

## ESKIMO EDUCATION THROUGH ART

"If by education we understand preparation for life, the Eskimos have always been amongst the best educated," the Deputy Minister of Northern Affairs and National Resources, Mr. Ernest A. Coté, told a recent meeting of the Rotary Club in Ottawa. "They were marvellously trained not only to survive in a harsh environment, but to live in the best way possible under Arctic conditions. As they had no written language, this knowledge was handed down by song, story-telling and by art."

Mr. Coté's speech continued as follows:

"Children were taught to develop the skills they would need as adults - how to make well-balanced, reliable weapons graceful and attractive so as not to insult the spirit of the animal they were hunting. Tools and household implements, comfortable and well-cut garments. The toys the parents made for the children were miniature replicas of these necessary objects and, like youngsters everywhere, the children also tried their hand at making them. And sometimes, when the weather closed in, preventing the hunter from leaving the igloo and time stood still in the long Arctic night, he would take out a small piece of stone and carve it in the semblance of a human figure, a bird or an animal. This he would show to his family and his friends, not as an artist would show his work to another, but purely as entertainment.

### MAGIC AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

"Again when supplies ran low, he might carve a seal or a bear to please the spirits and make the game come back.

"Always there was this preoccupation with beauty, with pleasing appearance and careful craftsmanship. The Eskimo believed the magic would work only if the object or carving was pleasing to the eye, if it was the best he could do. Conversely, the spirits were the first art critics so to speak: if a seal was killed with a crude or unattractive weapon, or a clumsy carving was made, the spirits would be offended and a calamity would come.

"This may explain in part the high incidence of artists among the Eskimo people. All human beings have been gifted with a certain number of faculties which are used in varying degrees in the course of a lifetime. When we think of our own complicated environment, we shudder to think of the demands continually being made on all our faculties. We decide which brand of cereals to have for breakfast, dodge traffic on the way to work, do daily tasks in highly complex organizations and maybe end the day in the entertainment - be it film, theatre, music or television....

### SIMPLE BEAUTY FROM HARSH LAND

"The world of the Eskimo was reduced to its simplest expression - a few basic needs. He had few outside distractions. Yet his survival depended on skill, observation, the need to record and store visual experience for later re-interpretation back into life. He needed an unerring feeling for equilibrium; he felt the dire need, in a harsh land, of maintaining a

lightness of spirit and not waste his energies in futile regrets before the many dangers that threatened him. All these things, in the course of thousands of years, received his undivided attention. They appear in his works of art and give it particular appeal, a general affect of serenity, a formidable power. With an occasional note of good nature and humorous detail.

"The discovery of Eskimo art, departmental assistance of various kinds, its launching are of very great interest. But it is too long a story to tell here.

"The impact of making available Eskimo art to Canadians was great. Here was the old magic working again. To exorcise these modern "devils" - the ones who gave dollars - made it possible for the Eskimos to buy the necessities of life which the dwindling wildlife resources gave so meagrely. Not to speak of the many new products which went so far as to make life less harsh, more comfortable.

"For the Department of Northern Affairs, it was a responsibility - this tapping of a new pool of talent, a notable addition to the cultural and artistic resources of Canada. Clearly our duty was threefold - to foster the flowering of talent, protect it from destructive influences, supervise and support the agencies entrusted with marketing.

"It has been said that all children under five are artists. But the gift is fragile and once destroyed, not easily recoverable. So with the Eskimo artist. He might have come to believe that in the same way that a high-powered rifle is more effective than a harpoon, so the white man's ways in art were superior to his own. Instead of a free man he might have become a servile imitator, aping the white man's way.

"The responsibility lay with the arts and crafts directors of the Department of Northern Affairs to guide the artists without destroying their gifts. New techniques were offered to them, as they would be to any talented artist studying in the south. But always respecting their individuality, their free choice, their particular way of viewing the world. Materially, the Department helped them by supplying the experimental paper and colour for the first Eskimo graphic artist, for up till then their tradition had been to work mainly in stone.

### ESKIMO ART COUNCIL

"The Eskimo Art Council, an independent expert body, was set up to review all production and maintain high quality control. An identifying trade mark was created to protect both the artist and the legitimate dealers from cheap imitations and bogus forms of Eskimo art.

"Sales are handled through Eskimo co-operatives to authorized dealers and such agencies as the Hudson's Bay Company and the Canadian Handicraft Guild.

"Promotion is done most carefully and under the best auspices. The exhibition of Keewatin carvings held at Winnipeg's International Airport in 1964 in collaboration with the Winnipeg Art Gallery and the Department of Transport, is a good example. So was the display of new Cape Dorset graphic art and soap-stone carvings in July at Stratford.