

Oonark. *Photograph: Jürgen Vogt.*



Eskimo Art Is For Kabloona

ELIZABETH BELL¹

The real story of Oonark is to be understood through the pictures she draws, not through any written history. Nevertheless there are certain pieces of information about this fine Eskimo woman that do not appear in her drawings.

Oonark was born in the area around Garry Lake and the Back River about 1906. She was married very young, as was customary among the traditional Eskimos, and had many children, eight of whom survived. Her husband died before she moved to Baker Lake (around 1952).

At that time there was a famine in the Garry Lake region and Oonark and one of her daughters were starving. They were rescued by a Government Forces plane (she is not sure whether it was from the Army or the Air Force) and were taken to Baker Lake where she still lives today.

Oonark remembers that she began to draw just before her child, Noah, started school, which was around 1958. She was introduced to drawing by some school teachers, and some people from the Wildlife Service who gave her pencils and paper. From that point, she was on her own, and she began to draw pictures of things that were familiar to her. At first she was limited to ordinary lead pencils, but now she has access to many materials and prefers to use felt pens, coloured pencils and inks. Her drawings were first exhibited in the form of prints (executed by other Eskimo craftsmen) in 1960. Both stencil and stone cut prints have been made from her drawings, and have appeared in the annual selection of Cape Dorset prints. Oonark also does sewn felt wallhangings, a number of which were recently exhibited in Toronto.

Her drawings are a mixture of dreams, imagination and reality and reflect her many experiences. Many drawings portraying Eskimo men and women in their traditional clothes are executed in the greatest detail. Surprisingly she uses Alaskan designs for the clothing in some of these drawings. This is explained by the fact that she and her husband frequently travelled to island settlements like Cape Dorset and Cambridge Bay as well as to places along the north shore. In these travels she must have met people from Alaska or at least people who were familiar with Alaskan designs. Oonark does many drawings of people involved in their everyday activities. One of these shows people preparing fish for a meal. There is also an element of humour in these drawings. For example, she depicts a man coming home from fishing with two fish; evidently he is so happy with his catch that he has left his spear behind.

Other drawings illustrate the Eskimos' love of children. One of them shows a group of young people playing with a child and another records a dream of Oonark's about her child and two ookpiks.

¹Liaison Officer, Man in the North Project, The Arctic Institute of North America.

The most interesting of Oonark's drawings are those that combine reality with elements from dreams or imagination. In one she documents several Eskimo rope games, but between the various scenes there are some faces which, she says, just suddenly appeared as she was drawing and would momentarily disappear. In another, entitled "The Blue Fish", people are trying to kill a fish which although it is an ordinary fish, suddenly grew to be unnaturally large and frightening to them. One of her most fascinating drawings is "The Birds" which shows two creatures with human bodies and birds' heads fighting and arguing. There is a third figure, a woman, who is trying to pull her husband (one of the bird-men) away from the fight.

Still other drawings are purely from her imagination and Oonark does not discuss them, except to say that because they are dreams they don't make too much sense.

When I met Oonark and her interpreter, Ruby Angoateegota Arngnaknark, on the occasion of her exhibition of drawings at the Canadian Guild of Crafts in Montreal, Quebec, we talked about what significance her drawings had for her. I asked whether they meant anything specific for her and whether she hoped other people would learn something from her pictures. Ruby replied that Oonark probably didn't think about such things because "they are not in the Eskimo language" and Oonark said that she "just drew". I asked Oonark if she would like kabloona to understand the old Eskimo ways from her drawings and she simply said "yes".

Much of Oonark's drawing seems to be done to please the prospective buyer or the crafts officer (for whom the artists have great regard). She appears reluctant to make any drawings about spirits or legends. She said that she once did a drawing about the parts of a legend that she remembered but it was very difficult for her. When the crafts officer asked Oonark to draw a shaman she complied but she hasn't done any other pictures of this nature since then. People often remark how colourful her drawings are, and I wondered why she chose to make parkas red or blue when the real fur was brown and grey. She answered that she did this because she was asked to use colour.

Oonark wanted to know from me whether kabloona preferred drawings or wallhangings. I said that I thought it depended very much on the individual but Oonark and Ruby seemed to give more value to the wallhangings because of the fine craftsmanship required to sew on the appliquéd designs.

Oonark doesn't have any of her drawings in her house — as Ruby explains there was no notion of "art" in Eskimo life. They view their art primarily as something to sell, in order to be able to buy what they need or want. It seems so sad that in this form of visual art, supposedly an important medium of communication (and in many cases the only link), kabloona and Eskimo still do not really understand each other. The one judges it by arbitrary artistic criteria which are completely unknown to the Eskimo; the other sees his "art" very pragmatically, as an answer to some of his day to day problems.

Oonark is a very gracious lady; she says thank you to kabloona for giving her a living and says thank you to people for saying thank you to her.