

Culture and Tradition in the North: Inuit Art

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Art has been a significant part of Inuit life for thousands of years. Today, several paintings, prints, and sculptures made by Inuit artists have gained much attention in the Canadian art market. Although art was made for very different purposes during prehistoric times, producing art to sell was found to be a great (and sometimes only) opportunity for the Inuit to make a living since the arrival of European settlers. There is often a misconception that Inuit art has retained originality and unity over the centuries, but the Inuit have experienced several changes, just as any other culture, which is illustrated in their art. Decades of colonial influence has also affected Inuit art. Inuit art has changed and developed over time, both independently and through outside influence, and although it has garnered more attention in the 21st century than ever before, people have yet to understand the historical complexities and association it has with colonialism.

The history of Inuit art is commonly divided into three main time periods: prehistoric, historic, and contemporary. The prehistoric period consists of the Dorset, Thule, and various other cultures, spanning the time between 2000 BCE to 1700 CE. The historic period dates from the 1700s until the year of 1948 when a Canadian artist named James Houston first visited the North. The contemporary period begins in 1948 and continues to present day. There is a definite shift from the innocent and natural forms that art takes in the prehistoric period to the self-aware and commercialized forms of the historic and contemporary periods. Each of these artistic periods is distinct from each other stylistically yet have similarities that link them together, such as the knowledge and love of Northern nature.

Prehistoric Art

The prehistoric period in Inuit art is characterized by utilitarian yet beautifully carved tools and magico-religious figurines. Many of the intricate tools were found in areas where people belonging to what scholars call the “Arctic Small Tool tradition” lived. These people seem to have been nomadic as there was no evidence that they had permanent or even temporary homes (Swinton). Normally, people of such minimalist lifestyles would not be found creating artistic devices. However, the prehistoric Inuit’s small weapons and flint tools were very carefully made and decorative. The craftsmen seem to have thought about the visual aspects of their tools as they chose multicolored flints, carved them with expert precision and even fashioned decorative edges (McGhee 14). These tools can be considered not just useful and portable but also as works of art. When the climate began to cool down

around 1500 BCE, the Arctic Small Tool tradition people had to seek out a more sedentary lifestyle. This new way of life began to inspire better ways to hunt and the development of new tools.

Dorset Culture

These new factors formed what is known as the Dorset culture, named after Cape Dorset. This new Dorset way of life became the norm for many in the Arctic for almost 2,000 years. During this time, less functional artistic carvings were made. Settling into a more sedentary lifestyle may have given people the chance to explore creating items not necessarily needed for survival. Many of the Dorset carvings were made of ivory or wood, and depicted mostly animals, less commonly humans or spirits. Scholars believe that Dorset art was associated with shamanistic religious practices where items such as life sized wooden masks and drums would have been used in celebrations or rituals (McGhee 15). Other carved items and figurines of animals may also have been objects of magical power. There were many carvings of bears engraved with lines representing the animal's skeletal bones which led to the belief that they represented the "helping bear spirit" of shamans (McGhee 16). Other common figures found in Dorset culture included maskettes (small or partial masks), carvings of birds or land and sea mammals, and human "face clusters". These face clusters consisted of several expressive carved out faces on a large piece of bone, antler, or wood (Swinton). Also, Dorset art is uniquely characterized by the strong expressions on the features of the figures.

Thule Culture

The group that came after the Dorset culture had a very different style of art from its predecessors. The Thule culture is thought to have come from northern Alaska around 1000 - 1200 CE. The Dorset culture had all but disappeared at this point, so it was believed that the Thule people had invaded and killed or driven them away. The Thule seem to have learned certain skills from the Dorset such as building igloos and finding material to make tools with (McGhee 17). Although they appear to have learned some skills from the Dorset, there are many differences in the artwork of the Dorset and the Thule. Dorset art seemed to carry a stark and masculine quality in its form, whereas Thule art tended to be more feminine and related to female forms and uses. For example, the Thule made utensils like combs and sewing equipment as well as "swimming figurines" which depicted feminine representations of humans or animals (Swinton). The elegant female figurines of the Thule culture were mostly faceless while the male Dorset figures all wore very strong expressions (Swinton). Up until this point in history, Inuit art has had no influence from the outside, since there has been no contact with foreigners yet. Later on, during what is called the historic period, the style of Inuit art changed again, but this time it was due to colonial influences.

Historic Art

The historic period is described as "an ill-defined and poorly documented time span which is often only briefly acknowledged within the history of Inuit art" (Blodgett 22).

Compared to scholars' interest in prehistoric archaeology and contemporary art, the historic period does not gain as much attention and is lacking in documentation and examples of artwork. The historic period of Inuit art began when the climate dropped again and contact with colonizers is slowly made in the Arctic. Sometime in the 16th century, the unified style of Thule art dispersed and slowly paved the way for a new style of art to enter. The Inuit did continue to make functional tools, decorated items, and carvings during the historic period. These items ranged from everyday useful objects to special dolls and games; even personal utensils such as ivory combs and pipes were often adorned with special decorations.

However, most of the visitors to the North were largely unimpressed with the Inuit art they encountered. They found the historic period art to be crude and undeveloped. Art seemed to be more appreciated when it was done by artists who had previously been exposed to settlers and utilized western tools. Before 1948, people were aware of the Inuit's artistic abilities, but they did not see their carvings and tool making as an art form. When looking at stone or ivory carvings, most individuals saw "inexpensive handicrafts, curios, souvenir items, or simple functional items" (Crandall 45). These items were just seen as plain artifacts or exotic utensils from a foreign culture rather than art.



Caved Ivory Tusk, 1914, from www.historymuseum.ca/cmhc/exhibitions/tresors/art_inuit

Despite this, there was still a demand for historic Inuit art. Throughout the 1800s "souvenir carvings" were in high demand. The carvings that Southerners liked most were those that they believed truly illustrated traditional Inuit life (Crandall 38). So, artists had to cater to the desires of foreigners who really only saw their work as souvenirs and little trinkets. By the beginning of the 19th century, the animal carvings, as well as dolls and toys previously used to trade with occasional explorers, turned into a larger trading industry between the Inuit and settlers. The trade carvings began to become more exquisite in skill and detail than before. The previous indigenous magico-religious significance had disappeared and began to gear more towards the settlers' traditions. For example, replicas of Roman Catholic figures were being carved, as well as everyday items like cigarette boxes, match holders, and sail boats (Swinton). The Inuit carvings began to become increasingly catered towards the settlers' tastes.

Due to the increasing desire for Inuit carvings, an issue arose regarding "imitation art". This was a problem that began in the 1930s when cheaper versions of Inuit and other Indigenous artworks were being manufactured and imported in from places like Japan. These imitation pieces were sold in west coast souvenir shops for about half the price of the

originals. Although this production ceased briefly during World War II, the imitation returned with even more variety after the war. To make sure people could differentiate between the originals and imitations, the items were required by law in 1953 to have a sticker indicating the country where they were made (Crandall 131). However, the stickers could always be removed and this did not do much to improve the situation. The government then suggested the Inuit mass produce their crafts to compete with the low prices of imitation souvenirs. This became a problem for Inuit artists, as the quality of their work suffered and materials ran out. Mass production methods also risked the loss of traditional skills and true craftsmanship. This was only one of the many consequences that occurred due to the interactions with settlers.

Differences between Prehistoric/Historic and Contemporary Art

Many of the modern changes in the method, media, and subject matter of Inuit art were direct consequences of outside influences. Today, people may think Inuit carvings have always been made from stone, but the materials used in the prehistoric and historic periods were usually ivory or bone. Only in the contemporary period sculptures began being made from carving stone, which had to be imported from other countries such as Brazil and Italy (Crandall 56). The reason artists had to go from using ivory to stone was due to the demand for sculptures outweighing the supply of ivory. The over-harvesting of ivory from the competitive whaling industries in the 18th and 19th centuries caused a shortage in ivory. A ban on commercial whaling was placed because of this, which was unfortunate for the Inuit who relied on harvesting whales not just for their carvings but also for their sustenance.

Besides the change in materials, there were also alterations in the function of Inuit art because of western influence. Early Inuit carvings seem to indicate that much of the art in the prehistoric and historic periods were meant to be used or handled. In the past, art had utilitarian functions as religious charms, game pieces, or tools. These works did not have a favoured point of view or a "right way" of displaying them (Crandall 57). In contrast, contemporary art does have a specific point of view and is always meant to be displayed. As a result, Inuit art today is often more detailed on one side or just 2-dimensional.

Contemporary Art

The idea of contemporary Inuit art is often accredited to a Canadian artist named James Houston. Houston had the opportunity to travel North in 1948 to an Inuit community called Inukjuak. He became friends with the residents there and exchanged artistic knowledge with them (Sutton 907). When he returned from the trip, Houston brought several carvings that the Inuit had given him. He presented these to the Canadian Handicraft Guild and they were well received by the directors. Houston was then appointed to be an art ambassador to the North and was given responsibility to the upkeep of Inuit art (908). He also introduced new forms of art (such as printmaking) to the Inuit and this seems to have created more interest in the South.



The Enchanted Owl by Kenojuak Ashevak. 1960

Despite its long history, it seems that it was only through this mediation by James Houston that Inuit art began to be recognized as an “art” rather than a craft. With this new form of print-making, a certain number of prints were made before the original stencil was destroyed. This was to ensure the value of the limited prints. After the prints were made, they were sold at galleries or the Hudson's Bay Company at a set price (Craig 58). One very famous print, titled *The Enchanted Owl* by Kenojuak Ashevak, was originally sold in 1960 for \$75. This may have seemed like a fairly good price for the artist at the time, but the reality was that the price of these prints inflated exponentially over time. In the case of *The Enchanted Owl*, it was sold in 1969 for \$5,000. Five years later, in 1974, the same print was sold for \$35,000 in a private sale (59).

If the owners of a print want to sell a print later for profit, they can do so, for as much as they want. Unfortunately, the original artist does not get a share of the money. Although the inflated prices cannot be managed by the artists, \$75 is outrageously low for a print that can be sold 15 years later for \$35,000. Considering printing expenses and labour wages need to be paid as well, it is likely that the artist only received a small cut of the original profit. This cost discrepancy may be the fault of the co-operatives that produce and price Inuit art, but it is also the result of the capitalistic mindset that dominated North America since colonialism.

Co-operatives in the North began due to relocations of the Inuit that prevented them from being able to support themselves through hunting alone. The co-ops were meant to provide wage labour for the Inuit and for them to develop the local economy (Mitchell). With these cooperatives, the Inuit would be employed in retail, food service, construction, tourism, etc., but the most successful activity has been the production of art. The Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources provided much of the resources needed to start up these co-operatives. The goal was to allow the Inuit to eventually take control and ownership of the co-ops, but in the meantime, managers from outside the communities were brought in. This also meant that outsiders would have a large amount of control over the production, and they often had strict ideas on what was to be made. This was, of course, done with good intentions for the artists and the rest of the community, but it also limited the diversity of work that was produced.

Most contemporary Inuit paintings, drawings, or prints portray traditional life in the past rather than the experiences of the contemporary Inuit. Many of the scenes depicted would be of hunting with spears as it occurred hundreds of years ago, instead of the rifles that most contemporary Inuit would be more familiar with. This kind of art portraying the past is sometimes called "memory art" (Crandall 57). Memory art was most popular with Southerners who liked the idea of an "exotic" culture, so Inuit artists were discouraged from depicting contemporary scenes. During the contemporary art period, some "arts and crafts officers" were sent to the North to teach Inuit artists how to produce art that would appeal to the markets' idea of Inuit art (58). This clearly restricted the artists' freedoms as they had little or no say as to what they would create.



Man Abusing His Partner, by Annie Pootoogook. 2001-2002

However, there were a few Inuit artists that depicted contemporary scenes, such as Annie Pootoogook. Pootoogook began drawing in 1997 with a co-operative in Cape Dorset.

She quickly became drawn to coloured pencils and illustrating contemporary settlement life in her hometown. Her work is unique in that it features Inuit people today, wearing contemporary clothing and using everyday items such as cigarettes, lighters, and canned foods.

Pootoogook's work also revealed common tragic experiences in the North, including domestic violence and alcoholism. She rose to fame in 2006 when she won the Sobey Art Award, and her drawings were being put up in galleries. However, due to the very experiences her art revolved around, Pootoogook's life deteriorated until she found herself homeless and addicted to drugs and alcohol (Adami). This is not an uncommon issue for many Inuit artists, due to their living conditions and intergenerational trauma. Even being a successful artist with gallery exhibitions does not always guarantee sufficient income, and factors such as abuse and addiction can worsen the situation. Artists often have a sense of responsibility to depict important issues in their personal or collective lives. Therefore, we as viewers should also find it our responsibility to acknowledge all aspects of a culture and not accept it solely for its aesthetic appeal. The art of a culture and the material/social conditions of that culture should not be separated.

Although there have been many changes and developments to the style and media of Inuit art, an underlying theme has stayed intact throughout the years. The love of nature and impeccable observation skills of the Inuit are unique and shine throughout their work. Art collectors and scholars alike may believe that contemporary Inuit art is doing well in business today, but the reality is that Inuit artists are extremely underappreciated considering the quality and skill of their work. The Canadian government has done some work to make Inuit art more available to the public, but this may have been at the artists' expense as they have not always been paid fairly. It is unfortunate that many people are still unaware of the effort, and often pain, that it took to create such beautiful works of art. Art enthusiasts today would benefit from further research on the colonial history of Inuit art and current living situations of artists.

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