

Craftswomen of the North West Territories

Judy McGrath

The women of northern Canada are exceptionally fortunate to have a wealth of tradition, past and present, upon which they can exercise their creativity. Considering the entire population of the North West Territories as that of a medium size town the large number of craftswomen and artists that have emerged and the impact their creations have had upon the world is incredible.

The constant change and adaptation of Canada's northern women runs the gamut of creativity, from the daily imagination needed to adapt to changes without losing their culture and tradition to creating such exquisite designs that they win for their makers international awards, Canadian awards which include the Order of Canada, entrance to the Royal Canadian Academy of Art, and even a place in the fashion world.

Arctic artistry falls into three general categories: the functional/traditional which consists of parkas, tools and other practical everyday articles and spans all the communities; the adapted/traditional in which the age old skills, such as carving and sewing, are adapted to art forms and flourish in a limited number of communities; and experimental/traditional which ventures into recently introduced media and is limited to a few communities or even to an individual craftswoman. This recent creative trust, which began less than twenty-five years ago, is not only instilled with a proud heritage but reflects the influence of many Inuit women who have little desire to remain as inert as museum pieces.

The diversity of expression is as large as the Arctic itself. With warmth, humour, directness and imagination they share with

us their unique way of looking at life through their carvings, embroidery, applique, prints, drawings, silk screening, batik, weaving, ceramics, silversmithing, macrame, writing, film making, photography, and fashion design.

The harsh economic conditions of newly formed communities which had no economic base, with most of the inhabitants on welfare, was a stifling stranglehold on creativity. Women could only create as the need of replacement arose and what creative enjoyment is there in only being able to afford one skein of wool or unravelling a sweater to embroider a parka with only one colour? In this community they wanted to do crafts for a long time but had no one to help them get started, said Anaoyok Alookey, designer and co-developer of the Spence Bay Taloyoak Craft Shop. One of the greatest pleasures of my life was being able to help the Spence Bay women get the variety of materials and colours they wanted to work with and to watch their ideas blossom. The ideas are their own, each piece is signed in syllabics by the craftswoman, pride controls the quality, and their work was displayed in Creed's (Toronto) at the opening of the new store and won the Canadian Design Award for Toys.

In Anaoyok's words: 'I design things the Down Souths might like. If I like the style in my head and think it might work I design it. Now the people here borrow my patterns to make things themselves. You have to think about two things, one Eskimo and one Down South, and somehow put them together. I look for the things that are the same in the south as here and think about them. I think about the Northern things first and the Down South things afterwards, and then make them work together.'



rug hooking, Irene Layden, Red Bay.

'The first thing I made was embroidered kamiks (boots) made out of old canvas. I was eleven or twelve years old. I used to make clothes a little bit different from others. I would put fringe around the top of my kamiks and soon everybody was putting fringe around their kamiks.'

Oktookee Ashevak of Spence Bay writes: 'In 1973, summer, Pam Harris came to Spence Bay. She taught two girls and me how to take pictures. We learned to develop and print pictures in the darkroom at the old craftshop. I took colour pictures of Anaoyok this afternoon (for North/Nord magazine). She changed into different outfits. Her daughter Sandy didn't want me to take pictures of her with her mother today. She made me laugh. My right hand was cold when I took pictures of her. The weather is very windy and cold.'

'At least the coats I model are warm at forty below!' replies Anaoyok. 'I could pick flowers for dyes all summer. Even if I didn't like the colours I would like to pick the flowers and plants because it is the most fun we've ever had here. I like working with natural dyes. They make me feel good, close to everything. When we embroider Northern flowers the northern colours look better on the coats we make. They are not like the harsh commercial colours.'

Pitseolak of Cape Dorset is one of the older generations who spans the changes that have occurred in the north and her book *PICTURES OUT OF MY LIFE* is not only a beautiful work of art but a poignant chronical of change. Her creative activity has changed with the times and she writes, 'When I made a parka I used to try to make it the way I wanted it to look. I would try to make it look very good. It was not easy and I

used to sew on a parka for many days. We always used the finest skin of the young caribou for the head of the parka and, on top, we would put little ears from the baby caribou. It looked very nice. I would also make patterns and designs with different-coloured skins. Many people really used to like my clothes. . . . Does it take much planning to draw? Ahalona! It takes much thinking, and I think it is hard to think. It is hard like housework. The other day I drew an Eskimo woman with a blue fish spear. I did not want to leave the fish spear alone; that is why I put the bird on her head. There's a baby hidden inside the parka too – you can tell by the shape of the parka! To make prints is not easy . . . but I am happy doing the prints. After my husband died I felt very alone and unwanted; making prints is what has made me happy since he died. I am going to keep on doing them until they tell me to stop. If no one tells me to stop, I shall make them as long as I am well. If I can, I'll make them even after I am dead. . . . I became an artist to earn money but I think I am a real artist.'

Pitseolak's last statement shows how economic considerations are not easily separated from creativity in northern Canada where the base economy is built upon their arts and crafts. Most women will tell you they started making things for the money and that it is hard work but many of them will also go on to say how much they enjoy making things. The arts and crafts provide a creative link and an economic opportunity that does not disturb their values.

The creativity which combined function and design into the classic lines of the kayak, the snowhouse, and the ulu is still very much alive and being restated in many exciting forms, with unique promise for the future.

