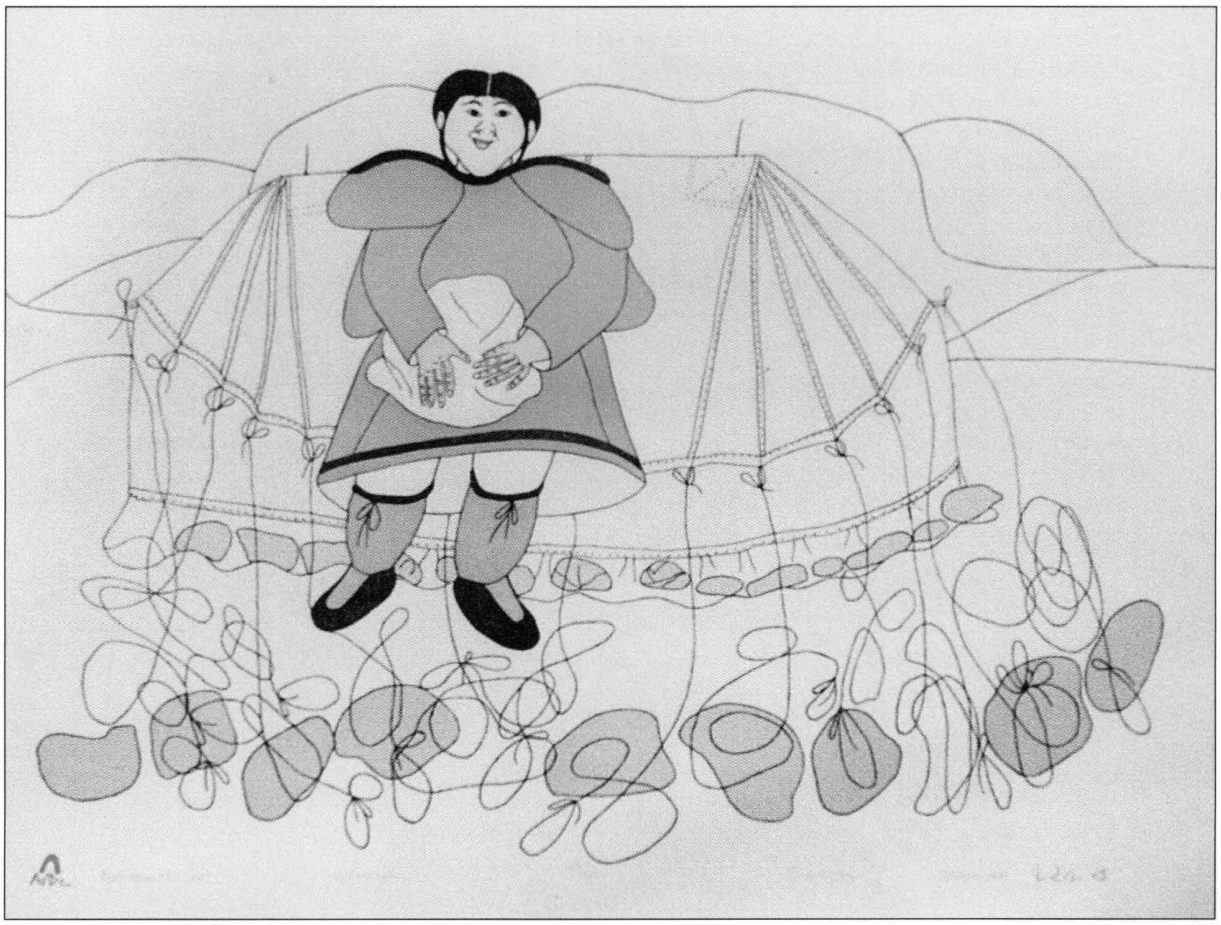
Inuit Art



Inuit Reflections

WESTERN WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Inuit Art/Inuit Reflections

Western Gallery
Western Washington University, Bellingham
May 14, - June 16, 2001

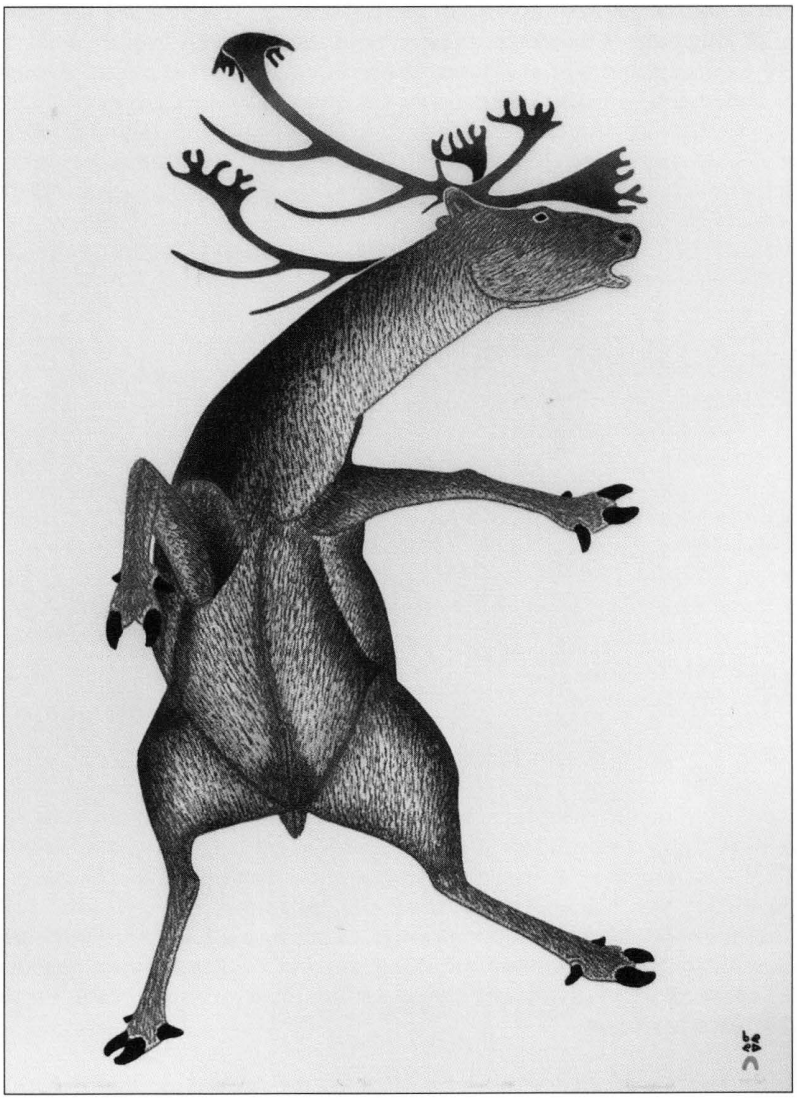
In keeping with the diversity mission of the university, the Western Gallery is extremely pleased to bring a two-part exhibition entitled *Inuit Art* to our campus. The two components of this exhibition include *Power of Thought: The Prints of Jesse Oonark* and *Inuit Reflections*. The *Power of Thought* segment from the University of Richmond Museums explores the prints of Jesse Oonark from the period of 1970-1985. Oonark is one of the most noted Canadian Inuit artists whose works focus on imagery of everyday life in the Arctic region as well as spiritual elements in Inuit cosmology. *Inuit Reflections* is a separate component comprised of the Inuit art in Western's own small collection as well as impressive works of some of Canada's top Inuit artists from a private source. It is our hope that this exhibition will give the audience a perspective on an indigenous art movement which has gained international recognition for its unique vision of life and spirituality.

These two interlocking exhibitions also bring together colleagues on the east and west coasts: at Western, the Canadian-American Studies program, the Department of Art, and the Western Gallery; from Virginia, the University of Richmond Museums and the owner of Arctic Inuit Art Galleries based in southeast US and Nova Scotia. We especially pay tribute to the artists and collectors of past and present whose foresight, personal experiences and wide knowledge help to make this a memorable exhibition.

Curatorial Team for *Inuit Reflections*
Sarah Clark-Langager, Ph.D. Director, Western Gallery
Momi Naughton, Ph.D. Co-curator/Advisor and Assistant Professor of Art History
Patricia Relay, Co-curator/Researcher and Double Eagle Endowment Scholar in Art History

(cover illustration)
Mayoreak, *Putting Up the Tent*, 1982
Lithograph 10/50 (27 x 33 inches)
Private Collection

Photo credits: Paul Brower



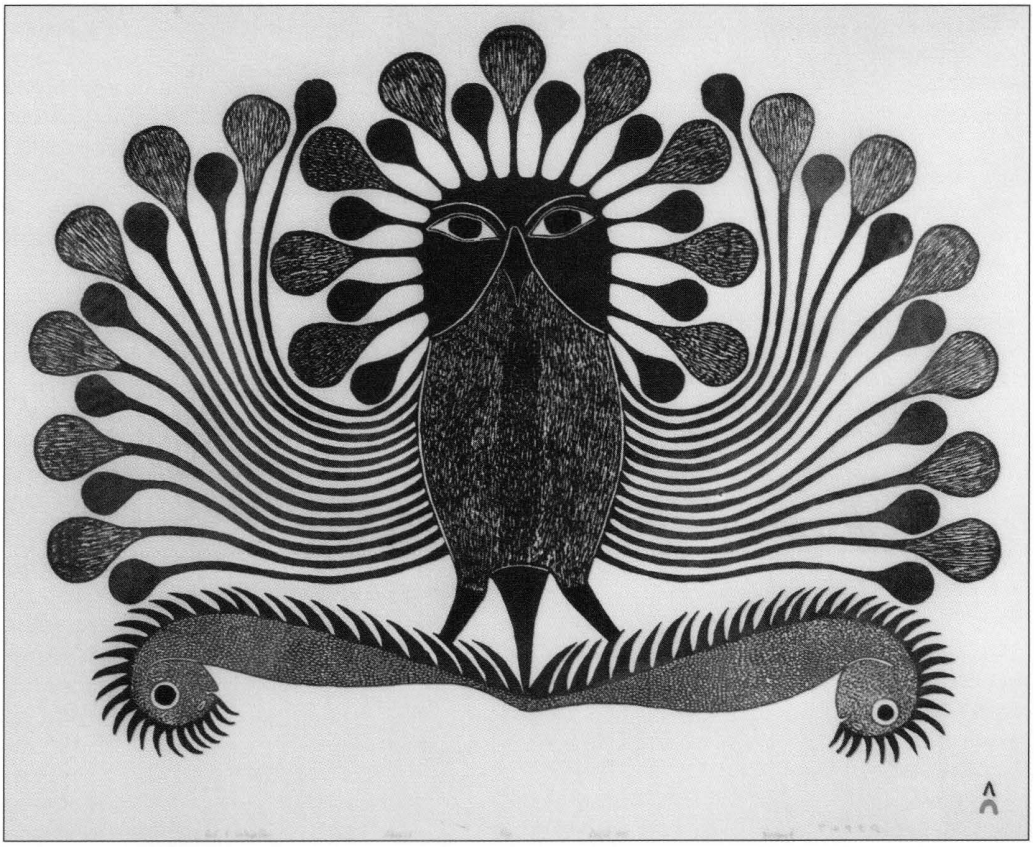
Approaching Danger
Kananginak Pootoogook
1996
Stone cut print 14/50 (35 x 27 inches)
Private Collection

Living in one of the coldest and least hospitable parts of the habitable world, the Canadian Inuit, formerly known as Eskimo, developed skills and technologies that not only allowed for survival but also served as the basis for a frugal and self-reliant way of life. The Inuit occupation of Arctic North America populated millions of square miles of tundra and sea ice spanning over 120 degrees of longitude. Completely isolated until the sixteenth century, Inuit began to be discovered by explorers and whalers. Later, nineteenth and early twentieth century explorers, missionaries, traders and Canadian law enforcement agents all molded an uncertain future for the Inuit. This acculturation process has led to social disorganization, particularly in larger communities. Today, approximately 35,000 Inuit live in about fifty small communities scattered through Northern Canada in Labrador, Nunavik (Arctic Quebec), the Northwest Territories and the new Territory of Nunavut. Introducing change to the Inuit way of life, influencing Inuit technologies and lifestyles, affecting traditional customs and belief systems, European contact gradually undermined Inuit independence.

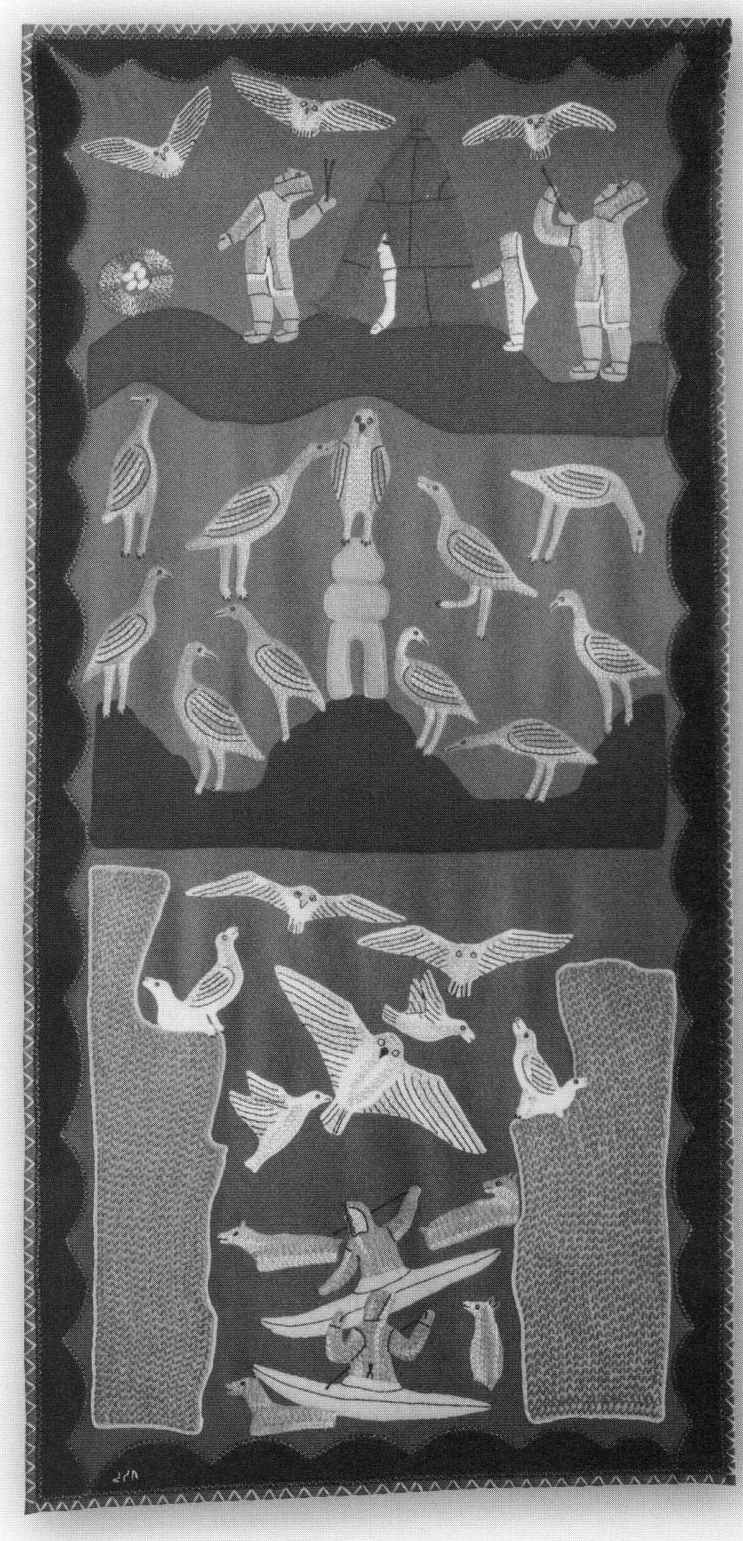
Given the declining self-sufficiency of the Inuit in the 1950's, the Canadian government established programs to stimulate local economy. Attempts were made to establish native enterprise in the form of cooperatives based on commercial fishing, handicraft programs and, in some cases, retail stores. Politically motivated and econocentric, government programs in the Arctic of the 1950's were anxious to introduce new industries. Inasmuch as Inuit artists had a proven ability to produce characteristic handicraft articles, the development of Canadian Handicraft Guilds appeared to be an ideal opportunity for Inuit craftsmen. The eager artist James Houston arrived in Cape Dorset in 1948, ready to affect change, which centered on the encouragement of native crafts. Houston brought with him contemporary techniques and a formidable knowledge of printmaking and founded the internationally known Cape Dorset style. Combining the efforts of Houston with the marketing techniques of the Hudson's Bay Company, a complex mixture of individuals, organizations, institutions, and governments conspired to encourage, discourage, and alter the work of Inuit artists.

The period after 1950 marked the transformation of the Inuit from nomadic to a settled population. The introduction of a marketable product–carvings, tapestries, wall hangings and stone cut prints–allowed many Inuit to pursue a relatively traditional lifestyle. While Inuit artists have been prompted and influenced to produce art by established galleries and institutions in southern provinces, they have nonetheless managed to imbue their art with traditional values and memories of life as it once was. A tradition of artistic expression is inherent to Inuit craftsmen and women, focusing on the materials of everyday life rather than on art for its own sake. Creating images of Inuit life for a foreign culture, the visual language evokes narrative qualities. Whether discovered, created or evolved, the images that Inuit artists create establish their cultural and subjective identity.

Just as their forebearers created art in what is called the prehistoric and historic periods of Arctic North America, contemporary Inuit artists have evolved from this foundation. It is generally accepted that the contemporary period has evolved from their earlier periods of artistic production. Collectors can still procure "contemporary" art which was created by the same ancient traditions and innate forces as art during the prehistoric and historic periods. Even though there may be differences in mediums and function, from personal use to commercial sale, these distinctions are relatively insignificant since the core traditions are still being expressed. Through the acquisition of art objects the collector can see that Inuit value their culture deeply. The survival training Inuit had received in their own culture helped them maintain their language and values. Adapting to modern aesthetics and establishing their cultural identity, Inuit artists transform these traditional themes into works of art.



Owl and Caterpillar
Kenojuak Ashevak
1995
Stone cut print 8/50 (29.25 x 34.25 inches)
Private Collection



Bird Hunt
Mary Yuusipik
Appliqué and embroidered wall hanging (57 x 27.5 inches)
Private Collection

The world class objects and images created by Inuit craftsmen and women not only have established a cultural identity but have also gained scholarly respect over the last fifty years. Oriented around the people and the mythical world they view, Inuit art reacts to the challenge of making art in a nontraditional context for an outside market. From the internationally acclaimed prints and carvings to the remarkable wall hangings and tapestries, the mediums that are stylistically applied have both an aesthetic as well as a functional value. 1986 marked the year that Inuit art evolved from themes reminiscent of the past to an art form that confronts a more responsive stance regarding contemporary themes. Establishing their contemporary cultural identity, artists started illustrating the past as well as the present. Since its beginning, contemporary Inuit art has internationally expanded cultural awareness in four basic areas-prints, carvings, tapestries and wall hangings.

Marking the contemporary awareness of Inuit art, printmaking in Cape Dorset and Baker Lake areas established the foundation for the international recognition of Inuit artists. Printed on Japanese rice paper (mulberry bark), applying techniques such as stone carving (serpentine, unique to West Baffin Island, reacted best to ink), engraved prints and stencil prints, the historical development of style and technique can be traced to James Houston's impact on Inuit craftsmen and women. According to James Houston, the technology of printmaking as a method was new to Inuit, but the images and ideas they created were firmly based on centuries of ancient Inuit traditions, myths and skills. It is not so much an ethnic art but an art that is created within the framework of contemporary Canadian cultural, social and economic climates. Inuit art is intimately tied to personal experience of the land and its animals, camp life, family life, hunting, spirituality and mythology.

Artists like Kananginak Pootoogook, one of Cape Dorset's founding printmakers, mixed naturalism with theatrical twists. *Approaching Danger*, a 1996 stone cut by Kananginak, reflects the theme of animals at play. Gerhard Hoffman, an author on Inuit art, has submitted that "both people and animals lived on the earth but there was no difference between them." As a vital role of the everyday life of the Inuit this subject matter is based on many years of observing, stalking and butchering prey. Evident in their wildlife art, gender differences are prevalent. While men portray the strength and ferocity of the animal, women present animals in a more decorative and stylized manner. For example, Kenojuak's *Owl and Caterpillar* is a stylized version of an owl. Therefore, Inuit prints focus on traditional themes and subject matter yet satisfy contemporary markets.

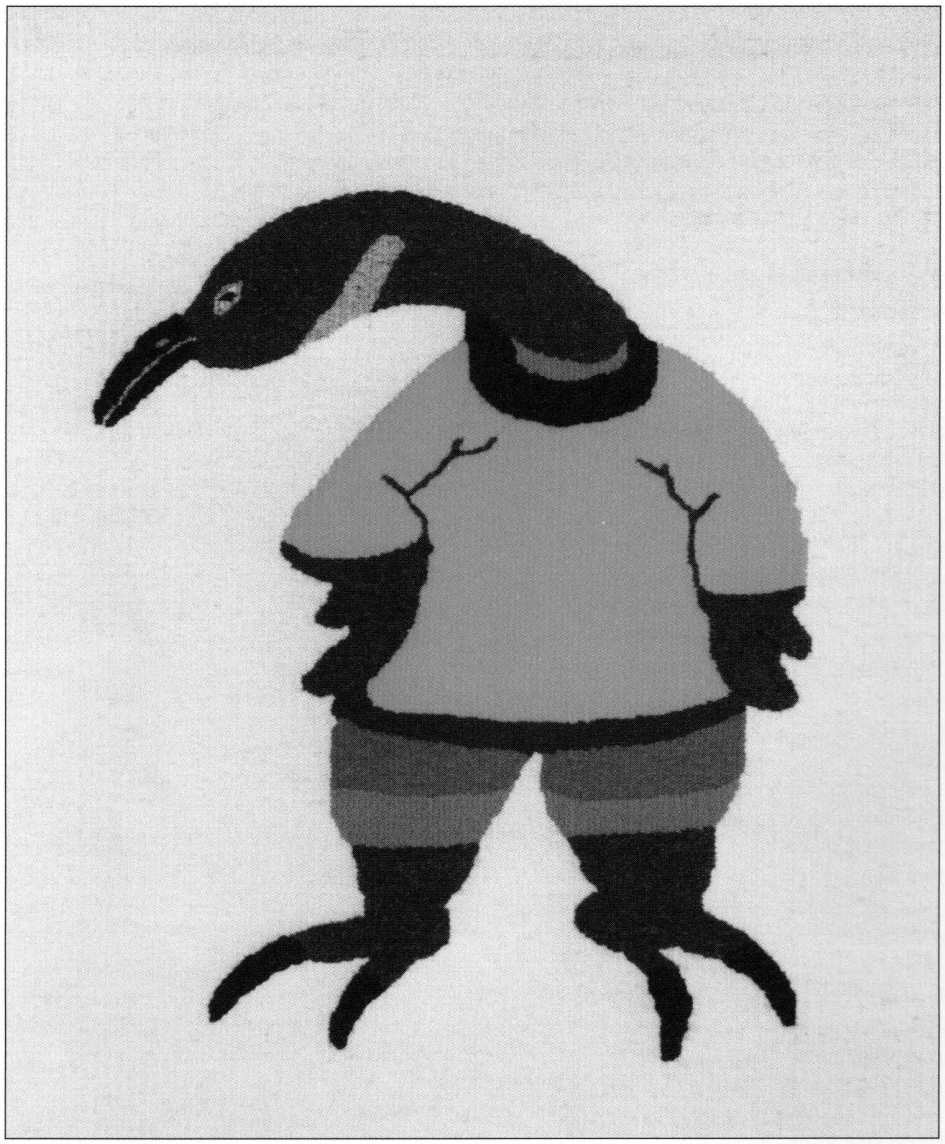
Just as printmakers represent images of a hunting economy, carvers depict various animals of the North, including musk oxen, caribou, walrus, dogs, hares and birds. The two defining features of Inuit sculpture are its physicality and relatively modest scale. With the presence of outsiders and modern equipment, as well as their acquisitiveness, the Inuit began to produce objects which were of no use to themselves but were predestined for sale to the collectors. Inuit craftsmen and women were marketed as "primitive artists". The carvings grew larger as their function changed. Although considered primitive by Westerners, the images that carvers portray tell a story. Recent carvers like Charlie Kogvik, for example, are concerned with the problems of mass produced souvenir carvings versus quality collectible carvings. Making this distinction, Charlie's stone carving called *Drummer* depicts a form of entertainment that has considerable spiritual significance. Charlie applies traditional subject matter with a modern awareness that is visually appealing to southern markets in depicting the ritualistic qualities of pre-contact Shamanism.

Drummer
Charlie Kogvik
Soapstone carving (16.5 x 9.5 x 10 inches)
Private Collection

Textile arts have achieved a level of importance as well. Both Inuit wall hangings and tapestries unite superb sewing and weaving with designs that document traditional ways of life with aesthetically pleasing patterns. Learning to sew from their mothers while living in igloos or summer tents, seamstresses making wall hangings utilized a wide range of colors and designs. According to Ingo Hessel, author of *Inuit Art: An Introduction*, the subject matter of wall hangings range from narrative or symbolic depictions of traditional camp life and animals to the spirit world, transformation and mythology. Recent Inuit artists choose to document their old ways for reasons of pride and a sense of heritage. Mary Yuusipik, a seamstress from Baker Lake, Nunavit, combines appliqué and embroidery techniques that artistically imply the overt symbolic overtones of humans and animals. Mary Yuusipik's *Bird Hunt*, for example, is a tiered composition that is balanced and symmetrical. The subtlety of realism in her work, combined with the illusion of depth and narrative qualities, evokes similar themes reflected in prints and carvings.

Just as wall hangings have achieved a level of importance and satisfy the desire of tourists, tapestries have established recognition as well. United with superb weaving, designs parallel printmaking. As a medium, tapestry is indicative of the level of complexity of the woven imagery and of the refined technique. The finishing is so perfect that the viewer can hardly tell the front from the back. Weavers, like printmakers, are employees of a shop. The artist designs the image and the weaver executes the design. Telling a story and utilizing their ability to see, weavers rely on patience and dexterity to complete a work of art. Malaya Akulukjuk's *Long Neck*, woven by Rhoda Veevee, is a weaving which is conceptually altered by the medium. The background and the representation of a bird develop in the weaving process. Malaya, who is also a shaman, contributes a spiritual essence to her work in depicting single animals and spirit creatures. Rooted in women's traditional sewing and design skills, both tapestries and wall hangings expand the range of imagery.

Although their status as individual artists has evolved over the years, Inuit craftsmen and women do not pretend to be anything but themselves. Simply stated, the artist conveys the visual narrative's purpose by following the conventional Inuit lifestyle. Knowing the Inuit traditional ways of survival and knowing about camping while out hunting, men and women do their part and help take care of the necessities. Creating images and ideas are firmly based on tradition, myths, and skills. Although their function has changed, many of the artworks represent scenes of everyday life. Appreciated by a broader audience and recognized for their artistic integrity, the Inuit display their culture through their works of art. Today, Inuit artists make statements through their visual language of expression. Linked to their surroundings and their history, artistic production of Arctic North America is reflective of the Inuit's collective and subjective identity.



Long Neck
Malaya Akulukjuk and Rhoda Veevee,
Woven tapestry 2/10 (25 x 21 inches)
Private Collection

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