



First For
Television

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Images of Canada

SPIRIT IN A LANDSCAPE: INUIT ART
AND THE HARD HERITAGE IT REFLECTS

June 15, 1976

It took a year and a half to make. Producer-director Carol Myers read "everything" she could find on the Inuit culture. She saw at least 50 collections of Eskimo art (4,000 pieces in one collection alone) in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto - and thousands of color slides of collections in Detroit, New York, Washington and England. Carol and a CBC film crew made two trips to Canada's Arctic to film. They camped overnight in a tent in 40 below weather on the Arctic ice - to get footage of Eskimo hunters.

The result is a beautiful and unusual film, Spirit In a Landscape . The People Beyond, to be telecast in the fall (Wednesday, October 27, 8:30 p.m.) on CBC-TV, the latest special in the network's Images of Canada series.

In addition to the original version (in English), Spirit In a Landscape will be seen (on the CBC Northern Service) translated into Inuktitut (the Inuit language); and on Radio Canada, translated into French. This adds to its inherent uniqueness.

Spirit In a Landscape looks at the Inuit people of Canada's Arctic, through their distinctive Eskimo sculpture and prints, and the environment in which they live.

"There has never been any word in the Inuit language for Art. The concept of art object has never existed," says Minnie Freeman, the Inuit narrator of the one-hour film.

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"Art is a concept imposed by the white man," Carol Myers affirms, "but the Inuit for several thousand years had what we consider art or craftsmanship in the design of their tools, amulets and knives. They never decorate their homes with their prints or sculpture - basically, it's been a livelihood since the late 1940s and early 50s. Yet through their art, we get a better understanding of their past and present - and what the future may hold for them. They express a lot of things in their art they would never verbalize or act out."

Spirit In a Landscape is a remarkable film for its insights into the heritage of the Eskimo. Its three "acts" focus on (1) the outer aspects of their lives (the real world of their cruel 'landscape' (2) their inner world, the spiritual and imaginative, and (3) the culture in conflict, as new ways are imposed on the old, and technology changes their environment.

The film has three principle narrators: Minnie Freeman from Cape Hope Island, Hudson's Bay; anthropologist Dr. William E. Taylor Jr., director of the National Museum of Man, Ottawa (who has a personal understanding of the culture); and Douglas Rain, who speaks the poetry some of it by Rasmussen ('Across Arctic America'), the Danish anthropologist who was part Eskimo.

The profound effect of the Far North and its people upon the filmmakers from the south changed the shape of the film. "Meeting the Eskimo people in their landscape turned around a lot of misconceptions," says Carol Myers. "In a community, they are somehow reduced in stature. It is when you see them hunting on the land that you begin to understand."

Accompanied by cameraman Walter Wicks, sound man Dave Brown, and (on the first trip, Barbara Moon, script writer), Carol Myers travelled by plane to Baker Lake, then to Spence Bay, in April/May of 1975. While Barbara stayed in the communities interviewing Eskimos and whites as part of her research, Carol and crew travelled 60 miles by skidoo from Spence Bay - their overnight stay in Arctic sleeping bags in a "summer" tent at 40 below was virtually sleepless. "I've never been so cold in my life," says Carol, adding, "And I've never 'heard' silence before - no wind, no aircraft, nothing. It was very strange - like being on another planet."

In July of '75, in order to record "the other side" of the environment, the briefly-open water, the tiny delicate flowers of the tundra, they returned to travel by 30-foot canoe with a hunter and his son. They went to the Belcher Islands, where they were "weathered in" for a week by impenetrable fog and wild seas.

The soft-spoken producer-director, acknowledging that "conflict" is a dominant theme in the environment and in the film, found its most dramatic illustration in the Belcher Islands where, in the 1940s, a cruel and violent episode in Eskimo life was played out. Nine people died as a result of religious misconceptions and fanaticism; some murdered, some frozen to death. "The early sculptures of the region were of birds which abound there, they were delightful," says Carol. "After the murders, the art seemed to change. The people also started carving grotesques - animals and men, in weird shapes."

Referring to this incident, Minnie Freeman questions in the film whether the ideas of Christianity "are too deep to understand," and adds, "But they are alien."

Carol Myers notes that, in spite of this, Christianity plays a central role in Eskimo life - "at the beginning and end of the film we see Eskimos happily going to church, we hear them singing hymns."

Although he came as early as the 16th century, the white man is a latecomer to the North, and as narrator William Taylor says in the film, "To us ... the landscape seemed meaningless, a hunk of geography without history. We scarcely seemed to notice that it was inhabited already.

"But the People - the Inuit - had been there beyond the treeline for some 4,000 years. The gods had been named. Protocols had been established. This culture had come to its own terms with the geography

"What's happening now - out of sheer need and in the face of change - is that they have been making us illustrations of their world.

Spirit In a Landscape takes these "illustrations" (their sculptures and prints) a step further - to show something of that real Arctic world of the Inuit, yesterday, today ... and tomorrow?

Vincent Tovell is executive producer of Images of Canada.

Original music for Spirit In a Landscape is composed by Harry Somers, performed on a synthesizer by John Mills-Cockell.