

Hunters of the Canadian North

Anthony Qrunnut working on a kamotik or sled for the British Museum in Igloolik, August 1986.

Living North is an exhibition of Inuit and Indian life in Canada's north, opening December 3 at the Museum of Mankind in London. This article previews what's in store.



Photo: John MacDonald

The friendly cold

The extraordinary variation of the seasons, and the great migrations of land and sea mammals, mean that people are constantly on the move. In each season they seek out the birds, fish and mammals that will provide them with food, and the fur bearing animals — fox, beaver and marten — whose skins will provide the money for the new necessities of Canadian life — snowmobiles, fuel and rifles. For while many people today are based in modern villages or hamlets with access to medical facilities, schools and government offices, hunters and trappers spend most of their time on the land in camps: tents, log cabins or snow houses. Although they live in what may seem to be the most inhospitable part of the globe, they accept the cold as part of their lives, and make use of it. Ice and snow make travel by sled and toboggan easy, while snow helps in the tracking of animals and provides a ready building material for occasional use by Inuit in the creation of snow houses. The furs, and the skins of animals and birds, provide a wide variety of warm, waterproof clothing to meet the requirements of the seasons and the job.

Four houses

The exhibition introduces the history of the Arctic, from the time 300 — 400 years ago when European explorers and fur traders first visited eastern Canada, to today when the aboriginal peoples of the north are striving to obtain self-government. The Indian section of the exhibition includes superb nineteenth century costume and equipment from the Subarctic, and two full size hunting camps. The first is a tipi or tent from Mistassini in Quebec, which was erected by Crees and is shown as it would be in spring with all the appropriate food and equipment. A full size Dogrib log cabin from the Western Subarctic is shown in winter, during the season for trapping marten and mink. The Inuit section includes 18th and 19th century materials — sleds, kayaks, harpoons and clothing — from the heroic period of British exploration of the North. This is followed by a full size snow house shown as it would have been used in the late 1950s, with an Inuit family, and a typical bungalow of the Iglulingmiut as it might be today, with people watching television, using word processors, and preparing meat and skins in the age old fashion.

Most of the exhibition materials come from the Museum's own collections, which include Cree and Inuit materials collected 250 years ago for the Cabinet or Sir Hans Sloane, the Museum's main founder. Much of the contemporary material was acquired in the last couple of years specially for the exhibition, with the assistance of Indians and Inuit across Canada.

The importance of, and enthusiasm for, this major exhibition is illustrated by the large number of sponsors and contributors who include; Indigenous Survival International — Ottawa, Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, the Secretary of State for Canada, the Governments of Ontario, Quebec and Northwest Territories, the Department of External Affairs, Fur Institute of Canada and International Fur Trade Federation.

The exhibition is designed to contrast life today for the Indian and Inuit peoples of the Canadian North with their life in the recent past. It focuses on their relationship to the land, from which they gain a living as hunters and trappers, and on the way in which their ancient way of life has been successfully adapted to meet the demands and opportunities presented by the development of Canadian society over the last four centuries. This will be the largest exhibition about the circumpolar north ever mounted in Europe.

The Canadian North is the least known and least populated area of the Americas. The 150 000 or so aboriginal people living over many millions of square kilometres are the Athapaskan and Algonquian Indians of the Subarctic and the Inuit of the Arctic. They are often seen as mere survivors fighting a constant battle against cold and hunger. In reality they live rich and varied lives, with an unlimited supply of that food — meat — often most valued in western society.



A beaded Dene baby's bag, probably collected in the Mackenzie Valley at the end of the nineteenth century.

Photo: British Museum