THE POWER FAMILY PROGRAM FOR INUIT ART

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"tillirnanngittuq" (pronounced tid-lee-nang-ee-took)
means "unexpected." The history of contemporary
Inuit art is one of unexpected challenges, lucky
opportunities, and a cultural and economic
achievement unimaginable at the outset.

The exquisite stone and ivory sculptures in this exhibition were created by Canadian Inuit during the 1950s and 1960s, when they were confronting unexpected disruptions in their traditional hunting lifestyle. Migration patterns of Arctic animals shifted, diminishing their food supply. The world market for white fox fur collapsed, reducing trade for pelts. Many Inuit suffered from diseases like tuberculosis, introduced by whalers and traders during preceding decades. Survival of the Inuit was threatened. The Canadian federal government established administrative centers near trading posts to provide medical and other social services. Inuit gradually relocated into the new settlements, further eroding traditional hunting patterns.

In 1953 James Houston, a personable young Canadian artist with a passion for the Arctic, was appointed the first federal development officer for South Baffin Island and settled his family in the new community at Kinngait (then called Cape Dorset). There, he encouraged Inuit to carve soapstone sculptures that might attract outside audiences and provide new sources of livelihood.

To promote awareness of Inuit art, Houston worked with the Canadian Guild of Crafts, the Hudson's Bay

Company, and trusted friends, including Ann Arbor businessman Eugene Power. Passionate about Inuit art, Power and his son, Philip, established the non-profit Eskimo Art, Inc. in 1953, taking the lead in importing Inuit art and introducing it to a U.S. audience. With the assurance of a wider market, Inuit arts flourished. In 1959 Kinngait Inuit incorporated their locally owned-and-managed West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative, and the first annual Cape Dorset print collection was introduced at the Stratford Festival in Ontario—a landmark event in the public presentation of Inuit art.

Neither the Inuit artists nor those aiding them in those early years could have foreseen the phenomenal impact these initiatives would have. In less than a generation, contemporary Inuit art was recognized worldwide for its artistic excellence and became a stable source of independent income for the Inuit.

Tillirnanngittuq presents sculptures and prints from the Power Family Collection and celebrates Philip and Kathy Power's generous promised gift of Inuit art to UMMA. The exhibition also embraces the future of Inuit art and anticipates research and innovative programs at UMMA through the Power Family Program for Inuit Art.

Marion "Mame" Jackson
Guest Curator
in collaboration with
Patricia Feheley
Consultant

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