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Kenojuak Ashevak

Kenojuak Ashevak (*pronounced ken-OH-jew-ack ash-eh-vac*) was a leading and much celebrated artist of modern Inuit art. She was born on October 3 in 1927 in an igloo within an Inuit camp known as Ikirasaq, along the southern coast of Baffin Island, where she was named after her maternal grandfather. The reason behind the naming comes from Inuit naming tradition where the love and respect given to the mother during her lifetime would then be passed down to her daughter.^[1]

Her father was a respected *angakkuq* (shaman) in her community, but unfortunately, was killed by a group of Christian converts in a hunting camp when she was only six years old. After his murder, Kenojuak and her family moved in with her maternal grandmother, Koweesa, where there she was taught how to repair sealskins for trade with the Hudson's Bay Company^[1] by making waterproof clothing items from caribou sinew (tendons), a process by cutting out the tendons from the animal, letting them dry and then pulling it apart to get to the fibers within.

At the age of 19, her mother Silaqqi and stepfather Takpaugni, had arranged for her marriage to a local Inuit hunter, Johnniebo Ashevak. At first she was reluctant to marry him and would even playfully toss pebbles at him when he would try to approach.^[2] In time the two grew closer after Kenojuak grew to love Johnniebo's kindness and gentleness. He was a man of his own artistic talents and eventually would collaborate with Kenojuak on her projects.

It was in 1950 when Kenojuak's Arctic village was visited by a public nurse and was screened for tuberculosis. When Kenojuak tested positive, she was sent against her will to Parc Savard hospital in Quebec City, an Indian hospital^[3] (also known as an immigration hospital), racially segregated and acting as tuberculosis sanatoria against what the general public and health officials called "Indian TB". This was a fear that if not separated then the

non-indigenous population was going to be infected. Kenojuak was forced to stay in the hospital for the following three years, from early 1952 to the summer of 1955. ^{[1][2]}

It was during her stay at Parc Savard hospital that Kenojuak was introduced to Harold Pfeiffer ^[4], a fellow artist and occupational therapist who taught her how to make dolls and do beadwork during her stay. Through her crafting, Kenojuak attracted the attention of pioneer Inuit art promoter and civil administrator James Archibald Houston, and his wife Alma. “She was hesitant at first, claiming that she could not draw and that drawing was a man’s business. Yet the next time that she visited the Houstons, the sheets of paper that Alma had given her were filled with pencil sketches.” Said James Houston, 1999 ^{[1][2]}

When Kenojuak returned home, she and her husband Johnniebo moved from their village to Kinngait, formerly known as Cape Dorset, an Inuit hamlet located on Dorset Island near the southern tip of Baffin Island. Originally set as a trading post in 1913 by the Hudson’s Bay Company, as many as 50 Inuit families resided there to trade animal furs and skins for supplies such as tobacco, ammunition, flour, gas, tea, and sugar. ^[5] Here is where the Houstons began to work closely with the Inuit peoples there and aided them in creating traditional handicrafts, sculptures, and prints. Although Kenojuak experimented with sculpting and hand work, she much preferred printmaking and drawing, focusing much of her time on the discipline. ^{[5][7]}

Help from the entire community was used to create new pieces of artwork. Houston collected drawings from artists like Kenojuak and encouraged the local stone carvers to apply their skills to stone-block printing. This way they would be able to create art that might be more widely sold and distributed, providing a source of income for the community. ^[6] It was a magnificent show of adaptation of traditional art forms switching into more contemporary techniques. Kenojuak was among the first Inuit woman to ever have her art printed and distributed.

In 1958 is when Kenojuak had her first print, *Rabbit Eating Seaweed*, designed on a sealskin bag. This help to kickstart the creation of the Kinngait Co-operative (known as the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative at the time) to further provide fundamental services in the Canadian north. Artists were paid in advance for their work at a set price, and any extra

profits were shared with its members.^[6] This helped not just Kenojuak but other aspiring artists get their footing and were later go on to create Kinngait Studios. Fellow members included Pitaloosie Salia, Mayoreak Ashoona, and Napatchie Pootagook.

Kenojuak was an immediate success, due to her own sense of design and willingness to let the pencil go where it wanted to. Her hand-to-eye coordination to make the images in her head appear on paper astounded the art community. Despite the rather simplistic nature of her sketches, there was a confidence in each stroke that showcased just how sure Kenojuak was in her drawing.^{[1][8]} From that moment on, Kenojuak had contributed artworks to the Cape Dorset Annual Print Release every year from its inception in 1959.

With the raise in popularity, Kenojuak was approached by the National Film Board to create documentary. Titled “Eskimo Artist-Kenojuak” it showed the artist at work and provided detailed account of the print making process at Kinngait. The film itself too three months to film, as it attempted to show a glimpse into Kenojuak and her family participating in traditional ways of Inuit life such as hunting and dogsledding.^[9] The filming process itself was tiring and artificial, but the money produced from it enabled Johnniebo to purchase his own canoe, therefore earning his independence as a hunter. This was a wonderful time for the family, who had just welcomed new baby daughter Aggeo, and adopted son Ashevak.^{[2][5]}

Despite receiving numerous rewards and income throughout her life, Kenojuak never thought of herself as exclusively an artist, rather that her artistic career was merely one facet of her life. Kenojuak's unwillingness to view herself primarily as an artist is consistent with the traditional Inuit culture; living conditions demanded that men and women develop competence in a wide range of skills to survive. What is conventionally considered to be a work of art is valued by the Inuit people primarily for its usefulness. Kenojuak stated *"The main reason why I create things is because of my children, my family."*^[1] Kenojuak passed away in her wood-frame house at Kinngait from lung cancer on January 8, 2013.^{[1][8]}

The reason why I chose to cover Kenojuak Ashevak because of the impact she has had on Inuit artwork

I remember going to my aunt's home in Kamloops, British Columbia, during the winter months for our annual Christmas celebration and seeing a replica print of *The Enchanted Owl* hanging up on the wall amidst other art pieces. My aunt had other pieces of her work, along with other Inuit pieces or replicas in her home décor. Being from the United States, and also being about ten at the time, I didn't understand why she had so many of Kenojuak's prints posted about her home. It wasn't until I asked her that she began to explain to me the history and significance they held not just to her, but to the Canadian country itself. As she pulled out some stamps sporting the same design, she dove into telling me about how important it was for any culture to create art as a way for telling stories and sharing them, a visual history of how ancestors adapted. She just happened to like keeping pieces made by the Inuit, seeing as she grew up in Canada and it was a large part of her everyday life.

Through this paper and diving deeper into Kenojuak's life, as well as being a grown person now, I do enjoy seeing just how much she was able to achieve. Being born in one of the harshest climates on Earth and living a life full of persecution and ailments would do massive damage to one's spirit. However, Kenojuak had a spark that didn't seem to diminish, even as she got older in life. Despite being a single person, her designs were able to reach thousands of people and touch their lives. Even when times seemed bleak, like when she was forcibly taken away from her family, she was still able to work through the pain and suffering.

Creation of art is an outlet for many, myself included, as it is one of the purest ways you can express and show things that may not be able to be put into words. The creative process is different for everyone, some (like Kenojuak) can just put pen to paper and let it guide them, while others may have to make hundred of drafts before even thinking about the ink they'll use to draw. It's nice to see that despite the societal pressure of tradition and maintaining status quo, it's ok to go outside of your comfort zone to try out new things.

Citations:

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7. "Kinngait Co-Operative." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 4 June 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kinngait_Co-operative.
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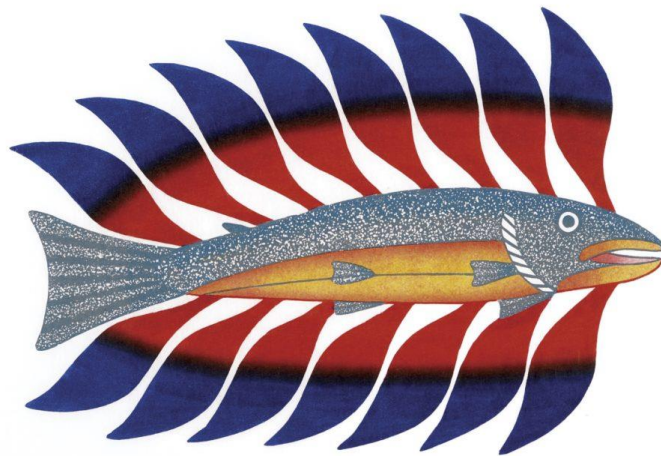


"The Enchanted Owl" by Kenojuak Ashevak



A ten-dollar Canadian banknote featuring artwork of Kenojuak Ashevak

"Courting Loon"



"Luminous Char"



"Resplendent Owls"