

CERAMICS FROM Rankin Inlet

by Heidi McKenzie

Last fall, when I happened upon an array of Inuit sculptures displayed in the Michael Lee Chin Gallery of the Art Gallery of Burlington (<https://artgalleryofburlington.com>), a stone's throw west of Toronto, Canada, I was disoriented at first. I assumed I was amidst an exhibition of soapstone carvings, as this is the media that is most traditionally—and I would suggest, bordering on stereotypically—associated with sculpture and art production from the indigenous people of the far north in Canada. My second instinct was that something wasn't quite right. And, when I peered into the Plexiglas cases, upon closer examination, my heart leapt as I realized that what I was witnessing were Inuit ceramics. As a ceramic artist myself, I could tell from the patina of the works that they were not stone, and from their mottled organic hues of gray, charcoal, and tawny browns, I assumed they were saggar or smoke fired. I came to know later that the works were actually finished in a unique way that circumnavigates the need for high-temperature glaze firings with the use of terra sigillata on bisque work that is subsequently fired with sawdust.

Generosity of Spirit

The exhibition to which I am referring was entitled “Ceramics From Rankin Inlet.” All of the 32 works came from the collection of an individual who prefers to remain anonymous, but to whom we owe a great debt of gratitude for their generosity of spirit in bringing these works into the public domain, if only for a brief moment in time.

To understand this work and the artists who made it, a little history and context is in order. The North Rankin Nickel Mine opened in 1953 close to the Inuit community of Kangirqliniq. Many locals settled in the mining town for work, but the mine closed in 1962. Regionally, a number of Inuit communities had





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government supported art centers and were producing handmade fine art objects, prints, and carvings for Western markets, and so the federal government invested in an experimental arts center in Rankin Inlet. Two years after the mine closed, Chicoutimi, Quebecois ceramic artist, Claude Grenier took the helm of the arts center and actively engaged workers to pursue sewing, carving, and painting, and introduced ceramics production. Three years later, the exhibition “Keewatin Eskimo Ceramics ‘67” was presented at the Toronto Public Library to much acclaim. Sadly, the center was unable to sustain itself and closed in 1975. By 1993, the privately owned Matchbox Gallery revitalized ceramic production in Rankin Inlet. By 2002, with the assistance of Jim Shirley and veteran local ceramic artists, Yvo Samgushak and Laurent Aksadjuak, Matchbox

Gallery established the Kangirqliniq Centre for Learning and Arts (KCLA), where individuals were offered a broad education from analytical problem solving and Inuktitut language skills, to painting, drawing, doll making, printmaking, and ceramics.

Distinguished on Many Fronts

The works distinguish themselves on many fronts—they are narrative and include one or multiple human figures in virtually all instances. Roger Aksakuik’s *Beneath the Sea II* tells an intricately sculpted story of the relationship between man and seal, drawing on the Inuit people’s complex spiritual and shamanic tradition, with figurative work applied to a coil-built, amphora-like vase. The vessel affords the maker a visual storytelling in the round. His *Trip to Marble Island* skillfully depicts a freeze frame of eleven individuals on a boat, engaged in their own tasks and gives a strong sense of the communal seal hunting expeditions. These stories break Western stereotypes of Inuit bludgeoning seals, and depict respect and symbiosis between man, the land mammals, and the sea mammals.

Many of the works are collaborative, insofar as they are worked on sequentially by multiple artists. This practice resonates with a core value that is simpatico with the customs and belief system of the Inuit peoples, distinct from Western solo studio production styles of making. *A Man Saves his Drowning Brother* is a superb example of a porcelain non-smoke fired piece created by Pierre Aupilardjuk and Leo Napayok. The details in the solo kayaker’s clothing and the totemic-like carving on the boat are masterful. The abstract way in which the undulating waves



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1 Pierre Aupilardjuk and Leo Napayok’s *Messages for the Afterlife*, 2014. 2 Roger Aksadjuak’s *Trip to Marble Island*. 3 Pierre Aupilardjuk’s *Two Friends Sharing Gossip*, 2014. Works on loan from a private collection.

suspend fragments of drowning men straddles verisimilitude and abstract realism with a level of expert sophistication. Another of their collaborations, *Messages for the Afterlife*, broaches the supernatural realm with a messenger within a messenger and a multitude of messengers' faces covering the figures' clothing, all with upward cast gaze. The smoke firing on this work is remarkable and lends the piece a strong sense of being grounded in the organic matter of the earth, in counterpoint to the piece's inherent unearthly subject matter.

Aupilardjuk's solo piece, *Two Friends Sharing Gossip*, carries similar heightened meaning through the inclusion of multiple faces applied in the round to the coats of the two friends. Is the artist trying to tell us that we are all much more than our individual selves? Do we carry the stories of generations? One of the collaborative pieces that stood out strongly for me was the four-artist work, *Enchanted Polar Bear* by Jack Nuviyak, John Kurok, Roger Aksadkjuak, and Leo Napayok. As a Canadian, I am somewhat familiar with the animal totems, carvings, and paintings of the West Coast Haida peoples. It's hard not to draw parallels with this work where the goose and the humans depicted seem to emerge from the bear—whose stance is at once that of the gentle provider and the fierce predator. What this piece manages to achieve is to take narrative out of the realm of the literal and into the world of the viewer's imagination.



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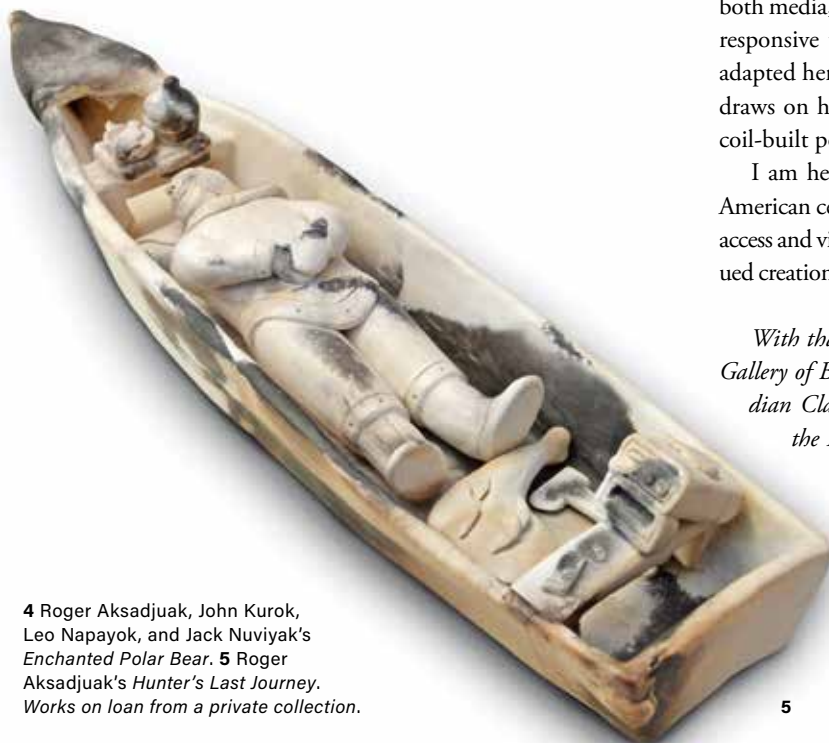
A number of the ceramic artists whose works were featured in the exhibition come out of the soapstone carving tradition, or straddle both media, and find the additive nature of clay modeling to be more responsive than stone carving. One such artist, Lucy Sanertanut, adapted her carving skills from ivory and stone to clay. *Four Winds* draws on her people's shamanic heritage, again working from the coil-built pot as a base for storytelling in the round.

I am heartened to bring to light this work to a broader North American ceramic community. The challenge for its survival is public access and viewing of the work that will sustain a demand for its continued creation within commercial, public, gallery and museum markets.

With thanks to Denis Longchamps, then Chief Curator of the Art Gallery of Burlington, and currently Executive Director of the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery; Alysa Procida, executive director of the Inuit Art Foundation; and Angeliki Bogiatji, guest writer from Manitoba whose essay contributions to the exhibition catalog, Ceramics From Rankin Inlet published by the Art Gallery of Burlington, 2017, informed the writing of this article.

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4 Roger Aksadkjuak, John Kurok, Leo Napayok, and Jack Nuviyak's *Enchanted Polar Bear*. 5 Roger Aksadkjuak's *Hunter's Last Journey*. Works on loan from a private collection.