

Jessie Oonark: A retrospective

The first major retrospective exhibition at a public institution of the works of Jessie Oonark, one of Canada's leading Inuit artists, has been mounted at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Some 87 drawings, wall hangings and prints illustrating the artist's concerns and interests, document the development of her career. They were chosen from the more than 800 drawings, 120 wall hangings and 100 different prints produced by this unusual artist.

Jessie Oonark (1906-1985) began drawing and sewing in 1959, soon after she moved to Baker Lake, Northwest Territories, as a widow who had raised a large family. Her productive but brief career ended in 1979 when a neurological disorder made it difficult for her to use her hands.



Wall hanging on felt, 149.2 x 137.2 cm., c. 1973.

Oonark's versatility enabled her to switch back and forth from drawing to sewing, paper to cloth, flat to textured, small to large. She worked with a variety of materials including coloured pencil, felt-tip pen, brush and ink and coloured paper.



Wall hanging, 121.5 x 138.2 cm., c. 1970.

Oonark photos: Ernest Mayer
Winnipeg Art Gallery

Colour, an important element of her work, is especially evident in her wall hangings with their striking bold and intense colour combinations. In many instances, additional colour was achieved with different decorative stitches and patterns sewn on with embroidery floss.

The earliest wall hangings were generally small but Oonark began working on a larger scale as more materials were made available to her. Her largest work, measuring approximately four by six metres, was completed in 1973 and installed in the lobby of the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

Jean Blodgett, guest curator at the Winnipeg Art Gallery, said that, while Oonark's small drawings were often of an intimate and personal nature, her large-scale wall hangings represented more formal statements. She worked essentially from one end of a hanging to the other, building her images in rows and zones to produce a complete statement, not a compilation of individual parts.

Different clothing styles were of particular interest to Oonark and her figures were often represented in colourful, decorative garments. She also repeated a number of motifs

Exhibition tour

The Jessie Oonark retrospective was organized for the Winnipeg Art Gallery by guest curator Jean Blodgett and curatorial assistant Marie Bouchard. It will be on view at a number of Canadian locations:

Winnipeg Art Gallery

November 16, 1986 - February 15, 1987

Art Gallery of Windsor

April 12, 1987 - May 17, 1987

Art Gallery of Ontario (Toronto)

June 27, 1987 - September 6, 1987

Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre (Yellowknife)

September 25, 1987 - November 6, 1987

Edmonton Art Gallery

November 28, 1987 - January 17, 1988

Confederation Centre (Charlottetown)

February 15, 1988 - March 20, 1988

The catalogue prepared for the exhibition in English and Inuktitut includes some 100 illustrations, a biography of Oonark and a discussion of her work.