**The art of being an Inuit woman**

Who are the women of the Arctic? What trials do they endure? What joys do they reap? *Inuit Woman: Life and Legend in Art*, at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton until April 2, offers a glimpse into the female condition in the North.

The 35 carvings and 28 prints, on loan from the Winnipeg Art Gallery’s Twomey Collection, explore the iconography of female roles in Inuit society. The “life” component of the exhibit depicts women engaged in traditional tasks. The implements of labour — e.g., the *ulu*, or woman’s knife, and the *kudlik*, or stone lamp — take on a symbolic force, as does the wearing of the *amautik*, or mother’s parka. The word *amautik* (from the Inuktitut word for “carry”) refers to the pouch (*amaut*), in which babies are carried on their mother’s back until they are two or three. This ingenious garment allows the child to be swung to the front for breastfeeding, and the large hood allows fresh air to filter down to the *amaut*.

The “life” works are wonderfully instructive, but equally interesting are the origin myths depicted in the “legend” component of the show. In the shamanic traditions of the Inuit, women are associated with the sea, the sun and birds. The sea spirit, Sedna, a sort of mermaid who gives birth to various sea creatures (or, in other versions, a new race of humans), is an archetype that recurs in numerous cultures. Several exquisite sculptures, including one by Juana Iruqiuana Kuanana, depict the fate of a bad mother transformed into a narwhal. The often violent stories behind these artworks usually relate to weather, luck or taboos; for example, The Story of Sun and Moon, as shown in a striking print by Luke Anguadluq called *Sunwoman*, cautions against incest.

Darlene Coward Wight, curator of Inuit art at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, remarks on the power and strength conveyed in these works. Traditionally, she notes, Inuit women performed “essential roles ... in partnership with the men in their families. ... [I]n the modern society of today’s north, women are moving into positions of political and social power on an equal footing with men.”

**The doctor’s farewell**

I know they came for her late that night after all the goodbyes, and all the tears and another comforting doctor’s words. I know they came silently wordlessly gently settling her onto a bed with wheels to carry her deep into that final night, for anointing and grooming, preparing her while I flew thousands of miles to see her one last time, preparing myself for her final rite of passage, a celebration of her life in words and tears.

We all comforted one another gathering around her one last time.

I know they came for her but I’ve never felt this way before, I’ve never had these images. This time it was different, this time it was mother.

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