

# Tuniit: Arctic Giants & Ivory Miniatures



*Tuniit are stronger than any humans, even though they, too, are people* Joe Patiq 1987<sup>1</sup>

Around a thousand years ago people living in the region of present day Igloolik created exquisite miniature sculptures. These were skillfully carved by people of the Dorset Culture (500 – 1500), identified by many contemporary Inuit as Tuniit, mythic giants who were the previous inhabitants of Nunavut. The carvings were made from walrus ivory using flaked flint blades, and very occasionally knives with meteoric iron blades. The subjects include human and animal figures, as well as harpoons, and abstract forms. While the meaning of these sculptures is unknown, they may have been used as amulets in a world dominated by spirits and mediated by shamans.

the Dorset virtually disappeared from the archaeological record, perhaps absorbed by Thule immigrants from the west. Thule people, immediate ancestors of the Inuit, may have acquired new harpoon types, snow building technology and seal hole hunting techniques from the Dorset.

## Missionaries & Archaeologists

The Arctic changed rapidly from the beginning of the 20th century. Missionaries, police and fur traders established themselves in what is now Nunavut. The town of Frobisher Bay, today Iqaluit, was founded in 1942 as an air base and government services soon followed. The gathering of Inuit people off the land and into settled communities dominated the 1960s.

In 1931 French Oblate missionary, Etienne Bazin, set himself up in the Igloolik area. In 1936 Graham Rowley, a Cambridge-



In 1925 Diamond Jenness of the National Museum of Canada established 'a new Eskimo Culture' based on informally sourced archaeological findings from Cape Dorset, Nunavut. The Dorset people used a wide variety of toggling harpoons to hunt seal and walrus. Caribou, killed with lances, and seal skin provided material for clothing. While they used snow building technology and sleds, Dorset people did not have access to a wide variety of later Inuit tool kits, especially the bow drill for the easy creation of tools and weapons, bows and arrows, and the throwing stick for launching harpoons. Around 1400

Top: Man carrying child. H. 5cm. 1950.405

Right: Aipilik Innuksuk excavating an ancient house site with Graham Rowley, 1939. Igloolik. Photographed by Graham Rowley, 2014.83

Far right: Aipilik Innuksuk fishing for char near Ugarjuaalik 1990s. Photographed by John MacDonald





Top: The wood church and home built by Bazin in the 1930s, protected from the winter cold Inuit-style with turf built up all around the building. Photograph courtesy the Eskimo Museum, Churchill, Manitoba, c. 1930s

Above: The wood church at Avvaaja as it was in September 2013. Photographed by Jonathan King



Left: Community leader Monica Ataguttaaluk wearing an inner parka, attigi. (d. 1948). She is commemorated today in Igloolik in the name of the school. Igloolik, 1930s. Photograph courtesy the Eskimo Museum, Churchill, Manitoba

Below: The Legislative Assembly of Nunavut, opened by the Queen in 2002. There are no political parties in the Assembly, which is governed Inuit-style by consensus. Photographed by Jonathan King 2015



Father Etienne Bazin wearing Inuit caribou skin clothing. Photograph courtesy the Eskimo Museum, Churchill, Manitoba, c. 1930s



trained archaeologist, travelled to the north as part of the British Canadian Arctic Expedition. He was befriended by Father Bazin, and by Monica Ataguttaaluk, an early convert and leader of the Inuit community. Rowley describes Father Bazin showing him some specimens from a site at Avvaaja which had been 'found by Eskimos while digging turf for their winter houses' and likely collected by Ataguttaaluk. Bazin gave Rowley 400 artefacts, including the ivories on display here. Rowley and his Inuit assistant Aipiluk Innuksuk excavated a further 1500 items in 1939. Rowley's report, with map and chart, was written in 1940 with the encouragement of Diamond Jenness. The collection was donated to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in 1950.

### Nunavut and 'Dorset'

Igloolik today, with 2,000 people, takes immense pride in nurturing Inuit traditions while embracing the inevitable changes brought by modernisation. Self-government was established in Nunavut in 1999, a territory of 1.8 million square kilometres and 36,000 mainly Inuit people. While English is the de facto language of the government, dialects of Inuktitut are spoken everywhere. The hunting of seal, walrus and caribou, and fishing for char continue to be the most important subsistence activities.

Cape Dorset, or Kingait, literally 'Mountains', was named in 1631 by Luke Foxe, after the Earl of Dorset. The community, with a population of 1300, is famous for its creativity. Dorset Fine Arts is a very successful marketing co-op which sells art around the world. This includes stone sculpture, the annual print collection and superb drawings of Inuit life and Nunavut created by dozens of artists.

In Dorset and the north, Inuit women make and use the *amauti*, the unique woman's parka. This has a large hood and pouch for holding a baby. The *amauti* is designed with large shoulders, so that the mother can bring the child to her breast for feeding without being exposed to the cold. Of all Inuit tools perhaps the most important and least recognised is the needle. Traditionally made of ivory rind from walrus tusks, these were laboriously

*Woman's parka, amauti, with short trousers and leggings with boots, made of caribou skin by an unidentified Innuinait woman in western Nunavut. Early 20th century. Collected and donated by Diamond Jenness. 1948.208, 1928.218 & 1948.209 A,B*



carved and protected in needle cases, which were often beautifully decorated. Dorset Culture needles were carved with flint blades.

### Dorset Art

Many of the Dorset items collected by Bazin and Rowley are of superb aesthetic quality, and have attracted attention. Of the greatest note are the art objects, articles of expressive use, many of which are unusual and important for the understanding of Dorset Culture. Unlike historic Inuit amulets, which are often made from virtually unmodified elements of animal physiology, such as claws, beaks and bones, Dorset amulets are often figurative.



Graham Rowley Collection, 1930s. Walrus ivory. Dorset Culture (500 – 1500) Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada. Above clockwise: Needles. 1950.362 L. 4 - 6cm Falcon. H. 3cm. 1950.370 A Walrus muzzle with tusks. L. 4cm. 1950.407 B Mask. Caribou antler. H. 7cm. 1950.366 Below: Caribou Mandible. Walrus Ivory. L. 3.2cm. 1950.370 M





Wand with human-like faces. Caribou antler. L. 20cm. Graham Rowley Collection, 1930s. Culture (500 – 1500) Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada. 1950.411

Walrus are usually represented by reduced representations of the muzzle and tusks, while caribou are most often shown by carvings of hooves and forelegs, though occasionally there are mandibles and even heads.

One of the most intriguing groups of articles are carved from interior antler tine cores, stripped of the hard outer surface and carved with interconnecting multiple images of faces. The Dorset antler carvings are often said to represent spirits, although it is possible that the carved faces represented known people.

Birds are represented in moving and stationary positions, and occasionally with skeletal outlines sometimes associated with shamanic beliefs. Bear heads are featured as well as elongated bears, carved from an observed knowledge of bears swimming through water.

Most remarkable of the articles in Cambridge are two tiny ivory figures of men, each with a child on their shoulder. They have great strength, with blocky somewhat cubist volumes and a rough textured finish. In the shamano-centric view of Inuit society these figures could be seen as representing the powerful hunter passing spiritual power to his son or perhaps they simply represent domestic happiness and love for children. While the adult figures appear male, the children could be either gender.

A series of miniature toggling harpoon heads give rise to interesting conjecture. In the first view they are amuletic, and perhaps suitable for burial as replacements for the deceased's tools which might be required by the living. It is also possible that they were used for hunting small animals

Rachel Uyarasuk wearing caribou skin clothing, tending her qulliq, oil lamp. She made the costume used in the film *Atanarjuat, the Fast Runner*, which won the *Caméra d'or* for the Best First Feature Film at the Cannes Film Festival in 2001. Photographed by John MacDonald, c. 2000, Igloolik



such as lemmings and snow buntings. For the Dorset people, as for historic Inuit, it is likely that there was little separation of the technical and the spiritual.

*Miniatures. Walrus ivory. Graham Rowley Collection, 1930s. Culture (500 – 1500) Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada.*

*From top: Bear head. L. 2cm. 1950.404 B  
Caribou hoof. L. 3cm. 1950.407 H  
Man carrying child. H. 5cm. 1950.369 D*



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<sup>1</sup>Joe Patiq, 'Tunijuaq', pp. 39-41, *Inuktitut*, Spring 1987, No. 66



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