

Inuit Views of Nature

by Kelly Skinner and Laura Brill

The Inuit are native peoples who have lived in the Canadian Arctic and Greenland for thousands of years, and since 1999 in the autonomous territory called Nunavut. They have both a physical and a spiritual relationship with the environment, and this relationship is embodied in their traditional practices of hunting and seasonal migration and in the ways in which they make use of all aspects of their environment, including all of its life forms. In Inuit society, animals hold a central role: not only do they share the land on which the Inuit live and serve as the traditional food source; they are also present in every sphere of Inuit culture, including religion, healing, and art.

The Inuit draw inspiration from their intimate relationship with the few indigenous animals of the Canadian Arctic. In a landscape of snow and rock, Inuit artisans traditionally worked with the limited materials available to them—bone, ivory, fur and stone—and most continue to carve pieces entirely by hand. As the Inuit settled into communities in the late 1940s, their carvings became larger, and the requests to produce them as artwork increased. The most common forms of contemporary Inuit art are prints and figurative works, often representing animals, and carved in relatively soft stone such as soapstone, serpentinite, or argillite.¹

Representing the Inuit in Their Environment

The Discovery School video, *Unitedstreaming: Biomes: Land of the Inuit*, compares the present-day Inuit to their ancestors and discusses their relationship to their environment, as seen

¹ Ingo and Dieter Hessel, *Inuit Art: an Introduction* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998); and “Discover Inuit Art.” *Affaires Indiennes Et Du Nord Canada | Indian and Northern Affairs Canada*. Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, 2000 <<http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ach/lr/ks/cr/pubs/disc-eng.asp>>.

in practices of hunting and fishing, survival skills, and oral traditions that have been passed down through generations.² The complex relationship between the historical Inuit and nature is also presented in the films *The White Dawn* and *Nanook of the North*. In these cinematic epics, the need for strong cultural and familial support systems for survival becomes a key element in each plot, whether in scenes of hunting and igloo building or in encounters with outsiders. Central to the films' narratives are episodes in which weather and the physical environment determine migration routes and the types of housing built in different seasons. In addition, these films demonstrate the need to understand the natural patterns of the Arctic for survival. They also depict the Inuit people's relationship to the animal world by illustrating respectful hunting customs, frugal methods for the provision of meat and clothing, and the keeping of domesticated dogs for pulling sleds.

In his book, *Inuit Behavior and Seasonal Change in the Canadian Arctic*, Richard G. Condon explores the relationship between human behavior and physiology and environmental variations. He researches aspects of the region, such as the physiography, the climate, ice conditions, and the flora and fauna. Each of these aspects contributes to Inuit behavior and, in turn, to settlement activity.³ Global warming has disrupted traditional lifestyles in its fundamental impact on hunting and gathering, and on migration. The warming climate has brought new weather patterns, reduced the amount of sea ice, and affected the lifecycles of plants, changing the times at which they bloom.⁴

The present-day Inuit have a different relationship to the environment than did their ancestors. Igloos; dog sleds and canoes; home-made fur and leather clothes, tents, and blankets;

² See note 1.

³ Richard G. Condon *Inuit Behavior and Seasonal Change in the Canadian Arctic* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research, 1983), pp. 13 – 25, 129 – 49.

⁴ *Unitedstreaming: Biomes: Land of the Inuit* (see note 1).

animal bone and antler tools; and a life sustained by hunting and fishing are giving way to permanent settlements with modern homes, and storebought clothing, food, and appliances. However, while children learn to read and write in schools, the oral transmission of traditional knowledge and stories still survives.

Adamie Ashevak 's sculpture *Woman Enjoys Fishing* (2004) is a literal representation of a woman fishing in the traditional way, with a pole and line, a rattle to draw the fishes' attention, and her baby tucked into the hood of her *amauti*. Spring fishing trips remain popular among Inuit families.

Animals and Spirits

Writing on animals in Renaissance art, Claudia Lazzaro sees animals as cultural symbols that exemplify a society's perception of nature and culture.⁵ The animals with whom the Inuit coexist have taken on this role in Inuit religion, and in their visual and performative arts (e.g., song, storytelling). Fish (as in *The Great Escape*, 2009, by Kavavaow Mannomee), whales, walrus, seal, polar bears, caribou, muskoxen, Arctic foxes, and many varieties of birds inform their sculptures, drawings and prints.

This reverence for animals is also evident in the film *The White Dawn*, in which hunters pray to the spirits of animals they have killed. In Inuit tradition, appeasements of these spirits is considered essential for successful future hunting and fishing, and therefore, for survival. Otherwise, the liberated spirits of the dead might seek revenge on the community. Such prayers are also directed at powerful gods who control the elemental forces and the migration patterns of animals. Traditionally, the Inuit have also protected themselves from harm with magic charms,

⁵ Claudia Lazzaro, "Animals as Cultural Signs," in *Grasping the World: the Idea of the Museum*, ed. Donald Preziosi and Claire J. Farago (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub., 2004) 500-25.

and avoided sickness and disaster by following strict taboos. For example, one taboo entails not eating seal and caribou meats together, or not cooking these meats in the same pot. Another forbids the sewing of walrus skins during the caribou hunting season.⁶

Inuit oral tradition preserves much information about the spirits. Legends about animals and about good and evil deities provide explanations for the starkly beautiful but difficult northern world in which the Inuit live. One of the deities is Sedna, a sea goddess. Legends about Sedna explain the origin of sea creatures, and in fact, Sedna is the most important Inuit goddess because she provides fish, walrus and seal—the most important part of the Inuit diet. In addition, she embodies the harshness of the Arctic waters, both because her stories tell of violence done to her, and because she is also vengeful.⁷

Three prominent animals in Inuit society are the owl, fish and raven. Each of these animals is unique for its purpose in society as well as for the legends told about it. Owls, who withstand the coldest Arctic conditions, are viewed as a source of guidance and assistance. Different owl species are connected with different stories. For example, according to Inuit tradition, the short-eared owl was once a young girl who was magically transformed into an owl with a long beak. But the owl became frightened and flew into the side of a house, flattening its face and beak. The Inuit also called the Boreal owl the “blind one,” because of its tameness during daylight.⁸ The second print in the 2009 Cape Dorset portfolio, *Owl on Sealskin* by Kananginak Pootoogook, features a large owl resting on a sealskin held by other owls (a leader among her/his subordinates?).

⁶ Minnesota State University, webpage on the *Inuit (Eskimo)*, 1 May 2010.
<http://www.mnsu.edu/emuseum/cultural/northamerica/copper_eskimo.html>.

⁷ Lenore Lindeman, *The Legend of Sedna the Sea Goddess*, 1999, 2 May 2010
<<http://www.polarlife.ca/Traditional/myth/sedna.htm>>.

⁸ Webpage, *Owls Mythology & Folklore*, 2 May, 2010, <http://www.pauldfrost.co.uk/intro_o2.html>.

Ravens are also common in Inuit art, and interest in the raven is complex and widespread. Several stories exist about the raven's birth, and this bird is also often juxtaposed with the owl. The twenty-first print in the Cape Dorset collection, *Owl Paints the Raven*, by Ningeokuluk Teevee, refers to the familiar legend:

Owl and Raven were close friends. One day Raven made a new dress, dappled black and white, for Owl. Owl, in return, made for Raven a pair of whale-bone boots and then began to make for her a white dress. When Owl wanted to fit the dress, Raven hopped about and would not sit still. Owl became very angry and said, "If I fly over you with a blubber lamp, don't jump." Raven continued to hop about. At last Owl became very angry and emptied the blubber lamp over the new white dress. Raven cried, "Qaq! Qaq!" Ever since that day Raven has been black all over.⁹

Nature's Central Role

Nature and the environment are at the core of Inuit life. The harsh living conditions of the Arctic affect survival, living patterns, foodways, social structure, and cultural choices on a daily basis. For that reason, it is hardly surprising that nature plays a central role in Inuit art. Prints, drawings and carvings demonstrate the bond that the Inuit have with the land and its animals, as well as with their original, nature-based religion. Inuit art serves a secondary purpose of helping to preserve knowledge and stories that otherwise survive only the more ephemeral oral and performative traditions.

⁹ Webpage, *First People: The Legends. Eskimo story of Owl and Raven*, 2 May, 2010, <<http://www.firstpeople.us/FP-HTML-Legends/EskimoStoryOfOwlAndRaven-Eskimo.html>>.

Art works discussed:



The Great Escape
By Kavavaow Mannomee



Woman Enjoys Fishing

By Adamie Ashevak 2004



Owl on Sealskin

By Kananginak Pootoogook



Owl Paints the Raven

By Ningeokuluk Teevee

