

# CANADIAN ESKIMO ART

Development of Eskimo Carving

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1. Auflage 2010. Taschenbuch. 52 S. Paperback  
ISBN 978 3 86850 715 7  
Format (B x L): 14 x 21 cm

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**Roger Duhamel**

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**Development of Eskimo Carving**



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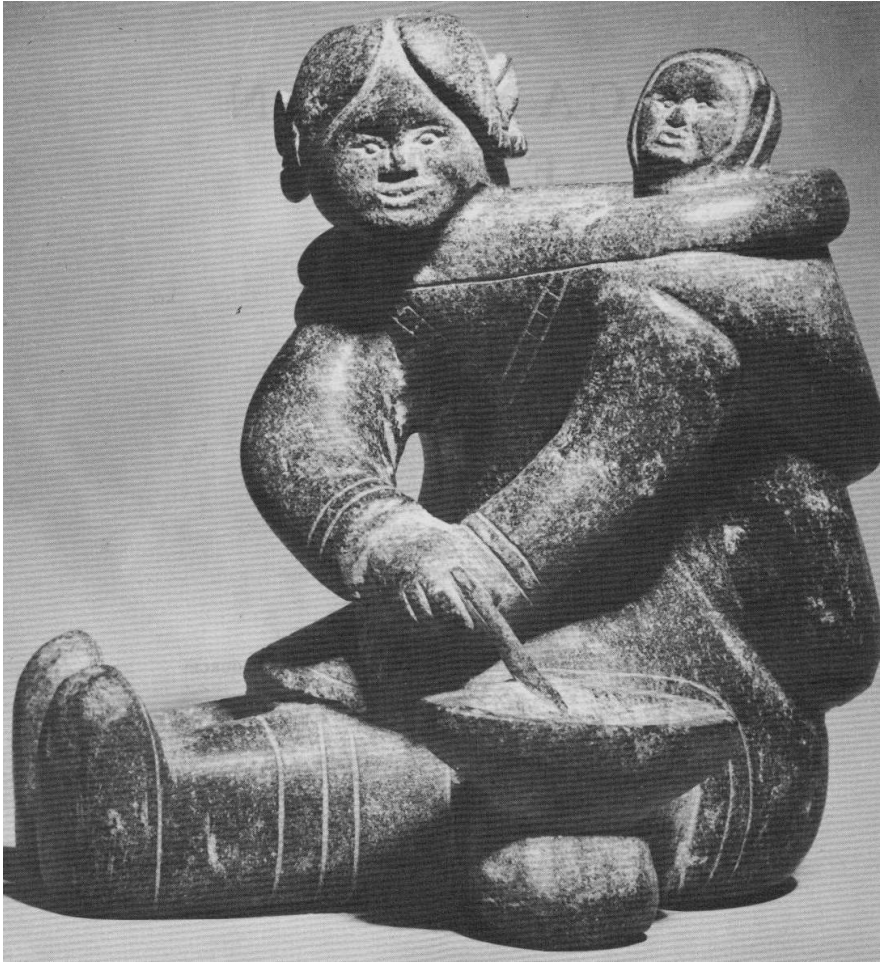
Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-86850-715-7

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.





MOTHER AND CHILD KUNAMEE  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND



**ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN CANADA** has taken many and varied forms because of the diverse elements from which our nation has been fashioned. The early French settlers, the British who followed them and more recent Canadians who have come from many parts of Europe and the world have all made their essential contribution to the cultural life of Canada. Few forms of artistic endeavour, however, have attracted wider public interest and enthusiasm, both here and abroad, than work of our Indian and Eskimo peoples. This booklet deals exclusively carvings of the Eskimos, a small but important group in the Canadian population.

Carving has always been an essential part of hunting culture of the Canadian Eskimos. With only natural resources such as stone, occasional pieces of driftwood and ivory and bone with which to make efficient hunting tools, Eskimos, of necessity, became accomplished carvers.

We may be grateful that this skill was not restricted to the manufacture of tools. Since early times, other objects have been carved. Perhaps for magical reasons, for success in hunting, for toys, for amusement, small figures of men and animals were carved in the round. Hunting and domestic scenes were also engraved on stone, bone and ivory.

This booklet outlines the development of Eskimo carving and shows the variations in form and subject of carving and other Eskimo crafts. Like the figures of animals, men and birds, all Eskimo handicrafts are characterised by simplicity and strength. Although all the work produced cannot be classed as art or sculpture, it never fails to provide a fascinating reflection of Eskimo life.









SEAL



DUCK



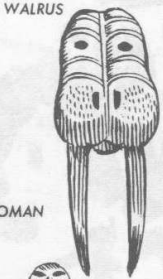
SEA SPIRIT



BEAR



WOMAN



WALRUS



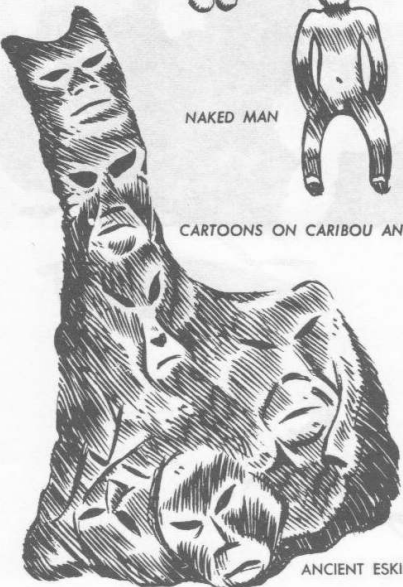
STONE HEAD



NAKED MAN



WHALE



CARTOONS ON CARIBOU ANTLER



OWL (PART OF BOLA)



EARRINGS

ANCIENT ESKIMO CARVINGS EXCAVATED IN THE IGLOOLIK AREA



**THE ESKIMO PEOPLE OF CANADA**, cheerfully living a difficult existence in a harsh climate, have developed over the centuries a unique art form, which today has won for them praise and acclaim wherever their work has been shown.

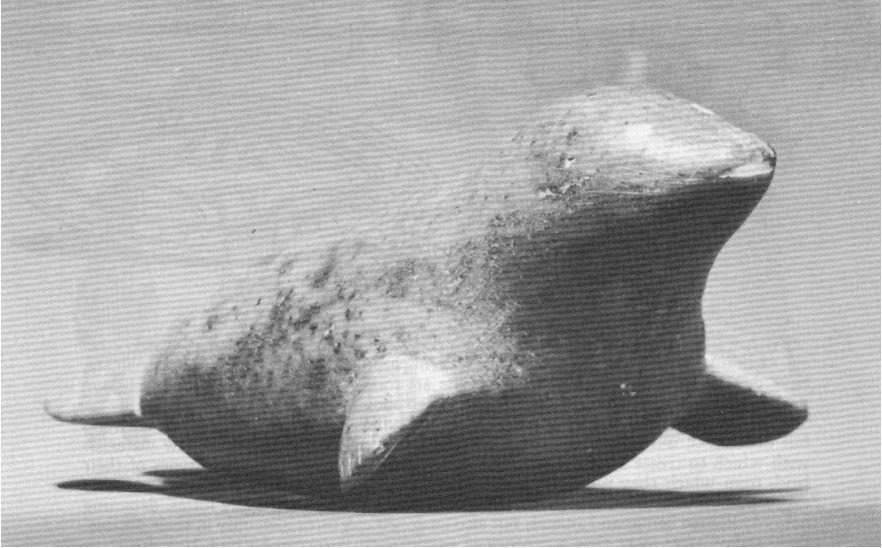
In an unceasing struggle for food and shelter, which has been their lot, with no wood but driftwood, with not textiles and no vegetable dyes, the Eskimos had few materials with which to create works of art. In consequence, they turned to the stones of their land, from which they were compelled to fashion their tools, as a medium for artistic expression. Out of the lifeless rocks they wrested imaginative and lively forms, depicting not only human beings and animals but also imagined creatures seen only in their dreams. Even today, after more than a century of exposure to European culture, this primitive art persists, original, creative and virile.

By force of circumstances these carvings have always been small. People, who are constantly on the move, pursuing game on which they must depend for the necessities of life, cannot burden themselves with large pieces of sculpture.

In the Igloolik collection of ancient carvings at Churchill, Manitoba, the figures are confined to such objects as human beings, animals or birds. Some of the animals are imaginary creatures, and sometimes human beings are portrayed in caricature. Similarly some of the utilitarian objects are decorated, but no decoration is allowed to interfere with the efficiency of the article itself. At Churchill, also, there is to be seen a caribou antler carved with cartoons of human faces. Antlers have been in this way by Eskimos in every part of the Arctic.



In decorative handicrafts the art forms employed as a rule are highly stylised and sometimes abstract. At the top of this page is an example of abstract design used in decorating clothing, or personal articles. At the bottom is a decorated harpoon head.

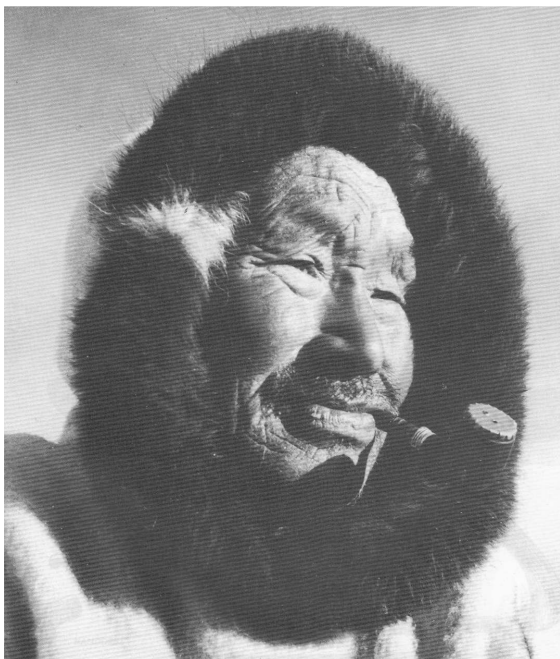


SEAL ON THE ICE BY KUDLALAK,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND (SERPENTINE)

**A MODERN SCULPTOR**, asked to produce a work of art with nothing but the tools used by the Eskimos, might well be baffled. These people know nothing of mallet and chisel, they have no callipers or dividers. The Eskimo artist must make do with the tools used in daily life, for building his kayak, or for making his harpoons and stone vessels.



In the older cultures, the Eskimos shaped their tools by chipping them from fine-grained, flint-like stones which readily took a sharp edge. In later cultures, tools were also made from slate which was ground and polished to the form desired. Common to the both techniques, whether chipped or ground, were certain basic tools—adzes, hand drills, reamers and crude saws produced by chipping notches in the edge of a stone blade. Today most of these have been replaced by steel tools, many of them from scrap metal ground to shape and fitted in a handle of bone, antler or ivory. Modern tools, such as saws and files, are used when they are available.



KUDLALAK, HUNTER AND CARVER  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND





MAN WITH STONE LAMP BY SHOOVAGAR  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND



**MANY ESKIMO PIECES** tell a story of animal life: the owl guarding its nest, the bear followed by its cub, the struggling bird in the hands of a boy. The concept is always simple, the statement direct and vivid. The Eskimo carver has advantage of complete familiarity with the seals, the caribou, the walrus, the birds which he depicts. They are part of his life. There is seldom a day when he does not see one or more of these animals dead or alive, still or moving. The experiences of the hunt are a large part of his conversation, and his descriptions of them to his friend are illustrated with pantomime and mimicry for the diversion and information of his audience. His concept of the universe causes him to ascribe to things, whether living or dead, the emotions and even the speech of humans. It is not difficult for the primitive Eskimo to believe that the animals talk to his occasion, and when the narrative of the hunt is told and retold their conversations are as real to him as the rage of the harpooned walrus.

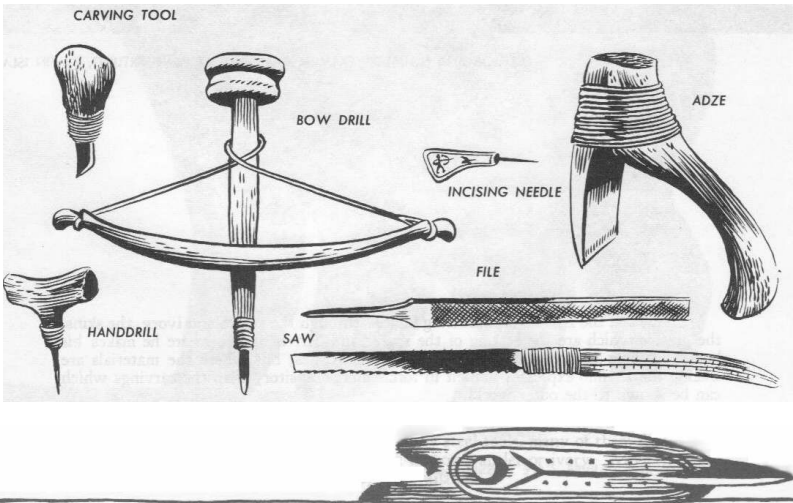
The human being, though, is at the centre of Eskimo's art. It offers the most in subject matter, for the lives of people are infinitely fuller and more varied than the lives of animals. The hunter stalking the polar bear, the mother holding the child, the boy solemnly dancing on his knees - these are the subjects which have appealed to native artists.

In his art, the Eskimo is expressing himself through the stones and ivory, the skins, the grasses which are the setting of sparse and barren tundra where he makes his home. Where nature permits, there art flourishes; but where the materials are lacking the Eskimo expresses himself in forms more transitory than the carvings which can be shown to the outer world.





ESKIMOS AND HOUSTON EXAMINE CARVINGS  
PANGNIRTUNG, BAFFIN ISLAND





**THE ESKIMO** sometimes tries to portray animals which, in the great cycles of nature, have disappeared from his hunting grounds. Desiring them for food, Kumalik has carved an arctic hare with the vague idea that he may magically encourage their return. Kumalik has never seen a hare. He has relied entirely on the descriptions of his elders who remember them from long, long ago.



RABBIT BY KUMALIK, POVUNGNITUK  
EAST COAST HUDSON BAY





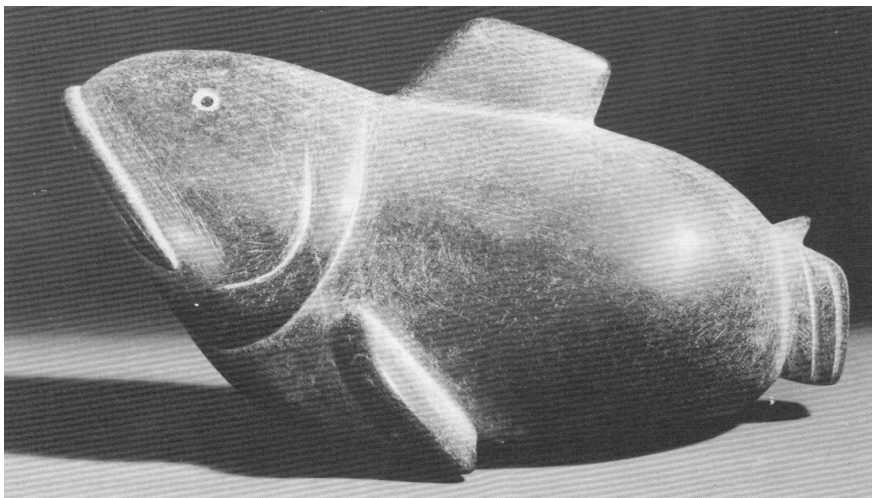
**THE MUSK-OX** is an animal worthy of the Eskimo hunter. From earliest times it provided meat in lavish quantity, its horns made bows, its shaggy hair was warm. The musk-ox is honoured in Eskimo legend and song, and in carving. The carving is a tribute to its subject; and, the carver thinks, it may also be an encouragement to the musk-ox to present itself to the hunter.



MUSK-OX BY AKEEATASHUK  
CRAIG HARBOUR, ELLESMERE ISLAND

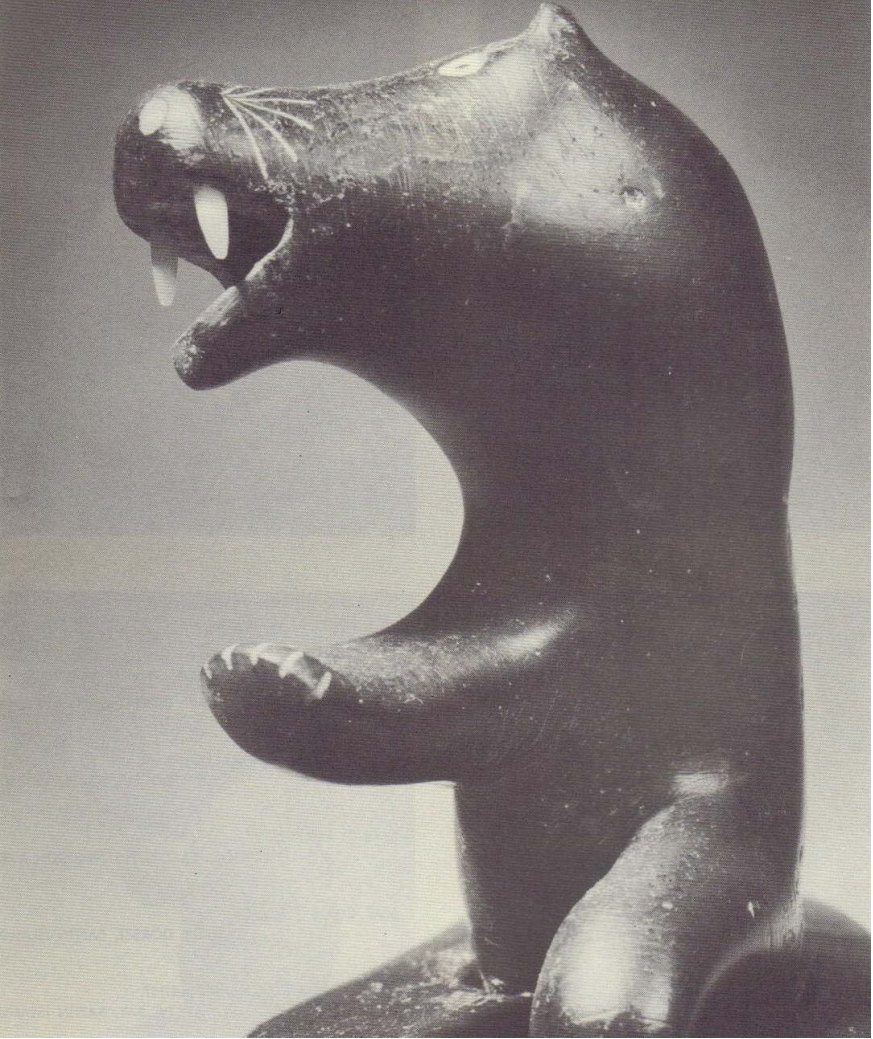


***THE FISH***, on other hand, is a lowly creature, fit to be caught only when other animals have disappeared. No Eskimo hunter wishes to be seen over a hole in the ice waiting for a rock cod to pass by when there should be bigger game worthy of his skill. With the same distaste does the artist regard all fish, and carvings of it are rare.



ROCK COD BY TUNU  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND





BADGER BY KALINGO  
POVUNGNITUK, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY



***EVEN THE BEST OF ESKIMO ARTISTS*** is a hunter first, a carver second. His very life depends on his keenness of observation, his consciousness of every feature, of every movement, of every habit of the animals which provide his food. He knows the subjects he carves with an intimacy which the sparseness of his life dictates.

Kalingo's rifleman depicts a basic concept – the hunter in action. Nothing of the scene is lost to him, but with his hard stone and his primitive tools he must choose conveyed with striking clarity and an economy of line. Sarkee's bear, rising from the water with a roar, has a force in action which could scarcely be surpassed in plastic form.



RIFLEMAN BY KALINGO  
POVUNGNITUK, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY







BEAR AND CUBS BY NAPACHEE  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

