The Inuit Sculpture of Nunavik – A historical summary

The following lines offer a short summary of the history of sculpture in Nunavik and provide a general portrait of its development. This information will hopefully help you guide your students in the observation and appreciation of the art works you will present to them.

There is no word in Inuktitut, the Inuit language, to express the concept of "art". "Today, the word used to represent the action of sculpting is 'sananguag' or 'sananguagay' which possess a significant etymology: 'sana' means 'to do' and 'nguag' relates to the concept of 'model, imitation, resemblance'. "1 (Open translation) Furthermore, in some Arctic regions, "nguag" means "small". Therefore, the term "sananguag" offers a definition that can be applied quite well to sculpture in general and which could be summarized by: a representation that resembles or imitates, in a smaller format, a certain reality, a fiction or even a narrative tale like, for instance, a myth or legend."

When we talk about Inuit sculpture, we mainly refer to the contemporary and post-contemporary sculptures which include the art works made from 1948-1949 up to the present day. Indeed, in 1948, a young artist from Toronto named James Houston goes to Port-Harrison (now Inukjuak) in Nunavik, where he develops a real passion toward Inuit sculpture. He gets offered and acquires a few pieces which he hastens to show when he returns "South". The keen interest for these sculptures is immediate and a real market begins. In the following years, Houston travels through Nunavik in search of sculptures. He encourages the birth of new talents, and thus contributes to the development of a new economy based on this new form of expression.

In the early 50's, the rise of this new market arrives just at the right moment. The fur trade is not as lucrative as in the past and the Inuit, especially the ones who started to settle down, find in the sculpture a new possibility for income. They represent the fauna surrounding them as well as diverse scenes of their usual everyday life. In less than a decade, art works inspired by legends and mythic tales start appearing. In the mind of the non-Inuit from the South, these are "traditional" sculptures, but for the Inuit themselves, all these sculptures result directly from this new demand. However, we should not think that the Inuit did not sculpt before the mid 20th century. Effectively, although the commerce of sculptures develops principally after 1948, the Inuit were already using sculpture as a bartering tool, notably, with the whalers who berthed on their coasts.

Well before the massive arrival of the "White Men", the Inuit maintained a semi-nomadic life style. They lived by hunting, fishing and picking, and traveled through their land according to the herds and seasons. They had to work arduously every day, in order to insure their survival. Everybody, young and old alike, had specific functions and tasks to accomplish. Consequently, we can imagine that in those days, the Inuit only devoted themselves to sculpture when weather conditions prevented them from going hunting or, by taking advantage of the passing of strangers, they sculpted in order to trade their art works in exchange for foreign goods.

Before 1948, Inuit sculpture was mainly of a functional nature. The Inuit were sculpting in order to create tools - for hunting and fishing amongst other things - utensils, receptacles and toys, which they used in their everyday life. Nevertheless, some of these objects could have an aesthetic value in addition to being useful, like the "qulliq", the oil lamp carved in steatite. It happened too that, sometimes, they would also sculpt figurative pieces, but it appears that most of these pieces were of small dimensions, perhaps because of the nomadic life style of their creators, but also because some of these art works were in fact 'magico-religious' objects.

Archaeological searches carried out in the Arctic have shown that the ancestors of the actual Inuit (the Thule people, and well before them the pre-Dorset and Dorset people) also sculpted. According to the periods, they sculpted harpoons heads, figurines and amulets. They did not only use stone, but also ivory, bones, antlers, as well as floating wood that they could find on the shore.

Although all these materials are still being used by sculptors from the North, when we think about Inuit sculpture the first thing that comes to mind, usually, is "soapstone". The term "soapstone", in fact, designates diverse stones from the peridotite family. These metamorphic stones are principally composed of mineral talc resulting from magnesium silicate. These are particularly soft and tender stones, easily workable and their texture may remind one, in a way, of the texture of soap. In Nunavik, we find mostly steatite, serpentine and serpentinite. These stones are sometimes grey, sometimes green, depending on the concentration of olivine they contain. While green stones are polished in order to obtain a shiny green color, sculptors usually cover the grey stones with a black wax (often, shoe shine is employed). Other stones can also be used for carving. For instance, in the extreme north of Quebec, near Ivujivik, we can find an ochre limestone. Sculptors say, generally: the harder the stone, the more beautiful the sculpture created from it...

In the past, the Inuit made their sculpting tools from what they had at their disposal: stone, bones, floating wood, etc. Then, when the first non-Inuit arrived in the North, the Inuit discovered metal, which they either exchanged with the foreigners or salvaged from wrecked ships, and with which they could build new tools. Today, some sculptors use mechanical tools and electric arinders. Nevertheless, whatever the era, the sequential order of the tools used remains the same. We rough-hew the stone with an axe or an adze until freeing the main volume of the sculpture. Then, we define the volume and the details with knives and gouges. We file and then polish with abrasives (nowadays, we use emery paper), progressing from the rougher to the finer and softer one. If desired, to add the finishing touch, we shine (or wax) and add the final details.

Inuit sculpture differs depending on the region, be it Nunavik, Nunavut, Alaska or Greenland. In Nunavik, for instance, we note a particularly pronounced narrative spirit. In addition, the presence of numerous details, more or less realistic, enriches the diverse scenes of everyday life, figures and animals that are sculpted by the Inuit from Nunavik. To the experienced eye, there is a predominant style from one village to the other, but also from one period to another. This style can be associated with the coloration or texture of the primary matter available in the nearby region, or with a specific way of doing, or with a particular thematic. One thing remains certain: like in any art, every artist, man or woman, develops his or her own style and his or her themes of predilection. Now it is up to you to discover them!

¹ CANADIAN ESKIMO ARTS COUNCIL, Sculpture / Inuit, La sculpture chez les Inuit : chefs-d'œuvre de l'Arctique canadien, p. 45.

Sculptures

In order to familiarize yourself with Inuit sculpture from Nunavik, you are invited to discover our entire collection.

If you wish to quickly refine your searches...

earch" - For sculptures representing animals, write down the name of the animal (seal, beluga, walrus, dog, bird, fish, etc.) in the "S section.

- For sculptures representing items, write down the name of the object (knife, sled, etc.) in the "Search" section.

- For the art works of specific sculptors, write down the name of the sculptor in the "Search" section.

The following sculptors present a truly personal style: Davidialuk Alaasuaq AMITTUQ, Lucassie Qumaaluk ECHALOOK, Noah Arpatuq ECHALOOK, Mattiusi Manukuluk IYAITUK, Henry Ainalik NAPARTUK.

Other web links

- Musée de Lyon / Dossier culturel inuit - 4 files in French accessible from: http://www.museum-lyon.org/apedagogigues/dcinuit/fiches them/ft1 art.htm

- The Canadian Encyclopedia / Inuit Art

http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=F1SEC910058

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