

CULTURAL REFLECTIONS
Inuit Exhibition from the Dennon Museum Center
TEACHER'S GUIDE
Lesson One: Grades 1-4



INTRODUCTION

The Exhibition *Contemporary Inuit Art from the Dennon Museum Center* presents the traditional culture of the Inuit people, including selections related to survival, Arctic wildlife, nomadic life and the spirit world. Through many different media the viewer gains insight into these four aspects of traditional Inuit culture. Objects included in the exhibit serve as narratives for keeping alive the old ways of their culture.

WHO ARE THE INUIT?

Nunavut is a land of wild rivers, icy seas and open tundra located in the Arctic Circle. It is a huge territory, encompassing more than one-fifth of Canada's land mass, and is almost completely populated by Inuit – meaning “the people,” in the Inuktitut language – who make up 85% of the estimated 29,000 inhabitants. Canadian Inuit are also found in the Western Arctic, Nunavik (formerly Northern Quebec), and Labrador, but the most influential centers for art making – Cape Dorset and Baker Lake – are in Nunavut.

The Inuit have occupied these lands for thousands of years. Their ancestors are believed to be Asian hunters who crossed the land bridge between Siberia and Alaska in search of mammoths, although anthropologists have never agreed upon the exact time of their arrival. In one of the most challenging environments on earth, the early Inuit lived a nomadic existence in a never-ending search for food.

This hunting culture experienced profound changes once contact was made with the *quallunaat* (white people). In the 17th and 18th century, English, Scottish, and American whalers made the first ventures into Arctic waters. Trappers from the South soon followed, cementing the idea of a trading economy and quasi-permanent encampments. By 1850, Christian missionaries arrived to introduce a foreign system of spiritual beliefs and written language, and to establish hospitals, nursing stations and schools.

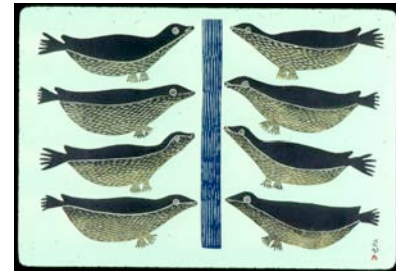
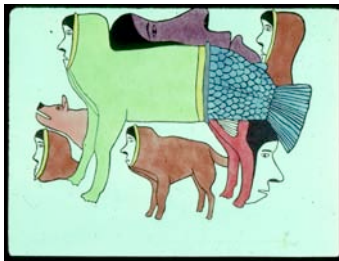
The *quallunaat* also brought guns, which made hunting easier and soon animal numbers decreased. No longer able to sustain themselves with hunting, the Inuit moved closer to the settlements and became increasingly dependent upon the white trappers and clergy for food. With no natural immunities against imported diseases, flu and other viral strains killed thousands of Inuit. In the 20th century, modern technologies exposed the native peoples to the strong forces of the outside world, and the old ways of living were on the brink of vanishing.

Enduring Idea of the Exhibit Lesson

The growing need to communicate and teach traditional Inuit life and the history of a community rich in culture is important as the ethics, codes and rituals of this nomadic, tribal society are challenged by modern technology and society. Their art reflects the Inuit's desire to document their history and preserve a treasured heritage.

Objectives

- Students will learn what Inuit art shows us about traditional Inuit culture.
- Students will learn that Inuit art often communicates strong emotions - sometimes humorous and happy, sometimes sad, or even frightening.
- Students will learn about Arctic animals.



Discussion

Themes and Subjects in Inuit art:

The traditional way of life- Inuit artists are keeping their history alive. Art helps the Inuit remember and treasure the ways their ancestors hunted and made protective clothing and shelter.

Arctic birds, animals, and sea mammals- powerful polar bears, sleek seals, swift caribou, white wolves, and magnificent owls are a few creatures you will find in Inuit sculpture and prints.

Inuit myths and legends- these stories tell how humans and other living beings are all connected in a powerful universe.

The Shaman- the Shaman, Inuit societies believed, was a particularly wise man with healing and mysterious powers. Stories of Shaman tell how they can go to the bottom of the sea, fly to the moon and back, and transform themselves into all kinds of animals.

Vocabulary

Arctic- area near the North Pole.

Eskimo- an American Indian term meaning “eaters of raw meat.” The Inuit people are sometimes called Eskimo.

Igloo- domed house made of hard packed snow. The Inuit lived in these houses during the winter.

Inuit- are people who live in the Arctic, the icy lands surrounding the North Pole. They prefer to be called Inuit rather than Eskimo. Inuit means “the people” in their native language of *Inuktitut*.

Nomad- one who moves from place to place.

ACTIVITIES

History

1. Discuss the history of the Inuit and their nomadic way of life of hunting and gathering. The ways in which they survived off the land and their different gender roles are also very important to address.
2. After reviewing the vocabulary, have the students draw or write about the Inuit way of life. For example, one might draw an Inuit community in the winter with igloos, people dressed in the traditional Inuit clothing, men fishing and hunting while women prepare food and take care of children.

Language

Before the last century, Inuit did not have a written language. The Inuit had the ability to read the land, sky, water and sea for information. All of Inuit history, practical knowledge, values and beliefs were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth. The information was contained in both songs and stories, repeated to children by their parents and grandparents as they grew. This is now referred to as *oral tradition*: the wealth of information held by elders about the past. Oral tradition also refers to the way in which this information is passed along: the skill of remembering and telling stories, sharing and singing songs. For example, the story and legend of *Sedna*, the Inuit Goddess of the Sea, has been passed on to many generations through oral tradition.



THE STORY OF SEDNA

Sedna was a beautiful girl, who lived alone with her father. Many men wanted to marry her, but she loved only one- a strong hunter who sang with a haunting voice- he promised her comfort and much food. She chooses to go with him and after they married she found out that he was a spirit- the spirit of fulmar, the seabird. He swept Sedna away to a distant land, where seabirds surrounded her. The birds scolded and cried, pecked and fluttered. Sedna was frightened and lonely. She sang for her father to come and take her away.

A year went by before her father came. Sedna's father rowed them out onto the water to flee. The sky turned black. The birds went after them and huge waves erupted in the sea, threatening their death. Afraid for his life, Sedna's father pushed his daughter into the sea to hopefully calm the seabird. But Sedna clung to the side of the boat with her fingers. Her father chopped off her fingers.

Sedna soon sank below the waves and was gone. As Sedna's fingers fell into the sea they turned into seals, whales, walruses, polar bears and fish, her nails became whalebone. As the young woman sank into the sea she was transformed into the mystical being known as Sedna, "Mother of Oceans" and ruler over all life in the Sea. The blessings of Sedna are still sought by the people of the North who know it is She who sustain them.

The Inuit know that if a sea animal lets the hunter catch it, Sedna must be thanked, and if the Inuit are hungry from the failure in the hunt, Sedna is showing her displeasure.

Language Activities

1. Write a poem or a legend:

Read *The Story of Sedna* to the class as an example and then have them write their own legends using their creative writing skills and imagination. Remind them about the Inuit culture and how important telling stories are to their community.

Every picture or sculpture tells a story- to help students brainstorm, have them think about their favorite object in the exhibit and then write a poem or legend about that particular piece of art work!

2. Draw your idea of Sedna:

After reading or listening to "The Story of Sedna," draw what you think Sedna looks like. Think about her clothing, what she would have with her....?

3. Reading:

Have the students read "Julie and the Wolves," or "Julie" by Jean Craighead George.

Geography Activities

- Discuss the location of where the Inuit lived and from where Inuit artists' draw their inspiration. Ask the students to imagine what kinds of homes nomadic people who lived in the Arctic might have.
- Have the students think of why working together in the community would make life easier.
- Discuss why the Inuit people chose sculpture as an art form. Have them think about why the sculpture would be small.



Geography Activities Continued:

Using Map Skills:

1. Using the provided map of the Western Hemisphere, have the students locate the Arctic area around Hudson Bay and explain Nunavut to them. In doing so you may teach them about the different bodies of water that surrounds this area as well.
2. Using the map provided, color the region where Inuit **used to** inhabit and also color the region the Inuit **now** live.
3. See if you can locate Iqaluit- the capital of Nunavut on the map.
4. Baffin Island is the largest island in Canada and the fifth largest island in the world— see if you can locate Baffin Island on the map provided.



QUICK GEOGRAPHY FACTS ABOUT NUNAVUT

- Although it covers four time zones, Nunavut uses Central time.
- In winter, the lakes and the ground are so frozen that they can be used as temporary roads.
- The purple saxifrage is the official flower of Nunavut.
- The ptarmigan is Nunavut's official bird.
- The territory's motto is "Nunavut Sanginivut," which means "Nunavut, our strength."

Science Activities

Discuss the importance of the Arctic environment to the Inuit people. How did their environment influence their artwork?

EXTRA: Critical Thinking Activities

1. Choose five words to describe a piece of Inuit Art in the gallery. Think about the color, shape, and the emotions on the subject's face, the activities and actions of the animal or person.
2. Considering the nomadic way of life and the possessions the Inuit carried with them, compare your life with the Inuit. The scenario: Inuit are packing up their belongings to travel to the next camp location. What would the Inuit take with them? Similarly, you are moving. If you had to pack up your room in your apartment or house, what would you take with you?

Things to Think About:

Art Aesthetics- Art Aesthetics include the study of art from all cultures and all times.

Art Criticism- thinking and talking about ideas in the classroom as a whole is very important. Challenge the students to elaborate on their ideas: "Please explain to me why you say that?" or "How did you arrive at that judgment?"

Breaking up the class into small groups also assists in having a fruitful discussion. Often times students feel more comfortable in smaller groups and are more likely to talk about their ideas and thoughts in a smaller setting. At the end of a discussion, bring about a conclusion to help students.

Art History- the study of objects that reflect the times, places and cultures in which they were created.

Art Production- is important for students to participate in hands-on activities related to the particular area or period in which you are studying. Have the students express ideas through original artwork and written stories.

RESOURCES

Websites:

Official Nunavut Site

<http://www.nunavut.vom>

The Nunavut Handbook

<http://www.arctic-travel.com>

Government of Nunavut

<http://www.gov.nu.ca>

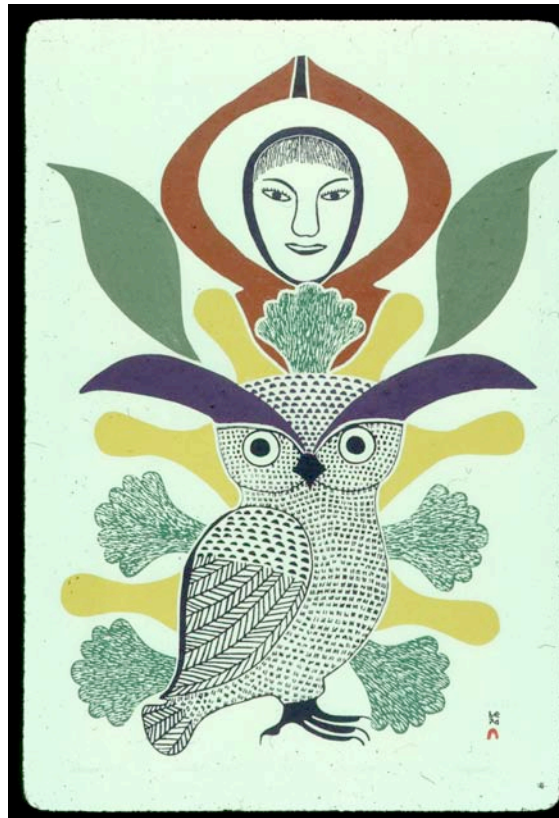
Books:

Beckett, Harry. *Nunavut*. Calgary: Weigl Educational Publishers Limited, 2001.

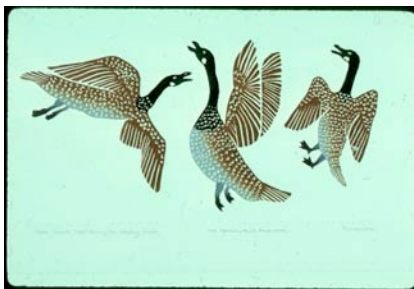
Hancock, Lyn. *Hello Canada: Nunavut*. Minneapolis: Learner Publishing Group, 1995.

Keen, Jared. *Iqaluit*. From the Canadian Cities series. Calgary: Weigl Educational Publishers Limited, 2000.

Soubliere, Marion. *The 1999 Nunavut Handbook*. Nunavut: Nortext, 1998.



Worksheet #2: Artic Hunt in the Contemporary Inuit Art Exhibit



1. Find a work of art showing a woman's responsibilities for her family's survival.

Name of art work _____

Activity shown _____

2. Select one bear or bird print in the exhibit. Also find one bear or bird sculpture.

Name of print _____

Name of sculpture _____

How are they different? _____

How are they alike? _____

3. Find a work of art portraying a man's responsibilities for his family's survival.

Name of artwork _____

Activity shown _____

4. Select your favorite work of art.

Name of sculpture or print _____

Why is it your favorite? _____