

INUIT INTUITION

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ETHNIC SCULPTURES CONVEY BELIEFS AND SOCIAL CHANGES

Last Sunday - November 5th at 2:00 PM - I attended the official opening of *Stories in Stone* at the Fredericton National Exhibition Centre. *Stories in Stone* is an exhibit organized by the faculty of education at McGill University and is traveling as one of Communications Canada's International Exhibitions. This exhibition is a representation of both Kenyan (the Gusii people of the Kisii district in Western Kenya) and Inuit soapstone sculptures. Also on display are sixteen Inuit prints from the A Murray Vaughan Collection courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. The exhibits will be on display from November 4 to December 3, and admission is free.

Guest curator, Jerome Sabut, commenced the event by saying a few words about the exhibition before introducing Ian Lumsden - director of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery. After talking about the exhibit and his news of it, it was officially opened and the public mingled among the display.

The exhibit reflects Inuit and Gusii life in areas such as myths, legends, animal lore and traditions. The Inuit sculptures are mostly black soapstone on grey soapstone bases while the Kenyan sculptures are comprised of pale pink, red, orange and white soapstone.

The Inuit sculptures varied in themes from a family paying tribute to a dead relative to a mythic half fish half human creature. There were also depictions of Inuits fishing, conflicts between Inuits, and wildlife (such as polar bears). Folklore was also represented by Aipili Qumaluk's *Ilkalu Nappa* meaning half fish which is a rotund bulbous sculpture or Johnny Qaqtuq's *An Eagle Married To a Young Girl* which depicts the plight of a young girl kidnapped by an eagle.

An interesting Inuit Sculpture is *Migration* by Joe Talirunili which displays a hunting party in a boat. The figure at the front of the boat holds an ivory bow, and the remaining figures hold wooden oars. The mast is wooden and the sail is of sealskin. Jerome Sabut pointed out that it was like a puzzle to put this sculpture on display, because the figures were separate from the boat. Each component had to be placed in exactly the correct place.

The various Inuit sculptures were intriguing and there was even an abstract - *Enchara Ya Botende* by Cosmas O Abuya, but my personal preference was towards the Kenyan sculptures.

The Kisii soapstones displayed a variety of the different aspects of Kenyan life. For example *Head Surgery* by John O Nyakagi shows a traditional surgeon (omobari) fixing the broken bones in a patient's skull. Then there are others such as one showing a traditional diviner, another displaying a man playing a trumpet and several of women performing various chores like child care and food preparation. Most of the people sculptures are vertical and the general form is of someone standing or sitting up straight. A personal favourite is *Sad Memories* by John O Nyakagi which is a sculpture of a woman thoughtfully resting her head in her hand. The piece creates a sense of intense sorrow with its smooth curved shapes, and flowing and lyrical characteristics. Another enjoyable piece was *Breast Feeding* by John O Musese. This sculpture has sharp contours with protruding features (such as eyes and lips) and is quite Picasso-like.

The other Kisii sculptures were those of animals - both real and mythical. *Frog* by Francis O Masese stands out. This is a pinkish grey frog with rippled skin and a rotund form which looks as though it is filled with marbles because of the bubbles all over his body. Also appealing was the smooth pink *Beautiful Bird* by Elkarna O Ongles, which looks like marble rather than soapstone. Perhaps my favourite sculpture of the entire exhibit is *Leopard* by Nelson Nyangate. This is a block cylindrical form with four triangle-like legs. There are square spots systematically painted in rows along the body. It looks more like a toy than a sculpture.

The Inuit Print Collection beautifully complements the soapstone exhibit. Through most of the prints runs the common theme of birds - mostly owls. The well-known print - *Triumvirate* by Kenojuak Ashevak was on display along with my favourite print - Lucy Quinuayuaa's *Dancing Bird*. This is a reddish-brown print of a bird with a bulb-like head, small v mouth and bulb-like wings. The entire figure is dotted with yellow circles and the *Dancing Bird* (who is obviously dancing) conveys a feeling of happiness and joyous celebration.

Also, as part of the *Stories in Stone* exhibit, there are photographs of Inuit and Kisii people learning how to create sculptures. Soapstone carving started as something of decor on items such as tools and eating utensils, and religious objects, but evolved to becoming something of art for art's sake. The soapstone art of the Inuit and Gusii people continue to be carved with assistance from various institutions and governments, and they are important not only for artistic value, but for conveying beliefs and social changes of a people.

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