

Carving in Inuit Art History

PREHISTORIC PERIOD

During the Prehistoric Period, the Inuit crafted carvings primarily for two purposes: for use in shamanic rituals and to create amulets. These carvings took the form of miniature figures made from bone, antler, or stone, often worn on a belt or string. Shamans or angakoks carried multiple carvings as part of their equipment. Additionally, artifacts were crafted as educational tools, toys, gifts, and for adorning practical objects like hair combs and sewing kits. Due to the Inuit's nomadic lifestyle, these objects were usually kept small in size.



Photo by [William A. Turnbaugh](#).

HISTORIC PERIOD

The Historic Period, spanning from the 1770s to the 1940s, marked a significant shift for the Inuit. During this time, increased interaction with whalers, traders, and missionaries exposed them to southern culture. As a result, Inuit art and artifacts gained attention from these southern visitors, who primarily sought traditional depictions of Inuit culture and Arctic life. This interaction had a profound impact on the style and subject matter of the artworks being produced.



Photos by [William A. Turnbaugh](#).

While the content of art during the Historic Period still revolved around traditional life and themes, artists began presenting it in an illustrative manner to appeal to external audiences. By the mid-1800s, the majority of Inuit art catered to the "tourist" market. Instead of small, handheld pieces, larger artworks emerged, often accompanied by bases or stands, transforming them into tabletop display items.

CONTEMPORARY PERIOD



Sculpture by Judas Ullulaaq.
Photo by Jean- Pierre [Dalbera](#).

The Contemporary Period of Inuit art emerged in 1949 when a young artist named James Houston introduced this art form to The Canadian Handicrafts Guild in Montreal. Encouraged by the Guild, Houston returned to the North to acquire more Inuit sculptures. Subsequently, they sponsored an exhibition to promote Inuit carvings in southern regions. Recognizing the potential economic benefits, the Canadian government actively supported the promotion of Inuit art as a means to drive development in the Canadian Arctic.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Inuit-owned cooperatives were established in numerous Arctic communities, bolstered by marketing initiatives in southern Canada. The marketing efforts for Inuit art in the south led to its recognition as a prominent Canadian contemporary art form, attracting international interest. With the escalating demand for Inuit carvings, ivory, the traditional carving material became scarce. As a most cost-effective and readily available alternative, soapstone became the preferred medium, surpassing ivory. Consequently the average size of carvings increased, a shift encouraged by collectors. Ivory was reserved for accentuating details such as face, tusks or tools.

During the Contemporary Period, Inuit art pieces gained recognition as sculptures rather than mere curiosities. This shift allowed artists to express themselves more freely, exploring subjects inspired by their inner spiritual lives.

KINNGAIT

Kinngait, formerly known as Cape Dorset, Nunavut, is widely recognized as the hub of Inuit art among the numerous communities in Canada's northern region. Situated on the southwest coast of Baffin Island, this small, isolated hamlet faces a formidable environment characterized by harsh winters, extreme cold, and prolonged periods without sunlight. Despite these challenges, approximately 1,300 resilient Inuit individuals endure average temperatures of 40 degrees below zero, sustaining their way of life.



Photo taken by Ansgar Walk. Kinngait- Cape Dorset. 1997-05-04.

Carvings originating from Kinngait are crafted from natural materials such as Soapstone (also known as steatite or soaprock), Serpentine (a distinct dark green stone found within a few kilometers of Kinngait), ivory sourced from marine mammals, caribou antlers, and bones of various animals. Local Inuit community members gather soapstone or serpentine and deliver it to their Co-op, where the stone is assessed and valued. The Co-op then supplies the stone to Inuit carvers who work diligently outside their homes, braving all weather conditions, to shape and refine the sculptures with meticulous sanding and polishing techniques. Soapstone carvings and sculptures remain highly coveted pieces within the realm of Inuit Canadian art.

Inuit art serves as a vivid depiction of the generational transmission of the Inuit way of life and culture. The intricate carvings reflect the traditional Inuit lifestyle, where hunting remains a vital means of sustenance and Inuit women wear the amautik—a hooded pouch—to carry their babies. These remarkable carvings capture the essence of this cultural heritage, showcasing the beauty and significance of Inuit artistic expression.