
AN INUK AND ART HISTORIAN
EXAMINES
THE RECENT HISTORY *of*
THE LABRADOR INUIT
IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND THE UNEVEN
TRAJECTORY
of THE ARTS IN HER REGION.

CHANGE ON THE HORIZON:



From left to right:
Philip Hunter, Bill Edmunds, Gustav Boase,
Mary Andersen, Sam Andersen and two
unidentified Inuit men from the Labrador Inuit
Association meet with Bill Rompkey, MP for
Labrador Happy Valley-Goose Bay circa 1970s
Courtesy Nunatsiavut Government Unknown photographer

THE INTERTWINED HISTORY OF

POLITICS AND ART

in Nunatsiavut

BY
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The Intertwined History of Politics and Art in Nunatsiavut

While encounters with Nunatsiavummiut have been well documented for over four centuries, and a number of excellent studies from the related fields of archeology, anthropology and ethnohistory exist, the art historical literature is scant. Scholarly publications, museum collections, and exhibitions of Inuit art and visual culture have been noticeably light on Nunatsiavut content; most seminal texts on Inuit art ignore Labrador completely or mention it only in passing; and only a handful of journal articles and catalogue essays over the last 60 years since Confederation deal with Nunatsiavummiut art in any depth or breadth. Yet in spite of the lack of an enduring arts industry, a cooperative system, institutional support or scholarly interest, Nunatsiavut continues to produce such exceptional artists as metal smith Michael Massie, stone sculptor John Terriak, and graphic artist Heather Campbell.

Despite the broader recognition of the talent and skill of many individual artists and craftspeople from our territory, on the whole our Inuit artists have not yet gained acknowledgment of their work outside of Labrador and the world has not yet had the opportunity to learn about Nunatsiavut art. The introduction of Labrador Inuit art into the critical history and art market alike may be long overdue, yet the reasons for our relative obscurity within this field are largely unknown, even within Nunatsiavut.

My doctoral research into this area—completed in 2013—has revealed that it is likely that political maneuvering, unrelated to the arts, may be chiefly responsible for our conspicuous absence from the art market. Therefore, in order to understand what happened in the arts, we have to examine the history and politics of the time and region. In 1949—coincidentally, the same year that modern Inuit art was “discovered” by James Houston—the Newfoundland government joined Confederation but refused to enter into the Indian Act and submit to other federal jurisdiction over its Aboriginal peoples. The two governments could not reach an agreement on who would be responsible for the First

Nations and Inuit populations, so in the end, both Newfoundland and Canada decided against extending the Indian Act and other federal considerations to the new province’s Indigenous peoples.¹ Therefore, in contrast with the rest of Canada, when Newfoundland joined Confederation, the government did not have any special agencies to deal with the Inuit, Innu, Mi’kmaq, or NunatuKavut people. The Terms of Union did not even mention Aboriginal peoples, despite recommendations that the Canadian government accept full responsibility for the provision of social services to Newfoundland and Labrador’s Aboriginal peoples, as it did for similar groups across the country.²

Instead, beginning in 1951 responsibility for Aboriginal administration and services was transferred to the new province’s Department of Public Welfare, which later formed the Division of Northern Labrador Affairs to administer to the Native population of Labrador. Throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s Inuit faced many new societal and cultural challenges as they adapted to life within the province of Newfoundland. Older students were sent to boarding schools and residential schools where they spoke only English. Wage labour was introduced. The residents of the northern Moravian settlements Okak and Hebron were forcibly resettled into more southern Inuit communities in 1956 and 1959, respectively, causing grave disruptions to both those relocated as well as the small communities who had to accept the burden of their dramatically increased populations. Suicide rates climbed to the highest in the country. It was arguably one of the darkest periods of our recent history. Of course, these experiences were not unique to Inuit from our territory. All regions of Inuit Nunangat have been deeply impacted by colonialism.

Yet because the federal Department of Mines and Resources, Northwest Territories Administration was the primary funder in the early years of the modern Inuit art movement in the 1950s, Houston, and the many others who followed him, never came to Labrador to try and establish an arts industry as they did

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Inuit participate in a land use and occupancy discussion in a gymnasium in Postville Postville circa 1990s
 Courtesy Nunatsiavut Government Unknown photographer

elsewhere throughout the Canadian Arctic. Labrador Inuit artists were unfortunately omitted from virtually all of the developments that emerged from the concerted efforts of Houston, the government, the Canadian Guild of Crafts, the Hudson's Bay Company, and others, because the federal government did not officially recognize that there were Inuit in Labrador until decades later. We did not establish studios, form co-operatives, build relationships with the southern Canadian art world, and develop national or international markets for our work. We were not even permitted to use the ubiquitous "Igloo Tag" for authentication until 1991. Without state funding, institutional support, or even recognition as Inuit artists, in the 1970s and 80s, Nunatsiavummiut had to find their own ways to assert their cultural self-determination and resilience through their arts.

Following the 1971 formation of the national Inuit association, Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (now Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, or ITK), the Labrador Inuit Association (LIA) was founded in May of 1975. After its formation, the LIA began a land claims process that would lead, decades later, to the creation of Nunatsiavut. Within fifteen years the association expanded to include the Labrador Inuit Development Corporation, the broadcasting

service Okalakatiget Society, and the Labrador Inuit Health Commission. Supporting the ongoing land claim was the groundbreaking survey text *Our Footprints are Everywhere: Inuit Land-Use and Occupancy in Labrador*, edited by Carol Brice-Bennett (1977). This volume provided a comprehensive assessment of Labrador Inuit territory based on Inuit land use, oral history, archeology, ethnohistory and related evidence.

Parallel to these early political strides, our Inuit artists began to finally gain recognition, opportunities and exposure within and outside Labrador in the 1970s. A few small exhibitions were circulated, and other initiatives began locally, sparking the creation of one of the most historically significant, if short lived, organizations in our history, the Labrador Craft Producers Association (LCPA). The LCPA formed in December 1975 and was an organization by and for Labradorian artists whose membership was largely—but not exclusively—Indigenous. Their purpose, as stated in their mandate, was to "preserve traditional crafts of Labrador and to create awareness and appreciation of our crafts." The organization was formed in December of 1975. While it was only operational for two decades, it provided many services and opportunities for Labradorian artists and

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LIA President William Barbour walks with then Newfoundland Premier Brian Tobin location unknown circa 1996-2000
Courtesy Nunatsiavut Government Unknown photographer

craftspeople. The Labrador Craft Producers Association taught artists about how to price their works; how to produce quality items and identify areas in need of improvement. They also created opportunities for artists to show and sell their work.

The existence of the LCPA also seemed to inspire other grassroots initiatives throughout the 80s and 90s. All of the communities in northern Labrador formed their own craft councils and craft shops. Perhaps the most famous of these was the longstanding Makkovik Craft Council, discussed in Chantelle Andersen's essay in this issue, and the Nain craft shop which was first founded and run by respected senior artist Gilbert Hay and his colleague artist William Ritchie, the current Studio Manager of the Kinngait Studios. These local art and craft organizations were instrumental in encouraging development and, when possible, assisting artists to obtain raw materials to sell their work. Grants and funding trickled in; experts were consulted; the LCPA even began producing position papers on local arts strategies which they presented to government agencies such as the Provincial Department of Regional Economic Expansion (DREE). Unfortunately, like any underfunded industry that runs largely on volunteers, it began to struggle in the 1980s when the start-up funding ran out and no new grants were forthcoming. Although the LCPA was eventually absorbed into a provincial arts council in the mid 1990s, it had ignited momentum in the arts in our communities, bolstered by the late 1980s acknowledgement by the government of Newfoundland that the Labrador Inuit Associations land claim was valid.

Perhaps most excitingly, in the 1990s support from the Inuit Art Foundation helped many from our region to finally gain recognition outside of Labrador and to foster and develop their careers in contexts within and beyond the northern coast. One of the most significant undertakings was a three-week stone sculpture workshop held in Nain in November 1991 that brought Nunatsiavut artists together with instructors from Nunavut and Nunavik. The core group of participants in the workshop

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Susan Onalik displays the tools and sealskin pattern pieces for making a pair of kamiks Makkovik 1989 Labrador Craft Producers Association collection
 Courtesy Them Days Archives Photographer Dinah Andersen

included Philip Hunter, William Nochasak, Michael Massie, Dave Terriak, Gilbert Hay and John Terriak.³ Led by Charlie Kogvik of Baker Lake and Mattisusi Iyaituk of Ivujivik, the workshop focused on carving techniques but also included discussions on professional development, marketing, portfolio creation, and photographing artwork. From that major workshop came many more opportunities for Labrador Inuit to become involved in the national Inuit art conversation. The Inuit Art Foundation sponsored Labrador artists to attend carving workshops in

Ottawa and Vermont. As Terriak said in 1996, “the Labrador art world has come a long way in the last few years, but this wouldn’t have happened without the Inuit Art Foundation.”⁴

Most notably, Inuit in Nunatsiavut gained representation on the IAF’s Board of Directors, and thus a voice in the national Inuit art world. Hay was the first to join the board, and later Terriak and Moorhouse took up active positions as well. Currently, Billy Gauthier represents Nunatsiavut in this capacity. The Inuit Art

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Foundation provided some much-needed support and exposure to artists in Nunatsiavut throughout the 1990s and 2000s, at a time when many arts organizations within the region had all but disappeared, and provided continuity to Labrador Inuit artists in the years leading up to the establishment of Nunatsiavut.

Our land claim negotiations successfully ended on December 6th, 2004, and we officially formed the Nunatsiavut Government on the first of December in 2005. The region of Nunatsiavut consists of 72,520 square kilometers of land in northern Labrador and 48,690 square kilometers of sea. Of this, the Inuit people



Voting Day Celebrations May 2004:
Overhead crowd shot Nain Labrador 2004
Courtesy Nunatsiavut Government Unknown photographer
[On May 26, 2004, the Labrador Inuit voted overwhelmingly to ratify the agreement, with 76 per cent of eligible voters supporting it.]

own 15,800 square kilometers of land outright and have special mineral, marine, and land rights in the remaining areas. The agreement also provided for the establishment of the Torngat Mountains National Park Reserve within the settlement area. While the Inuit of the Nunatsiavut were the last in Canada to finalize these processes, they are now the first self-governing Inuit region. With this, Nunatsiavummiut regained the opportunity to begin taking control over our sovereignty, cultural representation and self-definition. The road ahead of us is long, but we are accustomed to struggle and hard work.

Today, while craft shops still operate in Nain, Makkovik and Happy Valley - Goose Bay, not every community has a store that provides materials, or a place to sell their work. Neither are services for artists consistently provided through any central organization. Birches Gallery, which was located in Happy Valley - Goose Bay for nearly two decades, was recently relocated to Nova Scotia when its proprietor Herb Brown retired (see the Comment at the end of this issue). Yet changes seem to be on the horizon. Torngat Arts and Crafts, which buys and sells art from Nain and the other Nunatsiavut communities and seasonally in the Torngat Mountains National Park, was formed in 2008; the Nunatsiavut Government Department of Culture Recreation and Tourism has been hosting a variety of capacity-building workshops for artists in such areas as carving with hand tools, photography, and making jewelry, and supporting numerous other arts-related initiatives; and late in 2017 the Illusuk Cultural Centre—touted as a “living room for the community”—is slated to open in Nain, Nunatsiavut.

As this special issue attests, despite being excluded from many of the modern Inuit art developments of the twentieth century, artists in Labrador have created and maintained a rich and varied practice, including not only stone sculpture and the graphic arts, but also, textile arts, grass basketry, painting, photography, pottery, video, wood sculpture, jewelry and among others just beginning to gain ground throughout the Inuit art world. In our tenth anniversary year of self-governance, Nunatsiavummiut have an opportunity to transform the current arts industry in ways that will not only benefit our economic future, but, more significantly, contribute to the health, well-being and vibrancy of our communities and our territory. ●

NOTES

- 1 Anne Brantenberg and Terje Brantenberg, “Coastal Northern Labrador after 1950,” *The Handbook of North American Indians*. Vol. 5. Ed. David Damas. Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1984: 689.
- 2 Adrian Tanner, “The Aboriginal Peoples of Newfoundland and Confederation,” *Newfoundland Studies* 14:2 (1998): 349.
- 3 There were also several women carvers invited to the workshop, who had to withdraw due to scheduling conflicts and other work commitments.
- 4 John Terriak quoted in “The Contemporary Living Art: John Terriak,” *Inuit Art Quarterly* 11.1 (Spring 1996): 12.



Voting Day Celebrations May 2004: A group of children from Nain stand in front of the new flag of Nunatsiavut Nain Labrador 2004
Courtesy Nunatsiavut Government Unknown photographer

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