

WIGHT, Darlene Coward, Zebedee NUNGAK, Lorne BALSHINE and Harry WINROB, 2008 *The Harry Winrob Collection of Inuit Sculpture*, Winnipeg, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 136 pages.

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Volume 32, Number 2, 2008

Franz Boas et les Inuit
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URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/038227ar>
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/038227ar>

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Publisher(s)

Association Inuksiitiit Katimajjiit Inc.
Centre interuniversitaire d'études et de recherches autochtones (CIÉRA)

ISSN

0701-1008 (print)
1708-5268 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Vorano, N. (2008). Review of [WIGHT, Darlene Coward, Zebedee NUNGAK, Lorne BALSHINE and Harry WINROB, 2008 *The Harry Winrob Collection of Inuit Sculpture*, Winnipeg, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 136 pages.] *Études/Inuit/Studies*, 32(2), 198–200. <https://doi.org/10.7202/038227ar>

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2008 *The Harry Winrob Collection of Inuit Sculpture*, Winnipeg, Winnipeg Art Gallery, 136 pages.

When the Curator of Inuit Art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (WAG), Darlene Coward Wight, describes the Dr. Harry Winrob 2006 donation as "one of the most significant personal collections of Inuit art, and [...] one of the most important donations ever to be received at the Winnipeg Art Gallery," (p. 33) readers ought to take special note. It was, after all, the same curator who oversaw previous landmark donations, exhibitions and/or catalogues on the George Swinton collection (1987), the Ian Lindsay collection (1991), the Jerry Twomey collection (2003) and the Faye and Bert Settler collection (2004). Like these earlier examples, the Winrob donation was

feted in an exhibition at the WAG (from March to June 2008—which I did not see) and has resulted in an accompanying catalogue. Given the vaunted scale and significance of this spectacular donation, this modest catalogue deserves reserved praise.

The Winrob donation, 246 sculptures in total from 1971 to 2005, is remarkable for its imaginative subject matter, variety of materials, and overall aesthetic quality. It will greatly enhance the contemporary focus of the WAG collection of Inuit sculpture (the WAG's Inuit sculpture collection numbers roughly 6,900 pieces, 5,000 of which are from before 1970, according to the curator [p. 33]). The Winrob collection is notably comprehensive as a private collection, covering virtually every community in the Canadian Arctic that has actively produced art over the past three decades—29 communities in total are represented; as Lorne Balshine recalled in his catalogue essay, “Harry [Winrob] often made the comment, ‘Nobody has traveled as many miles as Lorne and I in pursuit of Canadian Inuit art and culture’” (p. 14). This likely explains why the curator adopted thematic groupings rather than more straightforward community groupings while organising the catalogue.

Particular strengths of the collection are carvings from the Kitikmeot region, including Gjoa Haven, Kugaaruk and Taloyoak, home of the master artists Judas Ullulaq, Charlie Ugyuk, Nelson Takkiruq, Nick Sikkuark and Karoo Ashevak, who are all represented with first rate examples. Ashevak's *Shaman* (p. 29), an expressive whalebone carving from 1972, is arguably one of the most exquisite examples in this late artist's signature style in any public collection. Apart from aesthetic value, the comparatively high number of whalebone carvings (36 in total) endows this collection with an important historical value due to the fact that import restrictions have caused a major decline in whalebone carving in recent years. Artworks from Nunavik are also firmly represented in this collection, and this book offers many now-classic examples of “narrative carvings” from the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The catalogue, which includes images of 133 sculptures (just over half the Winrob collection), has relatively short essays by Balshine, Nungak and Wight, in addition to a brief “Collector's Statement” written by Winrob in 1992. Winrob unfortunately passed away in late 2006, prior to the publication of the catalogue and the opening of the exhibition. Wight touchingly recalls that the transfer of his collection became an urgent priority in the weeks and days before his death. Balshine's essay portrays Winrob as not only a passionate collector of Inuit art, but a humanitarian who blossomed with many worldly interests, a dedicated physician and a long-time supporter of public museums. Altogether, the essays are a credit to Dr. Winrob's passion and legacy.

In her essay, Wight characterises Dr. Winrob's collecting tastes as leaning towards “atypical” carvings with a “flamboyant, expressive quality” (p. 30). Carvings such as Lukie Airut's *Walrus Skull, Tusks with Bas-relief Scenes* (p. 115), 2001, certainly lend credence to her assessment. As mentioned earlier, Wight organised the catalogue according to the artwork's depicted subject matter—shamanism, stories and legends, creative imaginings, everyday life and animals—and she gives these overlapping themes a light gloss in her essay. At various points, Wight ties Dr. Winrob's collecting

practices to his profession: his interest in whalebone and antler carvings, she suggests, owes to Dr. Winrob's training as a physician; and the frequent appearance of carvings depicting shamanism, she claims, is due to the fact that "Winrob related the healing powers of the Inuit shaman to those of a medical doctor like himself" (p. 31). These are tantalising propositions, and certainly compelling, but without a footnote, the reader is left to guess if these are Wight's own speculations or if they are Winrob's stated views.

Overall, the catalogue's layout and style is unassuming and restrained. One might even say plain (despite having 139 colour photographs of artworks plus three black and white historical photographs). Wight, as usual, is meticulous about having complete "tombstone" entries, including artist's markings. But there are very few extended captions and the reader will have to remain content with a list of "references" citing previous occasions the artworks were published. This is helpful, but these imaginative sculptures cry out for much thicker and more robust descriptive captions. Nungak's short essay, "Inuit Culture: A Deep Well of Inspiration" adds a welcome level of interpretation although his comments shed light on only a select few of the artworks. Conspicuously scarce in this catalogue are the first-person voices of the artists themselves.

As museums continue to respond to a variety of financial and operational challenges, the WAG should be applauded for continuing to publish its collection, effectively making it available publicly to students, artists, collectors and aficionados. They have an enviable publishing record and seem to release new catalogues at a remarkably brisk pace. But perhaps that's also why *The Harry Winrob Collection of Inuit Sculpture*, for all of its obvious value, feels a little too attenuated at times. The problem is the genre, which circumscribes an area of investigation that gravitates towards the collector. As is well known, catalogues focusing upon private collections tread a fine line between their legitimate scholarly purpose and collector-aggrandisement. Now, it would be categorically wrong to suggest *The Harry Winrob Collection of Inuit Sculpture* is a vanity publication: it has got too much meat on its bones to use such a diminutive. But considering the WAG's impressive resources—a world-class Inuit sculpture collection and a foremost specialist on contemporary Nunavik and Netsilik art—maybe it is fairer to say they have spoiled us once too often with this genre of catalogue.

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