

InfoNorth

Woven, Not Carved:

The Pangiirtung Tapestries are Northern Art with Global Appeal

by L.D. Cross

SAY THE WORDS “INUIT ART” and people immediately think “sculpture.” But there is much more to art by Inuit. Consider tapestries, a vital art form with a short 30-year history.

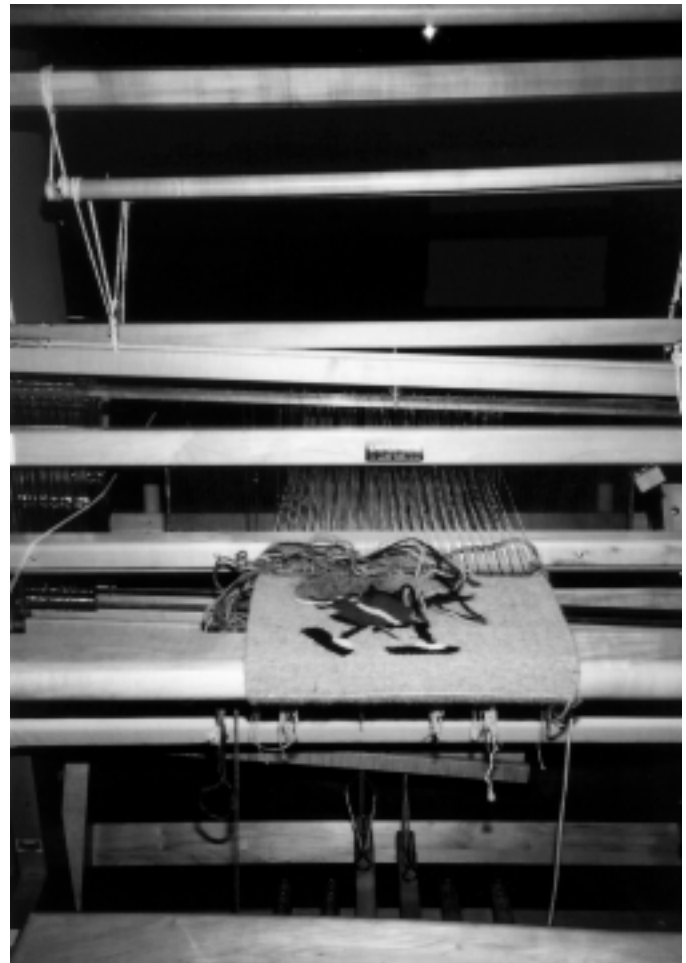
For centuries, Inuit in the Canadian Arctic lived a seminomadic, hunter-gather lifestyle. Their annual cycle involved long, arduous treks between summer and winter camps and the creation of tools, clothing and shelter using available raw materials such as bone, stone, hides, and snow. Even the introduction of firearms and other trade goods by Europeans in the early 19th century did little to change traditional life on the land.

It was only in the early 1960s when Inuit were placed, often forcibly, in permanent settlements by the Canadian government that their life changed significantly. Even though they then had access to schools, hospitals and social services, the move was controversial. In an attempt to ameliorate the negative effects of relocations and to create an economic base, the government funded arts and crafts initiatives across the Arctic.

One such project was a weaving studio in Pangiirtung on Baffin Island, now in the Territory of Nunavut (meaning ‘our land’). There, from 1969 to 1972, Ontario textile and silver/goldsmith artist Donald Stuart, supported by the federal government and the Canadian Guild of Crafts in Montreal, initiated a weaving project for a small group of young Inuit women. Already skilled in knitting and sewing wind- and water-resistant garments, they quickly mastered hand-weaving techniques. Today, this initiative has become the largest hand-weaving studio in Canada, and Stuart has returned on many occasions as friend and advisor. The Arctic environment has been an inspiration for his own creative work, and he met his wife, a nurse from England, in Pangiirtung.

IN THE BEGINNING

While every culture practises some type of textile creation like knitting, basketry, or thatching, Stuart knew that weaving was totally foreign to Inuit culture. A tapestry is, by definition, a flat-woven cloth that uses discontinuous



This floor loom is similar to looms used to weave fabric and shows a partially completed Drum Dancer mini-tapestry in wool and cotton. Joel Maniapik, drawing artist; Kawtysee Kakee, tapestry artist.

weft (horizontal) threads to create images. Early tapestries have been found in Egyptian tombs, but European tapestry-making reached a peak in the 16th-century ‘ateliers’ or workshops of Aubusson and Gobel in France.

The ancient skills used to create smooth-finish, flat-weave rugs and tapestries are now used by trained

CREATING A PANGNIRTUNG TAPESTRY

1. The tapestry artist selects a drawing to be interpreted as woven art.
2. The size and shape of the finished tapestry are determined, along with the colours of yarn to be used and any background detail. Many drawings do not have an identifiable background, and the tapestry artist can add some details.
3. The drawing is transferred by hand onto tracing paper and may be enlarged by redrawing from a square grid. These outline image tracings, called “cartoons,” are placed under or behind the tight warp (vertical) threads on a fabric loom.
4. The finished front side of the tapestry faces the weaver. As weaving progresses, the traced cartoon image is marked onto the long vertical warp threads using a black pen, in a process called “inking on.”
5. As in fabric weaving, the vertical warp and horizontal weft threads become interlocked when the weft threads are laid in, one row at a time, and packed down by hand with a tapestry comb to completely cover the warp threads in the finished tapestry.
6. As the tapestry gets bigger, it is rolled around a wooden take-up spool, which keeps it out of the way at the bottom of the loom.
7. Whenever yarn colours are changed during the weaving, the ends of the horizontal weft threads are stitched into the finished reverse side of the tapestry with a needle. The result is a smooth, firm product with no loose threads.
8. Further attention to detail occurs when top and bottom vertical warp ends are braided to finish a Pangnirtung tapestry. A cloth sleeve that contains information, written or embroidered in English and in Inuktitut syllabics, is added to complete the work. It names the drawing artist who created the original image followed by the tapestry artist who created the woven interpretation.
9. Following the same cartoon, and matching yarn colour as closely as possible, additional tapestry editions of each drawing may be produced.
10. Although editioning usually implies exact replicas, in the Studio a weaver will recreate another tapestry version that has small variations and reflects individual stylistic preferences, so the concept of limited editions does not apply here.



Big Head, 1995. Malaya Akulukjuk, drawing artist; Rhoda Veevee, tapestry artist. Wool and cotton. Approximate size: 67 cm × 55 cm.

Inuit weavers to translate drawings by local artists into fibre art. Their blending of craftsmanship with local images expresses unique cultural values, just as the artists and designers commissioned by the 17th-century kings of France used weaving techniques to interpret contemporary scenes. As king succeeded king, new designs reflected each era's tastes and trends in flowers, animals, buildings, and musical instruments.

The women in Pangnirtung started by converting finger-weaving techniques to loom weaving of linear patterns into utilitarian items such as sashes, scarves, and hats. The weavers chose their own bright colours and designs, quickly moving from initial creations similar to geometric Navajo rugs, to illustrations of domestic camp scenes, then on to works of the imagination depicting dreams, storytelling, shamans, spirits, hunting and the Arctic landscape.

Malaya Akulukjuk, reputed to be a shaman, provided some of the first artistic drawings that Stuart and the weavers selected to be turned into tapestries. Two years later, they had moved from these humble origins to their



Seejariaks Feeding, 1992. *Jacoposie Tigllik, drawing artist; Anna Etoangat, tapestry artist. Wool and cotton. Approximate size: 175 cm × 69 cm.*

first exhibition of tapestries at the Guild offices in Montreal, called “In the Beginning.” The exhibition sold out.

Since then, Inuit tapestry artists from Pangnirtung have reflected their way of life in their creations that reveal *inummarlit* ‘the true Inuit way’ and *kajjaarmaqtuq* ‘fond memories.’ Their centuries-old, seminomadic lifestyle of hunting and fishing may be gone, but it has not been forgotten. Inuit artists work cooperatively, with one person creating the drawing and another person interpreting it in wool and cotton.

The weaver re-creates the drawing as faithfully as possible in the first tapestry of an edition that can number from 10 to 20. And, while styles and techniques have changed in the short history of this unique art form, the central theme has not: most tapestries depict the Old North and life before settlement.

The people of Nunavut are now recognized worldwide for their artistic works—sculptures and prints, as well as tapestry creations. The federal Department of Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (2001) estimates that 30% of

THE UQQURMIUT CENTRE FOR ARTS & CRAFTS AND THE PANGNIRTUNG TAPESTRY STUDIO

The Uqqurmiut Centre opened in Pangnirtung on the east side of Baffin Island in 1991. Situated on the edge of a fjord on the leese side of sheer cliffs (Uqqurmiut means ‘people of the leese side’), the Centre serves the entire spectrum of the arts and crafts community with facilities and equipment. The permanent buildings that make up the Centre consist of an interconnected cluster that resembles traditional circular huts of old Inuit camps. Housed inside are the Tapestry Studio, a Print Shop, a retail Craft Gallery, and administrative office space.

For the village of Pangnirtung (meaning ‘gathering place of the bull caribou’), the Centre is the major means by which the people can promote and preserve their local culture and foster the continuing development of their artistic heritage.

Originally owned by the Northwest Territories Development Corporation, the Centre is now owned jointly by the Nunavut Development Corporation and the Uqqurmiut Inuit Artists Association, so decisions taken reflect the interests of the Pangnirtung community. While the Centre generates two-thirds of its budget from art sales, it has diversified into other operations, such as sign making for businesses. Collectors of prints, carvings, and tapestries highlight its artistic reputation.

The old ‘weaving shop’ was handed over to the Government of the Northwest Territories in 1972. Today, as part of the Uqqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts, it is owned and operated by the Pangnirtung Inuit. Their hand-woven tapestries hang in galleries, private collections, and public buildings worldwide.

Inuit derive some of their income from arts and crafts. Art is not only a major economic force; it is a source of cultural identity and pride. With a small population of 30 000 thinly spread across the Arctic, average Inuit incomes are low, unemployment is high, transportation expensive and the climate severe, but Nunavut’s greatest potential is its young population—almost 60% are under the age of 25. Many of them will carry on their expressive heritage.

THREE GENERATIONS

Three artistic generations in 30 years have had different life experiences, and they draw different images to be interpreted as tapestries. The first generation, born in the first third of the 20th century, lived on the land for most of their lives. Their art shows large, solitary figures of animals, birds and people, often from different angles, floating on a neutral background. The works of artists Malaya Akulukjuk, Atungauja Eeseemailie, Eleesapee Ishulutaq, Martha Kakee, Annie Kilabuk, Ekidluak Komoartok and

TAPESTRIES ONLINE

Uqqurmiut Centre for Arts & Crafts

Website: <http://www.uqqurmiut.com>

E-mail: inuitart@nunanet.com

Houston North Gallery

Website: <http://www.houston-north-gallery.ns.ca>

E-mail: Inuit@houston-north-gallery.ns.ca

FIBRE ART VARIATIONS

While Pangnirtung is making its reputation as the home of Inuit tapestries using European weaving techniques, Baker Lake (Qamani'tuaq) on the Arctic/West Hudson's Bay coast near the geographical centre of Canada, has become known for its richly embroidered appliqué wall hangings. In the early 1960s, women there made winter parkas and vests from a heavy wool blanket cloth called "duffel," which was originally imported from England by the Hudson's Bay Company. The women transferred the needlework techniques they used to decorate clothing items to the making of brilliant cloth pictures that have found a following in southern galleries and markets.

Inuit women have made dolls from earliest times. The women of Taloyoak (formerly Spence Bay), the northernmost community on the Canadian mainland at 69°32'N, began producing wool "packing dolls," which are Arctic animal figures wearing a baby-carrying or "packing" parka (called an *amauti*) containing their young, miniatures of the mother animals. There are, for example, finely embroidered packing polar bears, packing owls and packing Sedna (the sea goddess). Marketed under the trade name Taluq Designs Ltd., each is signed by the artist and considered a collector's item.

Simon Shaimaijuk are the original tapestries of Pangnirtung.

The second generation of artists is caught between two realities. Alan Alikatuktuk, Ananaisie Alikatuktuk, Annie Pitsiulak, Lypa Pitsiulak, and Jacoposie Tiglik represent this generation of artists. They were born in the 1940s and 1950s and grew up on the land, but they had to adjust to settlement life when their families moved to Pangnirtung.

Their art has strong images against an unidentified space and may contain impressions of new technologies like helicopters. The third, and youngest, generation has been raised in settlements like Pangnirtung. Gyta Eeseemailie, Jaco Ishulutaq, Joel Maniapik, and Andrew Karpik represent this generation of artists whose drawings have been interpreted as tapestries at the Pangnirtung

Tapestry Studio. Most of their works have a single perspective and are often in brighter colours, with themes of dramatic northern scenery and figures blended against a landscape background.

Basically, this tapestry evolution has been described by Maria Von Finckenstein in the book *Nuvisavik: The Place Where We Weave*, published in 2002 to accompany an exhibition of Inuit tapestries at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Gatineau across the river from Ottawa. She explains how the tapestries have progressed in sophistication and compares this with the progression of poster art to prints to the effect of an oil painting (Von Finckenstein, 2002:7).

From February 2002 to September 2003, the Canadian Museum of Civilization presented an exhibition of 49 Pangnirtung tapestries dating back to the earliest days of the weave shop. Most had never before been displayed publicly. Also called *Nuvisavik: The Place Where We Weave*, it featured the work of 15 drawing artists and 16 weaving artists who transformed their illustrations into tapestries. (See the book review on page 299.)

The fact that a major Canadian museum mounted such an exhibition is a significant accomplishment for the Pangnirtung artists. Tapestries are so new—and so much less recognized than, for example, soapstone carvings—that weavers have difficulty getting their work shown in galleries. The *Nuvisavik* exhibition recognized their excellent body of work and pushed northern tapestry weaving into the spotlight (Anon., 2002a).

IS IT INUIT ART, OR ART BY INUIT?

Art critics are divided on whether weaving is a "real" art form or merely a craft. Some say it is art that uses a craft technique. Another recurring argument is that weaving is not an indigenous art, and so tapestries cannot be considered true Inuit art. The counterargument is that Inuit culture has been transforming over three centuries because of contacts with European explorers, whalers, traders, and missionaries. Tapestries are just another example of integrating new techniques into an existing culture. Recently, the term "art by Inuit" has sometimes replaced "Inuit art." That Pangnirtung tapestries are art made by Inuit is obvious.

One spectacular example of this art is the large (10' × 22') tapestry mural that the weavers of the Pangnirtung Tapestry Studio created to hang in the Great Hall of the Nunavut Legislative Assembly in Iqaluit, the territorial capital. Represented are an inukshuk, hunters, and caribou, with birds flying in a purple and pink sky. Joel Maniapik created the original watercolour painting called *Back Then*. It was subsequently interpreted by seven weavers, who worked simultaneously for over seven months to complete the tapestry. *Back Then* is a gift from the Uqqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts in Pangnirtung to the Territorial Assembly in Iqaluit and is the largest tapestry ever created by the Studio.



Going Fishing, 1981 (partial). Annie Pitsiulak, drawing artist; Kawtysee Kakee, tapestry artist. Wool, cotton, and embroidery yarn. Approximate size: 134 cm × 147 cm.

It is also one of the largest tapestries ever woven in Canada. Its sheer size was a challenge for the weavers. While they had previously produced a 12' × 7' tapestry for Iqaluit's Unikkaarvik Visitor Centre in 1992, the large loom in the Tapestry Studio is only 12 feet wide, so the Assembly tapestry had to be woven sideways. As lengths were completed, the tapestry was rolled onto a heavy pickup spool at the weavers' feet, so they were unable to see the entire product until it was completed (Anon., 2002b).

Most of the Pangnirtung tapestries are much smaller in size, ranging from one-foot squares up to 4' × 5'. To handle such a large-scale project as *Back Then*, they had to scan the original drawing with a high-resolution scanner and copy it in sections, which were enlarged 200%. These sections or 'cartoons' were then printed out on legal-sized paper, numbered with the colours of wool to be used as either pure colour or a blend of tones, and placed behind the loom for reference during weaving.

Although initiated by outsiders, Inuit tapestry art has captured the essence of northern life and cultural values in

a way that speaks directly to people from many nations. As Inuit weavers continue to develop their tapestry art, new styles and new subjects will evolve. Who knows where their adaptability and collective creative spirit will take them in the next 30 years?

REFERENCES

- ANON. 2002a. Woven through time. Nunatsiaq News, February 22.
- . 2002b. From the artist's mind. Nunatsiaq News, September 13.
- DIAND (DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN AFFAIRS AND NORTHERN DEVELOPMENT). 2001. The Nunavut economy: Challenge and potential. Ottawa: DIAND.
- VON FINCKENSTEIN, M. 2002. Nuvisavik: The place where we weave. Gatineau: Canadian Museum of Civilization.

L. Dyan Cross is a freelance writer and member of the Periodical Writers' Association of Canada.