

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF CONTEMPORARY INUIT ART IN BRITAIN

## The Contemporary Era

Before World War II, tentative efforts to provide a stable income for Canada's Inuit were initiated by government and the Hudson's Bay Company. It is, however, generally agreed that a commercial dawn for contemporary Inuit art in Canada began in 1948 through guidance and under the auspices of James Houston (Fig. 1). He traveled to the Eastern Arctic funded by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (CHG), headquartered in Quebec. Houston returned in 1949 with the first collection of carved "soapstone pieces" that were quickly sold in Montreal, and consequently went north again to further pursue the economic potential for "Eskimo Art" (Houston 1951).

Houston could quite easily have reported back expressing doubts that a market for this new art form could ever be sustained. This is particularly so, if conversations such as the one he had with Koperkoolik from Povungnituk (Fig. 2) were to have been taken more literally. "He offered me the most perfect stone carving of a walrus that I had ever seen, I praised it and asked if he would make another. After a perplexed silence he said: 'You see that I can carve the likeness of a walrus! Why would you want another.' However, he was excited with the idea of making a caribou and went out immediately to find the stone" (Houston 1955: 33).

To encourage this potential whereby art could provide an income for the

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Fig. 1 Eskimos and Houston examine carvings at Pangnitung, Baffin Island. Photograph: Bert Beaver, National Film Board of Canada (Houston 1955: 12).

Inuit, it was necessary for the Government of Canada to provide subsidies. There was a clear need to establish an industry within the context of increasing settlements and decreasing fur prices, and in 1952 the government committed to promoting Inuit art. This situation prevailed for many years, although today direct regular funding is only channeled through the Inuit Art Foundation (IAF).

By 1955 Houston and his family were living almost permanently up north visiting encampments in south Baffin Island and Northern Quebec. Many settlement communities were still in the planning stage and the majority of Inuit were still semi-nomadic, living on the land in their traditional way. In 1958 Houston went to Japan and studied printmaking, bringing back the methodology to the Arctic in what has now become a well-established tradition of graphic production, broadening the artistic base.

Increasingly from 1958 all art production was organized through cooperatives in each settlement. With

distribution initially by the CHG and the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), a consistent branding was established to provide purchasers with a guarantee of authenticity. At that time not regarded as politically incorrect, the emerging art form was trademarked as "Eskimo Art" and the chosen logo of certified authenticity was an igloo printed onto a tag attached to every



Fig. 2 Walrus carved in steatite by Koperkoolik, Povungituk. Photograph: Bert Beaver, National Film Board of Canada (Houston 1955: 33).

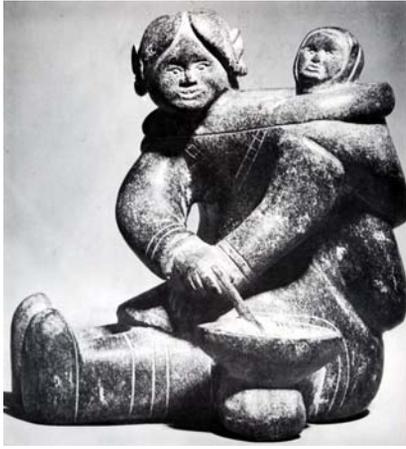


Fig. 3 Mannumi Shaqu (Cape Dorset), "Mother and Child," presented to Princess Elizabeth of the occasion of her visit to Canada, 1951. Photograph: Bert Beaver, National Film Board of Canada (Houston 1955: 2).

carving (IAQ 1991). Marketing practice has not re-branded the product and this "tag" remains; the sole concession to modernity being the introduction of the word "Inuk" rather than "Eskimo."

In a little more than half a century production has proved to be a vital source of income for Inuit. One in three households in Nunavut are involved in arts or crafts representing an important element of GDP. Within the first four years Houston himself brought or sent south more than 30,000 small works.<sup>1</sup> During the entire period some 4,500 artists (living and dead) have produced well over a million pieces. To put this in context the current Canadian Inuit population is about 35,000.

### Commercial Activity in the UK

Within four years of the project start up, Southern Canada was witnessing an increasingly demanding market. The controlling authorities starting to look further afield in an effort to widen this potential. Unsurprisingly with strong ties to the Commonwealth, they first looked across the Atlantic to Great Britain, a major trading partner at that time. In November 1951 a relatively large carving by Mannumi Shaqu had been given to Princess Elizabeth (Houston 1955), and in connection with her coronation celebrations in 1953 Charles Gimpel, after reading James

Houston's *Canadian Art* article (1951), contacted the HBC. Subsequently he mounted the first exhibition of "Eskimo Art" outside of North America at his mainstream art gallery in London. At this show the Royal piece (Fig. 3) was featured alongside almost 100 other pieces lent by the Canadian Handicrafts Guild (IAQ 2004: 10–13).

Perhaps surprisingly Canada did not at first look south to the United States, to a large and easily accessible market. But by 1953 among other strategies Houston co-produced a booklet as part of a tour of the northeastern United States promoting this newly emergent art form (Houston 1952). Regrettably this was the first and last time that we saw the British and American markets on the same footing.

This was not however due to the lack of effort on behalf of Charles Gimpel (Fig. 4). On the contrary, he doggedly maintained the presence of Inuit art throughout those early days, and when in the late 1950s Inuit graphics were introduced Charles became the first, and for many years the only European gallery to show the annual collection of Cape Dorset prints. These are no longer shown in Britain due to, among a myriad of reasons, lack of demand, a suitable venue, and the financial commitment required. The annual collection has, however, once again previewed recently in Europe at the Canadian Arctic Gallery in Basel, Switzerland. Having maintained a close relationship with James Houston and his successor Terry Ryan and through traveling in the North extensively, shortly before his death in 1974 Charles Gimpel was also the first European gallery to have a Cape Dorset artist, Iyola Kingwatsiak, at an exhibition (Tippet 1994; Fig. 5).

Inuit art exhibitions were still held annually at Gimpel Fils until the early 1990s. Within the established art market a further presence of Inuit art in Britain continued throughout the 1960s and 1970s when Theo Waddington, through his Cork Street gallery introduced Western Arctic carvings. During the same period the small central London gallery "Antrobus" also sold Inuit art, but for the first time as a permanent adjunct to a broader ethnographic specialist collection. Galleries exhibiting wholly ethnographic works have since emerged but without any Inuit representation.

Other attempts to introduce Inuit art into Britain were no more than passing flirtations and included a potentially prestigious but brief franchise within Harrods, along with more recently



Fig. 4 Charles Gimpel, Self Portrait, Point Enusko, NWT, 4 April 1968. Photograph: Estate of Charles Gimpel (Tippet 1994: 1).

Fortnum & Mason's. By the early 1980s Antrobus was retired while Theo Waddington and Gimpel Fils mounted fewer and fewer exhibitions. The latter ceased completely more than ten years ago, while the former shows only rarely. At this time more than twenty years ago I returned from Canada with my own collection of Inuit art and was persuaded to show it on a commercial basis, which as the Narwhal Inuit (originally Eskimo) Art Gallery, we have been doing ever since.

In addition to gallery based activity, up to the early 1980s established London auctioneers including Sotheby's and Bonhams, held specialist "Eskimo Carving, Paintings and Prints" auctions (Fig. 6) in which the early, and now highly sought-after abstract artists such as Kavik and Tiktak were prolifically featured along with several examples by respected artists including Tat-taniq, Weetaluktuk, Sevoga, and Makpa and "emerging" graphic artists including Pitseolak and Kenojak.

We have seen that the promotion of Inuit art in Britain has always been the result of an individual passion for the work and therefore generally philanthropic, in the true Victorian sense, rather than a purely entrepreneurial business venture. Jonathan King from the British Museum (pers. comm.) has referred to our own efforts as "a labor of love," and it is partly this philosophy that has ensured the Narwhal Inuit Art Gallery remains the sole British venue where a permanent collection of contemporary Inuit art can be seen.

Institutional presentations in Britain have also featured high quality Inuit

<sup>1</sup> *Time* magazine and associated national newspaper articles, including *London Art News* and *Manchester Guardian*, 1953 (TD Bank Collection, Toronto).



Fig. 5 Iyola Kingwatsiak at Gimpel Fils Gallery in London, October 1972. Photographer unknown (Tippett 1994: 172).

art exhibitions on a random basis including but not limited to Sculpture of the Inuit: Masterworks of the Canadian Arctic at the British Museum in 1971 and various exhibitions at the gallery in Canada House London.

Consequently we can see that contemporary Inuit art has had a continuous commercial presence in Britain for over fifty years, but either in absolute terms or by comparison with, for example, the United States, it cannot be said to be thriving. Why has it not prospered, and what if anything can be done to re-establish a more thriving market? The answers are, I believe, relatively simple and make up the remainder of this paper whereby the problems fall into two main categories:

- the failure to develop a broad base of British collectors and
- structural and financial issues in the distribution chain for Inuit art.

### Why is there no Broad Base of Collectors in Britain?

A survey by the Inuit art Foundation Ottawa published as a special *Inuit Art Quarterly* edition (IAQ 1991) in the section referring to the British market noted the inability of the early gallery to develop a body of serious collectors. The co-author of the British section, Jonathan King, went on to say that the low level of commercial activity may have been the result of the relative poverty and conservatism of British collectors. Fifteen years later,

this deserves a more detailed consideration.

- I identify a number of linked factors that have contributed to the failure to develop this potential body of collectors:
- an initial introduction of Inuit art through galleries linked to modern art;
  - the diffuse nature of the academic effort in relation to ethnographic art;
  - the related failure of museums to either start or keep collections updated or to exploit existing collections to promote Inuit art;
  - the development of a perception of ethnographic and tribal arts, including Inuit art, as “craft” rather than “art”;
  - no institutionalization of interest for Inuit art; and
  - the pricing of Inuit art and competitive products.

### *Introduction into “high-brow” galleries with high price tags*

Undoubtedly the level of acclaim given to Inuit art when it emerged was far greater than was subsequently given to it later, at a time when it should have been establishing itself in the British Art Market. Looking back it is now clear that the late 1940s and early 1950s were the halcyon years for modernist primitivism in Britain, in an era typified by Henry Moore, Epstein, and other artists such as Barbara Hepworth who was one of Gimpel Fils primary exhibiting sculptors.

Thus the 1953 exhibition of Inuit art put on by Charles Gimpel was well

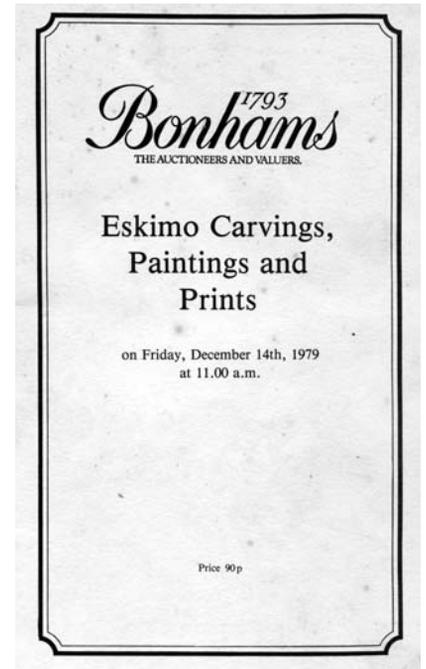


Fig. 6 Bonhams 1979 auction catalog. Author's collection.

timed to coincide with the primitive impulse of the day (IAQ 2004). Critics used the exhibition to continue the ongoing debate surrounding modern art in Britain at the time, with publications such as *Time* magazine quoting critics reviews ranging from London's *Art News* “all very much more than craftsmen, indeed they display an understanding of the potentialities of their materials, a sense of rhythm and an ability to convey astonishing subtle and effective relationship between mass and line that should be the envy of many an established English sculptor,” to the *Manchester Guardian* who discussed Inuit art in a formal manner and establishing the carvers as “powerful enough to make the most fervent admirer of Henry Moore pause a moment and ask if there is not something to be said for sculptors who have no intellectual pretensions.”<sup>2</sup>

Ironically Inuit carvings were thought to be more authentic than European modern art because, as was assumed at the time, the Inuit did not carve for economic gain, while on the other hand the very nature of the Gimpel Fils gallery in London precluded the general population from either crossing the gallery threshold or enquiring about the prices, thus condemning Inuit art to the elitist good and great of the time.

<sup>2</sup> *Time* magazine and associated national newspaper articles, including *London Art News* and *Manchester Guardian*, 1953 (TD Bank Collection, Toronto).



Fig. 7 Narwhal Inuit Art Gallery—Kenojuak Ashevak, "Raven Shields the Owl," 1984 (Glasgow Art Fair 1997: 49). Author's collection.

#### *Diffuse academic activity*

As stated in the *Inuit Art Quarterly* special issue article on Great Britain (IAQ 1991), many museums hold Inuit material (this also includes Alaskan, Siberian, and Greenlandic). Few, however, include contemporary art objects within their collection, and those that do, including the British Museum (London), Scott Polar Institute (Cambridge), National Museums of Scotland (Edinburgh), Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), Horniman Museum (London), Hunterian Museum (Glasgow), Leeds City Museum, and others, have singularly failed to either contemporize Inuit life through their art, or more importantly to show any planned or cohesive collecting and/or exhibiting policy. This is perhaps the most significant reason behind the British public's lack of knowledge or opportunity to become educated in Inuit art.

Major exhibitions such as "Living Arctic" at the Museum of Mankind in London which ran for more than two years (December 1987–July 1990) had a somewhat political overtone (IAQ 1990–1991), but was enormously popular notwithstanding the cursory attention paid to Inuit art, which was almost put in as an afterthought. The potential, however, was clear.

There have been other exhibitions that have touched on Inuit art, but not as a key area of focus. Random purchases have been made without an apparently coherent exhibiting policy, e.g., by the Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow. This lack of focus reflects

what is interpreted as a general lack of academic and critical focus on contemporary ethnographic arts. Although Centres for Canadian Studies exist, and History of Art is widely offered at our universities, there are no taught programs at either under- or post-graduate level that suggest this area as a main topic.

Activity that does occur tends to be "anthropological" rather than "aesthetic" with History of Art programs containing little material on tribal arts, although some anthropology programs do address material culture. However, the perspective is one of objects within the social, cultural, and religious context of a particular culture (although this is rarely, if ever, Inuit culture) and it is never in an artistic context. Thus there is no literal "critical" mass and as a result little discussion of tribal arts in general or Inuit art in particular, whether historical or contemporary, in mainstream art media. The term "Aboriginal" as now used as a synonym for tribal art has through its very name focused on Oceania.

#### *Perception as craft rather than art*

The failure of the academic art community to take ethnographic art seriously has been the proximate cause of a more general view in that community that it is not worthy of being taken seriously, and so as Contemporary Art Fairs have become a significant part of the art market in Britain and Europe over the past twenty years, there has often been a specific

clause excluding the exhibiting of "ethnographic" material, or simply turning down applications without entering into discussion.

Without doubt this showed both unwillingness of selection committees to evaluate each ethnographic art form on its own history and merits, but instead conveniently and through ignorance (and perhaps arrogance) chose a blanket method whereby a general exclusion avoided having to face up to the increasing reality whereby many objects of ethnographic origin were and have evolved into accepted and sought after art forms.

A specific example within the United Kingdom involves the Scottish Art Fair, soon to celebrate its tenth anniversary, which for its inaugural event in 1995 not only invited Narwhal to put on an exhibition of Inuit art to be shown in Glasgow, but continued to accept them to exhibit for a further six years (Fig. 7). Consequently in 2001 the involvement of the Scottish Arts Council in the selection process for the Fair resulted in a ruling that "crafts" would no longer be accepted and as they perceived Inuit art under this heading, it too was excluded.

While there was no total exclusion in the early days of British Contemporary Art Fairs, galleries exhibiting ethnographic art were often placed together, e.g., at the Olympia in London in the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> The intention of the organizers was to perhaps segregate what was seen by them as more craft than art, whilst still staying above the more obvious "souvenir" objects commonly seen and purchased by tourists during their travels. The reality was that this small grouping of galleries representing works from the Arctic, Africa and the West Indies provided a vibrant and commercially successful enclave within the more mainstream art fair. On the other hand, comparisons made between these altogether differing art forms, particularly in size and cost, did have a negative impact at this and subsequent art fairs.

This view of Inuit "art" was also reflected in bureaucratic practice. Prior to computerized tariffs being introduced in about 1988 by H. M. Customs & Excise, Customs officers generally treated importation of Inuit art as stone objects which attracted both duty and VAT at the full rate. This was in direct contrast to the Canadian Government marketing of the art form that proudly advertised it as "duty

<sup>3</sup> *2nd International Contemporary Art Fair*, London, Olympia (January 1985), 49.

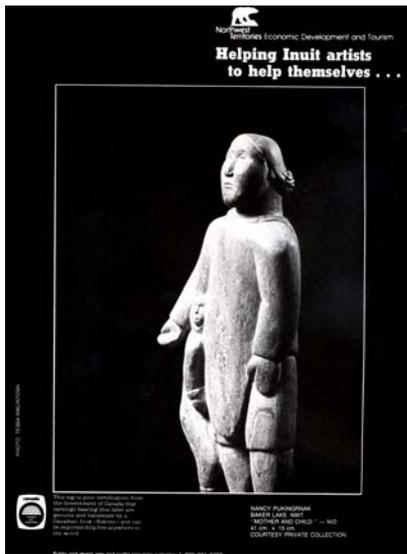


Fig. 8 Advertisement by Northwest Territories Economic Development and Tourism stating that Inuit art “can be imported duty free anywhere in the world” (IAQ 1989: inside front cover).

free” in publications such as *Inuit Art Quarterly* (IAQ 1989; Fig. 8). Although records need to confirm the exact wording found in pre-1980s tariff catalogues, customs officers of that era would cite the specific exclusion of “Eskimo” art as an art form. It is now accepted within a tariff that includes ethnographic material (ref. 9705 0000), which attracts no duty as well as a reduced rate of VAT. Ironically the use of the term “ethnographic,” while perhaps showing some sort of politically correct evolution within the civil service, became itself the very anathema that precluded Inuit art from other opportunities to be seen by a larger audience, e.g., at art fairs.<sup>4</sup>

It was perhaps symptomatic of the decline in the commercial British Inuit art market by the early 1990s, that the article in *Inuit Art Quarterly* discussing international perspectives on Inuit art in Great Britain concentrated mainly on museum collections and exhibitions, and that of the two included photographs, one was by British artist Andy Goldsworthy simply because it portrayed an Arctic scene (IAQ 1991). As with Bonhams, who included several Canadian and British artists paintings at the end of each auction (e.g., Bonhams 1979), this penchant for including non-Inuit works in what was otherwise a “dedicated” Inuit event was unsettling in that it almost certain-

<sup>4</sup> 1st London Contemporary Art Fair (for business), London, BDC (September 1987), 28–29.

ly drew on the need for credibility to be given to the main body of Inuit art through the inclusion of “mainstream” works. Effectively this was a reversal of the prominence given in written articles to the earliest exhibitions of Inuit art, and consequently a return to decontextualizing the art form.

#### *No institutionally based advocacy for Inuit art*

There have been and still are passionate collectors and buyers of Inuit art in Britain. However they have been unable to find support for their interest through academic activity or to challenge the “ethnographic craft” prejudice.

Modern art both in the USA and Britain had the Museum of Modern Art and the Tate as institutional foci. Subsequently through their boards, and later their advisory committees and friends organizations they could find or argue for funds and thus provide a motive force for developing public taste. Outside of the Museum of Mankind in London there has been no similar focus for ethnographic art (IAQ 1991). While providing some attention, it was primarily from an anthropological perspective, and within the larger context of the British Museum, but even this becomes lost within the much broader historical and archival effort of this great institution, and so there is no obvious way for an interested member of the British public to support ethnographic art or to learn more or to be encouraged in collecting tribal or Inuit art.

#### *Pricing and Competition*

The market can be characterized as having two main elements which merge and overlap along their boundary.

- a tourist oriented souvenir section “airport art,” with work characterized by repetition of form, speed of production and comparative affordability;
  - a “fine art” section, with work characterized by individuality, high technical skills and aesthetic content characterized by higher price.
- Europeans including a substantial British contingent often visited newly emigrated Canadian relatives following World War II at a time when availability of Inuit art was expanding. Those with an eye for this emerging art form would often return with “souvenirs” of Canada that were still relatively inexpensive. This close contact continued, later evolving into a sub-

stantial tourist market, but original Inuit art as a souvenir became more expensive and was often placed side by side with molded mass produced facsimiles produced by companies such as Wolf. The effect on the purchaser was both confusing and dramatic, and subsequently original Inuit art was no longer the first choice. The market therefore has faced a strong challenge at the lower end.

At the higher end there has been a clear problem in that very little Inuit art is seen as “expensive” by comparison with modern art produced in the same period by, for example, the best known British artists. There is still the possibility of building a representative Inuit art collection for little more than £100,000, something that would be impossible in most other areas of the art market. While this may be seen as an opportunity, it is nevertheless the case that many of the top collectors are inspired not only by a special feeling for art they collect, but also by feelings of competition, elitism and a desire to show off. The fact that the Inuit art market has not yet produced works valued at a million or more may be a disincentive for the richest collectors to devote time and effort to the subject.

#### **Structural and Financial Issues**

##### *Primary distribution: Long distribution lines*

There has always been across the entire Canadian and Greenlandic Inuit art market related dilemmas of ownership and financing.

In Arctic Canada, due to the original Government and now Co-op assisted system, the artist is virtually guaranteed the sale of his/her objects at the point of contact with the local buyer (Swinton 1965: 46, 48). There is no consignment system—i.e., no work is supplied on a “sale or return” basis excepting sanctioned and sponsored exhibitions. The wholesaler therefore seeks to recoup their investment as soon as they can by requiring the retailer to purchase outright. At each point along the distribution chain capital is tied up in owning material objects. This in itself limits the quantity and quality of objects each gallery can purchase as once the capital is fully invested, it can only be replenished based on sales. Despite this phenomenon, it is well known and seen throughout the industry that many stock items will remain unsold for considerable lengths of time. In fact some



Fig. 9 Inuit Art at Auction—Duncan Mclean of Waddington's, Toronto 1990 (IAQ 1991).

require eventual physical disposal or reworking to facilitate sale and space for new objects. This reduces the capacity for evolution and choice, and the further from the source an outlet finds itself, the greater the problem becomes.

The system is understandable from a public policy viewpoint. The aim is to provide artists with a steady, foreseeable income, and avoid increased social benefit dependency. Indeed this has often been the lot of art dealers, to put bread into the mouths of their artists. However from the viewpoint of enlarging and developing the end collector market the system leads to an inefficient use of dealers' capital, a restriction in stock turnover and, very importantly, poor and slow feedback from the market to the artists.

In the early 1980s partially in recognition of this particular problem the Hudson's Bay Company, under the auspices of David Liney, an Inuit art enthusiast and employee in the fur trading side of the business, used the opportunity of an available spacious warehouse on the Thames in London to assist European based galleries by bringing a small wholesale stock of carvings to London. Galleries were invited to view and purchase, but the stock was not replenished on a regular basis, and within eighteen months of setting up the company was taken over. The wholesale outlet was closed and the residual stock passed on to the purchasing company in Finland. To date no similar attempt has been made by any other Canadian cooperatives/wholesalers.

### *Secondary distribution*

Along with Bonhams, other major auction houses including Sotheby's, Christie's, and Phillips all held periodic "Tribal" auctions including Eskimo artifacts and contemporary Inuit art in London until the early 1980s. Where appropriate this was relocated to the company's American auction houses ostensibly to streamline operations, but in reality was more likely to have been a combination of lack of specialist knowledge within the market in Britain and a perceived lack of financial potential.

Today we look back with incredulity that more than a dozen works each by Tiktak, Toona Iqliq, and Kavik were being auctioned in Britain as recently as 1979 for no more than £50 (US\$90) (Bonhams 1979), and although prices have risen dramatically in the last few years, the British market for Inuit art at auction disappeared shortly thereafter. Today when approached I always advise an owner of any significant Inuit art to contemplate disposal through the Toronto auction house which has become the most prominent current outlet (Fig. 9).

A recent example of such disposal comes from Germany where a long-standing gallery closed when the founder retired, and the stock was equal in size to that held by a modest wholesaler in Canada. Eventually most pieces filtered into the system but not without repatriation to Canada often through the auction house. This example also highlights another problem whereby the first generation of gallery

owners have retired or are soon retiring, no younger family members wish to carry on the business. This has been seen in Canada as well as Europe.

There has been no significant commitment of capital to the modern tribal art business in the UK, and it follows from that, that efforts to promote modern tribal arts have been limited. As an example respected outlets such as Fortnum & Masons have followed policies of minimizing such an investment in favour of short-term promotion and gain. There are perhaps only two galleries seriously and regularly showing contemporary tribal arts in Britain: Narwhal for Inuit art and Rebecca Hossack for Australian Aboriginal and Islander art.

The golden era of three galleries selling Inuit sculpture and annual graphic collections has passed and despite attempts at revival by both the Canadian High Commission's cultural department and major retail outlets the current British market for Inuit art remains very small.

### **What Can Be Done?**

Given this apparently gloomy history of an art form seemingly in decline almost since its inception in the UK, how can there be a future for Inuit art in Britain? The prophesy of doom and gloom has risen periodically even back in Canada as the art form grapples with a continuing need for maintaining the high GDP that it has established in the Arctic.

Speaking for Britain, there is no reason why the presence of commercial Inuit art should not survive, albeit it with a requirement to revisit the early days involving a degree of either subsidy or funding and a substantial change in the overall perception of how Inuit art fits into the commercial art world in general. The problem appears to be one of critical mass, whereby a concerted effort by all involved to re-launch it could prove to be the required catalyst.

I have answered two questions: "Why is there no broad base of collectors in Britain?" and "What are the structural problems in the Inuit art market?" The way ahead lies in addressing the factors that have led us to today's situation.

In the first place it is quite clear that education is a requirement. In 1995 as a response to a significant amount of enquiries annually dealt with by the Narwhal Inuit Art Gallery often channeled from other institutions including



Fig. 10 Terry Ryan in the Textile Shop, Cape Dorset, 1 April 1968. Photo Charles Gimpel—Estate of Charles Gimpel (Tippet 1994: 155).

the British Museum and the Canadian High Commission, it was decided that an educational wing of the Narwhal Gallery could best suit the increasing thirst for knowledge at primary, secondary and tertiary educational levels and by the public at large.

As with all projects of this nature funding is always an issue, and it took until 1999 with the help of charitable solicitors and others to form and register NIAEF—Narwhal Inuit Art Education Foundation as a registered charity, whose mission statement is probably fundamental to the prospective continuance of a British Inuit art market, and so it is offered as a catalyst for the future prosperity of a long existing history:

“To advance education in all aspects of Inuit life, including without limits its traditions, religions, social structure and relationship with its environment”<sup>5</sup>

Since inception NIAEF has toured the United Kingdom from the Shetland to the Channel Islands in an effort to carry out its mission statement through exhibiting art, tools, artifacts, and clothing accompanied by books, video, and audio material.

This however has necessarily to date been a limited effort, and so much more could be done. As to what that could be, particularly educationally, I postulate the following ideas for discussion, even if the common link is the need for funding.

– Universities should expand courses on ethnographic arts and Inuit cul-

ture at undergraduate and post-graduate level. Teaching bibliographies and materials could be developed co-operatively.

– There should be studentships and more senior research roles and projects established focusing on the area.

– A national catalogue of Inuit artifacts would be a first step to creating at least a virtual national collection of Inuit art.

– Some of the treasures held across the country—currently with limited use and access—should be brought together in one place with a substantial proportion on public show. This would significantly increase the visibility of Inuit art and culture and might provide the basis for new artifact-based research.

– A “Friends of Inuit Art” group should be set up—probably using NIAEF as its basis.

– Academics should consider establishing a cross discipline forum to foster discussions and research cooperation on ethnographic arts and Inuit culture. This could be the vehicle for rationalizing national holdings and establishing rational on-going collecting and exhibition policies.

We need to reach some consensus on what needs to be done, what can be done and how much money will be needed to achieve reasonable goals. We need a well developed development plan looking forward to allow individuals and institutions to be able to argue for change in their spheres. If all that were to be done the remaining issue of the structure of the market needs to be addressed.

Whilst not wishing to suggest that the “Inuitness” should be devolved, it is imperative that Inuit art and the artists recognize that the guaranteed purchase systems that have been in place until now, are potentially hindering a more worldwide growth. Market forces must prevail to a far greater degree.

The new generation of Inuit artists are looking to expand their artistic horizons in both medium, form and geography, and in so doing acknowledge that the comfortable cooperative cocoon in which they are slowly metamorphosing must eventually split open and allow the new artist to enter the world. If more galleries are to show more work then clearly the relationship between gallery and artist needs significant modification

I believe that contemporary Inuit art has a future in Britain. We were grateful when in recognition of our efforts Terry Ryan (Fig. 10), who took over in Cape Dorset for forty years the inspiring work of the Godfather of contemporary Inuit art James Houston, recently accepted a position as the honorary Patron of NIAEF. We believe that together with the right corporate sponsorship, and the backing of the Canadian government and the Inuit art cooperatives we can achieve the critical mass required to re-establish the vibrancy first seen more than fifty years ago in Britain.

Quoting from a previous professional life, one of the laws of stratigraphy states that “the past is the key to the present” (James Hutton 1726–1797). To proffer a future for Inuit art in Britain, we do not need to reinvent the wheel but to re-inflate it.

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