

Inuit Prints: Japanese Inspiration

Early Printmaking in the Canadian Arctic



About the exhibition

Inuit Prints: Japanese Inspiration is a groundbreaking inquiry into the Japanese influences on the early years (late 1950s and early 1960s) of the world-renowned Cape Dorset studio, the oldest and most successful printmaking enterprise in Canada's Far North. The exhibition also focuses particular attention on the late James Houston, the Canadian artist and government employee who in 1958 forged this remarkable link between printmakers in Japan and the Canadian Arctic.

The exhibition begins with a brief introduction to contemporary Inuit art and its connection with traditional forms of Inuit cultural expression, such as stone carving, sewing, and tool making. The introduction also describes how printmaking arrived in the Canadian Arctic in 1957, and sets the stage for the exhibition's focus on the Japanese influence.

The core of the exhibition has three main sections:

A Leap into the Unknown, 1957–1958: This section offers a fascinating look at Inuit printmaking in the short “experimental” period before the introduction of the Japanese influence. Highlights include *Three Caribou*, dated November 20, 1957, one of the first prints ever made in the Cape Dorset studio; and three linocuts — prints made with linoleum floor tiles, one of the few flat and “carve-able” materials then available to Cape Dorset printmakers.

Lessons with a Japanese Master, 1958–1959: From November 1958 to late January 1959, James Houston studied woodcut printmaking in Japan, primarily with Japanese master Un'ichi Hiratsuka. Using Houston's own artwork, this section highlights some of his many cultural experiences in Japan. The pieces include works in ink, watercolours and prints that Houston created while learning about Japan's rich printmaking traditions.

Japanese Inspiration, 1959–1963: In this section — the heart of the exhibition — early Inuit prints are juxtaposed with the actual Japanese prints that Houston brought back to Cape Dorset, revealing their similarities and differences. Among the many highlights are powerful black-and-white stonecut prints created by Inuit artists who were inspired by Hiratsuka's example; rare Inuit stonecut rubbings; and stencil prints created by Inuit artists inspired by the Japanese kappazuri techniques. This section includes historically significant works by some of the finest Inuit and Japanese printmakers of the modern era, including Hiratsuka and Shikō Munakata, and Inuit artists Kananginak Pootoogook, Lukta Qiatsuk and Kenojuk Ashevak, among many others.

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The exhibition also features a display of a stonecut print block and early printmaking tools that Cape Dorset artists created and used in the late 1950s, modeling them after the Japanese tools Houston introduced into the community. The artifacts include a hake brush made of polar bear fur and a sealskin Baren (a light-weight disc used to rub the back of the printing paper after it is placed on the ink block). These tools show how Inuit artists made resourceful use of local materials.

Complementing the artworks is an 18-minute video specially produced for this exhibition. *Threads that Connect Us: Washimakers Meet Cape Dorset Artists* puts a contemporary spin on the printmaking story. Filmed in 2002, it follows a group of traditional Japanese papermakers as they travel to Cape Dorset to meet the Inuit artists who continue to use their handmade papers — half a century after Houston first forged the link between Japanese and Inuit artists.

In developing this exhibition, the Canadian Museum of Civilization gratefully acknowledges the contribution of the following outside co-curators:

Asato Ikeda is a Ph.D. Candidate in the Department of Art History, Visual Art and Theory at the University of British Columbia. Her dissertation examines Japanese art during the Fifteen-Year War (1931-1945) and the question of Japanese fascism. She is co-editor, with Ming Tiampo and Aya Louisa McDonald, of an anthology on Japanese war art, which will be the first anthology on the subject in English (forthcoming from Brill Academic Publishers).

Dr. Ming Tiampo is associate professor of Art History at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, and is a specialist of postwar Japanese art and transnationalism. Her book, *Gutai: Decentering Modernism* was published with the University of Chicago Press, and she is presently curating an exhibition on Gutai for the Guggenheim in New York City.

Inuit Prints: Japanese Inspiration is a travelling exhibition produced by the Canadian Museum of Civilization specifically for presentation in other institutions in Canada and abroad.