

Thoughts on Inuit Art

by Carol Heppenstall

“Art can never be understood, but can only be seen as a kind of magic, the most profound and mysterious of all human activities.” —Bill Reid

Inuit Art has enjoyed a global presence for over fifty years. While curators, dealers, and government funding agencies struggle with the definitions and parameters of these exciting visual forms, those of us who encounter works by Inuit artists are immediately touched by their honesty, intimacy, and communicative power. The art of any cultural group is a window of opportunity for insight and understanding. What better way to experience Canada’s last frontier, and its most exotic landscape, than through the artistic outpourings of its people?

The art of Inuit, Canada’s Arctic people, has a history of some 4,000 years. Its means of expression took the form of highly decorated material culture. Whether these objects were used for hunting or personal adornment, their significance is unquestionable. The aesthetic appeal beyond western understanding underlies the amazing collections to be found in the world’s great museums and galleries. For Inuit, this rich artistic outpouring created a spiritual bond, a means of communicating with the world around them and the spiritual forces that controlled that world. For a non-literate people, art was a means by which they translated *isumasi* (“our thoughts”). That they have a rich oral history which complements this tradition has only come to light within the last century.

Today’s Inuit artists continue the role of communicator. This voice honours the land and its people, initiating a dialogue with those who encounter the works of art. To confront a stone carving of a polar bear dancing to its own music or a mother nursing her newborn is to experience a glimpse of the Arctic rich with both the familiar and the exotic. Realizing the distance the artist must travel just to quarry the stone—and the dangers inherent in this exercise—raises the level of motivation beyond the challenges of artists elsewhere. The raw materials of stone, bone and antler emerge from the Arctic landscape. When we hold a handmade carving we are in touch with this landscape.

Paper for limited edition prints and drawings and textiles used for weaving and wall hangings are newer materials for these artists. Both these mediums afford a narrative means of sharing information. Prints that illustrate life in the communities, often contrasting then and now, bring us closer to their way of life. Sprinkled with humour and imagination, prints have become highly sought by collectors. The excellence with which they are produced is a tribute both to the many artistic advisors who come north to share their expertise and the talent of the artist to capture the idea on paper, translate it in the print medium and produce the print. Weavings and wall hangings expand the traditional sewing skills of women and are a richly decorative and highly personalized art form.

As Inuit artist gains recognition, a more personal vision may inform his or her work. We often see signature pieces that characterize the work of a particular artist.

Personal thoughts and ideas are translated into stone or on paper, or an artist may choose to work in a new medium such as film, video or precious metals. At times we are challenged by notions of what is traditional, what is art? These questions are not limited to art made by Inuit or anyone else. Suffice to say that as we encounter the art of Inuit we experience what Reid calls a kind of magic, a gift of seeing and knowing another.