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Inuit Sculpture: Beyond THE STEREOTYPES

Daniel Pokorn

An interview with Mr. Norman Zepp, Curator of Inuit art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, in connection with the showing of *The Williamson Collection of Inuit sculpture*, AGO, June 2 - July 15, 1990. The Collection focuses on the Keewatin Region from the mid-1950's to the mid-1970's, a period now considered the golden era of Inuit sculpture.

Daniel Pokorn : *When we look at this refreshingly intimate collection of Inuit art, we realize how varied its pieces are. We are confronted more with individualistic sculptures that happen to be made by Inuit artists than with "Inuit" sculpture per se. What makes the Williamson collection special?*

Norman Zepp : The collection allows the viewer to focus on specific aspects of Inuit sculpture through the small-scale works of several good artists. Nowadays, with interactive sculpture on a grand scale, we have forgotten how to appreciate these small works that can be precious gems, such as those in this collection.

Different aesthetics dominate Inuit art, which is not a monolithic form of expression. For example, Cape Dorset sculpture is known for the flamboyantly baroque tendencies of its large, dramatic carvings in green stone. However, the Keewatin Region sometimes exhibits a reductive, even minimalist tendency. Artists like Tikeayak, Tiktak and Pangnark have been compared to Moore or Brancusi, as they reduce the form to its essentials and strip away any superfluous information. In *The Somersaulting Man*, John Kavik eschews detail. Rather, the work is composed of curvilinear volumes whose flowing action is arrested only by a severe, flat face. The figure's legs punctuate the surrounding space, giving the work a precarious, dramatic quality. This is an expressive, exuberant work

with an element of humour. On the other hand, if we turn to *Shaman with Fox Helping Spirit*, a piece less than 10 cm high by Nicholas Ikkuti, we notice another marriage of form and content. The circle motif created with the upraised arms acting as a frame focuses attention on the face while creating a multi-referential halo. Here, a succinct, carefully defined form utilizes fine detail to clearly describe the content.

When we take the time to identify the artists, we realize the individuality of their works. It is not until the 60's that a few people started to look at Inuit art as the work of individuals. We should look at a work by an Inuit just as one would look, for instance, at a Henry Moore.

What has led to a perception of Inuit sculpture as a collective, undifferentiated artform?

People come to Inuit art with many misconceptions, many preconceived ideas. I don't blame them, because Inuit art has been mis-promoted for too long, for good and bad reasons. We had a situation where practically everyone in a community was producing art. Inuit art was deliberately presented as an anonymous activity. Some promoters did not stress individuality, but rather wanted to homogenize the art production for the Southern market where, in the guise of a communal outpouring, they believed it would have more appeal as a collective primitive vision.

What are the processes involved in Inuit sculpture?

Inuit art tends to be naive art, in the finest sense of the term. It is a relatively untutored artform, not dependent on any particular teachings or conventions. Intuitive, its immediacy and vitality cause it to be highly expressive. Inuit artists capture the essence of what they know and see. I recently looked at the sculpture of a pack dog. It is not so much a depiction of a dog as the expression of what a dog is. It goes far beyond illustration.

The Inuit world is changing as a result of the technologies coming from the South. How can an Inuit sculptor maintain his identity in a world relentlessly subjected to acculturation? Are the changes reflected in his art?

They probably can't maintain their traditional values, at least not all of them, but they can maintain their identities. Acculturation is inevitable, and to remain meaningful, Inuit sculpture must necessarily reflect the new realities. Since 1980, more and more artists reflect a new awareness, new attitudes to art-making. Some of the younger artists in particular are aware of European art history and Southern imagery and are incorporating these references into their art. It is neither wrong, nor less significant. Some artists are deliberately trying to reflect the past as a demonstration of cultural affirmation. It is a complex

process of coming to terms with the new through an awareness of the continuities and evolution of tradition.

The Inuit lifestyle and value system are widely different from the Western, predominantly White world. In what ways are they reflected in the Williamson collection?

In several of the pieces by artists like Kabluitok and Angutituar, there are references to legends, shamanism, beliefs in the spirit world, which are overt references to their traditional belief system. You will also find less direct indications of past circumstances. There are a large number of *Mother and Child* carvings by artists from the Keewatin, an era noted for its particularly harsh environment leading to a very tenuous existence. The sculpture of Tiktak is able to give special meaning to this universal symbol of rebirth and life.

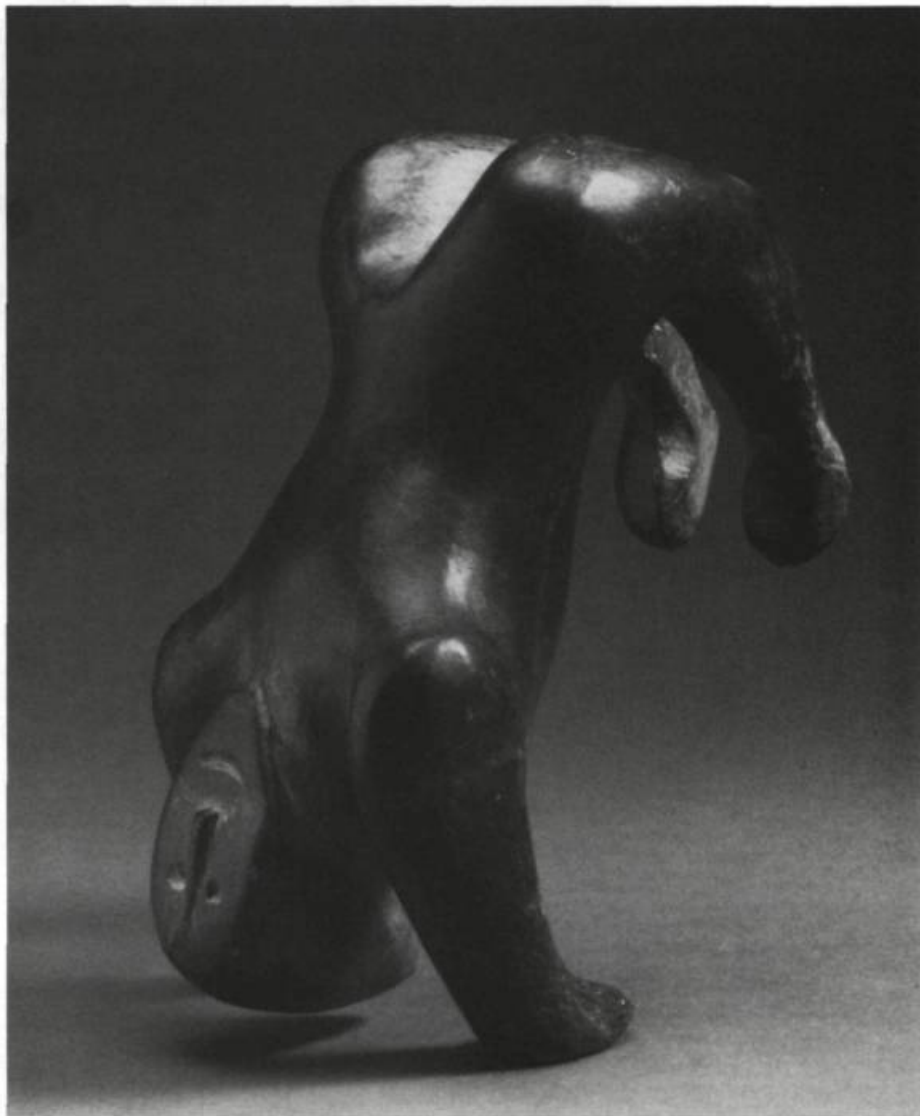
Just like the Greeks and Romans, the Inuit create their own mythology, as they combine animal and human elements into fabulous creatures. How do you explain this tendency?

The Inuit have a rich, fertile imagination and their traditional belief system allows for all kinds of spirits to exist. The adoption of Christianity freed artists from the reluctance or fear of representing spirit creatures, who were no longer so scary and forbidding. The Inuit now have other beliefs that would help counterbalance those forces. So, in a paradoxical way, Christianity allows them to express their ancestral beliefs.

What can personal memories and an anthropological vocation, such as with Doctor Williamson, bring to the appreciation of Inuit sculpture? What are the relationships of form and content?

Personal memories and anthropological insight can add to our knowledge of the content. By learning what a work is about, we can often enrich the viewing experience. On the other hand, Inuit art can be appreciated on formal terms alone, and one may not really wish to know what something actually is. In any case, content in Inuit art is so dense that a full comprehension is usually beyond our grasp.

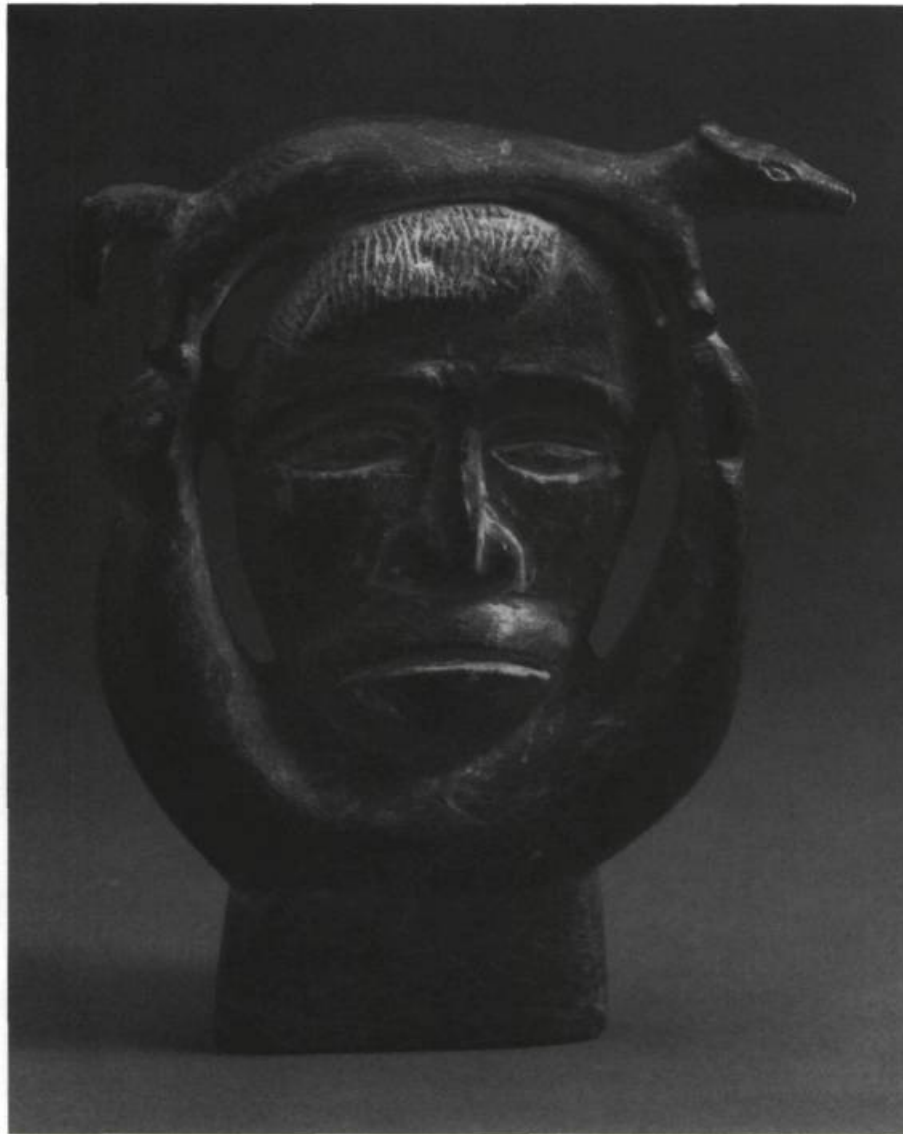
It may be similar to our appreciation of European paintings from the Middle Ages. We perceive the formal qualities, without being necessarily aware of the connotations.



That's right. If you go into a whole iconographic analysis, you may gain a deeper level of appreciation. However your fundamental level of aesthetic appreciation is not significantly altered.

Although we perceive the formal richness of Inuit art, we may very well miss its symbolic significance, its intellectual sophistication. In the Williamson collection, the themes seem to deal mainly with the Inuit world: traditional way of life, physical environment, combined human and animal imagery, shamanism, myths, legends and spirits. What happens to the perception of an Inuit work when it enters the Western, predominantly White culture?

John Kavik, *Somersaulting Man: As I Think of Myself*, 1964.
Black stone. 16,5 x 10,5 x 8,4 cm.
Collection of The Art Gallery of Ontario.
Photo: AGO.



←
 Nicholas Ikkitu, *Shaman
 with Fox Helping Spirit*, c.
 1968. Grey stone.
 12,1 x 10,1 x 5 cm.
 Collection of The Art
 Gallery of Ontario.
 Photo: AGO.

I think it depends on the nature of the audience. If you're talking about sophisticated, knowledgeable viewers, they will probably deal first of all with the formal richness of the art itself and then its symbolic significance. However, a lot of gallery-goers, certainly the average viewer, very much respond to depictions of the traditional way of life. A work symbolizing a shamanic flight would really intrigue people because of its exotic qualities.

Are Inuit aesthetic criteria the same as in the Western, predominantly White culture?

No, because the Inuit don't have a clearly articulated aesthetic. The Inuit language has no word for art. What we consider good art is not necessarily the art the Inuit find to be good. To an Inuit, good art is art "made well", art that "works", that is a "good likeness of". The Inuit tend to like "well done" realism, as opposed to the stylized, abstract or minimal

carvings that some people in the South, such as myself, prefer.

Can't the works be diverted from their authentic purpose and be designed primarily with saleability in mind? Can't they be robbed of their initial originality?

Yes they can, in exactly the same way it happens in the South. What applies to the South applies to the North. There are artists in the South who have been diverted from their original goals. They have modified their art production in the interest of saleability. In some the originality is completely gone and they can't resist repeating the same marketable work over and over.

The Inuit artist works with ideas specific to his culture, but his production is mainly directed to another, fundamentally different one. How does this situation affect Inuit art-making?

Because Inuit artists are able to produce carvings of great quality in a seemingly non-art-conducive environment, for an audience they will likely never know, with hardly any feedback, save for how much they get paid for their works, some writers have questioned the integrity of the works as a genuine expression of an Inuit. We must not confuse motivation with the creative act itself. I have found that the good artists can hardly be influenced and that the element of self-expression is present whatever the impetus to carve. Most of the misconceptions surrounding contemporary Inuit art are due to spurious generalizations about the whole. In order to fully appreciate and understand this remarkable and multi-faceted phenomenon, it is necessary to approach it via the work of the most talented individuals. We therefore must focus on the artworks themselves. Questions of validity and authenticity become inappropriate in the light of the strong visual evidence provided by the works. ♦