

Inuit Prints: Japanese Inspiration

Early Printmaking in the Canadian Arctic



About Inuit Printmaking

The art of printmaking can be traced back to Chinese antiquity, but its presence in Canada's Inuit communities dates only from 1957. Traditionally, Inuit graphic artists expressed their creativity by etching and carving on natural materials such as stone, bone and ivory; by sewing beautiful and intricate decorations on their clothing; and by creating elaborate face and body tattoos. Drawing implements and paper — essential tools in printmaking — were unknown in the Canadian Arctic until the arrival of European explorers and missionaries.

Modern, professional printmaking requires specialized skills and equipment. These were first introduced to Cape Dorset by James Houston, an artist from southern Canada who moved to the Arctic in 1948. He found a number of artists in Cape Dorset who were eager to explore this new form of cultural expression. By 1959, the first five Inuit printmakers — Kananginak Pootoogook, Iyola Kingwatsiak, Lukta Qiatsuk, Eegyvudluk Pootoogook and Osuitok Ipeelee — were creating prints under the umbrella of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative (known locally as the Kinngait Co-operative), which soon garnered international fame as the “Cape Dorset studio.”

From the outset, Inuit artists have used printmaking to illustrate Inuit myths and history, as well as Arctic animals, and to document traditional ways of life and a changing cultural and social landscape. Their work has captured the attention of art lovers around the world and has become an economic mainstay of Cape Dorset and a few other Inuit communities.

In many parts of the world, printmaking involves a woodcut: a raised image carved on the face of a flat plank of wood. In the treeless Arctic, wood was not a practical option, especially in the early days when transportation in the Far North was severely limited. Inuit artists turned instead to materials that were at hand. In the early years they experimented with linoleum floor tiles imported from the south. By 1959 they had found a local quarry of greenstone, ideally suited to create their unique “stonecut” prints.

In the Cape Dorset print studio, it is not uncommon for one artist to produce a drawing and another to cut the image into stone and print the image on paper. Early prints typically carry two signature marks stacked vertically: the artist's at the top, the printer's second, and the mark of the Cape Dorset studio at the bottom.

Whether using a woodcut, stonecut or linocut, the printmaking process is essentially the same: the original image is carved in relief, with the desired image becoming the medium's top surface. Ink is then applied to the surface and paper is pressed onto the ink, completing the transfer of the image. In some cases, additional colours are added to the final prints through the use of stencils. For each colour, a corresponding space is cut in a sturdy sheet of paper or mylar,

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which is then placed over the print. The colour is added by brush through the opening in the stencil. Other print techniques now used in Cape Dorset include lithography and etching.

In keeping with the co-operative marketing approach adopted in the 1950s, most prints produced in Cape Dorset and other Inuit communities are not sold by individual artists but as part of annual “collections” released by the community. Cape Dorset has produced an annual collection every year since 1960, retaining its status as the epicentre of Inuit printmaking and one of the world’s recognized centres of art production.

Today, a new generation of Inuit printmakers is coming to the fore, adding a new and exciting chapter to a remarkable story that began a half century ago.