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Eskimo Graphic Art

BEFORE 1957 AFTER 1957



In 1948 a 27-year-old Canadian artist named James Houston went to the Canadian Eastern Arctic to paint Eskimos. He stayed there twelve years, mostly at Cape Dorset, a small settlement on West Baffin Island. There he learned the Baffin dialect and great respect for the Eskimo people, as they for him. In the process, he had an extraordinary effect on the course of Eskimo, and perhaps world art. Jim Houston taught Eskimos how to print. He left the Arctic rather reluctantly, and still practically commutes there — five trips in the last year. Now he is the associate director of design for Steuben Glass in New York City. The following is Jim Houston talking about the people and their work, mostly in a recent interview, partly from an excellent book of his called *Eskimo Prints*.

Eskimos have been carving for 4,000 years or more, but there's no word in the language for art. *Senouk* is a word for small things, playthings. *Tatlutak* means marks you make with your hands. But you can't really translate what we mean by art.

For Eskimos the action of carving was always the important thing. The action of having was of no importance. Say we're sitting in a snow house, waiting for the weather to break. You knock a piece of stone off the lamp and start shaping it — usually into the subject we're talking about, probably a seal.

Now it's always been felt you can set up a sympathetic relationship with a seal. A man does not get a seal because he is a good hunter, but because the seal gives himself to a good man. The good man knows enough not to be offensive to a seal. A seal knows a good man would give

him a drink of fresh water — even if he had to melt snow in his mouth. If a good man kills a bird, he puts the tail feathers back into the snow. You don't kill the animal — you merely take the envelope and leave the soul free to recreate itself. Things come to a good man because he obeys the rules of good life: *Angogtee Merik Tok* — he is a full-blown man. He lives life well.

Pootagook, Joyfully I See Ten Caribou. Stone cut and stencil, 18 x 12, 1959

A hunter from the inland with the dark un-plucked beard of the traveller signals to his hunting companions, using his fingers to indicate the number of caribou he has seen.

Pootagook died in 1959, a wise and powerful leader among the Kingnimuit. His early offer of splendid drawings gave prestige to the whole idea of printmaking and caused many others to contribute their work.