



The Power Family Program for Inuit Art:

Tillirnanngittuq

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In the language of the Canadian Inuit, the word “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.

Geography



Kinngait, formerly Cape Dorset, means “mountain” in Inuktitut. It is located on the southern tip of Baffin Island, bordering the Northwest Passage. Population: Approx. 1,400

Language

Inuktitut is the language of the Inuit. It contains 15 consonants and 3 vowels and is written syllabically.

	i	ii	u	uu	a	aa	final
	△	△̇	▽	▽̇	◁	◁̇	⋈
p	∧	∧̇	∨	∨̇	∟	∟̇	◁
t	∩	∩̇	∪	∪̇	∩	∩̇	∩
k	ρ	ρ̇	σ	σ̇	τ	τ̇	σ
g	∩	∩̇	∪	∪̇	∟	∟̇	∩
m	∟	∟̇	∩	∩̇	∟	∟̇	∟
n	σ	σ̇	τ	τ̇	ρ	ρ̇	ρ
s	∩	∩̇	∪	∪̇	∟	∟̇	∩
l	∩	∩̇	∪	∪̇	∟	∟̇	∩
y	∟	∟̇	∩	∩̇	∟	∟̇	∩
v	∟	∟̇	∩	∩̇	∟	∟̇	∩
r	∩	∩̇	∪	∪̇	∟	∟̇	∩
q	σρ	σρ̇	σσ	σσ̇	στ	στ̇	σσ
ng	σ∩	σ∩̇	σ∪	σ∪̇	σ∟	σ∟̇	σ∩
f	∩	∩̇	∪	∪̇	∟	∟̇	∩

Historic Periods

Prehistoric Period (3,000 BCE-1770 CE)

Because prehistoric people lived a nomadic lifestyle, their belongings were small and portable. Of the objects that remain, most are sculptures of animals and humans that feature incised dots and decorative patterns.

Historic Period (1770-1940s)

During this period, Inuit had more contact with Europeans through the whaling industry, trade, and missionaries. Whalers and Inuit shared a visual vocabulary of incised ivory, such as scrimshaw, and exchanged objects as well as artistic techniques. Trade expanded the materials available to the Inuit, so they were able to incorporate metal and paper into their art. The Hudson's Bay Company set up a post in Cape Dorset in 1913, which established it as an economic and cultural hub.

Contemporary Period (1950-Present)

The transition to the Contemporary Period included elements from the Historic Period, such as small-scale incised sculptures. Prior to the 1950s, the primary material Inuit used for carving was ivory. Sculptures were small, limited by the size and rarity of walrus tusks. In the 1950s, Inuit artists continued to carve in ivory, but with encouragement from James Houston turned increasingly to locally available soapstone as a potentially attractive carving medium.

Gradually soapstone became the primary medium for Inuit sculpture, with ivory used mainly for decorative elements on spears, knives, and inset details such as teeth, eyes, and antlers. Finding the properties of soapstone more flexible than ivory, Inuit carvers began to create larger and compositionally more complex sculptures. Subject matter expanded and individualized styles and techniques emerged among the artists.



Images from the Canadian Museum of Civilization



Artist Unknown, Kimmirut, *Standing Woman* ca. 1950, Stone, Ivory



Innuqi Oqutaq, *Incised Antler* ca. 1954, Antler, stone

Sculpture



Johnny Inukpuk, Inukjuak, *Mother and Child* ca. 1954, Stone, Ivory, Inlay



Mark Tungilik Repulse Bay, *Muskox* ca. 1965, Stone, antler

Inuit sculpture and carvings are made from natural materials such as bone, driftwood, stone, and ivory. They represent a variety of subjects including daily life, relationships between parents and children, and animals in their environment. The depiction of animals varies stylistically, but Inuit artists have a keen sense of the physical characteristics from their close observation. For example, they capture the shifting weight of the polar bear and the lumbering musk ox in a smooth soapstone sculpture.



Artist Unknown, *Walking Bear*, ca. 1935, ivory

Print Making



Niviaksiak, Cape Dorset, *Polar Bear and Cub in Ice*, 1959, Stencil on paper



Kenojuak Ashshevak, Cape Dorset, *The Enchanted Owl*, 1960, Stonecut



Kenojuak Ashevak, Cape Dorset, *Birds from the Sea*, 1960, Stencil on paper

Inuit printmaking experiments began at Kinngait (Cape Dorset) in 1957, when sculptor Osuitok Ipellie responded enthusiastically to an informal printmaking demonstration by artist James Houston. Realizing that Osuitok was unfamiliar with the concept of printing multiple images, Houston rubbed ink into an incised image on a nearby ivory tusk, removed the excess ink, and pulled a perfectly acceptable print. Amazed at the resulting print, Osuitok exclaimed confidently, "We could do that!" This sharing of technology led to a powerful Inuit printmaking practice. James Houston traveled to Japan to learn various techniques, which he then taught to Kinngait artists.

Since 1959, the Kinngait Studios of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative have released annual collections of fine art prints, attracting an international audience of passionate collectors. Kinngait's professional printmakers first became known for the quality of stone block and stencil printing and, later, for lithography and intaglio techniques as well. This exhibition presents a selection of twenty-four prints from the Power Family Collection, including seven prints from the first annual print collection in 1959.

Story of Sedna

Sedna was a young woman wooed by a handsome suitor, who promised her a life of abundance. But her new husband tricked her; he was not human but a sea bird who took Sedna to his isolated island, where she was lonely and miserable. Hearing of his daughter's sadness, her father came by boat to rescue her. As they paddled away, the bird-husband swooped from the sky in a rage, creating winds threatening to capsize the boat. To calm the storm, the father put his daughter over the side of the boat, but Sedna held tight and the wind continued to rage. Fearing for his life, the father chopped off his daughter's fingers, and she slipped from the boat to the bottom of the sea, where she became the sea goddess. Her severed fingers became the sea animals—whale, walrus, seal, and fish. Sedna controls the sea animals and offers them to hunters if she chooses.

In Inuit sculpture, some images refer to stories like Sedna, and others portray the magical transformation of animals into people and people into animals.



Saggiak, Cape Dorset, *Sedna*, ca. 1964, Stone



Niviaksiak, Cape Dorset, *Sedna*, ca. 1957, Stone

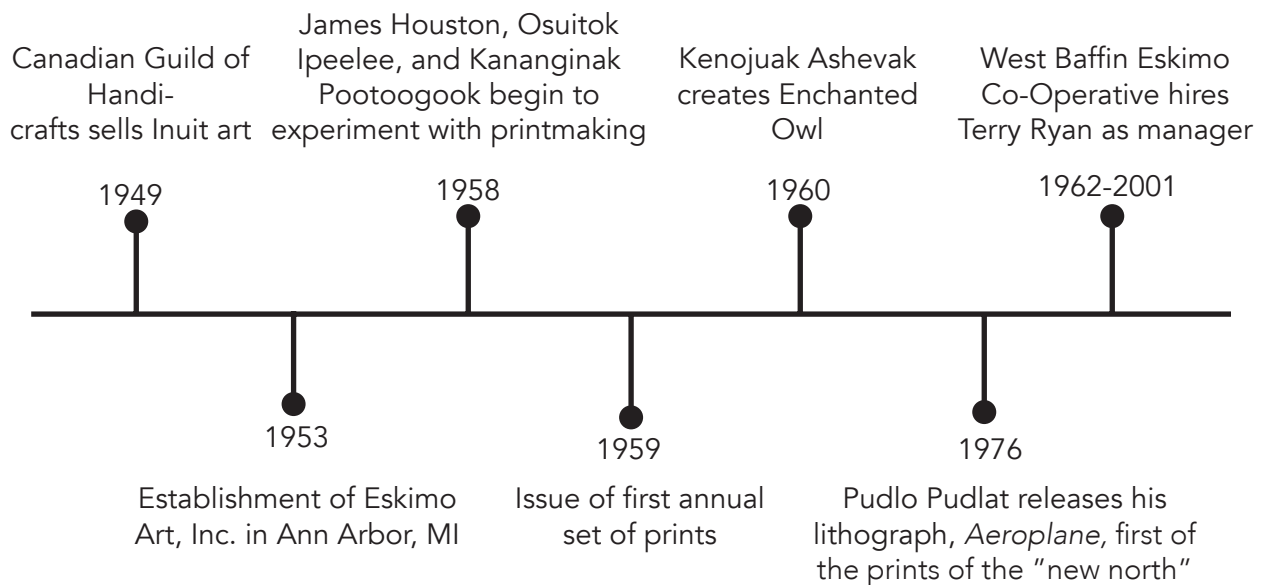
The Power Family

Until the 1950s, most Inuit lived in small, isolated camps a day or more from the nearest trading post. Migration patterns of Arctic animals had shifted, diminishing their food supply. The world market for white fox fur had collapsed, reducing trade for pelts. Many Inuit suffered from diseases introduced by whalers and traders during the preceding century.

The Canadian federal government established administrative centers near trading posts to provide health, education, and other social services - an array of policies that advocated for cultural integration; and Inuit began gravitating toward these new settlements. In 1951 a personable young Canadian artist, James Houston, became the first administrator of the South Baffin settlement of Kingait (Cape Dorset). Houston quickly identified potential artists and encouraged them to carve soapstone sculptures that might attract an outside audience and provide a new source of income. Inuit adapted to these commercial proposals, selling their carvings to Houston for shipment to southern Canada.



James Houston worked with the Canadian Guild of Crafts and the Hudson's Bay Company and approached trusted friends—including Ann Arbor businessman Eugene Power—for advice about building an audience and market for Inuit art. Power and his son, Philip, were already passionate about Inuit art and established the non-profit Eskimo Art, Inc. in 1953, taking the lead in importing Inuit art and introducing it to a U.S. audience. In a recent gift, Phil and Kathy Power have generously donated objects from their collection to UMMA.



Resources

Books

Christopher, Neil & Louise Flaherty. *Stories of the Amautalik/Fantastic Beings from Inuit Myths and Legends*. Illustrated by Larry McDougall. Inhabit Media, Iqaluit, 2009.

Hessel, Ingo. *Inuit Art*. Douglas & McIntyre, 1998.

Houston, James. *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller*. Houghton and Mifflin, 1995.

Kaslik, Ibi and Anthony Brennan. *Tales from the Tundra: A Collection of Inuit Stories*. Inhabit Media, Iqaluit, 2010.

Mikkigak, Qaunaq & Joanne Schwartz. *The Legend of the Fog*. Illustrated by Danny Christopher. Inhabit Media, Iqaluit, 2011.

Nappaaluk, Mitiarjuk. *Sanaaq: An Inuit Novel*. University of Manitoba Press, 2014.

Tagaq, Tanya. *Split Tooth*. Viking, 2019.

Films

The Searchers (Maliglutit), by Zacharias Kunuk, which includes a score by Tanya Tagaq

Kinngait: Riding Light Into the World

The Living Stone

Credit

This exhibition inaugurates the *Power Family Program for Inuit Art*, established in 2018 through the generosity of Philip and Kathy Power.

The Power Family Program for Inuit Art: Tillirnanngittuq is curated by Marion (Mame) Jackson, with special consultant Pat Feheley. Thank you to all involved in writing texts for labels and educational materials. If not otherwise noted, text in the educational guide is taken from and inspired by exhibition labels.

Educational Guide: Designed by Halley Burnside, text by Mame Jackson, curator, and Pat Feheley, consultant