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## Inuit Art and the Quest for Canada's Arctic Sovereignty

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# *Inuit Art and the Quest for Canada's Arctic Sovereignty*

Patrick Lennox

## *Introduction*

The true north, the territory north of 60 degrees latitude, is a place few Canadians have explored. Yet its presence weighs heavily on the collective imaginings of this nation. *The idea* of the Arctic, more than any personal encounters with it, has its own political power, which has been illustrated in recent times by the popularity of the Harper Government's "Northern Strategy" to protect Canada's Arctic sovereignty. Unlike any other potential catalyst short of Olympic hockey, it seems that tough talk about protecting Canada's north creates a "rally-around-the-flag" effect in this country. Such an effect was revealed most dramatically in 1969, when the Humble Oil Company sent the American vessel *SS Manhattan* through the Northwest Passage. This voyage challenged Canadian sovereignty in Arctic waters and a new side of Canadian nationalism manifested itself in a seemingly instinctive fashion. As Abraham Rotstein, a political economist from the University of Toronto, wrote in 1970,

suddenly, Canadian newspapers from coast to coast, most of which had traditionally welcomed the takeover of Canadian businesses, now wrote as many as two or three editorials a day in great alarm. 'Fly the Canadian Flag' read the hysterical headline of the now-defunct Toronto *Telegram*, a newspaper that had viewed with complacency the passing of 70 percent of southern Ontario's industry to American control.<sup>1</sup>

Rotstein was pointing to an aspect of Canadian attitudes which continues to react to challenges or threats to the Canadian homestead to this day. Factories and head offices might fall to foreign ownership and control without eliciting more than a whimper in response. Yet, when confronted with even the possibility of a challenge to Canada's sovereign control of its territories and waters, a visceral populist reaction is elicited from somewhere within the collective Canadian mind.

Given the remoteness of the Northwest Passage and the fact that the vast majority of Canadians live as far away from it as possible without crossing

the 49th parallel, an inquiry into the roots of Canada's ideational connection to the Arctic is worthy of engagement. According to Rotstein, the *Manhattan* voyages awakened in Canadians a homestead instinct that was at rest deep below their collective consciousness, and had its origins in the founding mythology of the pioneer making a home from no-man's land. Surviving in such a harsh climate and indeed making a home from stubborn rock, hostile forest, and parched prairie, Rotstein surmised, brought with it certain natural rights for the survivor. Canadians had earned their jurisdiction over their vanquished space out of sheer toughness and perseverance. So when the *Manhattan* proposed to break through the Northwest Passage without the permission of the Canadian government, Canadians were both enraged by the brash disrespect shown to them by the Americans and reminded of their own true birthright: dominion over an otherwise forsaken land. The event inspired the Trudeau government to react in an aggressive manner which was otherwise out of character for the Canadian state on the international stage. By introducing the Arctic Waters Pollution Protection Act (AWPPA), which declared a 100-mile control zone in waters around the archipelago, and extending the territorial limit of Canada's coastal waters from three miles to twelve miles, the Trudeau government vastly increased the size of the Canadian territory, and then declared that the issue was one over which it would not recognize the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction.

Canadians applauded the bold, unilateralism of their government's approach to the issue because it resonated with a sentiment stemming from deep roots within their collective imagination. Rotstein's explanation of this response of the Canadian state to a perceived infringement of its sovereignty in the north, though impossible to prove empirically, is worth examining further. If ideas, powerful enough to hold vast nations together, exist then there are most certainly events that can threaten the integrity of those ideas, which will compel nation states towards collective action. Benedict Anderson famously defined the nation as "an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." It is "imagined" wrote Anderson "because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion."<sup>2</sup>

Such a definition strikes a chord of clarity when one thinks of the Canadian political community. The ideational bonds which hold the country together from Victoria in the west to St. John's in the east are relatively well understood and form the intellectual basis of most of our daily lives as Canadians. But the bond between the south and the mysterious north is per-

haps less well understood. A crucial element of that bond, this paper posits, is Inuit art. In fact, it is the primary medium through which the image of the northern half of Canada's sovereign political community has been conveyed to both southern Canadians themselves, and the rest of the world. Most Canadians never will visit the Arctic; though those who wander through any of the country's major art galleries will glean an imagined sense of what life is like for their fellow Canadians in the north. They will gather a respect for their capacity to survive in such barren lands, they will marvel at their strength of creativity, relate to their spirituality, and sympathize with their joys and sorrows. In short, they will, through their glimpses, imagine themselves in communion with the Inuit. This imagined bond is an essential element in the maintenance of the internal cohesion of Canada. Abroad, Inuit art can arguably be seen as having similar effects. This paper will outline the experience of Inuit art exhibitions abroad and examine the ways in which the Canadian state crafted and framed those exhibitions throughout the Cold War.

This paper examines the historical and archival records in an attempt to understand the extent to which Inuit art was intentionally put into the service of branding Canada as a northern nation for audiences both at home and abroad. The reader will find in the pages that follow an argument that unfolds cautiously, and suggests first and foremost that Inuit art, like all art, has a political dimension. Rarely examined through such a lens, the politics of Inuit art appear tied to nation building and to the integrity of Canada's northern sovereignty. The involvement of the Canadian state in the development and promotion of Inuit art dates back to the early years of the Cold War. This involvement began ignorant of the political power contained in early Inuit sculpture, but evolved quickly to channel the imagery unique to Canada's northern artists towards political ends.

### *The Political Etymology of Inuit Art*

The early 1950s marked a period of major transformation for the Inuit from a nomadic existence to one of living in settlements. This transition was administered by the Canadian government due to its need to assert a formal administrative presence in the north brought on by the pressures of the Cold War, a growing awareness of northern natural resource riches, and a perception that Canadian sovereignty over the region had to be actively protected and reinforced if it were to be prevented from slipping to *de facto* American control.

Up until 1950, the federal government had a minimal interest and presence in the north. Preoccupied with other matters such as western settlement,

the First World War, the Great Depression, and the Second World War, the Canadian state had done little to develop its northern frontier. Not a single school had been built outside of Yellowknife, for example, and the future of the region had been essentially left to the fur traders, the Catholic and Anglican missionaries, and the Inuit.<sup>3</sup>

After 1945, awareness of the deficiencies of the fur trade and the mission system as sources of income, education, and health care for the Inuit began to grow.<sup>4</sup> Increased government involvement in the economic development of the north followed. Schools, health and welfare facilities, and housing complexes were built up around trading posts, which allowed government agents to administer services to Inuit. But these settlements were neither large enough for the development of self-sustaining economies, nor small enough for their inhabitants to be sustained solely by the land.

The transition from life in nomadic camps to life in the townships that grew up around the former trading posts brought considerable difficulty for the Inuit people. New modes of economic survival were required. Fortunately, a young artist named James Houston was sowing the seeds of one new economic venture for Inuit at the time. In 1948, Houston, following three of the disbanded Group of Seven (Varley, Jackson, and Harris) who had taken up the north as a subject for their renderings, went on a painting and sketching trip to the east coast of Hudson Bay. He returned from the north with a small collection of Inuit carvings that he used to gain the interest of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild,<sup>5</sup> which, like Houston, awakened to the commercial possibilities of these fresh artistic forms almost immediately. The Guild hired Houston to return to the Arctic the next year to make a purchase of carvings that could be used to test the market for Inuit art in southern Canada. Houston returned from his second trip north in 1949 with over 1000 pieces, which were put up for sale in Montreal. The entire lot sold out within three days, such was the popularity and artistic merit of the carvings.

By the next year, Houston, now employed by the federal government and supported financially with a \$5000 grant, was traveling more widely across the Canadian Arctic in an effort to encourage carving as an alternative means of economic survival amongst the Inuit. The Department of Resources and Development (to become the Department of Northern Affairs and Natural Resources in 1953) "envisaged the building up of a carving industry whereby the Eskimo's complete dependence on the uncertain fox-fur market might be lessened, and his economy supplanted by a new source of income."<sup>6</sup> The Hudson's Bay Company (HBC), the Canadian institution with the greatest presence in the Arctic at that time, was brought in to assist

with this development plan. The HBC instituted a purchasing program that enabled Inuit to exchange their carvings for credit at trading posts. Together with the Canadian Handicrafts Guild, the HBC handled the marketing of these sculptures in the south. In 1950, Houston bought 2500 pieces from Inuit in the eastern Arctic, and wrote in his report to the Guild that art critics were starting to understand that “some of the Eskimo...are producing Canada’s most important sculpture today.”<sup>7</sup>

By 1951, the federal government was starting to see the effects of Houston’s work on a number of different levels. The RCMP in the north reported higher levels of morale in the communities visited by Houston, and lower levels of welfare requests. In Southern Canada and in the United States as well, Inuit art was beginning to awaken considerable popular attention. Within a decade, Houston’s venture had virtually transformed the economic situation in the north. Soapstone carvings and later prints would become the most reliable source of income for Inuit as their artistic endeavors were rapidly made into a multi-million dollar industry.<sup>8</sup>

Throughout the early 1950s, however, the federal government remained reluctant about continuing to subsidize this burgeoning “industry.” Having spent \$31,000 on this venture, and despite the fact that Inuit art was coming to rival the Group of Seven as the high cultural symbol of Canadian nationalism, federal officials still remain on record grudging the price.<sup>9</sup> For example, in December of 1953 the chargé d’affaires at the Canadian Embassy in The Hague, Netherlands, described in a memo to the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester Pearson, a conversation he had had with the Director of the Gemeente Museum in The Hague, Dr. Wijsenbeek, who had expressed interest in having an exhibit of “eskimo art and handicrafts” at his gallery.

It was pointed out to Dr. Wijsenbeek that the major obstacle to the sending of exhibitions abroad was the financial one...Dr. Wijsenbeek then imparted the very interesting information that there was a standing arrangement with the Holland-America Line to carry free of charge any cultural exhibition coming to and from the Netherlands. This is the first we had heard of such an arrangement, but it may possibly throw an entirely different light on the possibility of Canadian exhibitions travelling abroad, ...<sup>10</sup>

The notion of financing an exhibition of Inuit art abroad had not, to this point at least, occurred to the chargé d’affaires as a legitimate cost for the Department of External Affairs. Helping the Inuit help themselves by creat-



ing an international audience for their art work, and filling the void left by the disbanded Group of Seven in the Canadian art scene were not convincing rationales for federal spending in this area. It was only when the political power of this seemingly apolitical "primitive" art was recognized that the Canadian state became serious about developing and defending the market for it both at home and abroad.

### *Defending Our North*

In 1947, Canada and the United States, in response to the Soviet Bomber threat, established an elaborate system for continental defence, which involved the installation of a variety of radar, weather, and other defence related stations in unoccupied Canadian territory north of 60 degrees latitude. Since the United States was doing the lion's share of spending and building in the Canadian Arctic Archipelago, and since it was understood that new defence projects in the north would be initiated in the future by Washington, Canadian officials became concerned with maintaining Canada's sovereign control over the region. These concerns were finally brought to the cabinet table on 21 January 1953, by the Secretary of State for External Affairs, Lester B. Pearson. In a memo addressed for the Cabinet on that day, Pearson wrote:

In the circumstances, it seems desirable to examine the extent of Canadian and US activity in the Arctic, with particular relationship to the maintenance of Canadian sovereignty, and to consider whether, and in what fields, further Canadian activity is justified to serve Canadian interests of a political, administrative, scientific or military nature.<sup>11</sup>

It is clear from this memo, that Pearson had a broad view of the different means available to the Canadian state in maintaining its Arctic sovereignty. It is also clear, moreover, from the report that he requested from the Advisory Committee on Northern Development, that a wide range of different approaches to the preservation of the Canadian Arctic sovereignty were being considered by the government at the time.

It took a year, but the Public Information Sub-Committee of the Advisory Committee on Northern Development (ACND), upon Pearson's request, produced a strategy document for cabinet. The sub-committee recommended that "the first object of public information on the north is to emphasize that the northern regions are as much a part of Canada as any other area in the country. It is most important that all Canadians should be aware of this fact



in order that the measures to stimulate and encourage the development of our northern frontier will be supported and sustained. It is also important that the rest of the world should be aware that the Canadian Arctic is not an 'Ultima Thule' but is being effectively occupied, administered, and developed by the Canadian Government and people."<sup>12</sup>

Coming from the Public Information Sub-Committee of ACND, the report obviously was concerned with how the government could shape popular perceptions both at home and abroad about the Canadian Arctic. Mirroring the Massey Commission's observation that foreign policy was increasingly about the dissemination of information, the report offered recommendations about the material that both should and should not be forthcoming from the federal government. While all activities of the government in the north should be emphasized, "no emphasis should be placed on Canadian claims in the north lest we seem to be on the defensive."<sup>13</sup>

No mention is made of the potential use of Inuit art as a means of symbolically projecting Canada's northern presence in this document, which was produced by the spring of 1954. But this not to say that it had never crossed the minds of government officials. On the contrary, this note from the Prime Minister's representative suggests:

If we can get these [arts and crafts] in visible places...and to important people, we will be able to show the World, especially the United States and Russia, that we are indeed a true Northern Power. (March 1953)<sup>14</sup>

### *The Diplomatic Gift*

Indeed the practice of placing Inuit art onto the international diplomatic scene likely began with the presentation of a carving called "Mother and Child" by Shargo to Princess Elizabeth, the future Queen of England, in 1951. Unusual at the time, the presentation of Inuit art to foreign dignitaries has become almost part of Canadian diplomatic protocol.<sup>15</sup> To give one historical example amongst many, Escott Reid, Canada's High Commissioner to India at the time and one of Canada's greatest diplomats, presented a Walrus carved by Oshaweetuk to Prime Minister Nehru in 1957. Reid's wife also presented a carving of a muskox to the Prime Minister's daughter, Indira Gandhi.<sup>16</sup> The practice continues to this day. A recent example can be seen in Prime Minister Chretien's gifting of a Kenojuak print to President Jacques Chirac in 1999. Chirac, a serious collector of Inuit Art, was in Cape Dorset touring the West Baffin Eskimo Co-Op printmaking shop where many of the

great Inuit prints have been produced, at the time he was presented with the Kenojuk work.

Involving Inuit art in the world of high politics has achieved a dual purpose by also raising the profile of the art. This practice contributed to the appreciation of the monetary value of these sculptures by creating a demand for it amongst art aficionados worldwide. This has resulted in Inuit art being the primary export of a number of prominent northern settlements, such as Cape Dorset—an island outpost situated on the eastern entrance to the Northwest Passage.

It is also placed in the hands and hung on the walls of world leaders, symbols of Canada's sovereign presence in the Arctic. The practice of presenting foreign dignitaries with gifts of Inuit art is the subtlest manner of projecting Canada's Arctic sovereignty. The practice of foreign dignitaries routinely accepting (and at least in Chirac's case, looking forward to accepting) these gifts, in turn, amounts to a tacit recognition of that sovereignty. It is an active, albeit extremely subtle, branding strategy deliberately implemented by the federal government. Understanding its purpose requires an examination of the history of how the Canadian Government first became involved in utilizing Inuit art as a tool of cultural diplomacy.

### *The First Exhibition Abroad*

A major exhibition in the summer of 1953 at the Gimpel Fils Gallery in London, England, entitled "Eskimo Carvings" marked the initial foray of this art form onto the international stage. The transportation costs of the 153 piece exhibition to and from London were paid for by the Department of External Affairs (DEA). Addressed as it was to Canada's High Commissioner in London, the exhibition was granted diplomatic immunity and allowed to bypass the complications and potential delays involved in clearing customs.<sup>17</sup> Norman Robertson, the High Commissioner at the time, opened the exhibition with a "suitable and pleasant speech." He was symbolically flanked by a Mountie dressed in "full regalia to lend credence and authenticity to the opening ceremony."<sup>18</sup> The exhibition reportedly took on a distinctively "nationalist tone, and was woven into preexisting debates in Britain about the colonies."<sup>19</sup> Despite this explicitly political dimension of the exhibit, serious art critics deemed the carvings themselves as being on par with the best modern sculpture of the time, such as that of Henry Moore.<sup>20</sup> On its own merit, the art overshadowed the supporting material. Sincere thanks are offered to the Department of External Affairs on the inside cover page of the catalogue issued by the Gimpel Fils Gallery, though this was merely a courtesy.

A close examination of the archival record reveals an interesting, if not counterintuitive story behind the origins of this exhibit. It was not, in fact, the Department of External Affairs that was responsible for its initiation, nor was it DEA that was behind the nationalist overtones of its display. Charles Gimpel himself, the owner of the Gimpel Fils Gallery, had done much of the early lifting to get the exhibit to London,<sup>21</sup> and had himself requested that a Mountie be present.<sup>22</sup> Presumably this was because he appreciated that such an officer would contribute to the exotic nature of his exhibition, and draw attention to it.

It would appear that the Department of External Affairs, though it did pick up the tab for this exercise in cultural diplomacy, as well it should have, did not fully grasp at first the fact that it was carrying out an important aspect of its own mandate—namely, spreading information about Canada throughout the world, including information about its culture. Evidence to support this view is seen in the fact that it took some time for the Information Division of the Department of External Affairs to realize that funding exhibits of this nature was “a legitimate charge against External Affairs.” The early negotiations regarding the initial tour of Europe are replete with efforts to recuperate shipping and handling costs from foreign governments and galleries, and disputes between DEA, the Department of Northern Affairs and even the National Gallery regarding who should pay the bill.<sup>23</sup>

However, by early 1954 a number of Canadian embassies in Europe had caught on to the political dimensions of the seemingly apolitical enterprise of exhibiting Inuit handicrafts in museums and art galleries throughout the developed world. Indeed, the idea seems to have filtered through key players in the Department of External Affairs, including the Minister of External Affairs, Lester Pearson, and the Head of the Information Division, Archibald Day. Day, it is worth noting parenthetically, was Vincent Massey’s secretary during the writing of Massey’s aforementioned 1951 Royal Commission Report. He was, accordingly, a man of culture, comfortable around the arts scene, as was Massey himself, who was an avid collector of Inuit Art, “especially in the role of Governor-General.”<sup>24</sup> The third crucial member of this DEA group, Robert Ford, was a former ambassador to the Soviet Union and in his spare moments, also a poet.

This core group was supported by a broader department that was responsible for what many historians and commentators have deemed the “Golden Age” of Canadian diplomacy. There were, amongst this crowd, some of Canada’s brightest minds, trained at the most prestigious universities in the world. They were without question men of culture, and more than

capable of navigating, if not engineering, the nuances of a cultural diplomatic offensive.<sup>25</sup> This task was made significantly easier by the fact that they did not have to include the artists themselves in any of the negotiations regarding how the art would be displayed or what supporting materials would accompany the works at the various exhibitions at which it would be shown. The Inuit artists may have created freely (and as we will see, even this is questionable), but their works were used by the Canadian Government to fulfill its own political objectives.

The first real travelling exhibition, slated to tour approximately 11 cities in Western Europe, had to be delayed an entire year in order to produce the necessary supporting materials to accompany the exhibition, and to "widen its scope to provide other information about Northern Canada."<sup>26</sup> For example, the Canadian Ambassador to Ireland wanted a large equal-area map mounted in "a conspicuous place where it will be seen by visitors when first entering the hall. The area inhabited by Canadian Eskimos will be clearly marked on this map."<sup>27</sup> He also had suggestions about showing "Canadian films, possibly in an adjoining room. These films would include items to do with the rest of Canada, such as "The Four Seasons", "Niagara Frontier", "Bronco Busters", and possibly "Ottawa on the river"...a photographic exhibition could also be mounted," showing scenes of Canadian industrial life.<sup>28</sup>

The films were to be products of the National Film Board. In so far as they were to be displayed in Western Europe they were intended to demonstrate that Canada was a place distinct from the United States and the United Kingdom, that its southern regions (at least) were industrialized, and that "the north" was one of the newly sovereign nation's foundational myths.

"Canadian Eskimo Art" began a four year tour in Ottawa in 1955. The exhibit made a couple of stops in New Orleans and Washington D.C., before crossing the Atlantic to tour continuously in Western Europe until 1959. It stopped in 11 major cities, logged many kilometers, and was seen by hundreds of thousands. It returned to Ottawa to be refreshed, and was sent back across the Atlantic, this time to tour behind the Iron Curtain for three years until the fall of 1962.

### *Masterworks ...*

Since that time, numerous major exhibitions of Inuit art have made their way around the globe, an important example of which can be seen in "Sculpture of the Inuit: Masterworks of the Canadian Arctic" which opened in Vancouver, toured Moscow, Leningrad, Copenhagen, Paris, London, and Philadelphia, before returning home for showings in Ottawa in the early 1970s. Moscow

and Leningrad were added to the schedule of the exhibition following Prime Minister Trudeau's visit to the Soviet Union in 1970. During this visit, the signing of the Canadian-Soviet Protocol made it possible for Jean Chrétien, then Minister of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, to offer the exhibition to the Soviets. Thus, this major exhibition was spearheaded from the political end by at least three of Canada's most distinguished statesmen. Jean Chrétien, Mitchell Sharp, then Secretary of State for External Affairs, and Donald Macdonald, the Minister of National Defence, all played a role in facilitating various aspects of the traveling projection of Canada abroad.<sup>29</sup>

At the opening of the Masterworks exhibit in Paris, Chretien deftly argued to the cultured crowd at the Grand Palais that "if the beauty of the works in this exhibition are to be understood and enjoyed the carvings must not be taken out of context. That context is the environment and culture from which these works of art spring."<sup>30</sup> Alluding to the "context" and the "environment" of the Canadian north without going over the top and making a political statement about Canada's Arctic sovereignty interests demonstrates both a respect for the exhibit—which provided a detailed survey of Inuit carvings from 720 B.C. to the present day—and a respect for the intelligence of the audience, who would presumably have been insulted by a propagandistic speech from a Canadian politician to open an art exhibit. Chretien concluded his argument and his speech with the following lines which are notably nuanced: "The exhibition states clearly that Canadian Eskimo art is vital and living from today. It states also that the pieces in it are things of beauty to be enjoyed to the fullest measure."<sup>31</sup>

The final paragraphs of the forward to the Masterworks catalogue that accompanied the exhibit and was translated into all necessary languages, provide further evidence of the subtlety of the early approach to the cultural diplomacy of Inuit Art. Written by George Elliot, then Chairman of the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council, the forward narrates the story of Elliot's encounter with a carver named Piungituk during a hunting trip north of 60 degrees latitude, who was featured in the exhibition. Vividly, it describes the human connection that transcended the vast differences in the cultures inhabited by the two men. Elliot concludes with the following reflection:

Like so many of his people in the Western Arctic, in the Keewatin, in the high Arctic, in the Eastern Arctic, in Nouveau-Quebec, Piungituk is an artist of the world: with his confident comprehension of volumes, inventiveness, feeling. All along, he has been using the language of art that is universal, the language that can

bind cultures together, that can preserve a culture, the language that can strengthen a multi-cultural society without weakening it.

So with our eyes we listen to the silent language of sculpture. Listen carefully. To do otherwise—to be indifferent—is the greatest betrayal of one person by another, of one culture by another.<sup>32</sup>

Elliot implicitly argues that the Canadian Government, as represented by the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council, has listened to the Eskimo, embraced and supported this mode of artistic expression, and in exchange that embrace has been reciprocated by the Inuit. The art now forms a crucial bond between north and south in multicultural and geographically distant and diverse country of Canada.

To reinforce Elliot's implied message, the catalogue for the Masterworks Exhibition was supported by a booklet entitled, "Canadian Eskimo Carvers and their Arctic Communities."<sup>33</sup> The booklet opens with a map of the Canadian Arctic with labels attached to the 30 different communities represented in the exhibition. Each community is then given its own detailed write-up with statistics about how many Eskimos live in each, how art factors into their cultural and economic lives, and how and when each receives annual supplies from the south during the period of the year the Northwest Passage is navigational. Without going so far as explicitly stating the fact, the booklet demonstrates quite clearly that the Canadian Government exercised a significant degree of administrative control over these communities, scattered along the shores of the Northwest Passage and Hudson Bay.

### ... *And Beyond*

Exhibitions in Peking and Shanghai, China followed the Masterworks tour in 1973. These exhibitions were accompanied by a film produced by the National Film Board of Canada, entitled *The Living Stone* depicting Inuit life in the Arctic.<sup>34</sup> That year the Canadian Government's Eskimo Arts Council also sponsored a one man show by Karoo Ashevak in New York City.<sup>35</sup> In the mid-1980s *Arctic Vision: Art of the Canadian Inuit* toured 13 U.S. cities in two years with federal financial backing. By the end of the 1980s Inuit Art made its first explicit foray into the world of diplomacy with a showing at the United Nations, General Assembly in New York. *Masters of the Arctic* was declared by UN officials of the time to be the most popular exhibition ever mounted at the headquarters of global diplomacy.<sup>36</sup>

By 2004, the Government of Nunavut began to tap into the political power of Inuit Art with its inaugural exhibition of its own collection at the presti-

gious Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts. *Our Land: Contemporary Art from the Arctic* was financially supported by the governments of both Canada and Nunavut. It was designed to raise awareness of the aspirations of the new territory. Before entering the exhibit—which included works on paper, sculptures, photographs, music and videos—visitors were greeted with a welcoming message from the Hon. Louis Tapardjuk, Nunavut’s Minister of Culture.<sup>37</sup>

The latest traveling exhibition mounted by the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade is entitled *Transitions—Contemporary Canadian Indian and Inuit Art*. The exhibition is in its 10<sup>th</sup> year and has traveled from its opening at the Canadian Cultural Centre at the Canadian Embassy in Paris, France, through Hamilton, New Zealand in 1997, San Jose, Costa Rica in 1998, Vancouver, British Columbia in 1998-99, Taipei, T’ai-nan, and Taidong, Taiwan in 1999-2000, Guanajuato and Mexico City, Mexico in 2002-2003, and St. Petersburg, Russia 2003-2004, and Mashtuiatsh, Quebec 2007-2008.

Outside of the major galleries and museums, the sales of Inuit Art to individual consumers across the globe have been considerable, and they continue to grow. A recent sale of 1,700 pieces at Waddington’s Auction House in Toronto netted over \$3 million in two days, for example.<sup>38</sup> And there are registered Inuit Art dealers across North America, Europe, and Asia whose combined sales total over \$30 million annually.<sup>39</sup> Thus, the distribution of these symbols of Canadian arctic sovereignty have trickled down from the more rarified worlds of international diplomacy and national art galleries and museums into the possession of the art-buying public across the globe.

Perhaps a reflection of the Canadian government’s marketing efforts abroad, the majority of the demand for Inuit art has historically come from outside of Canada. It was not until the late 1980s that the National Art Gallery of Canada began to take Inuit Art seriously and to develop its own collection for permanent display. It was only in 1990, for example that Pudlo Pudlat became the first contemporary Inuit Artist to have a solo exhibition at the National Gallery.<sup>40</sup> That being said, the collections of the major museums and art galleries in Canada are far from being insubstantial. Recent statistics are difficult to come by, but even in 1990, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, for example had over 8000 pieces in its permanent collection, and the Art Gallery of Ontario had nearly 4000 pieces with a 1600 square foot space for permanent exhibition.<sup>41</sup>

The results of this projection of Canada’s Arctic presence are, of course, difficult to measure in any concrete way. But it should be clear that since the early 1950s the Canadian state has been involved in what might be regarded



as something of a branding exercise both at home and abroad. That is, the state, through the medium of Inuit Art has been sending a message to the world and to the Canadian public as well: the Arctic is Canadian.

*The Medium Is the Message*

So important was it that this message be understood by the rest of the world, that the Canadian state could not allow the Inuit artists themselves to have sole control over the medium. Right from the beginning, government agents, beginning with James Houston himself, were involved in guiding Inuit artists towards the production of works that would be appealing to western audiences. For example, a nomadic people, the Inuit rarely carved large-scale objects, as they were always seeking ways to minimize the weight of the possessions they would have to carry during a seasonal migration. But the posters, movies, and illustrated guide manuals produced by agents of the Canadian government that instructed the Inuit on what to carve suggested that objects larger than the traditional "fingerlings" which could be carried in a pocket easily would be preferable to consumers in the west. The influence of these instruction guides was such that today it is common to find Inuit carvings of 200-300 pounds, often standing several feet in height. Bigger is always better according to western values, and so Inuit sculpture is interpreted through an international political lens. Large, awe-inspiring soapstone carvings depicting Inuit life in the Arctic, as monuments of Canadian sovereignty, are surely more effective in a museum and gallery setting than traditional "primitive" palm-sized works. By the mid 1960s, in fact, the Canadian government had even taken to making large shipments of soapstone to arctic settlements where it was in short supply.<sup>42</sup>

This sort of direct influence on the artistic process was also felt in the field of printmaking, which was introduced to Inuit artists by Houston and encouraged by federal subsidies. Printmaking was not amongst the traditional forms of Inuit art, as paper was scarce to non-existent in the Arctic, and could not survive the elements anyways. But western artistic tastes have long favoured the print as a format for artistic expression. Thus the Inuit print was born in 1960 and, along with it, a new extension of the Canadian government in the form of the Canadian Eskimo Arts Committee (CEAC). The mandate of the committee was to decide which graphics would be printed and become part of annual collections of the various co-operatives with print-making facilities released to the public in the south. Issues of pricing, promotion, and distribution would also be handled by the Committee. The CEAC was not, however, comprised of Inuit artists, but rather of eight southern art experts

appointed by the Minister of Northern and Indian Affairs. It was not until the late 1980s, almost thirty years after Inuit printmaking had begun, that the Inuit themselves gained any input into the selection of which graphics to include in their print collections, and this was only after some cooperatives had begun releasing so-called renegade collections on their own without the “chop” (or seal) of the CEAC. Shortly thereafter, the CEAC was dismantled by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development.

The Canadian state thus was directly involved in shaping the form and content of Inuit art, and as a result it shaped the messages the art conveyed to the rest of the world. It is reasonable to expect the Inuit artists to take on some different mediums as they became accustomed to a non-nomadic life. Sculpting on a larger scale, for example, is an easily foreseeable artistic side-effect of taking up permanent residence in a government administered settlement. That being said, the above examples of direct government influence over the medium—the manuals, the shipments of soap stone, the introduction to lithography—should be enough to suggest that left to their own devices the Inuit artists are unlikely to have effected these significant changes upon their traditional mediums. It is a testament to the artists themselves that through these political and economic pressures their creative brilliance has nevertheless persevered, and the quality of Inuit sculptures and prints has remained on par with or superior to anything else being produced in the art world today. Collectively the work of Canada’s Inuit artists arguably has played a major role in the political development of Canada as a nation state at home and abroad. As a result, a brief examination of the potential impact of Inuit art on present day legal disputes over the Arctic waterways is worthwhile.

### *Inuit Art and the Northwest Passage*

The impact of the last fifty-plus years of Canada’s public diplomacy in this cultural area on the preservation of Canada’s Arctic sovereignty claim is difficult to determine, and at first glance might seem emphatically to be nil. It should be clear that aside from the Hans Island dispute with Denmark there is no longer any ambiguity regarding the sovereign status of the Canadian Arctic archipelago. And while talk about annexation of some of this territory coming out of American defence circles in the early Cold War years might have made officials in Ottawa nervous at the time, as long as Canada cooperated in the defence of the continent against the Soviet threat, the Americans were happy to recognize Canadian sovereignty over its Arctic territory.<sup>43</sup>

The dispute is over the waters of the Northwest Passage, and it involves some complicated international legal issues that are far from being resolved.

Canada's official position on these issues evolved throughout the 1970s after the *SS Manhattan* (an oil tanker owned by Humble) transited the passage twice without explicit Canadian consent in an effort to demonstrate that an icebreaking bulk carrier was capable of year-round sailings between Alaska and the East Coast of the United States.<sup>44</sup> As was discussed above, this woke the Canadian government and the Canadian people up to the reality that the country's claim to sovereignty over the Arctic Archipelago and the Northwest Passage was far from secure.

After the *SS Manhattan* completed its second voyage in 1970, the Trudeau government implemented the Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act, which asserted Canada's jurisdiction over the waters 100 miles out into the Beaufort Sea and Arctic Ocean along the coastlines of the Yukon and Northwest Territories, including the islands of the Arctic Archipelago. This was an extensive jurisdictional claim that pushed the boundaries of existing international law, but which the government justified on the grounds that international law had yet to catch up to the need to provide protection to such a fragile ecosystem as the Arctic. Added to this, the Canadian government extended the territorial sea from three to twelve nautical miles, which brought a great deal of the Northwest Passage within the Canadian territorial sea. Finally, Canada withdrew its acceptance of the International Court of Justice's jurisdiction over these matters, essentially executing an end run around any legal challenges issued to the court by any state that did not welcome this extension of Canadian jurisdiction over the Arctic waters. This prevented the United States in particular from bringing the matter before the ICJ, but it also left the legal validity of Canada's actions up in the air.

In 1985, the United States announced that its icebreaker *USCGC Polar Sea* would sail through the Northwest Passage. Canada responded with the most comprehensive statement it had ever made on its position regarding Arctic sovereignty. Then Secretary of State for External Affairs, Joe Clark, in the House of Commons, on 10 September 1985 declared:

Canada's sovereignty in the Arctic is indivisible. It embraces land, sea, and ice. It extends without interruption to the seaward-facing coasts of the Arctic Islands. These islands are joined and not divided by the waters between them. They are bridged for most of the year by ice. From time immemorial, Canada's Inuit people have used and occupied the ice as they have used and occupied the land.<sup>45</sup>

This statement was followed by a number of specific policy measures, the most important of which was the establishment of straight baselines around the Canadian Arctic Archipelago. The baselines defined “the outer limits of Canada’s historic internal waters” according to Clark.<sup>46</sup> Clark further declared that Canada was willing to allow the ICJ to rule on the validity of this claim by withdrawing the reservation of the court’s jurisdiction on this matter that the Canadian government had made in 1970.

The legal requirements for the existence of historic waters are neither spelled out in the Convention on the Territorial Sea and Contiguous Zone of 1958, nor in the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea. It is not clear exactly what criteria the ICJ would use to determine the validity of Canada’s claim. The court’s ruling on the *Anglo-Norwegian Fishing Case 1951*, however, provides some clues,<sup>47</sup> as do authoritative studies on the issue by international legal scholars.<sup>48</sup> Common amongst these is that the country making the historic waters claim must demonstrate that (1) it has economic interests peculiar to the region that it can establish through a record of long usage. Beyond other purely geographical requirements, the country must also demonstrate (2) exclusive authority over the waters, and (3) that other states, particularly those who could have conflicting interests have acquiesced to the claim.

In support of the first non-geographical requirement, it is clear that the Inuit and their use of the ice are of critical importance in determining the validity of the Canadian claim.

The authors of the Inuit Land Use and Occupancy Project, which was funded by the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs and published in 1976, have documented the use of the ice of the vast majority of the Northwest Passage by the Inuit for their survival. And legal scholars have noted this as evidence in potential support of Canada’s claim to the passage as historic waters.<sup>49</sup> Inuit art provides further (and perhaps more powerful, due to language barriers and the lack of an indigenously written history of Inuit life in the region) evidence of the Inuit people’s use of the ice for survival, and as an essential aspect of their life and spirituality.

Interestingly, it was not until after the Canadian government became involved in Inuit art, that artists began to incorporate context and setting into their sculptures and subsequent prints. Traditional (pre-1949) Inuit carvings were rarely concerned with setting. On the contrary, carvings tended to exist in spatial independence.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, by the early 1960s, Charles Martijn could write confidently that “a large percentage of contemporary sculptures depict either outdoor hunting or domestic scenes from Eskimo life: Man-carrying-seal-on-back; woman-cooking-food-in-pot; etc. All these tableaux are a

modern invention designed to give a vivid portrayal of Eskimo existence to outsiders."<sup>51</sup> Connecting these depictions of life to the land, ice and sea was a thematic development in the history of Inuit art that took place after the Canadian government became involved in its development.

Whether the Canadian government influenced this significant change in the content of Inuit Art because it was concerned with symbolically binding the Inuit to the land, ice, and sea over which the state was claiming sovereignty is difficult to determine, and perhaps beside the point. Collectively, the body of Inuit art stands as a powerful visual representation of the historical use of the Canadian Arctic—water, land, ice, and animals—by the Inuit people. This body of art has been exhibited to audiences en masse across the globe, including and especially in the United States and throughout the European Union where Canada's claim that the Northwest Passage is historic internal waters, and not an international strait, is not formally recognized. Pieces of Inuit art have been accepted repeatedly over the last fifty years by leaders of these states as diplomatic gifts from the Canadian government. Whether this has any legal significance with respect to the third non-geographical requirement—acquiescence—should be considered an open question for lawyers and legal scholars working on this multifaceted geopolitical puzzle.

When one considers, for example, the number of people worldwide who have taken in an exhibition of Inuit art (over 90,000 people took in *Inuit: quand la parole prend forme* in Lyon, France in 2005<sup>52</sup>), and the number of diplomats and world leaders who have received this art in the form of an official gift from the Canadian government, in comparison with those who have witnessed a northern sovereignty overflight by a CP-140 Aurora (after 1995 these overflights were reduced to 1-2 per year), or a Canadian warship in Arctic waters, one begins to wonder whether the artistic (or soft power) projection of Canada's Arctic sovereignty isn't in fact the first line of defence against challenges to Canada's sovereign claim of the Northwest Passage.

At its base, sovereignty is a human concept, even as it pertains to international maritime law. It must be lived, or lost and thus resides in the people. The body of Inuit art that has developed over the last fifty years, and that has been projected both at home and abroad is an essential aspect of Canada's national identity, and a symbolic demonstration of lived sovereignty in the Arctic.

### *Conclusion*

The Canadian Government's involvement in the development and promotion of Inuit Art represents an instance (and arguably a highly successful

one) of the Canadian state projecting its cultural power abroad to realize a foreign policy goal. No other polar state has been able to compete with these efforts, and as a result Canada's image in the world is decidedly linked with the Arctic and the Inuit people. The Government has managed to convey the message through the medium of art that Canada is a northern nation that the Government of Canada has a significant sovereign presence in the Arctic, and that presence has not been at the expense of the Inuit people themselves. On the contrary, this relationship between northern Canadians and southern Canadians is a mutually beneficial one that ultimately stands at the existential heart of Canadian identity. Inuit art has become the mirror reflecting this uniquely Canadian reality to the world.

## Notes

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- 4 See Farley Mowat, *People of the Deer* (Boston: Little Brown, 1951).
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INUIT ART AND THE QUEST FOR CANADA'S ARCTIC SOVEREIGNTY

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper outlines the experience of Inuit art exhibitions abroad and examines the ways in which the Canadian state crafted and framed those exhibitions throughout the Cold War. The involvement of the Canadian state in the development and promotion of Inuit art dates back to the early years of the Cold War. The practice of presenting foreign dignitaries with gifts of Inuit art projects is the subtlest manner of projecting Canada's Arctic sovereignty, and the presentation of Inuit art to foreign dignitaries has become almost part of Canadian diplomatic protocol. As a result Canada's image in the world is decidedly linked with the Arctic and the Inuit people. The body of Inuit art that has developed over the last fifty years, and that has been projected both at home and abroad, is an essential aspect of Canada's national identity, and a symbolic demonstration of lived sovereignty in the Arctic.

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