Nunavut Culture on Cloth: Traditional Wall Hangings from Baker Lake

INTRODUCTION

“Nunavut’s Culture on Cloth” is a collection of wall hangings created by the women of Baker Lake. Using vibrant colors and patterns, the tapestries convey Inuit stories, beliefs, and traditions.

The tapestries use strong blocks and lines of color to depict traditional Inuit hunting scenes and enigmatic symbols of significance to Inuit culture. With no written tradition, the Inuit used tapestries such as these to convey their history and beliefs.

The application of women’s traditional sewing skills to the production of textile art first started in the settlement of Baker Lake, Nunavut, in the 1960s. After making wool duffle mittens, socks, and clothing, seamstresses used the leftover multicolored pieces of fabric to make art to hang on walls. In embracing a foreign artistic medium, the women of Baker Lake made their wall hangings a vehicle for expressing centuries-old Inuit traditions, and gave birth to a uniquely Canadian art form. These textiles tell a story of the culture of the Inuit who live in Baker Lake.
BACKGROUND

The tapestries were brought together by Judith Varney-Burch after immersing herself in the culture of the Arctic. Traditionally, sewing was a vital survival skill for Inuit living on the land. The women’s ingenuity and skillful stitching transformed animal hides into clothing, blankets, tents, and even into seafaring vessels such as the kayak. The entire family depended upon the sewing ability of women, from the men on the hunt to babies cuddled in their mother’s parka hood. In the long winter months in their igloos, as women decorated their parkas and garments with lavish colorful decorations, their daughters would learn to sew by observation. All these age-old skills have been transferred to the modern textile art of today’s Inuit women. These talented seamstresses easily apply their distinctive and complex abilities to their modern wall hangings, on which they depict the animals of the Arctic, the lifestyle of the Inuit, and the spiritual perceptions of their ancestors.

Curated by Judith Varney-Burch

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Excerpts from a Brief Interview with Judith Varney-Burch (For further information about her passion for Inuit Art look at the brief video titled, “I See Them in Their Art.”)

Judith Varney-Burch serves as a Research Collaborator for the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History and is the owner of the Arctic Inuit Art Gallery. Ms. Burch curates exhibitions and lectures around the world.

How did you first become interested in Inuit art? My first exposure to Inuit art was while spending summers at our home in Nova Scotia. I was immediately taken with the unique and powerful imagery depicted in the art. It just spoke to me.

What is your background in the arts and how did you get involved in curating and running a gallery? The gallery, like most things, was the result of a culmination of interests. Majoring in sociology at Duke led to years of community service. I did my best, in various capacities, to make a difference for those who had been marginalized in our society. In addition to the social work, appreciation of the arts led me down the path of a docent at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, where I specialized in European tapestries and Hindu art. Prior to Richmond, I had been a docent at Winterthur Museum and the Delaware Art Center, while living in Wilmington, Delaware. It was through this combination of interests in the arts and disenfranchised people that I felt the pull of the Inuit. The art was powerful and the people were all but invisible in the United States.

Please explain the types of art at the gallery and those that you consider to be the most interesting that you have studied. Is it mostly visual art or are you interested in the performing arts as well? I focus on the visual arts of the Inuit. The prominent art forms are stone sculpture and prints, with embroidered wall hangings being a small
portion of the collection. The mysticism and wilderness of the Arctic are wonderful themes, as are warm images of relationships set against a cold land. There are certain themes which are mainstays in Inuit art: wildlife, the environment, hunting and fishing, shamanism and mother/child. Through these and other themes, we are permitted a glimpse into Inuit culture. I have often used the phrase “art as the eye of a culture.”

You have been working in the field for over 25 years and have given talks at the Smithsonian and curated many traveling exhibitions. How have you witnessed the evolution of Inuit art and culture over that time? I would first have to say that the time I have devoted to Inuit art and culture, over the past 25+ years, has been deeply fulfilling. To the question of the evolution of the art, I would say it is not so much the art but its recognition that has evolved. This extraordinary art tradition has emerged as a lasting bridge between the remote Inuit culture and the rest of the world. With increased respect from the outside world comes increased self respect among Inuit artists. Today this has led to opportunities for younger Inuit artists who are examining their lives and our planet from uniquely Inuit perspectives.

Do you see a great amount of overlap between Inuit art and other aboriginal art forms? Naturally. In the more primitive or aboriginal cultures, though the environments may differ, many of the themes remain a constant. One example of a shared tradition is the transformation theme. The relationship between man and animal is often depicted by the combination of forms. These transformation figures evoke the powerful connection of the Inuit to their surroundings.

Tell us more about your travels to research and experience Inuit culture! Where was your favorite place to explore? What is your most memorable moment from your journeys? Oh my, the list is long. It began with a Canadian government grant, more than 25 years ago, from the head of the Inuit Art Section of the Bureau of Indian and Northern Affairs. I spent 7 weeks traveling on my own all over the Arctic… the inoculation that took. An incomplete list of work in the north would include: multiple trips funded by Nunavut to the Arctic and the NorthWest Territories, judging art exhibitions in Rankin Inlet (west of the Hudson Bay) and elsewhere, lecturing on Smithsonian and other educational/cultural trips north, board meetings for the Nunavut Arts and Crafts Association and the trips I have taken on my own to cultivate the personal relationships, which I so value, in the north. Some of the meaningful memories that come to mind: being asked to live in Eskimo Point/Arviat by an Inuit elder, [giving] a gift of a stone to the artist Mary Pudlat from the remote island where she was born… I was later asked to write Mary’s obituary, hosting a number of Inuit artists here in the U.S., being asked by Kenojouak whether our pot roast was grizzly or polar bear. At this point, I enjoy countless personal memories and close personal relationships with families in the Arctic. I will also mention, that eating raw caribou or raw seal for dinner is not something I have repeated very often in Virginia.

What do you love most about what you do? Promoting the Inuit culture and their art around the world is my guilty pleasure. I have curated numerous exhibitions and lectured at universities and museums over the years, including one at the Bayly, here at UVa, about 15 years ago. However, it is the relationships forged through the Canadian Dept of Foreign Affairs and the Arctic Studies Center at the Smithsonian Museum of Natural
History that have been the main stay of my traveling exhibitions over the past decade and hopefully into the future. My passion is sharing Inuit art and culture. Combining that with my love for travel has been a gift that keeps giving. My Inuit textile collection, “Culture on Cloth: Baker Lake Wall Hangings”, has traveled the world. I most recently opened the exhibition in Patagonia, Argentina. My travel/lecture schedule is one of the reasons that I don’t maintain regular hours in my new gallery location on the Corner. The gallery is open by appointment and by chance… so it is best to call ahead.

Edited Resume of Judith Varney-Burch (Selected exhibitions, Grants and Awards. Productions/Programs, Publications, Lectures and Exhibitions are listed below)

EDUCATION
Duke University, Department of Sociology, B.A. (1958).

GRANTS AND AWARDS
Grant, Jaipur Virasat Foundation, Jaipur, India (2007)
Grant, Government of Canada, Canadian High Commission, in New Delhi (2007)
Grant, Government of Canada, Bureau of Indian and Northern Affairs (1987)
Grant, Government of Canada, Bureau of Indian and Northern Affairs (1985)

PRODUCTIONS AND PROGRAMS
Independently-produced projects that combine lectures and interactive learning on artistic traditions of the Arctic, to preserve cultural resources in the North and create new connections with the global community.

“CULTURE ON CLOTH”/Producer/Director
Arts and education programming focused on textiles created by women of Nunavut. Recent venues:
Smithsonian Institution - Ripley Center (2012)
Portland Library, Portland Maine (2012)
Camden Library, Camden Maine (2012)
Fine Arts Museum of Neuquen, Neuquen, Patagonia, Argentina (2011)
University in Neuquen, Patagonia, Argentina (2011)
University in Mendoza, Argentina (2011)
Universidad Nacional, Rosario, Argentina (2011)
Canadian Book Symposium, Buenos Aires, Argentina (2011)
Cabildo Town Hall, Asuncion, Paraguay (2011)
North American Cultural Center, San Jose, Costa Rica (2011)
Museo Ixchel, Guatemala City, Guatemala (2011)
“NUNAVUT CULTURE ON CLOTH”/Producer/Director
Arts and education programming focused on textiles created by women of Nunavut.
Recent venues:
University of Virginia, Brooks Hall, Charlottesville, Virginia (2012)
White Hall Community Center, White Hall, Virginia (2011)
Orange Art Center, Orange, Virginia, USA (2010)

“POWER OF THOUGHT”/Director
Arts education programming focused on Nunavut printmaking and Jessie Oonark.
Recent venues:
UCLA Fowler Museum of Art, Los Angeles, California (2004)
Utah Museum of Art, Salt Lake City, Utah (2004)

PUBLICATIONS
Culture on Cloth, Catalog/Educational Materials (Translated into 12 languages)
Power of Thought, Catalog/Educational Materials (English)

LECTURES AND EXHIBITIONS
Ms. Burch has lectured at numerous institutions. She also administers special projects at the Canadian Embassy in Washington, D.C. She was invited to give a celebratory lecture at the Smithsonian Institution on the date of Nunavut’s birth. She has served as speaker on Smithsonian Institution Arctic cruises. With the American Association of Canadian Studies (ACSUS) she participates in scholarly panels supporting faculty research. Recent ad hoc lectures and events include:
Adventure Canada Expeditions (Toronto, Ontario) Lecturer
American Association of Canada Studies (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania) Panelist/Curator
American Association of Canada Studies (Portland, Oregon) Curator
Canadian Embassy (Washington, D.C.) Lecturer/Curator College of William and Mary (Williamsburg, Virginia) Lecturer/Curator
Corcoran Museum (Washington, D.C.) Lecturer
Duke University (Durham, North Carolina) Panelist
Friends of the Corcoran (Washington, D.C.) Lecturer/Host