



ARTS & CULTURE IN CANADA

Fact Sheet

July 2009

Contemporary Inuit Arts in Canada¹

- ◆ Since the late 1940s, there has been a flourishing of work by Inuit artists in the Northwest Territories, Nunavut, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Their works – sculpture, drawing and printmaking and other media – address issues of identity and aesthetics, and tell a compelling story of cross-cultural interaction. This represents a remarkable chapter in the history of art in Canada.

Inuit artists are reinventing old traditions and embracing forms of new media such as digital art and spoken word performances.

- ◆ Nunavut has a rich tradition of creativity and artistic ability.
 - Traditional Inuit culture, legends and the arctic environment provide unparalleled inspiration and distinct themes.
 - Inuit have been using their surrounding materials to create art for millennia.
 - Inuit storytelling, throat singing and drum dancing are honoured traditions.
- ◆ Art in Nunavut blends traditional knowledge with modern-day techniques. This combination of new and old brings together the practices of Elders and youth to create innovative art that is unique to Nunavut.
- ◆ Inuit artists and art organizations are nationally and internationally acclaimed, they include Arnait Video Productions (media arts), Taqralik Partridge (spoken word), Isuma Publishing (writing and publishing and media arts), Artcirq (inter-arts), Kitikmeot Heritage Society and Susan Aglukark (music).
- ◆ The Canadian Census reported that Nunavut's 250 artists represent 1.86% of the territory's labour force - more than double the national average of 0.77%

¹ Statistics Canada defines Inuit as persons reporting a single response of "Inuit" to the Aboriginal identity question. Inuit of the western Arctic are known as Inuvialuit and are included in this definition.

Sources:

National Gallery of Canada, "Inuit Art in the Collection of Indigenous Art," <http://www.gallery.ca/english/112.htm>

Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth – Nunavut, "Culture & Heritage," <http://www.gov.nu.ca/cley/home/english/arts.html>

Hill Strategies, "Artists in Canada's Provinces and Territories," http://www.hillstrategies.com/resources_details.php?resUID=1000304



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Photograph by Jim Logan
Inuit grass basket at NACA gallery, 2008

Contextⁱ

- ◆ Inuit people have inhabited the northern reaches of Canada for over 5,000 years.
- ◆ The Inuit population is growing fast. In 2006, 50,485 people reported that they were Inuit - a 26% increase from 40,220 in 1996.
- ◆ According to the 2006 Census, 78% of Inuit people in Canada (about 40,000 people), lived in one of four regions within Inuit homeland, known as Inuit Nunaat in Inuktitut. This region stretches from Labrador to the Northwest Territories. While Inuit share a common culture and traditions, the four regions of Inuit Nunaat are marked by considerable linguistic and geographic diversity.
- ◆ Just over one in five (22%) Inuit did not live in Inuit Nunaat in 2006. Among this group, just over three quarters (76%) were settled in urban areas. The urban centres with the largest Inuit populations were Ottawa-Gatineau (725), Yellowknife (640), Edmonton (590), Montréal (570), and Winnipeg (355). Iqaluit was the community within Inuit Nunaat with the largest Inuit population (3,540).
- ◆ The Inuit population is young. Census data show that the median age of the Inuit population was only 22 years, about half that of the non-Aboriginal population (40 years) and younger than First Nations people (25 years), and Métis people (30 years).
- ◆ In 2006, 69% of the Inuit population in Canada reported having knowledge of the Inuit language (Inuktitut). This represents a slight decrease from 72% in 1996. In Inuit Nunaat, 84% of the Inuit population can converse in the Inuit language. These figures mask regional variation, however. Knowledge of the Inuit language is almost universal among Inuit in Nunavik (99%) and Nunavut (91%). Outside Inuit Nunaat, 15% of Inuit speak the Inuit language. The rate increases to 19% in CMAs.²
- ◆ There are five primary dialects collectively known as Inuktitut:
 - Inuvialuktun (Inuvialuit region in the Northwest Territories);
 - Inuinnaqtun (primarily in some communities in western Nunavut);
 - Inuttitut (Eastern Nunavut);
 - Inuttitut (Nunavik);
 - Inuttut (Nunatsiavut).

² A census metropolitan area (CMA) is an area consisting of one or more neighbouring municipalities situated around a major urban core. A census metropolitan area must have a total population of at least 100,000, of which 50,000 or more live in the urban core.

History of Inuit Art in Canada

- ◆ Nunavut has a rich tradition of creativity and artistic ability.
 - Traditional Inuit culture, legends and the arctic environment provide inspiration and distinct themes.
 - Inuit have been using their surrounding materials to create art for millennia.
 - Inuit storytelling, throat singing and drum dancing are also honoured traditions.ⁱⁱ

- ◆ During the historic period,³ in addition to the curios made for tourist trade, the Inuit created objects for their own use which required both skill and an artistic sensibility such as:
 - animals carved out of ivory and used for games, amulets and fish lures;
 - embellished and decorated needle cases, combs, hair ornaments and buttons;
 - girls' dolls dressed up in leftover pieces of animal skin;
 - ivory handles for bags, decorated with elegant geometric patternsⁱⁱⁱ (made by the Kitlinermiut, or Copper Inuit).^{iv}

- ◆ After World War II, Inuit were forced to leave their nomadic lifestyle and settle in small communities around the Hudson's Bay Company posts scattered across the Central Arctic. The federal government set up arts and crafts centres as a way to integrate Inuit into Canada's cash economy. At these centres, they could learn new skills or continue carving, using local stone. Creating art was encouraged as an economic necessity, but developed into a powerful tool for conserving Inuit cultural identity in a time of accelerating change.^v

- ◆ Expo 67 in Montreal was a turning point in the history of Aboriginal artistic expression. It provided the first opportunity for Aboriginal peoples from across Canada to work on a project designed and realized entirely by them – the Canada Pavilion. Its central structure was an inverted pyramid, called Katimavik, which means “meeting place” in Inuktitut. Several Inuit artists demonstrated carving at the pavilion, including Elizabeth Okalik and Prime Okalik (Whale River), and Thomassiapik Sivuarpiq Sheeg (Povungnituk). Further, Elijah Pootoogook and Kumakuluk Saggiak (Cape Dorset) were commissioned to produce a mural for the restaurant.^{vi}

- ◆ As with storytelling traditions around the world, Inuit traditional stories have been passed from generation to generation, linking people to their culture and ancestors. Currently, however, many of these traditional Inuit stories are not being passed on and are at risk of being lost.^{vii} Nevertheless, modern forms of storytelling, such as filmmaking and telling stories through songs, are thriving in the North.

³ The "historic period" is defined as the era in Inuit art between the arrival of the Moravian missionaries in Labrador in the 1770s and the beginning of contemporary Inuit art marked by James Houston's visit to Nunavik in 1948 by the Canadian Museum of Civilization.

Inuit Artists in Canada^{viii}

- ◆ Nunavut's 250 artists represent a strikingly large percentage of the territory's labour force (1.86%, more than double the national average of 0.77%).
 - Yukon's 210 artists represent 1.04% of the territory's labour force (similar to the percentage in B.C).
 - The Northwest Territories' 180 artists account for 0.71% of the overall labour force.⁴
- ◆ The average earnings of artists in Nunavut are \$20,300, compared with average earnings in the cultural sector are \$33,200 and an average of \$38,000 for all Nunavut workers, a gap of 47%. Furthermore, one-half of these artists earn \$10,000 or less (median earnings of artists in Nunavut). In 2007, Statistics Canada defined the "poverty line" (or low-income cut off) for a single person living in a major city as \$21,666 (before tax).^{ix}
- ◆ To put the previous information on earnings into context, it is important to note that the cost of living in the north is extremely high, almost 75% higher than the Canadian average.^x
- ◆ According to the 2004-05 Nunavut Household Survey, 30% of respondents stated that they were involved in making arts and crafts in 2003.^{xi}
- ◆ In 2001, Nunavut's X0A postal code region was the most creative rural area in Canada. This area, encompassing Baffin Island (Iqaluit, Cape Dorset, etc.), had 230 artists among 6,700 total workers, for an artistic concentration of 3.4%. This was over four times the national average of 0.8% in 2001.
- ◆ Inuit artists are nationally and internationally acclaimed. Some of these artists are; Kenojuak Ashevak and Annie Pootoogook (visual arts), Zacharias Kanuk (film making), David Ruben Piqtoukun and Germaine Arnaktauyok (printmaking), Tanya Tagaq and Susan Aglukark (music), Taqralik Partridge (spoken word) and Michael Kusugak (writing and publishing).
- ◆ Some artists in remote communities have difficulty accessing materials. Sometimes natural resources have been depleted because of over-exploitation of the resource or due to the effects of climate change.^{xii}
- ◆ There are private galleries in every major city in Canada that sell Inuit art as well as many in the United States and at international venues.

⁴ Even though the census provides a very large sample, it is not a perfect source for information about artists. Some breakdowns of the number of artists in areas with lower populations such as Nunavut are less accurate because of the fairly small sample of artists in these locations. In addition, one gap in the Statistics Canada occupation classification is the fact that there is no distinct category for film makers or other media artists. The closest categories are: "producers, directors, choreographers and related occupations" (which includes a number of art forms), "film and video camera operators" and "painters, sculptors and other visual artists." Official census data may not capture fully the presence of artists in the population.

Inuit Arts Organizations

- ◆ The activities of Inuit arts organizations encompass storytelling, drumming, throat singing, as well as music, dance, writing, visual art, media arts, theatre, inter-arts and curatorial practices.
- ◆ Today, there are over 120 Aboriginal Friendship Centres located across Canada. They provide cultural programs, language training, skills development as well as other programs and services to First Nation, Métis and Inuit people.⁵ Several of these centres are the Pulaarvik Kablu Friendship Centre (Rankin Inlet, Nunavut), Labrador Friendship Centre (Happy Valley - Goose Bay) and the St. John's Native Friendship Centre (Newfoundland).
- ◆ Professional development is an important aspect of the mandates of Aboriginal (First Nations, Métis and Inuit) media arts organizations, with a specific focus on training, mentoring and workshops for Aboriginal youth.^{xiii}
- ◆ Many of the Inuit art organizations funded by the Canada Council are nationally and internationally acclaimed. In 2007-08, five Nunavut arts organizations were funded by the Canada Council for the Arts - Qaggiq Theatre Company (theatre), Artcirq and Artcirq Youth Collective (inter-arts), Nunavut Independent TV Network and Arnait Video Productions (media arts). Other organizations supported by the Canada Council include Nunavut's Isuma (media arts), Kitikmeot Heritage Society of Nunavut and the Flummies from Labrador (music), and the Inuit Art Foundation in Ontario (visual arts).
- ◆ Aboriginal artists and their organizations received little funding from the Canadian art system until after the 1960s. The excellence of their art forms was not recognized and not enough support was provided to build appropriate infrastructure. Nevertheless, in the past few years this situation has begun to change with programs like the Canada Council's Capacity Building Program: Multi-Year and Annual Support for Aboriginal Administrative Artistic Practices, the Aboriginal Peoples Collaborative Exchange program, the Aboriginal Traditional Art Forms Program and the Elder/Youth Legacy Program: Support for Aboriginal Artistic Practices. Inuit artists and organizations have successfully applied to these programs over the last seven years.
- ◆ According to artists and arts administrators, there is a serious lack of arts infrastructure in the North. Artists need access to supplies, studios, presentation spaces, artists-in-residence programs as well as connections with knowledgeable people. There is a particular need for recording studios both for contemporary artists and for recording Elders singing and storytelling practices.^{xiv}
- ◆ The Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) in Iqaluit provides a window to the Arctic by producing award winning television programming by Inuit, for Inuit. The IBC produces shows about Inuit kids, musicians, politicians, humour and issues in Inuktitut.
- ◆ Several annual festivals promote Inuit artists, their art and Inuit culture including the Alianait Arts Festival and the Nunavut Arts Festival in Iqaluit.

⁵ The concept of a "Friendship Centre" originated in the mid-1950s when many Aboriginal people were moving to larger urban areas in Canada. In an effort to address the needs expressed by their communities, concerned individuals began to push for the establishment of specialized agencies.

Examples of Canada Council funding

The following provides a snapshot of the many ways the Canada Council supports the endeavours of Inuit artists and arts organizations:

The **Inuit Arts Foundation** is known to many Inuit carvers and print makers in Nunavut and Nunavik. Its mandate is to ensure that Inuit artists are given training opportunities for safety measures and artistic development. It also publishes *Inuit Arts Quarterly*. In 2008, the foundation received a \$12,000 project grant from the Visual Arts section to host an Inuit art symposium in June 2009, entitled *Initiating Vital Connections for the 21st Century*.

The **Great Northern Arts Festival** has received funding from the Canada Council since 1998. The festival invites isolated artists to come to Inuvik to sell and exhibit their works to southern gallery owners looking to purchase new works. Besides showcasing visual arts, the Festival also produces evening performances featuring Inuit musicians, spoken word artists, throat singers, hip hop and circus arts.

Inuit filmmaker **Zacharias Kunuk**'s film, *Atanarjuat: Fast Runner*, winning the Golden Camera at the 2001 Cannes Film Festival and the 2002 Genie Award for Best Motion Picture. Zacharias Kunuk has received support from the Canada Council to produce numerous films including *The Journals of Knud Rasmussen* (2005), *Atanarjuat* (2001), and *Angirak* (1995). Further to this, he was one of the executive producers for the film *Before Tomorrow* (2008) which was created by **Arnait Video Productions** based in Igloolik and Montreal. Today, with Canada Council support, these films are available to view on the website www.isuma.tv – a free internet video portal for indigenous filmmakers, with unique indigenous-language content.

Michael Kusugak, a children's author and storyteller based in Nunavut, was awarded the Vicky Metcalf Award for Children's Literature in Toronto on November 17, 2008. Kusugak received a \$10,000 grant through the Canada Council's Spoken Word and Storytelling Program to develop a storytelling performance on Inuit legends in 2007-08.

Artcirq Youth Collective received \$34,000 to participate in the 2008 Festival au Desert in Timbuktu, Mali, through the Canada Council's Artists and Community Collaboration Program (Inter-Arts) and the Aboriginal Arts Office. Artcirq was founded to prevent suicide among Igloolik youth by providing them with a creative outlet. Artcirq participated in an Arctic/Desert Cultural Exchange that saw six Artcirq performers and two project coordinators showcase videos of arctic landscapes, acrobatic and theatrical performances, Inuit games and dances, and their signature *Oaraya* show at the festival.

Young Inuit children and their families^{xv}

- ◆ According to the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey, about 56% of Inuit children under 6 had participated in or attended traditional Inuit activities such as singing, drum dancing, gatherings or ceremonies. Within Inuit Nunaat, 63% had participated in these activities, compared with 36% living outside Inuit Nunaat.
- ◆ The survey found about two-thirds (65%) of Inuit children had someone to help them understand Inuit culture and history. In many cases it is through child care arrangements that promote traditional and cultural values and customs.
- ◆ The survey found that 40% of Inuit children under 6 were in some kind of child care arrangement. Of those children, 56% were in arrangements that promoted traditional and cultural values and customs and 59% were in arrangements where the Inuit language is used. This was higher than First Nations children living off reserve (24%) and Métis children (14%).
- ◆ In Inuit Nunaat, 70% of children in child care were in arrangements that promoted traditional and cultural values and customs and 82% were in arrangements where the Inuit language is used.
- ◆ Children everywhere learn valuable skills through play, games and sports. Inuit people have always enjoyed a variety of games and sports that develop physical strength, agility, and endurance – skills necessary for everyday survival in the harsh Northern environment. Many Inuit games are traditional and require no equipment.^{xvi}

Inuit Art and the Government

- ◆ Various federal, provincial and territorial departments have programs providing funding to Aboriginal arts including the Department of Foreign Affairs, Industry Canada and the National Film Board, Telefilm Canada, Nunavut Film Commission, and the Department of Culture, Language Elders and Youth – Nunavut and the Department of Economic Development and Transportation – Nunavut. Some other government organizations are outlined below.
- ◆ **Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC)**'s National Indian and Inuit Art Collection is comprised of over 4,000 works, of which 469 works are by Inuit Artists. There are 152 Inuit artists currently represented in INAC's collection.^{xvii} INAC's Indian and Northern Affairs Art Gallery in Ottawa has had numerous exhibitions of Inuit art over the years.
- ◆ The **Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC)** began in 1856 with a small collection of Aboriginal pipes and stone tools and has now become one of the world's leading museums and home to over 3 million artifacts. The CMC has approximately 9,959 Inuit works of art in their collection.⁶ The CMC has had a Curator of Inuit art since 1978.^{xviii}
- ◆ In 1956, the **National Gallery of Canada** acquired its first Inuit sculptures by Nunavik (Quebec) artists, including Charlie Sivuarapik. In the 1960s, important early prints, such as "The Enchanted Owl" by Kenojuak Ashevak were purchased from the first Arctic printmaking studio established by the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative in Cape Dorset. In the 1980s, major donations received from the Friends of the National Gallery, Dorothy M. Stillwell, and M.F. Feheley increased the National Gallery's Inuit holdings to over 350 works. In 1989 and 1992, the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development transferred a further 570 works to the Gallery. The collection now includes nearly 1400 works.^{xix}
- ◆ The Canada Council for the Arts has made it a priority to develop programs that meet the needs of Aboriginal artists and arts organizations. Beginning in 1994, with the creation of the Aboriginal Arts Secretariat, the emphasis on Aboriginal arts at the Canada Council was increased significantly in 1998-99 with additional funding for dedicated programs in media arts, dance, and visual arts. Between 1997 and in 2002, the Canada Council hired six Aboriginal program officers; there are now Aboriginal officers in music, dance, visual arts, theatre, media arts, and writing and publishing sections, all of which have received applications from Inuit artists and arts organizations.

⁶ This includes Inuit Prints, sculptures, wall-hangings, tapestry, ceramics, drawings and paintings and excludes Inuit garments, toys, miniatures, historical ethnological collections, or archaeological collections relating to Inuit culture.

Inuit Arts in Canada Today

- ◆ Inuit artists are reinventing old traditions and embracing forms of new media such as digital art and spoken word performances. Circus arts and hip-hop are becoming increasingly popular modes of expression among Inuit youth.
- ◆ The film, television and new media industry has become an exciting new sector in Nunavut's economy, and a vital vehicle to promote Inuit culture and language world-wide.
 - Igloolik's **Isuma Productions** brings the ancient art of storytelling into the digital age through video art and filmmaking, using mainstream technologies to present to the world a discourse from a distinctly Inuit point of view.^{xx}
 - In 2006, the **Nunavut Animation Lab** was created (a partnership between the Government of Nunavut and the National Film Board of Canada) to express the rich storytelling tradition of the Inuit in a new medium. Through this partnership, Alethea Arnaquq-Baril, Ame Papatsie, Gyu Oh and Jonathan J.K. Wright spent 4 months at the Banff Centre producing their own short animated films.
- ◆ The **Canada Council Art Bank** currently has a total of 836 art works by 221 Aboriginal artists, many of whom are Inuit.^{xxi}
- ◆ In December 2007, the National Gallery of Canada Foundation announced the creation of the **Audain Curator of Indigenous Art Endowment** which was made possible through a gift of \$2 million from the Audain Foundation. The Curator of Indigenous Art is responsible for exhibitions, acquisitions, loans, research, and publishing in relation to the care and promotion of the collection of Indigenous Art.^{xxii}
- ◆ Many Inuit artists have won national awards. In 2008, **Kenojuak Ashevak**, one of the most acclaimed of all Inuit artists, was awarded the Governor General's Award in Visual and Media Arts. Cape Dorset artist **Annie Pootoogook** received the 2006 Sobey Art Award. In 1999, **Kiawak Ashoona**, one of Canada's most renowned Inuit stone carvers, was awarded a Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prize. In 2009, **Natar Ungalaaq** of Igloolik won the Genie Award and the Jutra Award for Best Actor in a Leading Role for his role in the film *The Necessities of Life*.
- ◆ Today, urban Inuit artists create works that give glimpses of the influence of urbanization yet suggest memories of an arctic way of life that persists and continues to influence their. Elements of mixed cultural experiences meld with traditional Inuit culture to form a new and exciting genre of Inuit art.^{xxiii}
- ◆ Weaving and pottery are increasingly popular art forms supported by organizations such as the **Uqqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts** (Pangnirtung) that has a weaving/tapestry studio and the **Matchbox Gallery** (Rankin Inlet), a display and production centre providing training for artists and residents specializing in ceramics, printmaking, painting and bronze casting.^{xxiv}

Additional Information and Resources

The Aboriginal Canada Portal

www.aboriginalcanada.gc.ca

Canadian Heritage - Aboriginal Peoples' Program

http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/pa-app/prog-home_e.cfm

Department of Culture, Language, Elders and Youth – Nunavut

<http://www.gov.nu.ca/cley/home/english/index.html>

Department of Economic Development and Transportation – Nunavut

www.edt.gov.nu.ca

Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada

www.ainc-inac.gc.ca

Inuit Art Foundation

www.inuitart.org

Inuit Myths and Legends

www.inuitmyths.com

Native Drums

www.nativedrums.ca

Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre

www.ottawainuitchildrens.com

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- Matchbox Gallery, www.matchboxgallery.com