads and birds which are emerging from the border of the wall hanging. Human heads are sprouting from the sides of the woman's leggings. These human heads speak to the woman and encourage her to escape by transforming into a bird. She is in the process of doing this as her arms turn into large bird heads.

The Macdonald Stewart Art Centre has a program of continuously changing Inuit Art exhibitions and is very active in researching, publishing and producing touring exhibitions such as *Asingit* which will open at the University of Innsbruck in Austria in May.

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Macdonald Stewart Art Centre
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This exhibition featured purchases and special gifts from Marie Ridd, Ruth Bentley, Dr. Michael Braudo, G. Jean Elliott and Avrom Isaacs.

The Macdonald Stewart Art Centre is recognized internationally for its research, publications and touring exhibitions of Inuit art which have been shown throughout Canada, the United States, Denmark, Iceland, India and Austria.