ARTÍCULO

Arte Inuit

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Publicado en línea	8 de julio de 2008
Última edición	11 de octubre de 2016

La historia de las culturas inuit y el arte de las diversas regiones y épocas sólo pueden entenderse si se descarta por completo el mito de una cultura inuit homogénea. Aunque no ha sido posible determinar el origen exacto de los inuit, ni de las diversas culturas inuit, se han establecido cinco culturas distintas en el área canadiense: Pre-Dorset, Dorset, Thule, Histórica y Contemporánea.

Kenojuak es uno de los grabadores más conocidos de Canadá (cortesía de la Cooperativa Esquimal de West Baffin).

La palabra inuktitut inuit es un término anglo-francés canadiense bastante reciente y se usará en este artículo solo con referencia a los *inuit* canadienses históricos y modernos. Los groenlandeses, que hablan un dialecto similar al inuktitut canadiense y cuyo arte y artefactos son a menudo casi idénticos a los encontrados en el Ártico canadiense durante los últimos 4000 años, se llaman a sí mismos Katladlit. Los inuit siberianos (o asiáticos) y los inuit del oeste y suroeste de Alaska se llaman a sí mismos yuit. Hablan un dialecto llamado yupik, y sus formas de arte, excepto durante Cultura Thule , tienen pocas semejanzas estilísticas con las del Ártico canadiense. Sin embargo, existen fuertes relaciones iconográficas y temáticas entre las formas de arte, lo que indica un ancestro común o varios intercambios culturales, o ambos.

Fases de cultivo

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Cultura pre-Dorset

La cultura pre-Dorset se desarrolló a partir de las migraciones de personas procedentes de Siberia a través del estrecho de Bering hace 4000-4500 años (*ver* Prehistoria). Si bien pocos objetos de arte de este período parecen haber sobrevivido, los artefactos de formas exquisitas descubiertos, en particular las puntas de proyectil de cabezas de arpones y lanzas hechas de material lítico cuidadosamente seleccionado (piedras), no solo son funcionales, sino también de considerable valor estético. De hecho, estos objetos pueden llamarse arte, aunque carecieran de intenciones imaginarias. A través de su esplendor sencillo y su artesanía sensible, exudan el tipo

de "magia de caza" que se perpetuó en la cultura Dorset posterior. La cultura pre-Dorset duró más de 1000 años y se extendió hasta principios del primer milenio antes de Cristo.

Cultura de Dorset

La cultura Dorset comenzó a evolucionar entre el 700 y el 500 a.C., y puede llamarse la primera cultura ártica indígena canadiense. Se extendió desde Golfo de la Coronación hasta la punta inferior de Terranova y a toda la costa oeste de Groenlandia. Han surgido varios problemas en la datación del arte de Dorset, particularmente sus orígenes. En la cronología establecida por el arqueólogo danés Jorgen Meldgaard para el Igloolik Con los aspectos más destacados entre el 500 y el 1000 d.C., el arte surge solo en el período Dorset Medio, 400-500. Sin embargo, la conocida máscara de Tyara, hecha con el mismo arte perfeccionista que caracteriza lo mejor del arte de Dorset, ha sido fechada antes del año 600 a.C. La explicación puede estar en una datación por carbono defectuosa, o en la posibilidad de que la máscara sea una obra de la cultura Pre-Dorset que de alguna manera sobrevivió. Existen dos máscaras Pre-Dorset de la zona de Igloolik que son similares en apariencia.

En la cultura pre-Dorset, los objetos sobrenaturales imaginarios pueden haber sido destruidos o desechados después de su uso, como en otras culturas prehistóricas y prealfabetizadas, y la máscara de Tyara podría haber sido un sobreviviente incidental, utilizado o preservado en la cultura posterior. O tal vez la fina artesanía y la belleza estética tanto de la máscara como de los artefactos anteriores a Dorset apuntan a un propósito mágico en su creación: que la forma no solo sigue a la función, sino que aumenta la eficacia.

El arte de High Dorset parece ser en gran medida mágico-religioso en su propósito; esto parece ser así particularmente para los osos y halcones de Dorset "excavados" (ahuecados y perforados) relacionados en forma con las cabezas de arpón. Las puntas de las cabezas de arpón se convierten en las cabezas de oso; las aberturas de los agujeros de la línea se convierten en las patas delanteras unidas al cuerpo (o dobladas hacia atrás en un movimiento de natación); y los espolones basales se convierten en las patas traseras (más o menos abstractas). Los halcones excavados se asemejan a las formas excavadas de las cabezas de arpón y, al mismo tiempo, a los esqueletos de las aves. La imagen de criaturas destripadas se refiere a una técnica ritual utilizada

en las iniciaciones chamánicas en muchas partes del mundo polar, desde Siberia hasta Groenlandia: el chamán Tenía que pensar en sí mismo como un esqueleto duradero, desprovisto de carne y hueso, para que los espíritus ayudantes pudieran considerar que valía la pena venir a él. Los diseños esqueléticos grabados (no grabados) en muchas de las tallas de animales tienen un origen similar e insinúan varios significados sobrenaturales: el cuerpo como espíritu o esencia desmaterializada, como una especie de forma ritual o como un instrumento con fines mágico-religiosos.

Los signos lineales o incisos en muchas de las tallas (marcas conjuntas y cruces) también se pueden encontrar en otras culturas prehistóricas y prealfabetizadas. También parecen tener asociaciones sobrenaturales y refuerzan el contenido en gran medida mágico-religioso del arte de Dorset. Existen varios otros tipos de imágenes en la cultura Dorset, como la cornamenta o los "grupos de caras" de madera, máscaras de madera, máscaras, figuras humanas, múltiples imágenes de animales, varias aves y mamíferos terrestres y marinos (algunos con y otros sin marcas de esqueleto). Si bien sus propósitos son en gran parte desconocidos, tienen características comunes: la mayoría están tallados en marfil o, en menor medida, en hueso, asta o madera; con la excepción de los grupos faciales, son muy pequeños, de 1 a 10 centímetros; Todas son tridimensionales, talladas con rasgos fuertes o expresionistas y con golpes decisivos de cuchillo o buril. A excepción de las tallas de madera y asta, tienen un acabado notablemente liso a pesar de su pequeño tamaño y forma expresionista.

Petroglyphs have been cut in soapstone outcroppings near the sea at Wakeham Bay in Ungava, Québec, faces or maskettes not unlike the previously mentioned face clusters (*see* Pictographs and Petroglyphs). The shapes themselves, however, are reminiscent of the Tyara maskette, which comes from nearby Sugluk (Salluit). While this similarity asserts a Dorset origin for the Tyara maskette, it brings the date of its origin further into question.

Thule Culture

Thule culture is much easier to define and to date, but again some anomalies exist. Thule culture migration from northern Alaska into the Canadian Arctic began after 1000 CE and reached eastern Greenland by 1200. Thule is the most uniform of the Inuit cultures, covering as it did the entire Arctic of the western hemisphere, including the eastern tip of Siberia. That manifest uniformity was responsible for giving the Inuit the appearance of homogeneity, which is misleading except for Thule culture artifacts. Thule art across the Arctic was not as uniform as many social scientists once believed, and therefore the less conspicuous art forms of the Thule people in comparison to powerful Dorset and Old Bering Sea art of Alaska have led to the revision of many misjudgements by a new generation of archaeologists.

The Thule people, whose pre-Thule ancestry can be traced to southwestern Alaska but who had evolved into their new culture type in northern Alaska, were themselves the true ancestors of the contemporary Inuit. In Canada, however, the art forms of these two cultures reflect little of this relationship. This is in contrast to the Thule art tradition in Alaska, which continued well into the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The most frequent types of Thule art in Canada are combs, needle cases and "swimming figurines" (birds, spirits and humans), as well as various kinds of utensils and female effigies. In contrast to Dorset art, which had hardly any stylistic similarities to contemporaneous Alaskan art forms, Canadian Thule art is strongly dependent on Alaskan prototypes of the same culture and period.

While Dorset art, in its stark and expressionist form and technique, has a definite masculine quality, which in form and content relates to weapons and tools used by males, Thule art relates

in almost every detail to female images, forms and uses. Utensils such as combs, thimble holders, needle cases, bodkins and pendants are obviously women's practical and decorative equipment; the "swimming figurines" too are either female representations or relate to them in their shape. They are identical in their basic structure, with only the upper parts of their bodies shown; the parts underneath the waterline, not being visible, are therefore not shown. These figurines obviously had a common origin, probably as amulets or for similar magico-religious purposes. It is therefore difficult to believe that these carvings were gambling pieces (*tingmiujang*), though they were the prototypes for the gambling pieces used after the breakup of traditional Thule whaling culture in the 17th and 18th centuries.

Besides being small, elegantly shaped and often beautifully decorated, almost all female figurines and statuettes of Thule art are faceless, in contrast to the Dorset figures, with their strongly expressed mostly male faces. The two notable Thule exceptions with beautifully carved faces are a comb from the Pelly Bay region and a marrow fork (or perhaps a bodkin for tents or umiaks) from Strathcona Sound. There are a few other carvings with vaguely incised faces and also a few stick figures on combs, as well as a unique bow drill from Arctic Bay.

The Historical Period

The historical period begins with the demise of Thule culture, as the climate became colder and the whales disappeared, and the coinciding arrival of the white man in the Arctic in the 16th century. The unified art style also broke down, though some Thule effigies persisted into the 20th century, such as the swimming figurines that turned into gaming pieces and the female statuettes that turned into dolls. Certain women's utensils also continued, but carved in much cruder and less stylish forms.

At the start of the 19th century, the dolls, toys and animal carvings that were exchanged with whalers, sailors and explorers (who had then begun to visit on a more or less regular basis) gradually turned into trade and souvenir art, often quite exquisite. In fact, the trade carvings display a much greater skill than carvings made by the Inuit for themselves. By 1920 trade art (which was largely made out of ivory or bone) had lost all of its magico-religious meanings, and many carvings became replicas of tools and weapons of both Inuit and white men. In several

areas liturgical art (replicas of Roman Catholic figurines) were produced regularly, as were inlaid or incised cigarette boxes, match holders, cribbage boards and sailing vessels. Even though the Inuit had lived a largely traditional lifestyle before WWII, their art forms - but not the techniques or processes for making their objects *pinguaq* or "toy-like representations" - became increasingly oriented to the white man's tastes and uses.

The Contemporary Phase

The contemporary phase was a logical outcome of the transitional and acculturated art forms of the historic period, and coincided with the gradual "opening up" of the North after WWII, with the launching of the DEW Line (Distant Early Warning system) and, most of all, with the emerging interest of Western nations in the art and culture of preliterate societies. Largely owing to the insights and promotional energy of James A. Houston , a young artist from Toronto, Inuit art as we know it today came into existence in 1948-49. He encouraged the Inuit to use their "natural talents" in creating art objects to help solve their economic problems. In this regard they were assisted by the Inuit Co-operatives .

Soapstone and ivory carvings from Povungnituk and Inukjuak (Port Harrison) in Québec were the first art forms to appear for sale in the south. Salluit (Sugluk), Cape Dorset and Repulse Bay followed, and soon the entire central Arctic was covered, from Kugluktuk to Arctic Bay, with other areas to join later in the 1960s and 1970s. The whole enterprise resulted largely from the support Houston and the Inuit received from the federal government, the former Canadian Handicrafts Guild and the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1957-58 Houston also introduced printmaking into Cape Dorset; in the next 20 years, this craft spread to Povungnituk, Holman [Ulukhaktok], Baker Lake, Pangnirtung and, to a lesser extent, into several other arctic communities, including Clyde River.

In the new carving activities the emphasis is largely on soapstone and serpentine, which have become increasingly scarce, and stone is often imported from the south. Stone differs greatly from the organic materials used in prehistoric and historic times. Ivory is still used in several areas, especially at Pelly Bay and Repulse Bay, where miniature carvings predominate. Beached whalebone was first used at Arctic Bay but had largely disappeared by the mid-1970s. Instead,

large whalebone fragments taken from prehistoric Thule culture sites became extremely popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially at Pangnirtung and Spence Bay. The use of this material had steadily declined, largely because of the US embargo on endangered species.

Though carving is still the largest art activity, Inuit printmaking has become the one providing the greatest financial returns for southern collectors and "art investors." Drawings and paintings are also produced in quantity, but they have never enjoyed the popularity of the prints. Every printmaker draws, but only a few artists paint (notably Pudlo Pudlat from Cape Dorset and Davie Atchealak from Pangnirtung). Wall hangings (embroidered, appliquéd or woven) are probably the most impressive of the newer two-dimensional art forms but, though highly valued by connoisseurs, they have not achieved the wide acceptance of the prints.

The new art forms do not have the uniform style and content characteristics found in Dorset and Thule art, but rather exhibit local and individual characteristics. Inuit art is easily recognizable as such, but only because of a predictable subject matter or a definite personal or local style. Most Inuit art shares a predominantly narrative or illustrative content that depicts the traditional lifestyle and techniques for survival, the animals of the North, the spirits of those animals or the shamans and mythologies which were the links to that spirit world. But here the similarity ends. In Baker Lake, for instance, Vital Makpaaq and David Ekoota Ikutaaq have initiated a style of massive stone carving, whereas Luke Ikseetaryuk developed out of antler characteristic images and compositions of his own which have no stylistic relationship to the stone carvings. Baker Lake printmakers and producers of wall hangings such as Jessie Oonark, Marion Tuu'luq, Luke Anguhadluq, William Noah and Simon Tookoome also have their own individual styles, as have at least 10 others.

A similar situation exists at Cape Dorset, where all the well-known artists are highly individualistic, including carvers Aqjangajuk Shaa , Qaqaq Ashoona , Kiawak Ashoona , Kumwartok Ashoona, Latcholassie Akesuk, Osuitok Ipeelee and Pauta Saila , and printmakers Parr , Pitseolak Ashoona and Pudlo Pudlat. Collectively, however, they are typical of Cape Dorset art, and it is possible to speak of a Cape Dorset style with its definite and crisp shapes and often quite original ideas.

In Povungnituk, too, the principal artists all have their own style and subject matter. The stylistic individuality of artists such as Alasua Amittuq Davidialuk , Joe Talirunili and Josie Papialook (Paperk/Poppy) is noticeable in both carvings and prints. These 3 artists were seldom imitated, but ideas of Charlie Sivuarapik , Levi Alasua Pirti Smith and Eli Sallualuk were followed by many of the lesser artists. These multiple Povungnituk styles have one common feature - high finish and craftsmanship. This characteristic applies to both the highly representational and the fantastic art of Povungnituk, but not to the works of Davidialuk, Talirunili and Papialook which, though also narrative, have retained a definite feeling of simple rawness and forceful, personal expression. Comparisons could be drawn between Pelly Bay, Repulse Bay and Arviat (Eskimo Point), all of which have styles that could easily be related to folk art , but here too there are many subtle and individual exceptions. In general, Arviat carvings of stone and antler are carved more crudely than the stones and ivories of the other 2 communities, yet John Pangnark's abstract work from Arviat is extraordinarily elegant and sophisticated. Artists using whalebone, especially the vertebrae, which have naturally fantastic shapes, have a certain advantage, leading often to unusual sculptures. This applies particularly to Talovoak (formerly Spence Bay) artists such as Karoo Ashevak and Sakkiassee Anaija, but interesting work has also been coming out of the eastern and northern regions of Baffin Island.

The contemporary phase is evolving rapidly with changing styles and imagery, especially in the 3 Kitikmeot settlements at the most westerly side of the Central Arctic. There, among the most prominent artists, are Nick Sikkuark and Judas Ullulaq (at Gjoa Haven), Charlie Ugyuk (Taloyoak), and the late Augustin Anaittuq (Pelly Bay). Among the several major Inuit artists who, now middle-aged, have moved to the southern parts of Canada, are Manasie Akpaliapik (Toronto), and the brothers Abraham Anqhik (Salt Spring Island, BC) and David Ruben Piqtoukun (Toronto). Of the younger generation of contemporary Inuit artists who have developed reputations in the international art world are the late Annie Pootoogook and Shuvinai Ashoona.

Collectors and museums have started to pay very high prices for the work of these artists but even more so for the older, more "classic" carvings and prints. Yet while the production of the "new" art has increased noticeably, it unfortunately has been accompanied by an overall decline in quality. While there are still an astonishing number of very good artists producing a fair amount of outstanding work, the collective quality standards need careful watching. The better Inuit

artists are largely aware of this dilemma. However, only the local northern buyers - the co-operatives, the North West Company and several individual wholesalers who purchase the work directly from the artists - can actually exercise some degree of influence over the quantity and quality of the production - or over-production - of this important aspect of Canadian art.

Further Reading

"The Eskimo World," *artscanada* 27 (Dec 1971-Jan 1972); S. Cole, ed, *We Don't Live in Snowhouses Now* (1976); B. Driscoll, *The Inuit Amautik* (1980) and *Uumajuk: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art* (1985); H. Goetz,
The Inuit Print/L'Estampe inuit
(1977); Alma Houston (intro), *Inuit Art: An Anthology* (1988); George Swinton, *Sculpture of the Inuit* (1992).

External Links

Canadian Aboriginal Writing and Arts Challenge
The website for the Canadian Aboriginal Writing and Arts Challenge, which features Canada's largest essay writing competition for Aboriginal youth (ages 14-29) and a companion program for those who prefer to work through painting, drawing and photography. See their guidelines, teacher resources, profiles of winners, and more. From Historica Canada.

Carving Out a Future
An in-depth study of contemporary Inuit sculptures created by artists located in Arviat, Cape Dorset, and Clyde River. By Jill Barber. From Carleton University. A large PDF file.

Inukshuk
Watch the Heritage Minute about Inuit stone figures referred to as Inukshuk. See also related online learning resources. From Historica Canada.

Recommended

ARTICLE
Inuit Printmaking