

Kalvak (1901-1984)

Kalvak, like other Inuit artists, dealt with and resolved the practical problems she was born to endure during her lifetime. The harsh north was home. As a practical woman with five daughters to care for, she conquered her world. As a matter of fact, according to her peers at Holman Island, "she was the best seamstress in the settlement." It was her ability and sensitivity to the art of sewing that spilled over into her arts and crafts ability. Kalvak could draw, and her drawings caught the eye of Father Henri Tardy, pioneer priest of the Oblate Order. Father Tardy encouraged her interests and developed and protected a collection of Kalvak's drawings, which he started collecting in the early 1960s. This collection became the nucleus of the print shop movement at Holman Island.



Father Tardy and Kalvak, Holman Island, 1969.

By 1965 Kalvak was drawing more than sewing. A few of her drawings became valued by various connoisseurs. I saw my first Kalvak drawing in Santa Fe, New Mexico, in 1964 or 1965. The director of the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe had picked up a small drawing in Edmonton from a dealer. Kalvak's beautiful continuous line drawing of a caribou intrigued me.

In October 1966, loaded with photography and sketching equipment, I made it to Holman Island. Father Tardy was my host. The major part of my career had been dealing with and trying to understand aesthetics, production and protection of native art. But why had it taken me so long to deal with the feminine aspect of native arts? In fact, feminine Inuit art had not found its place in the annals of art history. Its history really began after World War II (1945).

Prior to 1950 art in Canada's central North had yet to find a place in Inuit art history. Ethnological and archaeological research brought to light many artistic artifacts, but very little effort was made by critics to explore the depth of Inuit art or the artists who created it. The subjects were there for over 4000 years, but the recent explosion of contemporary sculpture and prints had yet to hit the art markets. Marketing Inuit art burst forth onto the scene in the 1950s and '60s.

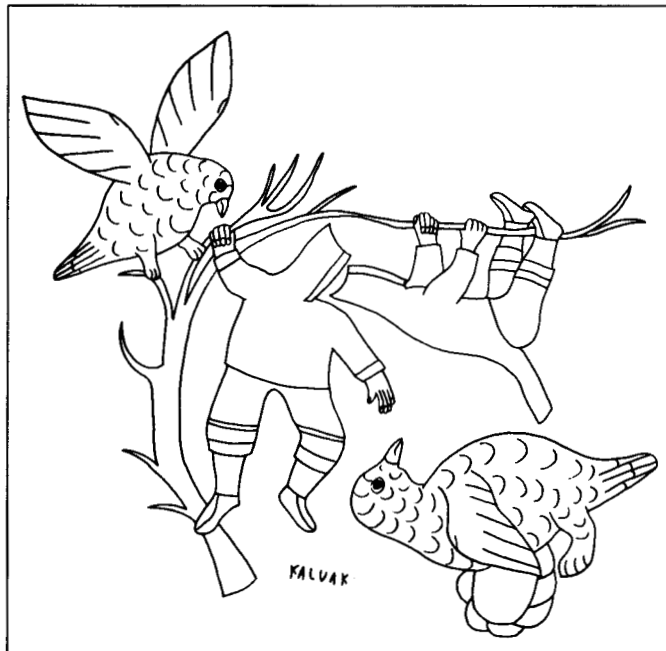
By the mid- and late '60s, however, several things happened to change the role of Inuit arts and crafts. The major shift was in developing the marketing of the print. Then the stone and stencil print gave way to the technology of silk screen, litho and etching processes. This required technical assistance from specialists, who not only influenced but in some cases almost directed Inuit aesthetics. The talented, creative Inuit artists

became worker bees. The free flow of Inuit ideas was restricted as social and educational form and lives changed drastically during this period. Thus, many Inuit children were now in schools with southern provincial curriculums. New ideas and social problems confronted these young students. They learned trades and acquired new customs. This led to gaps in family structures and to new problems. Religious groups in the settlements vied for souls and many young Inuits became "new" Christians.

According to Kalvak, she went where the feelings were highest for her art. Father Henri Tardy was probably the most forceful influence on Kalvak. He inspired her to draw. He was ever present with materials and other assistance. I became a secondary assistant in the procurement of supplies for Kalvak in the mid 1960s and early 1970s. Kalvak supplied the energy, knowledge and ability to depict her life experiences in beautiful pencil drawings.

Kalvak was born in 1901 near Tahiryuak Lake on Victoria Island. She inherited the mythology and shamanism from her mother and traditional hunting skills from her father. Since she was the only surviving child of her parents, she became an early partner in the survival skills necessary in her environment. She learned early in life to fish and hunt. The mystique and love of Inuit culture were instilled by her mother. Both aspects of environmental forces and mystical lore fill Kalvak's drawings and prints. She was able to transpose several enigmatic sources into a simple drawing using the sun, the earth or the sea as symbols that express a feeling of her reference in time. As she herself was a very expressive person, her drawings take on the experienced expressions of her life.

Kalvak was productive throughout her life; her drawings must have numbered in the thousands. In 1969 Father Tardy showed me a stack of drawings dating from 1964. I counted over 900! These drawings were statements of her encyclopedic, experienced mind and her deep interests, which included all of

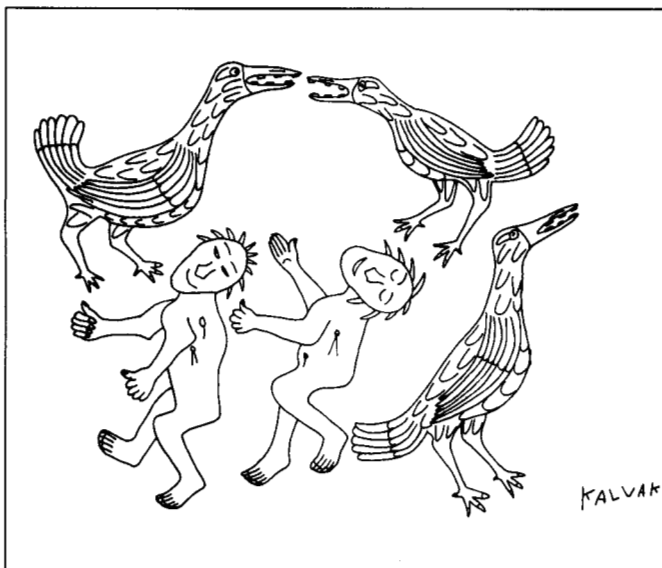


Two figures, two birds.

nature — the smallest living plants and animals, the eggs and larvae that produced them. But people and the environment were her main concerns. The straightforward front and side views of figures and faces always had strong characteristics of the subject she depicted. No two characters were alike, and each subject contained gender characteristics if only the face or head was shown. Kalvak was a marvel at suggestion. The unseen visual suggestion of a spirit or spirits was present in her drawings. She used the amulet or fetish to symbolize these spirits. Kalvak was a master at contour, straight on front and side view drawings to achieve clarity of her subject. She also used the cut-away top view to denote time and place. These universally accepted drawing techniques used by oriental artists so often indicate the knowledge, experience and execution abilities of Kalvak.

Kalvak also had a playful sense of humour. She sang as she worked on her drawings and sewing projects. I used to take pencils and coloured markers to her on trips to Holman Island. She always seemed so appreciative of these gifts. I recall the first time she used coloured markers; she really got enthused about the different colours. She made a drawing of fish, birds, animals and ground willows. She used every colour in the box of 12 markers! She was not interested in the drawings so much as in what colour came out of the end of each marker! These drawings are treasures to me because they were the first coloured marking pen drawings she had ever made. Many of them eventually faded and some were lost and many were ruined by the stone cutter who produced Kalvak prints.

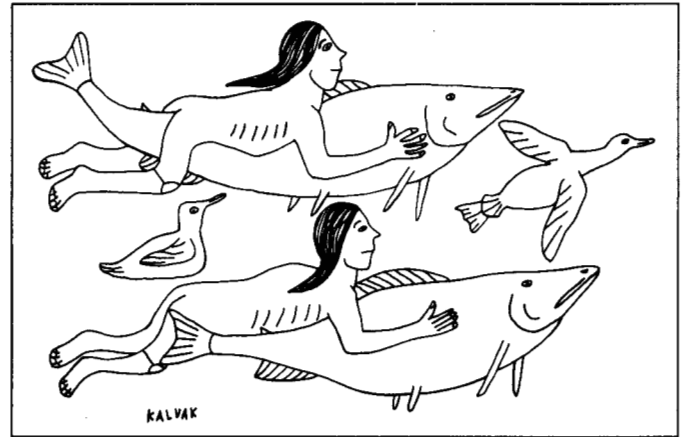
Using a brush was a different story. I was more enthused about bringing the brush to her than she was about receiving it. I wanted so much for her to try her hand at the brush but wanted her to ask to use this medium. What I realized was that she was more interested in the *suzri* (ink container) than the brush. After a bit of conversation with her daughter, who acted as an interpreter, Kalvak consented to use the brush. The results were a disaster. I insisted she pull the stroke of the brush rather than push the brush. But her experience was not with a soft drawing instrument. She had her eye on the *suzri*. She did produce a drawing of a snow hare, but it was not the precise line that



Two men, three birds.

Kalvak wanted. She discarded the brush and stuck to her awls, pencils and marking pens. I think this drawing of the hare was probably the one and only brush drawing Kalvak ever made. She was accustomed to the hard, sharp awl or pencil lines these tools made.

A few days later Kalvak showed me the results of the brush exercise. The brush was obviously the tool to brush oil in her lamp, which she proudly displayed on her table lighted with wick and all! The *suzri* became an oil lamp, which was more important and useful than an ink well!



Two men riding arctic char (1969).

Kalvak gave animals, fowl and fish equal status with man in her drawings. In her drawings, birds — ptarmigan in particular — were directors and men followers. In one drawing (of two figures and three birds) Kalvak turned the paper round and round 360° before starting her composition. The composition eventually became three oversized ptarmigan punishing two men figures. The wounds on the bodies of the men were symbolized with simple circles and lines, the circles depicting the wound and the blood. These birds had inflicted wounds on the bodies, directing them to follow their orders. In another sequence Kalvak showed two men riding the backs of arctic char. What a spirit and knowledge of the fish kingdom Kalvak had! She used the sea, sky and land to give a complete picture of the environment she knew so well.

The contribution of Kalvak's drawings and prints and their effects on native arts may not be realized for some time. But when it is, all Canadians will be thankful the drawings exist as ethnological documents that ensure understanding and respect for a beautiful but threatened culture. Kalvak received the Order of Canada in 1979 in recognition of her talent.

From 1967 into the early '70s Kalvak was at her prime in drawing. Her days were spent caring for her grandchildren, cooking, sewing and drawing. It was during this period that she turned out her most significant drawings. These were based on her knowledge of the environment of her youth and an extended imagination. She used shamanistic symbols in unique ways. Most were pencil line drawings, full of meaningful information. As a collection they have become some of the most highly sophisticated and visually articulate works from the world of native art. She seemed to me one of the most happy and satisfied native artists I had met. Her drawings during this period depicted this feeling.

Kalvak as a child travelled with her parents on hunting trips. These experiences influenced most of her drawing. She gave us a view of not only the environment but the innate and beautiful sensitivity of the Inuit. She added the sorceress in her being to bring power to Inuit art. When looking at Kalvak's art, you realize its power. Children especially can relate to her art.

When given colour, the sensual quality of her art form increased dramatically. This is more apparent in her drawings than any of the prints produced of her work in the 1970s. As a matter of economics, I am sure I will receive criticism for suggesting that the print does not justify the means as a pure art form. An original drawing is sometimes edited for commercial reasons and it loses its originality of space and time; and the convenience of marketing takes precedence over the originator's intention. It is a tough problem to deal with. The pressure to make the item salable takes over.



Waiting. (Reproduced from *Kalvak/Emerak Memorial Catalogue 1987.*)

Association with Kalvak and Father Tardy over the period 1966-79 was the happiest time of my career. My previous background of work with the Hopi and Navaho in the mid-1940s and early 1950s was a strong basis for my interest in Kalvak's work. Kalvak was as open with her work as the native Indian is. I once observed her showing her young granddaughters how to sew, draw, sing and dance. A lot of hand and arm gestures preceded Kalvak's drawing. One time I asked through an interpreter why she was drawing around her hand, and I was told she was drawing the paw of a polar bear. Actually her hand became the mass of a polar bear. The beautiful contour line around her hand became one of the most sensitive drawings of that animal.

Kalvak used her hands for placement of animals and figures in her composition. She was composing with her hands and fingers in various positions to get a feeling of what the composition could be. All the while she hummed or sang and moved slowly and gently as if she were warming up for a dance instead of a drawing session. No drawing or marks were made on paper before going through these rituals of placing her hands on the paper and humming or singing. In several cases I watched her put her left hand, palm down, on the paper as if to trace it before drawing the complete figure or animal. This gesture was for compositional purposes.

Kalvak taught me a lot about Inuit life, especially visual art. Our legacy is her collection of drawings and prints. The drawings of individuals like Kalvak are alive with a vitality that only this woman could have bred. Prints of Kalvak's art are beautiful, but they are not only negative impressions of her work but sometimes are edited and are no longer the original line drawings of this talented artist.

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