

Lifeworks

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



Davidialuk Alasua Amittu, 1910–1976. *Untitled (mythological bird)*, 1958. Stone; 43.4 x 38.2 x 16.2 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Three drawings and this sculpture show beings that are part bird, part woman. These are likely female shamans in the process of transforming into the form of their animal helping spirits.

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 Juanisi Irqumia 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 Anguhadluq 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."

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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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