

# Discover Inuit Art

What do polar bears look like when they stand up on their hind legs?

What kinds of creatures are the heroes of Inuit legends?

How did Inuit mothers keep their babies warm through the freezing arctic days and nights?

What does an Inuit summer camp look like?

What are some of the big concerns for young Inuit today?

You'll learn the answers to all these questions, and hundreds more, through the wonderful world of Inuit art.

The detail in Inuit sculpture and colourful drawings will open more doors than you can imagine.

Many of the older Inuit artists working today grew up in a traditional way. They lived in igloos in winter and tents made of animal skins in summer. Their families returned to their winter and summer camps each year when the sea mammals and animals (like seals, whales and caribou), came in greatest numbers.

Mothers carried their babies in an *amauti* — the big hood on their parkas. When the family travelled, it was on a sled pulled by a dog team.



## What Inuit art shows

This traditional way of life is one of the big subjects in Inuit art. By showing us in drawings and sculptures how their ancestors lived, Inuit artists are keeping their history alive. Art helps them remember, and treasure, the ways their ancestors hunted and made protective clothing and shelter. In their art, many Inuit are making a visual history to show how their ancestors adapted to living in one of the harshest climates on earth.

Arctic birds, animals and sea mammals are another important subject for Inuit artists. Powerful polar bears, sleek seals, swift caribou, white wolves and magnificent owls are just a few of the creatures you'll find in Inuit sculpture and drawings.

When you look closely at the birds and animals in Inuit art, you will see that each one often has its own special character. The individual appearance of the creatures in Inuit art grows out of the respect that Inuit gave to all living things.

Many Inuit myths and legends tell how humans and other living beings are all connected in a powerful universe. These legends speak of the spiritual forces that are present in the Inuit world. The stories, and the spirits they describe, continue to be inspiring sources for Inuit artists today.

A figure that appears in many works of Inuit art is the shaman. In traditional Inuit societies, people believed their shaman was a particularly wise man, with healing and mysterious powers. Stories of shamans tell how they can go to the bottom of the sea, fly to the moon and back, and transform themselves into all kinds of animals.

Many Inuit art works show the shaman on his various adventures, including his visits to Sedna. In Inuit legend, Sedna was the mother of all sea creatures and a terrifying spirit being. When Sedna was angry because the people had broken her rules, harmony in the Inuit world was disturbed. The people went hungry when the furious Sedna kept the sea creatures away from the Inuit hunters. The only way to restore harmony was for the shaman to go underwater and comb out Sedna's hair which was matted with seaweed.

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The National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa has a sculpture of "Sedna with a Hairbrush" by [Natar Ungalaq](#). The artist, who lives in Igloolik, Nunavut, has given his grey stone sculpture of Sedna a mop of dog-fur hair and a hairbrush made of bone. Sedna looks impatient and annoyed as she waits for the shaman to come and brush her hair.

As well as drawing on legends, the younger Inuit artists today are depicting all kinds of new subjects. The interaction of Inuit culture with the culture of the rest of North America is leading to new art forms, and new ideas in Inuit art.

For example, [Oviloo Tunnillie](#) of Cape Dorset, Nunavut, has made magnificent sculptures of a football player, and of a woman wearing high-heeled shoes. In a sculpture called "This Has Touched My Life," she shows us an unforgettable experience from her childhood. When she was six years old, she was sent south to hospital because she was ill. She was away from home for several years.

Her sculpture shows herself as a small girl, standing with three huge adult figures. There is a man in a suit and two women with big handbags and hats with veils. In this sculpture, Oviloo Tunnille helps us feel how lonely and out of place she felt far from home in a society that was totally strange to her.

As Oviloo Tunnillie's work shows, Inuit art is very good at communicating strong emotions. Even though Inuit artists use simple forms and materials, their works affect us deeply. Sometimes humorous and happy, sometimes sad, or even frightening — or a mixture of emotions — Inuit art has a lot going on under the surface.

## Carvers for thousands of years

Inuit and their ancestors have been expert carvers for thousands of years. As well as tools and weapons, they carved art objects from bone, ivory and wood. Ancestors of today's Inuit carved birds, bears and other land and sea mammals, human figures and masks. Most of these objects carved thousands of years ago were very small. Some experts believe that Inuit's ancestors wore these objects as amulets (charms to keep bad spirits away).

## The materials and the tools

Carving in stone and bone is a skill that Inuit have passed on, generation after generation. Most Inuit learn to carve by watching, and then helping, an older relative.

In Inuit art today, stone is the most popular carving material. Stone is very adaptable. Artists can work it to almost any size and shape. Stone also comes in a variety of colours, from grey and white and black to green and blue-green.

Getting stone to use in sculpture can be a big problem for Inuit artists. They must travel long distances over land or by boat to get good-quality stone from quarries. Travelling these long distances is expensive in the North.

Inuit sculptors also work with other materials — like caribou antler or musk-ox horn, when they are available. In fact, today Inuit artists (sculptors, painters and video makers) are working with all kinds of materials.

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These include watercolours, oil and acrylic paint, textiles, video and stone from southern Canada.

Most Inuit sculptors still use small tools like chisels, hatchets and knives to carve. They use files and sandpaper for fine work and finishing. A growing number of artists use power tools as well.

Most Inuit sculptors have to work outside, even in wintertime. This is because carving is very dangerous for artists if they breathe in the dust from the stone.

One of the things many people remember when they visit the North is the sound of sculptors chiselling and hammering their stone outside.

## How the world discovered Inuit art

In 1948, a Canadian artist named [James Houston](#) travelled to the Arctic to make drawings of the Inuit. He bought carvings from Inuit artists he met and shipped these art objects south. Later that year, these pieces attracted a lot of public attention when they were exhibited in Montreal.

A few years later, when James Houston was living in Cape Dorset, Nunavut, he and a group of Inuit artists tried an experiment. The result of that experiment was the creation of the second important art form for Inuit art today – the Inuit print.

Prints are produced using paint and stencils or other methods. They allow Inuit artists to make several colourful versions of an original drawing.

In a very short time, Inuit prints and sculpture became so popular, they were sold all over the world. Today, Inuit art work is on display in art galleries everywhere. Many people around the globe buy pieces for their private art collections.

One world-famous print is “The Enchanted Owl,” a masterpiece of design created by [Kenojuak Ashevak](#) of Cape Dorset. This beautiful owl stares out at us with its round eyes, proud and curious. The artist has given the owl long feathers that radiate round the bird’s head and body in bold strokes of colour. Kenojuak Ashevak’s love of birds is obvious in this work. Following the tradition of her ancestors, she transformed her respect for living creatures into a fascinating work of art.

By looking carefully at Inuit prints and sculpture, you can learn a lot about Inuit myths and legends, how Inuit lived in the past, and how the lives of Inuit are changing today.

Above all, you will see some very powerful art works that will stimulate your own imagination and stir your emotions.

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## Suggested activities

- Using the library or the Internet, see if you can find images of work by these Inuit artists: Jessie Oonark, Karoo Ashevak, David Ruben Piqtoukun, Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetak, Pitseolak Ashoona.
- Search for images of the sea creature, Sedna, using the library or the Internet. If you find several illustrations of Sedna by different Inuit artists, describe how each image makes you feel.

## Web sites

Check out these Web sites for more information and images of Inuit art:

- @ Indian and Northern Affairs Canada site under "Culture & History" at [www.inac.gc.ca](http://www.inac.gc.ca)
- @ Canada's Digital Collections for Cape Dorset artists at [http://collections.ic.gc.ca/cape\\_dorset](http://collections.ic.gc.ca/cape_dorset)
- @ McMichael Canadian Art Collection at [www.mcmichael.com/inuit.htm](http://www.mcmichael.com/inuit.htm)

## Northern and Southern Canada

Look at a map of Canada and find the 60th parallel. The North of Canada includes all the land north of that line. This huge region includes Nunavut, the Northwest Territories, the Yukon Territory, and parts of Quebec and Labrador.



From the point of view of someone living in the North, the rest of the country is "southern" Canada. If you live south of the 60th parallel, you are a "southern" Canadian.

# Bios

**Karoo Ashevak** was born in 1940 in the Kitikmeot (Central Arctic) region of what is now Nunavut. He had a great curiosity and a great love of life. These qualities helped inspire his direct, powerful sculptures. His sculptures were sometimes frightening, and sometimes humorous. He often depicted creatures from the spirit world he had learned about when he was a child. His favourite material for sculpting was very old whalebone.

Karoo Ashevak died tragically in a house fire at age 34. But in his short artistic career, he obtained wide recognition, with solo exhibitions of his work in Toronto, Montreal, New York and Washington. His sculptures are included in the collections of the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

**Kenojuak Ashevak** was born in 1927, and grew up on South Baffin Island in Nunavut. Her family lived a traditional lifestyle, travelling from camp to camp. As a very young woman, she married Johnniebo Ashevak. When she was in her 20s, she got tuberculosis and spent nearly four years in a hospital in Quebec.

When she was well again, she rejoined her husband and they lived on the land in different camps. In the late 1950s, Kenojuak and Johnniebo Ashevak met the Canadian artist James Houston. He encouraged them both to carve sculptures and to draw. One of Kenojuak Ashevak's images was included in the first catalogue of prints produced in Cape Dorset in 1959.

She and Johnniebo moved to Cape Dorset in 1966 so that their children could attend school. The couple worked closely together on their art until Johnniebo died in 1972. One of the pieces Kenojuak and Johnniebo Ashevak worked on together was a huge mural for the Canadian Pavilion at Expo '70 in Japan. Over the past 30 years, Kenojuak Ashevak's prints have been shown in over 100 exhibitions.

You can see examples of her imaginative, colourful prints in the collections of the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada, the Royal Ontario Museum and the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Kenojuak Ashevak has received many honours for her lifetime's work as an artist. She is still working at her art, exploring new ideas and styles.

**Lucy Tasseor Tutsweetok** was born in 1934 in Nunalla, Manitoba, very close to the border with Nunavut. Her family lived by hunting on the land.

After her father died, Tasseor Tutsweetok moved to Arviat, Nunavut, to live with her grandparents. She began carving images of animals in the early 1960s. Then she remembered the drawings of many human faces that her grandfather had done when she was a child. This memory inspired her to develop her own individual style. Working with large blocks of stone, Tasseor Tutsweetok sculpts small family groups of faces and heads. These groups of faces communicate a sense of community and closeness. The tiny faces seem to appear naturally out of the original shape of the stone.

Her works have been shown in exhibitions since 1970. You can see examples of her sculptures in the Art Gallery of Ontario, the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

**David Ruben Piqtoukun** was born in 1950 in the Mackenzie Delta area in the Western Arctic. He was one of 15 children. The family lived a traditional life on the land, travelling from camp to camp. Then, at the age of five, Piqtoukun was sent away to school.

In 1972, his brother, Abraham Anghik, introduced Piqtoukun to the art of stone carving. Since 1974, Piqtoukun's work has been shown in many exhibitions, including solo shows in Winnipeg, Edmonton, Inuvik and Expo 1986 in Vancouver.

One of Piqtoukun's ancestors was an Alaskan shaman. The shaman's mask is an image that he often uses in his work. In his sculptures, he also shows the shaman's changes from human to animal form. He works in a wide range of materials, including welded steel, whalebone, limestone, Italian crystal alabaster and African wonderstone.

His work can be found in the collections of the Art Gallery of Ontario, the McMichael Canadian Collection and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

**Oviloo Tunnillie** was born in 1949 in a camp called Kangia on Baffin Island in Nunavut. Her father was a sculptor and a hunter, and her mother did some drawing. When she was five, Tunnillie got tuberculosis and was sent to hospitals in southern Canada – once for an entire year, and then again, for more than two years, when she was seven and eight. This experience far from home has inspired one of her most powerful sculptures.

After she returned home to Baffin Island, she began carving soapstone as a teenager. She learned by watching her father. Since 1972, Tunnillie has been carving, experimenting with new subjects and forms. In her sculptures, she shows how the world of the Inuit is changing. Her works have been shown in several exhibitions, and as far away as Russia.

You can find examples of her work in the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

**Pitseolak Ashoona** was born on Nottingham Island in the Hudson Strait in 1904. She spent her childhood with her family moving from camp to camp near the present-day communities of Iqaluit and Cape Dorset. Her father died when she was a teenager. Then Pitseolak's three brothers arranged for her to marry a young hunter, named Ashoona. The couple lived by following the caribou. When Ashoona fell ill and died on one of their summer hunting trips, Pitseolak was left to bring up five children on her own.

In the 1950s, Pitseolak Ashoona moved to Cape Dorset with her youngest children. There, she met the Canadian artist, James Houston, who encouraged her to draw. Her energetic drawings showed the way she had lived on the land, and the strength of her own spirit. Over the next 25 years, she did more than 7,000 wonderful drawings. Many of these appeared in the catalogue produced each year in Cape Dorset. Her work was shown in over 100 exhibitions across Canada. Today, you can see examples of her work in the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the National Gallery of Canada and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

Pitseolak Ashoona received many honours in her artistic career. She died in 1985. Four of her children also became artists: her daughter, Napachie Pootoogook, and three sons who took up sculpture, Qaqaq, Kiugaaq and Komwartok.

**Natar Ungalaq** was born in 1959 near Hall Beach in Nunavut, and now lives in Igloolik. He started carving stone when he was nine years old, and learned by watching older sculptors work. He prefers to work in soapstone because it is soft and he can create the forms he wants.

His work has been featured in exhibitions across Canada, and in Washington, D.C., as well as in catalogues in Italy and Germany. You can find sculptures by Natar Ungalaq in the National Gallery of Canada, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery and the Winnipeg Art Gallery.

**Jessie Oonark** was born in 1906. Her family were travelling hunters who lived north of Baker Lake in Nunavut. Oonark went through many hard times in her early adult years. Her husband died and she was left alone to raise her children. Sometimes, they nearly starved. Oonark first went to Baker Lake in 1958, after a pilot spotted her and her daughter wandering the land in search of food. That same year, a Canadian wildlife biologist in Baker Lake noticed her artistic talent and encouraged Oonark to draw. She was then in her early 50s.

By 1960, her drawings were reprinted in the famous Cape Dorset print catalogue. Oonark worked extremely hard at her art, often singing as she drew. Her works have been described as creating "a world of light and laughter." Oonark liked to depict traditional children's games, and the clothing styles of different Inuit groups. She was awarded many honours, including membership in the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and the Order of Canada. Jessie Oonark died in 1985.

You can find examples of her work in the National Gallery of Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

This information is also available through the Internet at [www.inac.gc.ca](http://www.inac.gc.ca)



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