

# InfoNorth

## The Baker Lake Printmaking Revival

By Kyra Vladykov Fisher

**T**HE HISTORY OF PRINTMAKING in Baker Lake is also the history of a people going towards self-sufficiency and nationhood: “a culture employing art unconsciously for identity while moving inevitably into the unknown” (Bloore, 1973: Foreword).

In the fall of 1995, I was sent to Baker Lake to set up a drawing and printmaking program for Nunavut Arctic College. This was a challenging and exciting prospect for me. It was the first time since the late 1980s that printmaking was going to be done there.

Twenty years of printmaking in Baker Lake had ended when the Sanavik Co-operative decided to expand the retail side of the organization. Artists such as Jessie Oonark, Irene Avaalaaqiaq, Victoria Mamnguqsualuk, Janet Kigusiuq, Thomas and Philippa Iksiraq, Hattie Amitnaaq, Magdalene Ukpatiku, and Simon Tookoome had made Baker Lake prints famous. Ever since they had lost their studio, these printmakers had wanted to start producing prints again. What circumstances had led to the studio’s demise? What were the hopes for a revival of printmaking in Baker Lake?

In the 1950s, the Department of Northern Affairs and National Resources began to establish arts and crafts projects in northern communities. Their motivation was economic rather than responsive to any need expressed by the Inuit to produce arts and crafts (Goetz, 1985:43).

The severe famine in the District of Keewatin in the 1950s brought an influx of Inuit to Baker Lake. As a result, Bill Larmour, an arts and crafts officer with the Department, was sent to Baker Lake in 1961–62 to assess the potential for developing a graphics program. His reports were enthusiastic and encouraging. After a succession of arts and crafts officers, and on the advice of author, scholar, and collector of Inuit art George Swinton, Sheila and Jack Butler were recruited. In 1970, the era of printmaking began in Baker Lake.

Northern Affairs promoted the establishment of co-operative organizations, which it felt would fit well with the co-operative nature of Native societies (Blodgett, 1991:15). Although the government intervened financially with the economy of the North, it never intended to do so forever. “Once the [arts and crafts] development projects became viable, the Department assumed that the Co-ops would take over and [the government] would withdraw” (Goetz, 1985:47). The goal was eventual Inuit self-sufficiency.

Five northern communities were known for their printmaking co-operatives: Cape Dorset, Povungnituk, Baker Lake, Holman Island, and Pangnirtung. Printmaking began in Cape Dorset in 1958. Povungnituk became established in 1962, and print projects began at Holman Island in 1965. Although Baker Lake did not produce its first collection of prints until 1970, Jessie Oonark had been having her drawings made into prints in Cape Dorset since the early 1960s. In 1972, the Sanavik Co-op in Baker Lake was incorporated, and print projects at Pangnirtung were started in 1973.

Each of the printmaking co-operatives produced work of a distinct style. Cape Dorset work was characterized by its technical proficiency, subtle use of blended colour, richness of texture, and mythical figures, displayed in symmetrical compositions delicate in execution. The work of the artist Kenojuak perhaps best exemplifies this style.

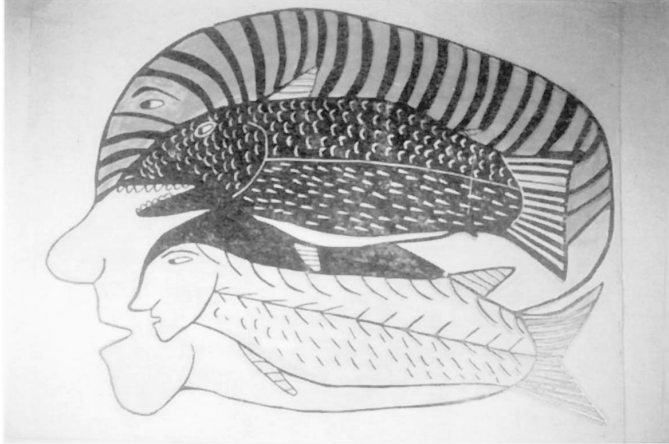
Prints from Povungnituk in northern Quebec tended to be monochromatic and relied largely on the use of incised lines to produce the image. Realistic scenes portraying the traditional way of life dominated the imagery.

Baker Lake prints were often made from stonecuts combined with stencil, which allowed for the use of many colours. Strong, bold images suggested that their source of inspiration came not only from the imagination and their rich oral tradition, but also from the shapes used in their sewn appliqué work. This latter source was especially evident in the work of Oonark and Avaalaaqiaq.

Holman Island artists tended to print their graphics in black, with minimal incised detail. Their imagery derived from the Copper Inuit tradition. Kalvak, an expert storyteller and a very prolific artist, was perhaps the best-known Holman artist.

Pangnirtung artists used the stencil, silkscreen, stonecut, and lithographic media. The traditional way of life was used frequently in their imagery. Their stencil prints, complex and subtle in their use of colour, perhaps best exemplified the Pangnirtung style.

It became evident early on that assistance was needed to promote and market the prints produced by the co-operatives. The population within the settlements could not absorb the proliferation of new art works, and distance made it virtually impossible for the Inuit to sell their work in southern Canada and internationally. As well, for a culture that had only



*"Fish Spirit," by Irene Avaalaaqiaq, woodcut and stencil print, 60 × 75 cm.*

recently ceased its nomadic existence, the complexities of the marketplace were daunting. Through the instigation of Cape Dorset artists, the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council was established.

The Canadian Eskimo Arts Council (CEAC) was in effect an advisory committee. It held its first meeting in Ottawa on 15 September 1961. Members present included Dr. Evan Turner, Director of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts; Paul Arthur, Managing Editor of *Canadian Art Magazine*; M.F. Fehely, President of T.D.F. Artists Limited, Toronto; Norman Hallendy, a designer with the Industrial Division for Northern Affairs; Don Snowden, Chief of the Industrial Division; and James Houston, who was running the print program in Cape Dorset (Goetz, 1985:60). The Department was trying to distance itself, yet still retain some control of the situation. They felt that an independent committee would be useful in advising both the local artists' co-operatives and the Department on various aspects of Inuit art. Council members would select the prints to be marketed each year. The Council's perceived neutrality would protect its administrators in the communities and the Department politically from accusations of favouritism.

One of the Council's duties was quality control. Unfortunately, the Council was seen to use the Cape Dorset style and technique as the standard measure of quality, causing jealousy and resentment among the other co-operatives. Cape Dorset, unlike any other of the printmaking co-ops, was fortunate enough to have Terry Ryan, who succeeded James Houston. Ryan lived at Cape Dorset for over 20 years and, even after moving south, still divided his time between Cape Dorset and Toronto. His continuous, close advisory role with the West Baffin Eskimo Co-op, combined with his high standards and keen aesthetic sensibilities, was directly responsible for maintaining the high quality and consistency of Cape Dorset prints over the years. The other printmaking co-operatives unfortunately lacked this long-term expert guidance.

The Baker Lake Print Co-operative has had a succession of advisors over the years. While the Butlers have been credited

with giving the Co-op its start, they left after only two years. Since their departure, there has been not only a succession of outside expertise, but also a succession of Inuit printshop managers. In printmaking, quality is dependent on technical proficiency as well as consistency. When new advisors introduced new techniques, artists needed time to learn and become proficient in them. Each new advisor had different expectations, and the artists had to keep adjusting to new circumstances. While adaptation was a good survival strategy, it could also be disruptive to the flow of the operation. With this lack of continuity, quality demands also fluctuated. As a result, Baker Lake acquired a reputation for technical inconsistency.

The negative side of the Canadian Eskimo Arts Council was its clear bias toward Cape Dorset work at the expense of other styles. On the positive side, the CEAC did enhance the public's confidence in what they were buying. The small limited editions of 50 prints kept the print market exclusive. The marketing was very professional, and all print collections were accompanied by illustrated catalogues. The Council organized annual print openings at prestigious galleries.

A major problem, which existed from the Council's inception and which ultimately led to its demise, was the discrepancy between its members' perceptions and the Department's original intent. For the Council members, the selection process was based entirely on their aesthetic judgement; they had no understanding of northern economic hardships. Ironically, one of the Department's major reasons for developing the arts in the first place had been to help alleviate the economic suffering of Northerners.

By the end of the 1960s, the development of arts and crafts had been transferred to the territorial government, so the Department could focus on promoting and protecting Inuit art and supporting the co-operative marketing structure (Goetz, 1985:65). The Department, now renamed the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), organized many major exhibitions. "The Inuit Print," a



*"Strange Bird," by Magdalene Ukpatiku, woodcut and stencil, 45 × 60.5 cm.*

major retrospective exhibit of works produced from 1957 to 1977, promoted the work of all five printing co-operatives. Mounted by the National Museum of Man and the National Museums of Canada in cooperation with DIAND, the exhibit toured for a decade (1975–85) and introduced Inuit art to new markets (Goetz, 1977). The Department encouraged international exhibitions and fostered co-operation with museums and galleries to gain further validation of Inuit art as an art form as opposed to a craft. They wanted Inuit art to be taken seriously.

Soon, however, the reality of economics began to plague the Department. In 1986, an \$11.9 million Northwest Territories Co-operative Business Development Fund was established. Its primary purpose was to provide a perpetual revolving fund so that the co-ops could receive assistance. Loans would be made to applicants who could demonstrate their ability to repay the loan. The Department also hoped that the fund would help build equity. Unfortunately, at around the same time, the May Report was released.

Ken May had been asked to research the economic viability of printmaking for the Fund. Printmaking had been considered profitable; however, May's Report revealed that, in fact, the co-ops were losing money. The Canadian Eskimo Arts Council's rejection of nine editions of Baker Lake prints in 1987 did have a strong bearing on the Sanavik Co-op's financial solvency. As Marybelle Myers put it, "The rejection of an edition of 50 prints can mean a loss of about \$5,000 to a co-op. When several different prints are rejected, the loss is staggering" (Myers, 1988:4). That year the Council rejected nine editions! In the fall of 1987, the Baker Lake and Holman Island co-operatives announced that they were no longer going to send their prints to the CEAC to be juried. The Baker Lake artists complained that the Council rejected too many prints, that it was demoralizing, and that its decisions caused financial distress. It was too late. The Sanavik Co-operative could not sustain these financial losses: the printshop was closed down. Twenty years of printmaking in Baker Lake had come to an end.

While the government had signed the death warrant of the unprofitable printmaking co-operatives by withdrawing funding for them from the Co-operative Business Development Fund, the Department was conscious of the need for some cultural funding. As a result, an Inuit Art Foundation was established, ostensibly to help provide art training to the younger generation. It was to be an interim funding program to help the Inuit artist become self-sufficient: "The Inuit Art Foundation was designed as an intermediary body to connect northern artists with mainstream sources of funding available to all Canadian artists" (Myers, 1988:8).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Arctic College and the Inuit Art foundation explored the possibility of setting up a fine arts course of study in the Arctic. The aging of the population of artists highlighted the necessity to train the younger generation, who lacked the skills and knowledge of their culture possessed by their parents and grandparents. Unfortunately, this co-operation never reached fruition; however, Arctic College, on its own, did begin to set up programs



*"Northern Lights People," by Thomas Iksiraq, woodcut and medium, 29.5 × 21 cm.*

in jewellery making, drawing, and printmaking. Teaching for the Fine Arts and Crafts Programs in Iqaluit in 1992 was my re-entry into the Arctic. In the late 1960s, I had lived in Cape Dorset, where I first learned what a print was and saw prints being made. It is to that experience that I attribute my desire to study art and printmaking.

Since 1992, I had been returning to Iqaluit to teach every fall, spending the winter and summer terms teaching at the University of Calgary. In 1995, Arctic College in Iqaluit decided not to offer printmaking: the jewellery program was given precedence. I did not expect to teach in the Arctic that year. However, one day in August, I was told that a printmaking program was going to be offered in Baker Lake: "Baker Lake is yours if you want it!" I arrived on 5 September into a unique and extremely exciting and challenging situation.

Since the printshop had closed in the late 1980s, the studio space formerly occupied by the printmakers in the Sanavik Co-op had been turned over to retail sales. All the equipment had been boxed up, and the lithography press and some print drawers had been shipped down to Winnipeg. The remaining print inventory had also been sent down to Arctic Co-operatives Limited in Winnipeg. Drying racks and litho stones, stored outside under the Co-op building, lay exposed to dust, snow, and rain.

In the mid-1990s, the printmakers had gotten together and expressed the strong desire to begin printmaking again. However, the government funding that had been

available in the past was no longer there. They did not have the financial resources to commit to such a venture. All they had was the strong desire to set up a print studio and produce prints.

Money available from both Pathways and Economic Development for training purposes was secured through the efforts of a few local residents. A two-year Drawing and Printmaking Diploma Program was set up, to be administered through the Fine Arts and Crafts Programs of Nunavut Arctic College. The dilemma I faced upon my arrival was that, on the one hand, I was responsible for implementing a college program and all that entailed; while, on the other hand, I was supposed to assist the printmakers in setting up a print studio and in pursuing their business aspirations.

Last year most of the twelve “students” were former printmakers with esteemed reputations: Victoria Mamnguqsualuk, Janet Kigusiuq, and Irene Avaalaqiaq, all daughters of the famous Jessie Oonark; Thomas and Philippa Iksiraq; Hattie Amitnaaq; Magdalene Ukpatiku; Janet Ikuutaq; and Nancy Sevoga. Only three were under the age of 45. If the only way the printmakers could start printing again was to be students, then they would become students! This year, five younger students were enrolled. This is extremely important, for despite the energy, vitality, and dedication of the present artists, others will need to succeed them.



*Printmaker Janet Kigusiuq in the “Old Pool Building” studio, September 1996.*

In May of this year, the two-year Drawing and Printmaking Diploma Program ended. What is the future of the printmakers? What are their options? Do they have any options? Thomas Iksiraq was the last Sanavik Print Shop manager. I have been working with him throughout the program. Our relationship is a partnership. Together, and in consultation with the other printmakers, we are trying to ensure that there is a future for printmaking in Baker Lake.

The building we are using at present, known as the “Old Pool Building,” used to house the community swimming pool. The concrete floor is convex and severely cracked, the



*Interior view of the printmaking studio, the “Old Pool Building.”*

metal beams are corroded from moisture, and rust flakes float down onto the working surface. The walls need insulation, and the lighting is inadequate. Despite all this, people work away and put their parkas on when it gets too cold. The cracks in the floor and walls have newspaper stuffed into them. A few buildings over stands the Jessie Oonark Centre—a state-of-the-art building constructed in 1991 as an arts centre and named after Jessie Oonark, Baker Lake’s most famous artist. Various economic ventures have been undertaken at the Centre, but despite the use of mass production to cut costs, none have been financially viable.

A number of politicians have told Thomas and me that the printmakers will be moved to the Jessie Oonark Centre and that it is only fitting that these famous artists be there. We were told that last year. Meanwhile, the Nunasi Corporation (an Inuit Beneficiary Corporation) has been running the Oonark Centre for the Development Corporation, a private business consortium. Profit-making, not printmaking, is their goal.

Is the dilemma we are faced with universal? Or is it a product of our North American culture? Is the validity of artistic pursuits to be measured only in terms of profit? That certainly seems to be the case within our present society. On 27 January 1990, a day-long meeting on the future of printmaking was held in Yellowknife. Only two options were discussed as strategies for ensuring the future of printmaking, and both were economically based: “to maintain the status quo by developing a business and marketing plan that would demonstrate economic viability for printmaking, or to diversify printshop production to include commercially-oriented print items” (Inuit Art Quarterly, 1990:45). Terry Thompson, the manager of Canadian Arctic Producers (CAP), did concede that while Inuit art “helps the image” of the Northwest Territories, it is “unlikely that Inuit fine art can break even” (Inuit Art Quarterly, 1990:45).

In 1987, the chairman of the Northwest Territories Co-operative Business Development Fund said, “While we recognize the cultural importance of prints...we feel it is not our responsibility to preserve Inuit culture” (Myers, 1988:6). Who, except the artists, will take that responsibility? Is art to

be made only if it generates a profit? Judging by the number of successful art galleries in existence today and the lucrative tourist industry, there must be some profit to be made in art. Ironically, the makers of art are still struggling.

Originally the printmakers were told that the Hamlet of Baker Lake would let them purchase the building for one dollar. Now the Hamlet has decided to keep the building and allow the printmakers to lease it at a dollar a year for twenty years. The Hamlet has no objection to renovations; however, the cost of converting the building into a safe and effective printmaking studio would be around \$200 000. If the printmakers do not own the building, they could spend that amount of money and still find themselves homeless again in twenty years. It will be difficult to find benefactors who are willing to put \$200 000 into a building that belongs to the Hamlet and not to the printmakers.

The Keewatin Chamber of Commerce, at its Annual General Meeting held in Baker Lake on 4–6 April 1997, passed a resolution supporting the Baker Lake Printmaking Society in the need to obtain its own building. However, the printmakers are still constrained because of local hamlet politics: they do not have the endorsement of the Hamlet Council, and they do not have the funds to purchase their own building.

With the imminent advent of Nunavut in 1999, more and more responsibilities are being transferred to the Hamlet Councils. Funding agencies, such as the Department of Resources, Wildlife and Economic Development, Government of the Northwest Territories, and the Extended Canada – Northwest Territories Infrastructure Program, are now delegating the allocation of funding within the various communities to the local Councils. This might sound ideal in theory;

however, when Council members have a vested interest in specific fund distributions, this situation does not necessarily bode well for the arts. In the rush towards progress and technology, the value of culture is put aside. Verbal affirmation of the printmakers' valuable contribution to the history of Baker Lake is easily given. Providing the funding to assist the artists is another matter.

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