

Iqqaipaa: Celebrating Inuit Art, 1948-1970. An online exhibition of the Canadian Museum of Civilization.*

Reviewed by Shannon Bagg

Commemorating 50 years of contemporary Inuit art production and coinciding with the inauguration of Nunavut, *Iqqaipaa: Celebrating Inuit Art, 1948-1970* opened at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in April of 1999 and remained on display until February of the following year. Curated by Maria von Finckenstein and with James Houston as a special advisor, the exhibition featured a total of 150 works from the institution's collection, as well as from Houston's private collection. The accompanying exhibition catalogue, more simply titled *Celebrating Inuit Art, 1948-1970*, is based largely on artist interviews—both new and old—and focuses on the crucial social and economic roles that art plays in the lives of Inuit artists, with particular attention paid to the difficult transitional era of the 1950s and 1960s, when Inuit abandoned camp life and moved into settlements. An online version of the exhibition continues to be available on the museum's website, although it fails to convey the strong curatorial message contained in the exhibition's catalogue.[1]

To date, only a small number of exhibitions have dealt with the significance of financial motivation and its role in contemporary Inuit art, even though Inuit artists continually stress the importance of economic factors on their artistic production.[2] Von Finckenstein's premise—as spelled out in the exhibition catalogue—is that first-generation Inuit artists, "...had no romantic notions about art—it was a way to survive...."[3] The author goes so far as to say that the act of projecting Western values onto Inuit artists is unjust and, ultimately, a disservice to them. She writes,

When Pauta Saila from Cape Dorset says, "I've been carving soapstone the whole time so my family won't go hungry," he says it with all the pride of the hunter who is successfully looking after his own. To expect him to carve with the wish to create, to fulfill, or "express himself," would be ludicrous and disrespectful, disregarding his cultural roots and the environment that has shaped him. This does not of course suggest that Inuit from the first generation of professional artists did *not* express themselves in their art or enjoy the process, but their motivation was and is first and foremost commercial.[4]

Unfortunately, Von Finckenstein's argument and, by extension, the underlining message of the original exhibition is, for the most part, absent from the online version. Instead, visitors to the website are presented with an accessible and user-friendly but nonetheless basic introduction to Inuit art and culture that includes maps, step-by-step demonstrations of carving and printmaking techniques, and information about cultural objects. Works featured in the exhibition are organized according to region and community or can be viewed individually accompanied by

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explanatory text. The most valuable component of the online exhibition is the “Artists” section in which artists’ statements are highlighted along with various black and white photographs of featured artists. It is here that visitors can gain a real sense of Inuit artists’ perspectives and the value that art holds in the North. As Inukjuak artist Paulosie Kasadluak states, “What we show in our carvings is the life we have lived in the past right up to today. We show the truth.”[5]

Perhaps the most problematic aspect of the exhibition is Houston’s collaboration on the project. A vital figure in the instigation and development of contemporary Inuit art, Houston is responsible for many of the misconceptions that form the basis of Inuit art history, including the contested role that economics plays. To look to Houston without somehow mitigating his authority through equal (if not greater) involvement by Inuit, subordinates the latter’s position in determining the value and meaning of the art. While Houston’s role as “special advisor,” the use of his collection, and his subsequent donation of several works to the museum are all touted on the website, his written contribution to the catalogue is not included online. Undoubtedly influenced by the exhibition’s concept, the perspectives expressed by Inuit artists, and the legitimacy offered by way of the museum’s authority, Houston’s essay recounts his first exposure to Inuit art, stressing how the potential economic benefit of art making was immediately apparent.[6] Although Houston attempts to tackle the subject of financial motivation head-on and—in keeping with the theme of the catalogue—acknowledge its significance, his reasoning is flawed and his argument seems forced. Houston writes,

Today some Inuit openly declare that they carve only for money. Unlike our more cautious Southern sculptors, painters, musicians, and performers, they are painfully truthful, eager to tell Arctic sociologists and anthropologists all about it. Most artists—unless they are like Degas, Manet, Munch, or Toulouse-Lautrec, who inherited wealth—work for some kind of necessary reward.[7]

As in his past writing, Houston strives to validate Inuit art by showing how it stands up to Western models. Perhaps in spite of his original aim, Houston minimizes the importance of monetary considerations, emphasizing instead romanticized notions of “universal” artistic struggles. The production of art in the North, he claims,

...was much more than a cold, calculating way of making money. Some Inuit at the very height of their fame, with newfound wealth pouring in with each new creation, would totally cease to carve for months, or even years, because of some disenchantment or because fresh images would not come to them.... Such inspired and uninspired periods are shared by true artists everywhere. This is not, I want to stress, a commercial approach to art.[8]

Ultimately, Houston’s contribution (and, to some extent, his involvement in the project) undermines some of what is gained in the rest of the catalogue, in particular, Von Finckenstein’s position that imposing Western art concepts on Inuit artists is disrespectful of their cultural and artistic heritage. Although the original exhibition recognizes economics as the primary motive for artistic practice in the Arctic, it does not go further than this point and the online version fails to engage in any critical discussion at all. Unfortunately, in both the original and online

exhibitions, artwork is discussed from a conventional art historical perspective, rather than in light of financial considerations and their effect on the final aesthetic. Such an approach would represent a significant step toward understanding Inuit art on its own terms.

Notes

1. The online exhibition is featured at <http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/iqqaipaa/home-e.html>, accessed most recently on October 14, 2007. Some of the views expressed here were originally developed in my doctoral dissertation *Art, Art Historians, and the Value of Contemporary Inuit Art*, submitted to Queen's University in 2006.
2. These include Shannon Bagg's 1997 exhibition, "Making Art Work In Cape Dorset," at the Carleton University Art Gallery and Marie Routledge's 1999 exhibition, "Carving An Identity: Inuit Sculpture from the Permanent Collection," at the National Gallery of Canada.
3. Maria von Finckenstein, "Introduction," *Celebrating Inuit Art, 1948-1970*, Maria von Finckenstein, ed. (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999), 12.
4. Maria von Finckenstein, "The Artists Speak," in *Celebrating Inuit Art, 1948-1970*, Maria von Finckenstein, ed. (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999), 45.
5. Paulosie Kasadluak as cited at <http://www.civilization.ca/aborig/iqqaipaa/artist-e.html>, accessed October 14, 2007.
6. According to Houston, his initial thought was, "Could their ability as carvers help the Inuit to support themselves? An idea flashed into my mind. It was by far the most important thought that I have ever had in my entire life. I might be able to help these people develop a channel for their art from the North to art galleries, museums, and collectors in the South." James Houston, "Fifty Years of Thinking It Over," in *Celebrating Inuit Art, 1948-1970*, Maria von Finckenstein, ed. (Hull, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1999), 21.
7. Houston, "Fifty Years," 24-25.
8. Houston, "Fifty Years," 26.

Shannon Bagg has curated several exhibitions on Inuit art and is the author of Making Art Work In Cape Dorset (Ottawa: Carleton University Art Gallery, 1997). She edited, with Lynda Jessup, On Aboriginal Representation in the Gallery (Gatineau, QC: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 2002). In addition to teaching in the fields of Inuit art and museum studies, she has worked as Curator of Inuit Art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization.