

# CANADIAN ESKIMO ART



THE DEPARTMENT OF  
NORTHERN AFFAIRS  
AND  
NATIONAL RESOURCES



EDMOND CLOUTIER, C.M.G., O.A., D.S.P.,  
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*Front Cover*

Spearman by Akeektashuk, Port Harrison  
Angry Owl by Kopeekolik, Povungnituk  
Running Bear by Akeektashuk, Port Harrison

*Back Cover*

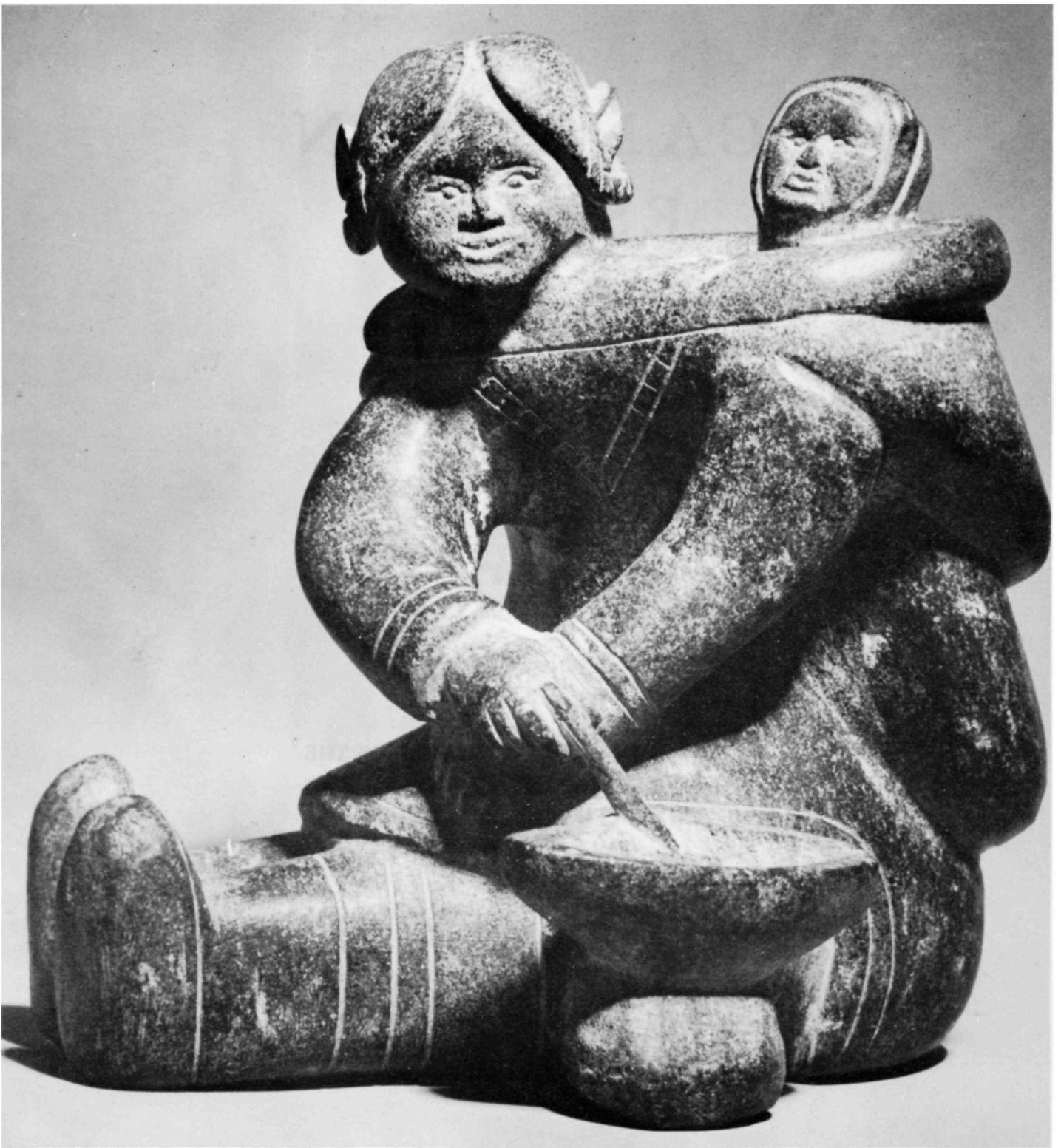
Seal Hunter by Amidilak, Kogaluk River  
Mother and Son by Keeawak, Cape Dorset  
Caribou by Sywooly, Port Harrison

# CANADIAN ESKIMO ART



ISSUED UNDER THE AUTHORITY OF THE  
MINISTER OF NORTHERN AFFAIRS  
AND NATIONAL RESOURCES

DESIGN AND LAYOUT BY JAMES A. HOUSTON  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY BERT BEAVER AND THE NATIONAL FILM BOARD



MOTHER AND CHILD BY MUNAMEE, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND (STONE), PRESENTED TO HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH ON THE OCCASION OF THE ROYAL VISIT TO CANADA, 1951.



**A**RTISTIC expression in Canada has taken many and varied forms because of the diverse elements from which our nation has been fashioned. The early French settlers, the British who followed them and the more recent Canadians who have come from many parts of Europe and the world have all made their essential contribution to the cultural life of Canada. Few forms of artistic endeavour, however, have attracted wider public interest and enthusiasm, both here and abroad, than the work of our Indian and Eskimo peoples. This booklet deals exclusively with the remarkable carvings of the Eskimos, a small but important group in the Canadian population.

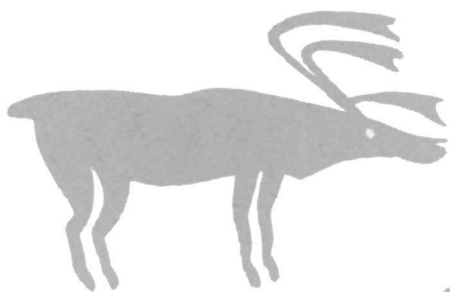
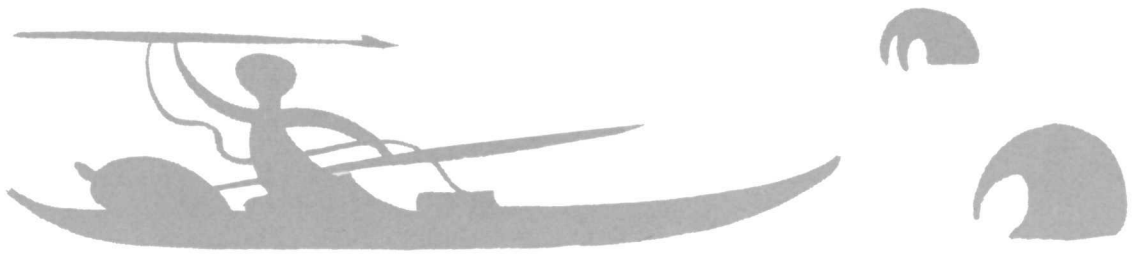
Carving has always been an essential part of the hunting culture of the Canadian Eskimos. With only natural resources such as stone, occasional pieces of driftwood and ivory and bone with which to make efficient hunting tools, Eskimos, of necessity, became accomplished carvers.

We may be grateful that this skill was not restricted to the manufacture of tools. Since early times, other objects have been carved. Perhaps for magical reasons, for success in hunting, for toys, or for amusement, small figures of men and animals were carved in the round. Hunting and domestic scenes were also engraved on stone, bone and ivory.

This booklet outlines the development of Eskimo carving and shows the variations in form and subject of carving and other Eskimo crafts. Like the figures of animals, men and birds, all Eskimo handicrafts are characterized by simplicity and strength. Although all the work produced cannot be classed as art or sculpture, it never fails to provide a fascinating reflection of Eskimo life.

*Alvin Hamilton*

Minister of Northern Affairs  
and National Resources.







SEAL



DUCK



SEA SPIRIT



BEAR



WOMAN



WALRUS



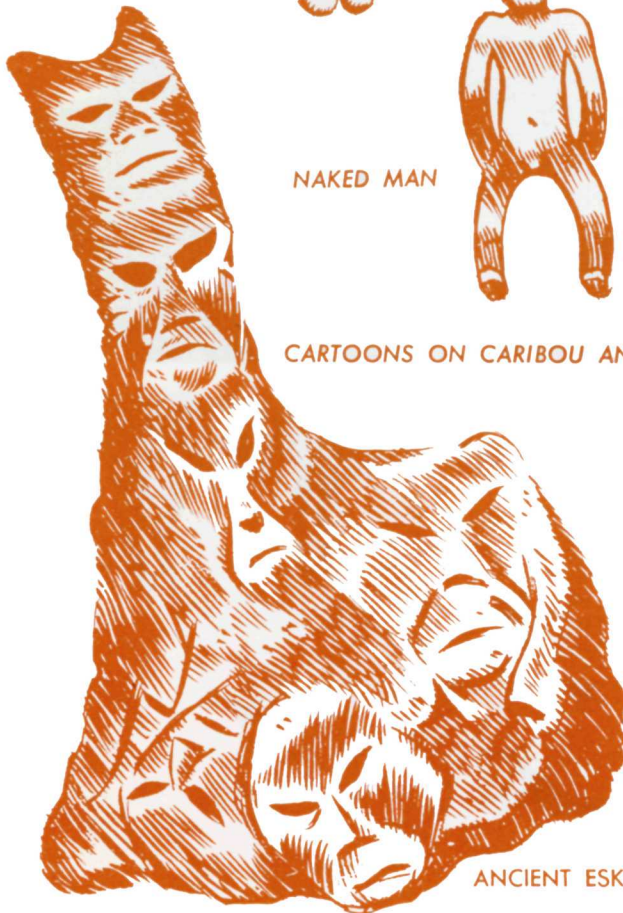
STONE HEAD



NAKED MAN



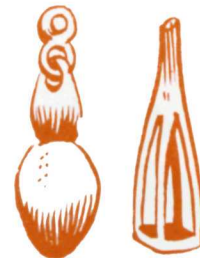
WHALE



CARTOONS ON CARIBOU ANTLER



OWL (PART OF BOLA)



EARRINGS

ANCIENT ESKIMO CARVINGS EXCAVATED IN THE IGLOOLIK AREA



**T**HE Eskimo people of Canada, cheerfully living a difficult existence in a harsh climate, have developed over the centuries a unique art form, which today has won for them praise and acclaim wherever their work has been shown.

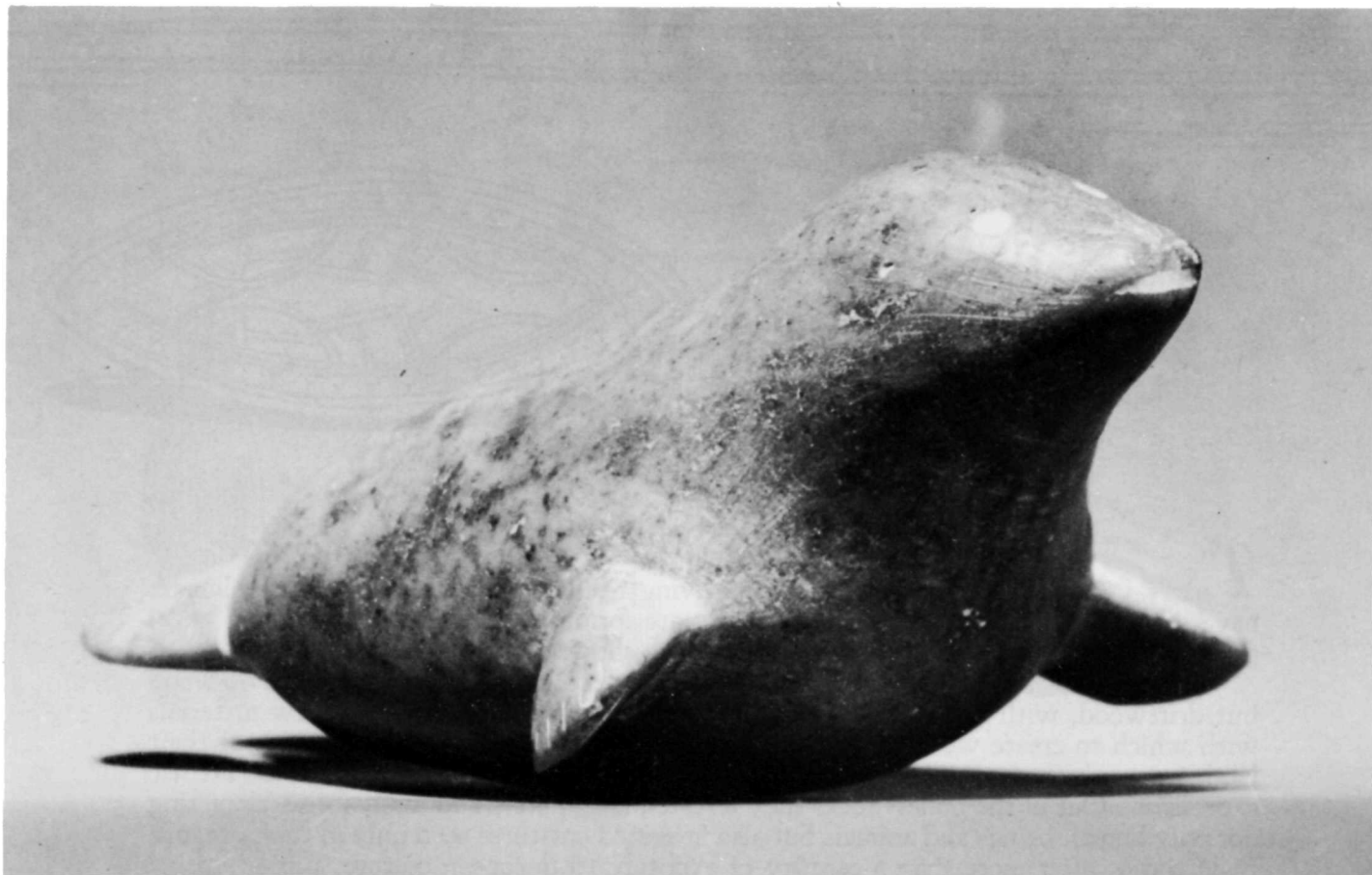
In an unceasing struggle for food and shelter which has been their lot, with no wood but driftwood, with no textiles and no vegetable dyes, the Eskimos had few materials with which to create works of art. In consequence, they turned to the stones of their land, from which they were compelled to fashion their tools, as a medium for artistic expression. Out of the lifeless rocks they wrested imaginative and lively forms, depicting not only human beings and animals but also imagined creatures seen only in their dreams. Even today, after more than a century of exposure to European culture, this primitive art persists, original, creative and virile.

By force of circumstances these carvings have always been small. People who are constantly on the move, pursuing game on which they must depend for the necessities of life, cannot burden themselves with large pieces of sculpture.

In the Igloodik collection of ancient carvings at Churchill, Manitoba, the figures are confined to such objects as human beings, animals or birds. Some of the animals are imaginary creatures, and sometimes human beings are portrayed in caricature. Similarly some of the utilitarian objects are decorated, but no decoration is allowed to interfere with the efficiency of the article itself. At Churchill, also, there is to be seen a caribou antler carved with cartoons of human faces. Antlers have been carved in this way by Eskimos in every part of the Arctic.

In decorative handicrafts the art forms employed as a rule are highly stylized and sometimes abstract. At the top of this page is an example of abstract design used in decorating clothing, or personal articles. At the bottom is a decorated harpoon head.





SEAL ON THE ICE BY KUDLALAK, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND (SERPENTINE)

A modern sculptor, asked to produce a work of art with nothing but the tools used by the Eskimos, might well be baffled. These people know nothing of mallet and chisel, they have no calipers or dividers. The Eskimo artist must make do with the tools used in his daily life, for building his kayak, or for making his harpoons and stone vessels.

In the older cultures, the Eskimos shaped their tools by chipping them from fine-grained, flint-like stones which readily took a sharp edge. In later cultures, tools were also made from slate which was ground and polished to the form desired. Common to both techniques, whether chipped or ground, were certain basic tools—adzes, hand drills, reamers and crude saws produced by chipping notches in the edge of a stone blade. Today most of these have been replaced by steel tools, many of them from scrap metal ground to shape and fitted in a handle of bone, antler or ivory. Modern tools, such as saws and files, are used when they are available.



KUDLALAK, HUNTER AND CARVER, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

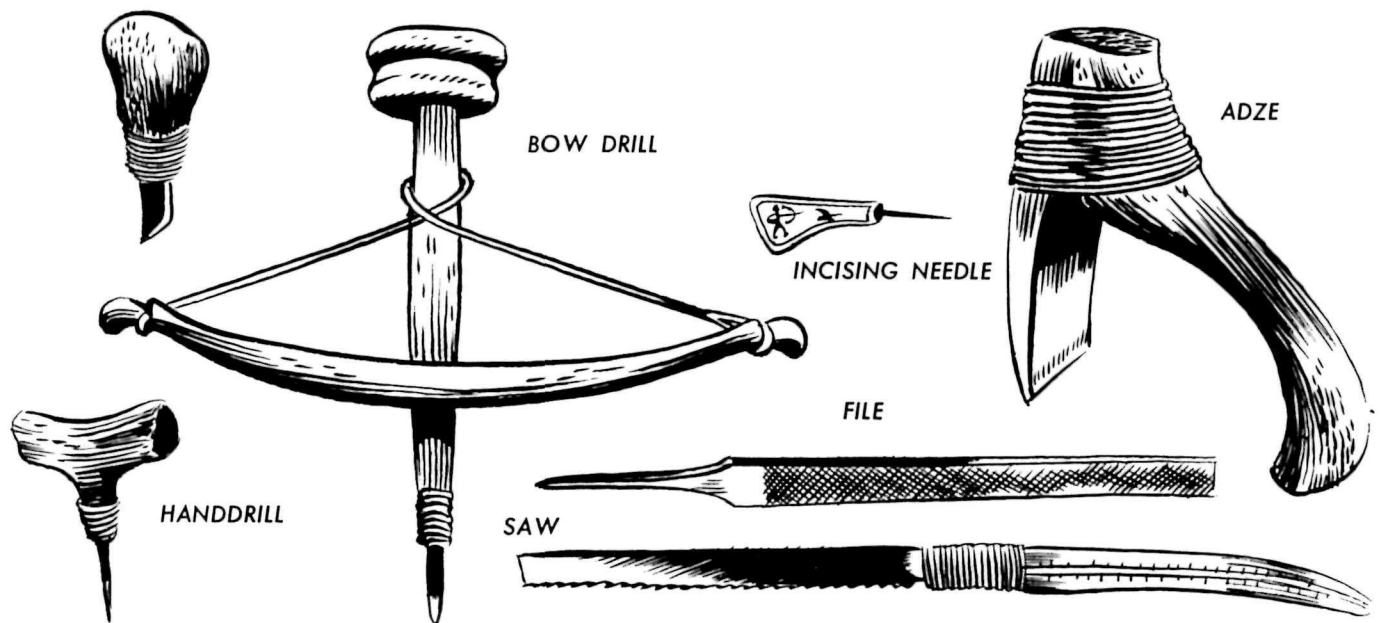


MAN WITH STONE LAMP BY SHOOVAGAR, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

**M**ANY Eskimo pieces tell a story of animal life: the owl guarding its nest, the bear followed by its cub, the struggling bird in the hands of a boy. The concept is always simple, the statement direct and vivid. The Eskimo carver has the advantage of complete familiarity with the seals, the caribou, the walrus, the birds which he depicts. They are part of his life. There is seldom a day when he does not see one or more of these animals dead or alive, still or moving. The experiences of the hunt are a large part of his conversation, and his descriptions of them to his friends are illustrated with pantomime and mimicry for the diversion and information of his audience. His concept of the universe causes him to ascribe to things, whether living or dead, the emotions and even the speech of humans. It is not difficult for the primitive Eskimo to believe that the animals talk to him on occasion, and when the narrative of the hunt is told and retold their conversations are as real to him as the rage of the harpooned walrus.

The human being, though, is at the centre of the Eskimo's art. It offers the most in subject matter, for the lives of people are infinitely fuller and more varied than the lives of animals. The hunter stalking the polar bear, the mother holding the child, the boy solemnly dancing on his knees—these are the subjects which have appealed to native artists.

#### CARVING TOOL





ESKIMOS AND HOUSTON EXAMINE CARVINGS AT PANGNIRTUNG, BAFFIN ISLAND

In his art, the Eskimo is expressing himself through the stones and ivory, the skins, the grasses which are the setting of the sparse and barren tundra where he makes his home. Where nature permits, there the art flourishes; but where the materials are lacking the Eskimo expresses himself in forms more transitory than the carvings which can be shown to the outer world.

The Eskimo sometimes tries to portray animals which, in the great cycles of nature, have disappeared from his hunting grounds. Desiring them for food, Kumalik has carved an arctic hare with the vague idea that he may magically encourage their return. Kumalik has never seen a hare. He has relied entirely on the descriptions of his elders who remember them from long, long ago.

RABBIT BY KUMALIK, POVUNGNITUK, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY



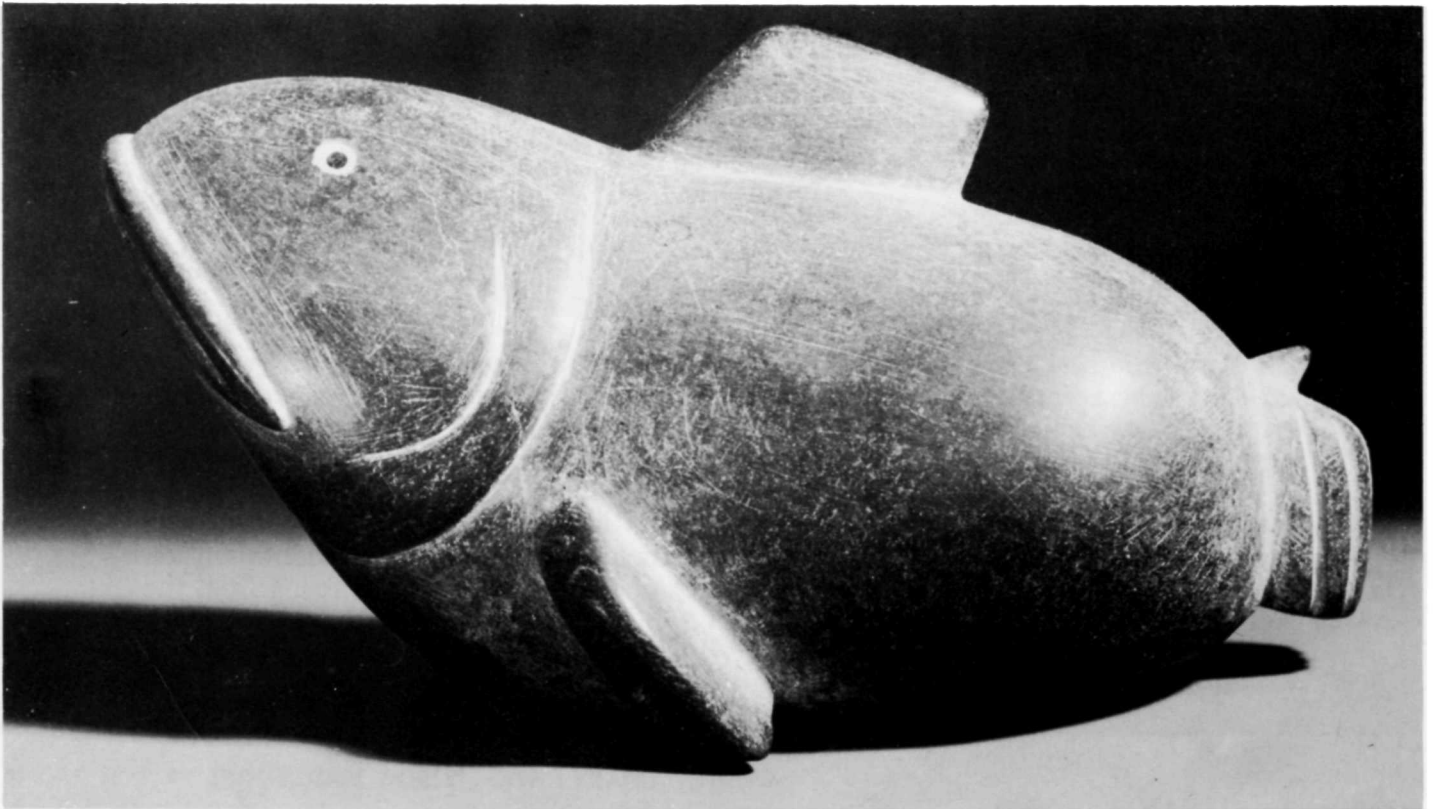


MUSK-OX BY AKEEKTASHUK, CRAIG HARBOUR, ELLESMERE ISLAND

The musk-ox is an animal worthy of the Eskimo hunter. From earliest times it provided meat in lavish quantity, its horns made bows, its shaggy hair was warm. The musk-ox is honoured in Eskimo legend and song, and in carving. The carving is a tribute to its subject; and, the carver thinks, it may also be an encouragement to the musk-ox to present itself to the hunter.

The fish, on the other hand, is a lowly creature, fit to be caught only when other animals have disappeared. No Eskimo hunter wishes to be seen over a hole in the ice waiting for a rock cod to pass by when there should be bigger game worthy of his skill. With the same distaste does the artist regard all fish, and carvings of it are rare.

ROCK COD BY TUNU, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND





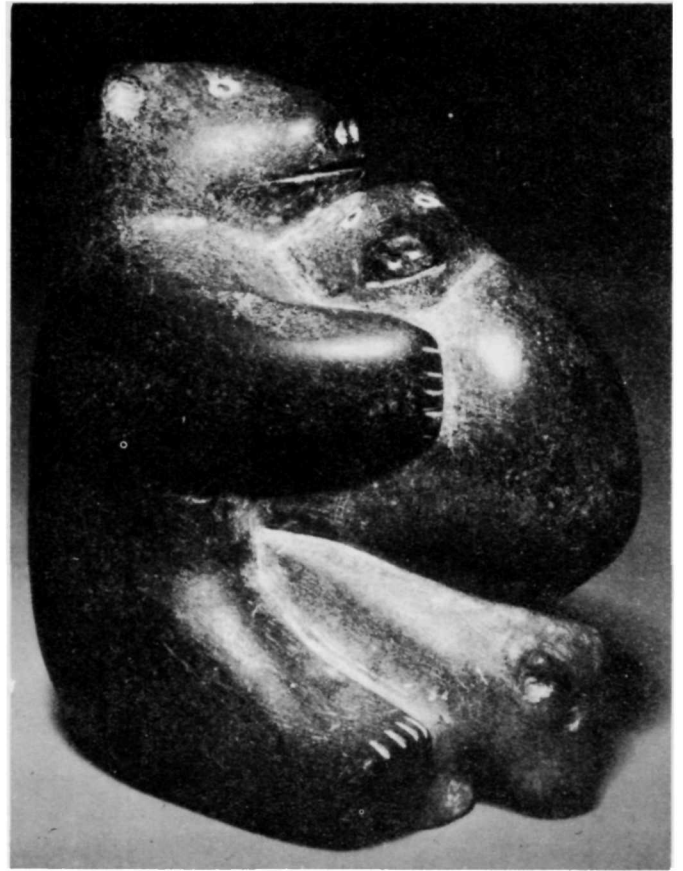
RIFLEMAN BY KALINGO, POVUNGNITUK, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY

Even the best of Eskimo artists is a hunter first, a carver second. His very life depends on his keenness of observation, his consciousness of every feature, of every movement, of every habit of the animals which provide his food. He knows the subjects he carves with an intimacy which the sparseness of his life dictates.

Kalingo's rifleman depicts a basic concept—the hunter in action. Nothing of the scene is lost to him, but with his hard stone and his primitive tools he must choose carefully what can be simply and effectively portrayed. The result is a sense of tension conveyed with striking clarity and an economy of line. Sarkee's bear, rising from the water with a roar, has a force in action which could scarcely be surpassed in plastic form.



ANGRY BEAR BY SARKEE, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND



WOMAN AND CHILD BY INNUKPUK,  
PORT HARRISON, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY

BEAR AND CUBS BY NAPACHEE,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

MAN'S HEAD BY NIVIAKCIK,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

BEAR BY PILLIPUSSY,  
PORT HARRISON, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY

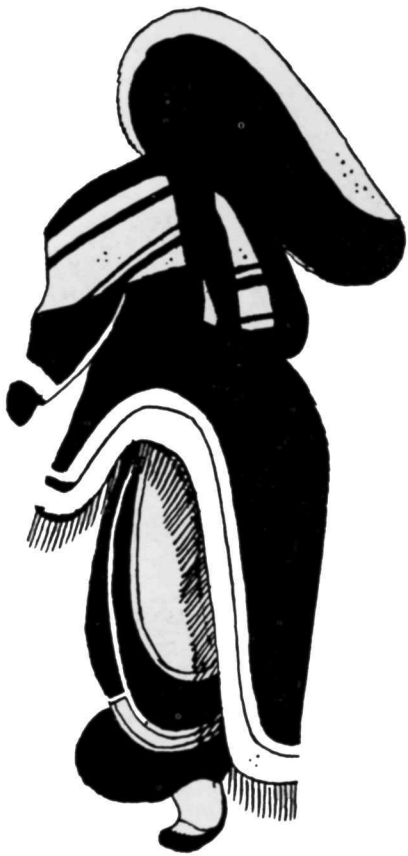
BEAR CUB BY TUDLIK,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

SMALL GIRL BY UNKNOWN ARTIST,  
ARCTIC BAY, BAFFIN ISLAND





MOTHER AND CHILD  
BY OSHAWEETUK-A,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

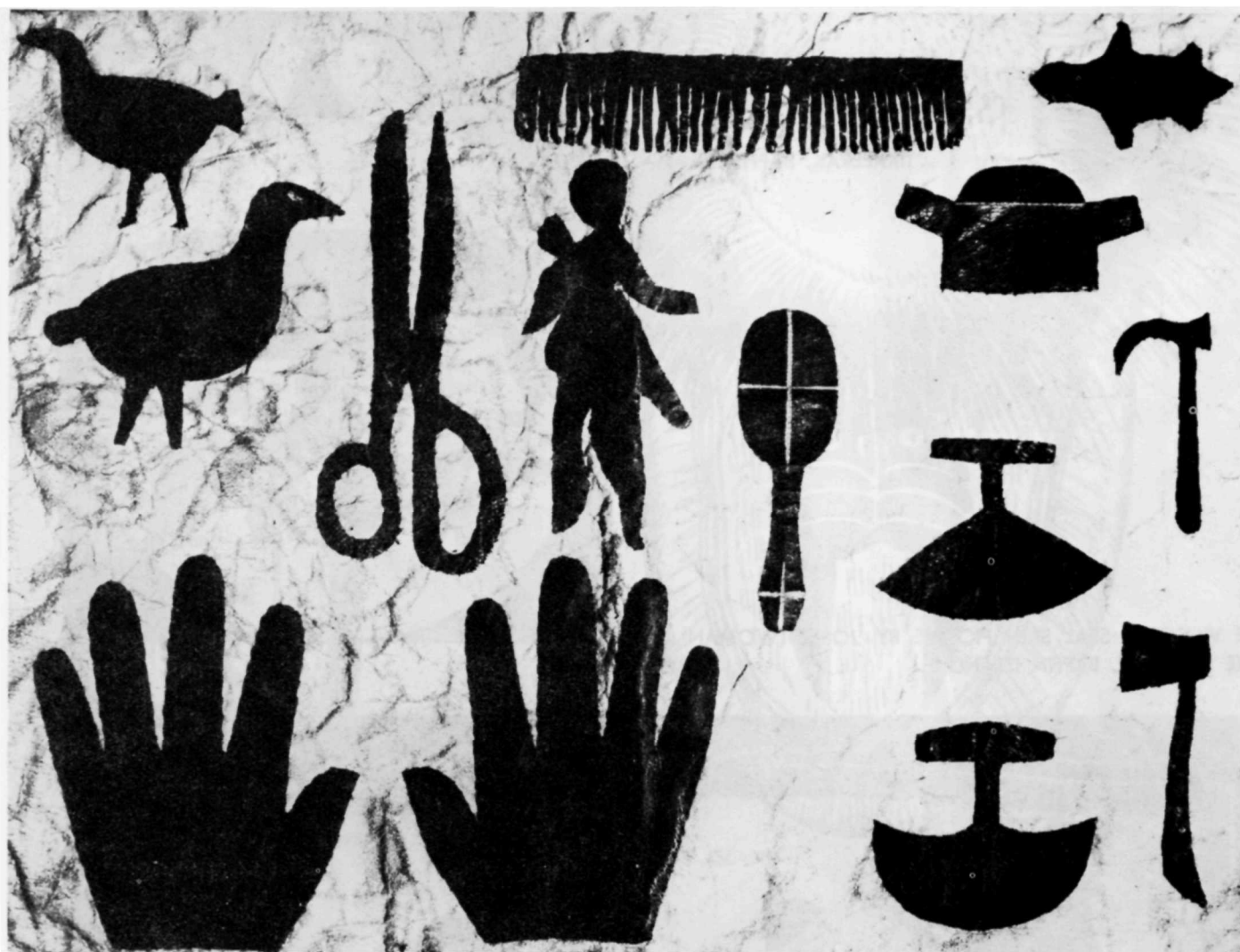


## THE WOMEN'S ART

Few women have interested themselves in carving. Their artistic inclinations and abilities find expression along other lines. Beautiful clothing is decorated with a multitude of narrow inset strips of white or brown fur; to make a single garment may require miles of careful stitching with an awl and sinew in place of needle and thread. When beads became available, they were used together with the fur insets, or sometimes instead of them, but the basic designs were often followed.

ESKIMO WOMAN, ARCTIC BAY, BAFFIN ISLAND.





SEAL SKIN PICTURE BY KEAKJUK, CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

But apart from all the decorative arts employed in their clothing styles, there is another and more significant women's art, one which seems to be created at times for magical reasons and at other times simply as a mode of artistic expression—the skin picture.

The background material of the picture is most often bleached sealskin or caribou hide. Usually an Eskimo woman visualizes her design in its entirety before she begins to sew, and cuts out objects without preliminary drawing or guide lines. Like the men who carve, she relies completely upon memory of form—an artistic feat in itself.

When the silhouettes are completed, they are superimposed upon the white background following the preconceived pattern.

In the Eastern Arctic, cut-outs are made of thin, black sealskin and are stitched onto bags and other articles. Most of these cut-outs depict objects familiar to the woman who makes them—her ulu, the crescent shaped knife which is an almost universal tool in women's work, the adze her husband uses, the steel axe brought in by a trader, gloves, scissors, a comb, birds and beasts.

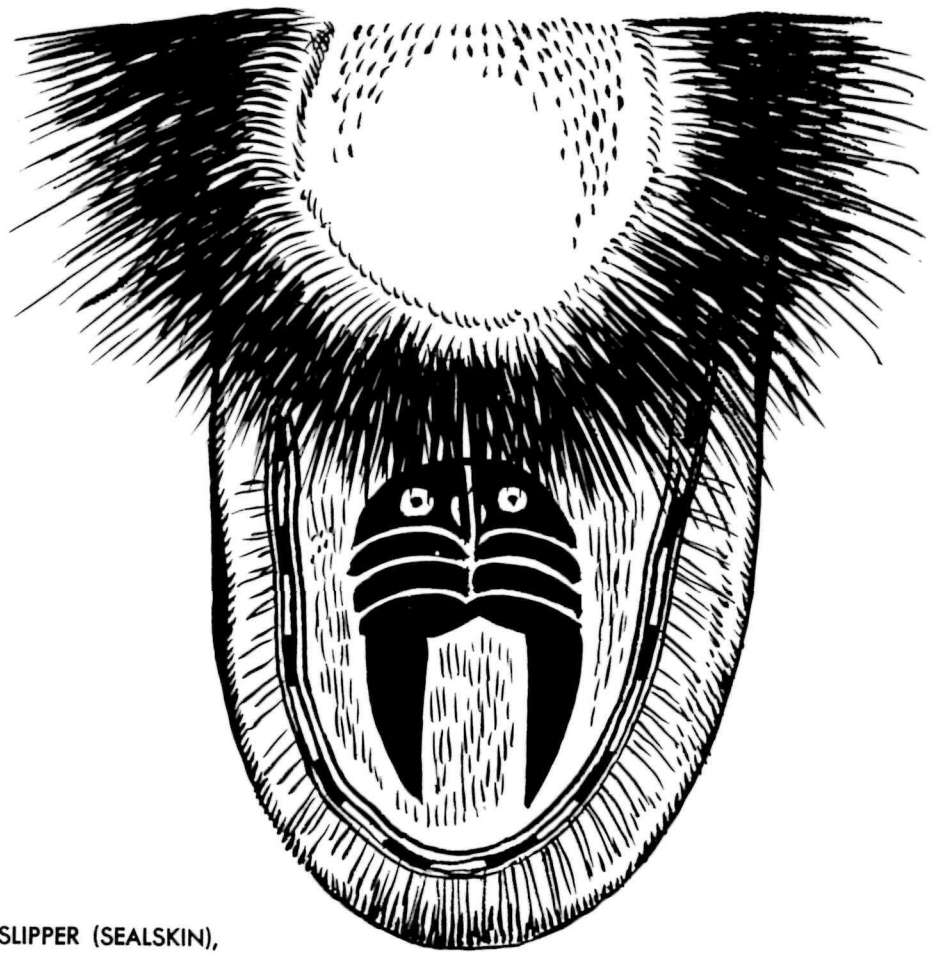
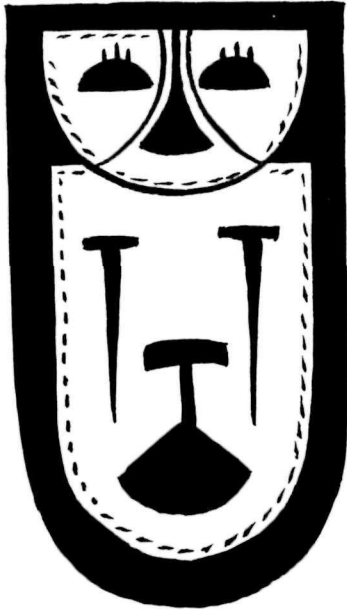
BEAR HUNT—  
SEAL SKIN PICTURE  
BY PITSULAK (WOMAN),  
TIKKEERAK, BAFFIN ISLAND



THE VISITORS—SEAL SKIN PICTURE BY JOSEE (WOMAN),  
LAKE HARBOUR, BAFFIN ISLAND



SLIPPER VAMP,  
REPULSE BAY,  
MELVILLE PENINSULA



SLIPPER (SEALSKIN),  
FROBISHER BAY, BAFFIN ISLAND

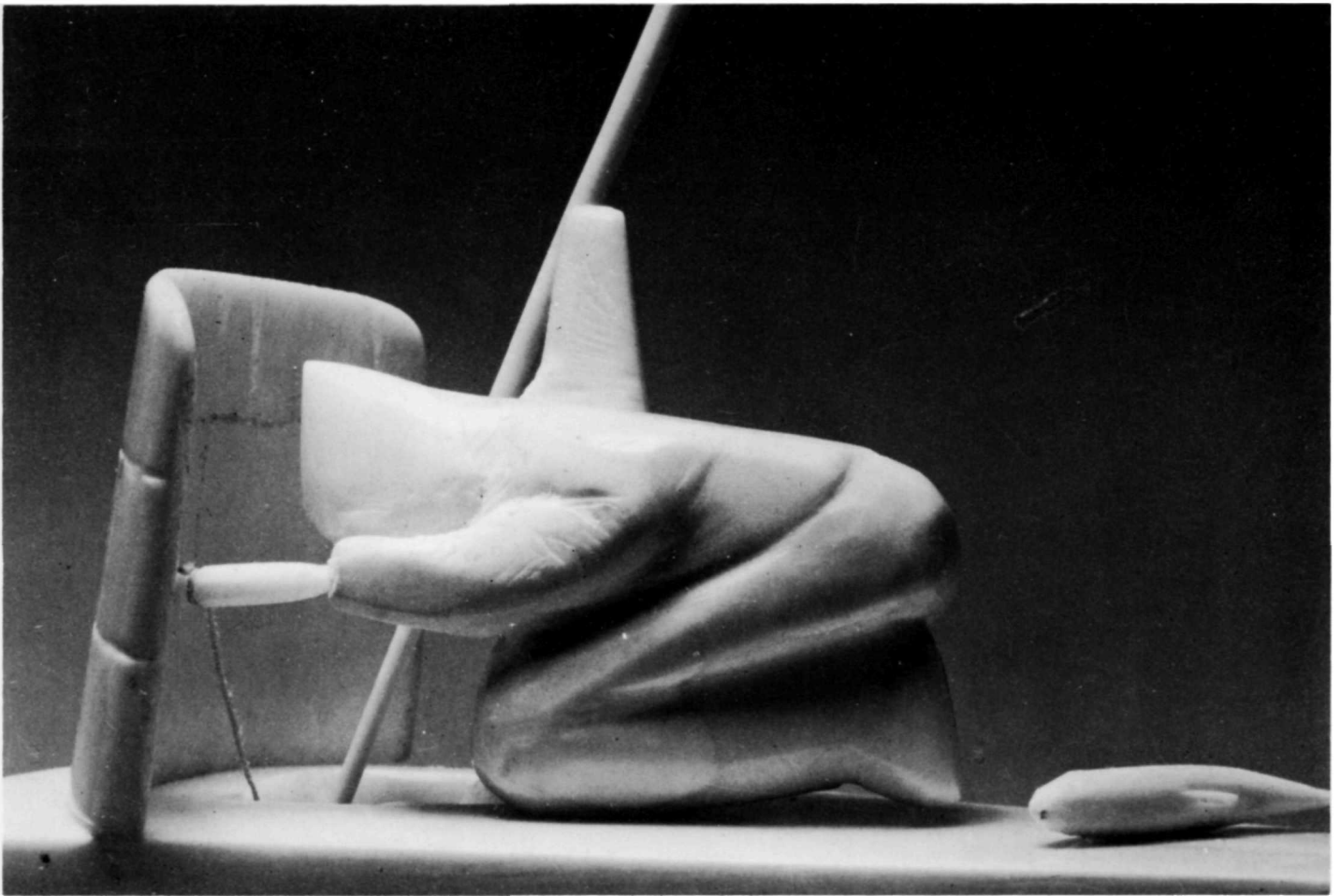
Though for summer wear woollen duffle from the trading post is becoming more widespread, the skin of the caribou or the seal remains the commonest material for clothing. It is tailored with imagination and superb craftsmanship, for an Eskimo woman earns respect for herself and her husband by the quality and design of her family's clothes. The skins, whose colours range from almost black to purest white, are carefully matched. Light horizontal strips are added for more than decoration: they give added strength to the garment. Skins of arctic animals and the head plumage of the eider duck are used for general decorations. Sealskin bags for carrying equipment may bear designs of cut-out skin. This general ornamentation is not functional; it is merely the Eskimo's love of colour and design in a country where the attractions of nature are simple and vast.

The grasses needed by the basket maker are not common throughout the Canadian Arctic, but particularly in the Eastern Arctic basket making is an old and established art. Here is the only part of Canada, excepting British Columbia, where the coil technique is used. Sealskin strips or the sinew of whale are woven into simple designs. The lid is often mounted with a small bone or ivory figure to serve as a handle.

The art of basketry is developed to its highest level among the Eskimos on the east coast of Hudson Bay. This is still the country of tundra, far north of the tree line, but lime grass grows in quantity along the river valleys.

GRASS BASKET, IVORY TOP, SEAL SKIN STRIP DESIGN, BY  
EVA SYWOOLY, PORT HARRISON, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY





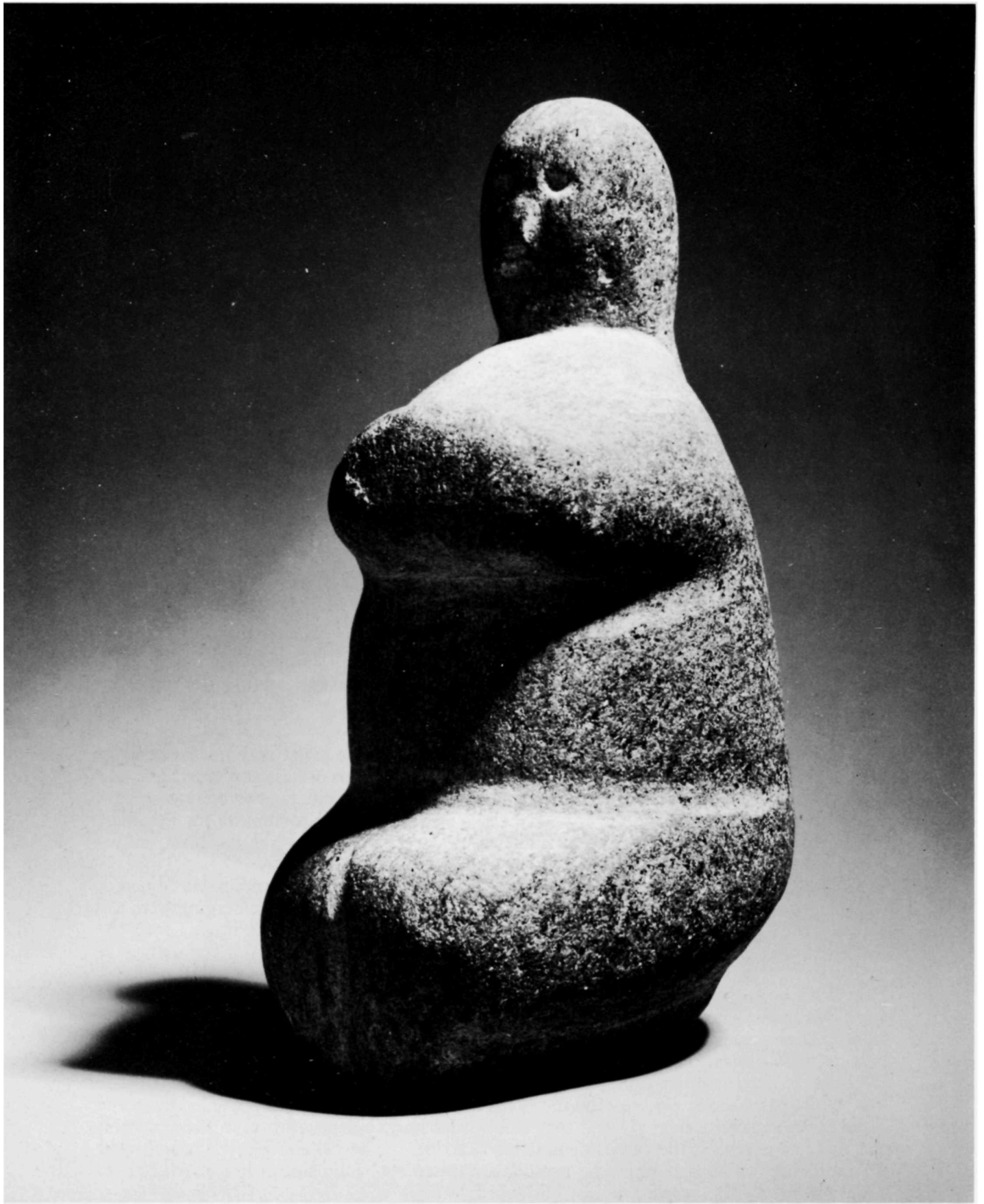
FISHING THROUGH THE ICE (IVORY) BY ANAWAK, REPULSE BAY, MELVILLE PENINSULA

Eskimo etiquette requires a display of modesty that the artist may not necessarily feel. The carver is likely to malign his own work, saying it is useless and worthless and that he should never try such a thing again. He is usually reluctant to copy or repeat a subject of his own, or indeed anybody else's work. This is fortunate, for in consequence he produces a wide variety of subjects, no two pieces being alike in form, movement, or concept.

There is a curious convention in Eskimo art. When a swimming animal is depicted, only the part of its body visible above the water is carved. A walrus emerging from the water, a bird rising to the surface with a fish in its beak, a polar bear plunging into the sea, all these carvings are cut off through a horizontal plane representing the surface of the water.

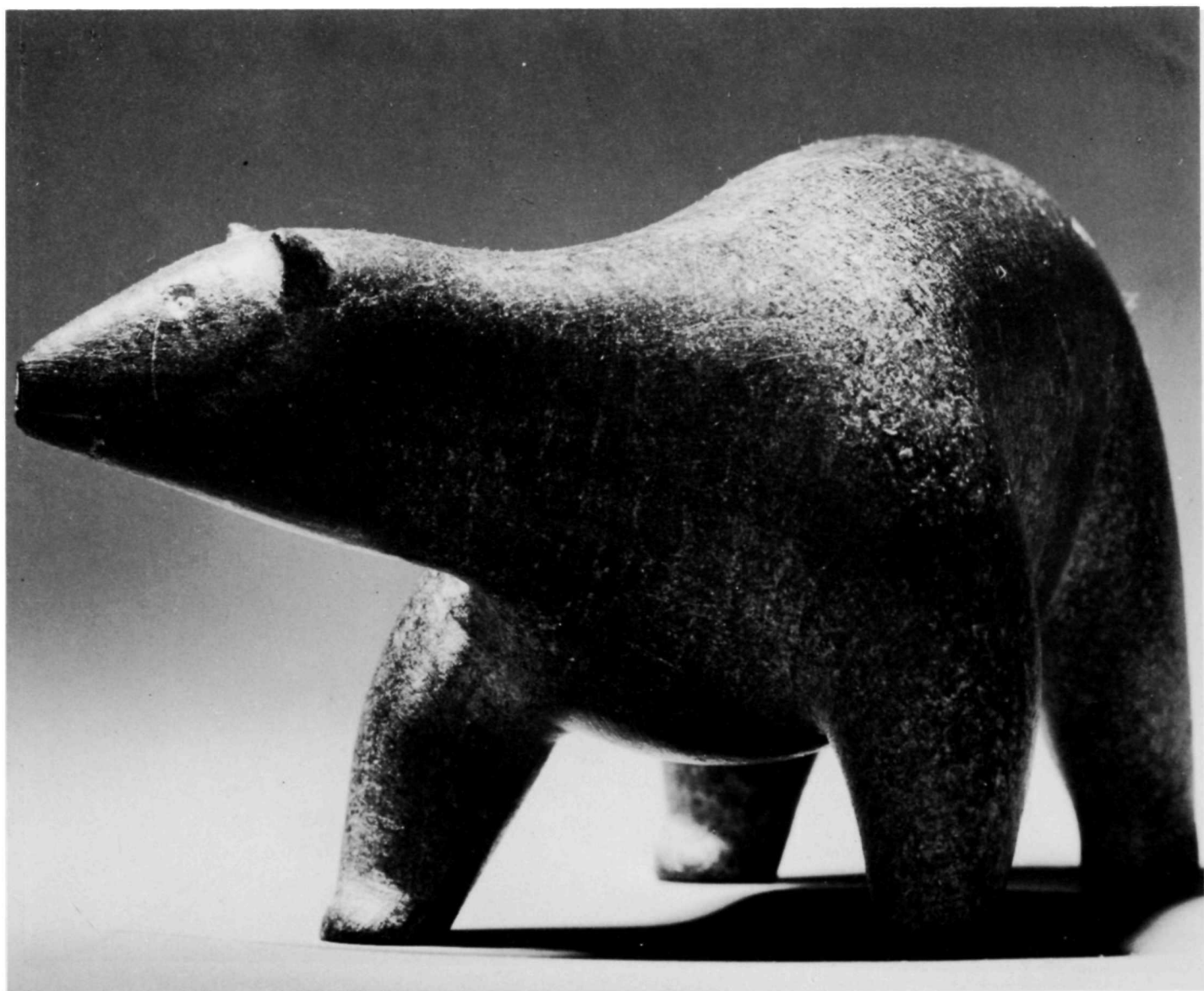
Why does the Eskimo carve? What induces people so hard pressed by their environment to expend energy in unessential occupation? It is impossible to know the objectives of the ancient Eskimo carvers since no written record accompanies their work. It is not easy either to analyze the motives of living Eskimo artists, because they seldom give utterance to abstract thought.

Quite naturally they enjoy the increased income that their art has provided in recent years. Fears have been expressed that this would lead to degeneration in the art form, but this has not been the case, nor is it likely to be. The Eskimo himself has already set standards for his art which he must maintain to command not only a market, but, more important, the respect of his fellow artists.



MAN KNEELING (GRANITE) BY TUDLIK,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

POLAR BEAR (STONE) BY TIKEETUK, KANGEAK, BAFFIN ISLAND





BOY HOLDING DOG (STONE) BY TUNU, KANGEAK, BAFFIN ISLAND

ONE Eskimo finds beauty in the light sleek lines of the weasel. Another sees the massive bulk of the walrus. Another tries to capture in stone the sullen treachery of a bear. They watch an infinity of detail, then, perhaps, discard all but the essence of the form. In quiet moments they remember, and carve what they see beyond the Arctic night. They carve without pretension and without self consciousness, for art has not yet become a specialization. It belongs to all.

What motivates this man and his art? Perhaps it is the clinging remnant of a forgotten civilization, of the Asiatic continent where he almost certainly originated. Perhaps it is pure love of craftsmanship which he clearly holds in high esteem. The severe climate demands that the Eskimo spend much of his life in his home. He must provide his own amusement. His industrious habits leave him time to contemplate and perfect his art.

And, of course, he has never wasted his energy on warfare.

WEASEL (STEATITE) BY SHEROAPIK, POVUNGNITUK, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY



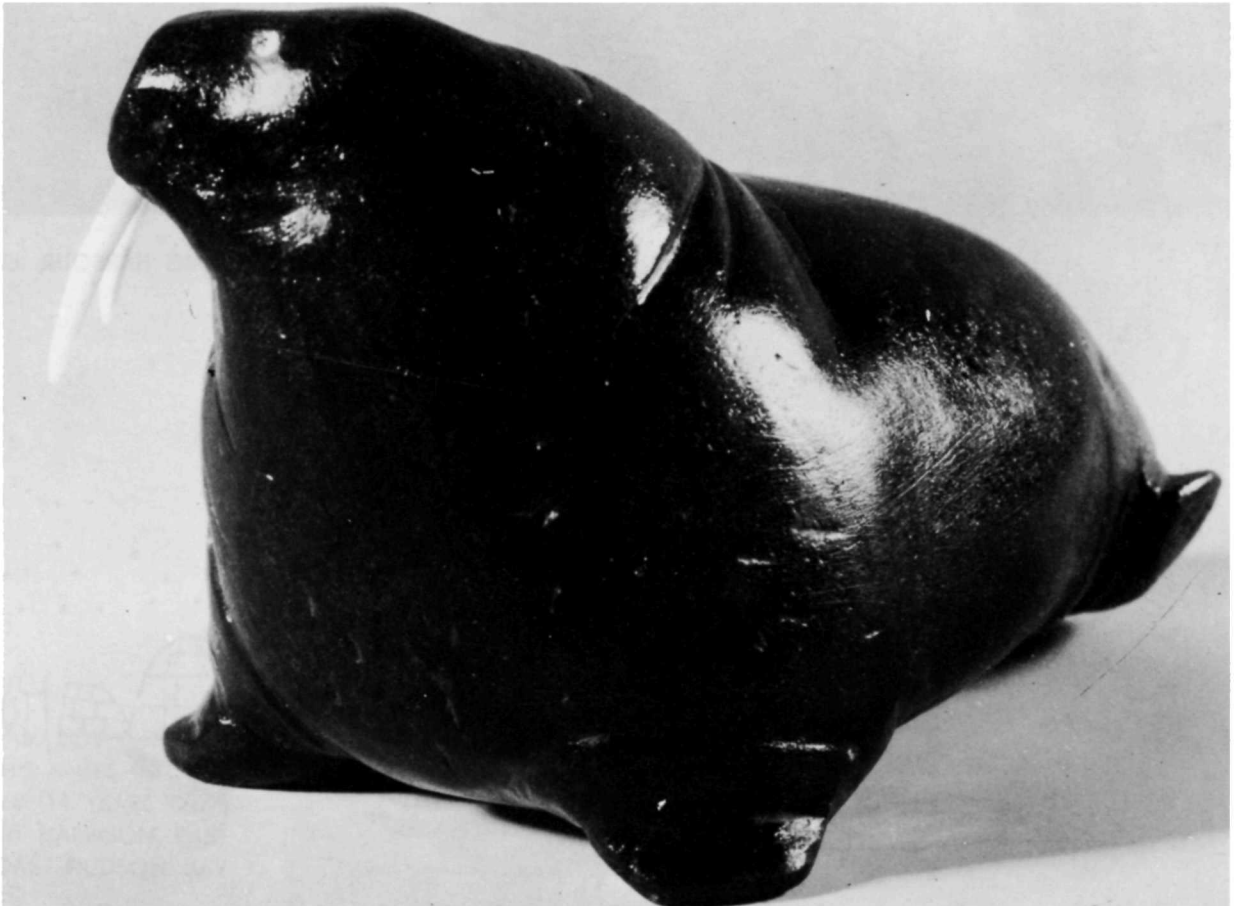


CARIBOU SPIRIT BY TUDLIK,  
CAPE DORSET, BAFFIN ISLAND

Just before the hunt at Povungnituk, Kopekolik carved a superb walrus in stone. It was a tribute to the walrus, which might bring good fortune. He kept it hidden away, to be treasured quietly. He called himself a useless and clumsy carver, and only with reluctance would he produce his art. When he was asked to carve another, Kopekolik was perplexed. After long silence he exclaimed, "You see that I can carve the likeness of a walrus! Why would you want another one?" He had proven himself a carver of walrus, and that was enough. But when the idea of carving a caribou was suggested to him, he immediately became excited. He had yet to prove himself a carver of caribou.

And he went to find some stone.

WALRUS (STEATITE) BY KOPEKOLIK, POVUNGNITUK, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY





DRUM DANCERS (STONE) BY AKEEAKTASHUK, CRAIG HARBOUR, ELLESMERE ISLAND



Carving, the decoration of skins, drawing on horns and antlers—these are the forms of Canadian Eskimo art which the outside world best knows. Singing, dancing and the poetry of the Eskimo legend or song are equally a part of the culture, but they are lesser known for they cannot be translated, or can be translated only with difficulty, to an alien land and an alien tongue.

The carver, though, sometimes puts in stone the lively moments of the Eskimo dance. His sculpture suggests the mechanics of a music which is solemn, even mournful to unfamiliar ears, but as subtly expressive of the Eskimo's reaction to his world as the most vivid carving.



SMALL BOY DANCING  
ON HIS KNEES (STONE),  
BY KUNI (14 YEARS OLD),  
PORT HARRISON, EAST  
COAST HUDSON BAY



WOMAN IN THE WIND  
BY AKEEAKTASHUK  
CRAIG HARBOUR, ELLESMERE IS.



SNOW GOOSE  
BY NOAHKUDLUK,  
BELCHER ISLANDS,  
HUDSON BAY

It is difficult to discover what precise aesthetic satisfaction their art has for the Eskimos themselves. It is known, however, that some of the small carvings found in the ancient villages had magical significance. This, of course, is a familiar concept in early art forms. In primitive minds throughout the world the idea has persisted that to make a likeness of anything helps to materialize it. The primitive magician has, since early times, painted, drawn, or modelled images of the animals on which he and his tribesmen depend for food. Perhaps the Eskimo hunter still attaches magical significance to the little models of the game he hopes to kill.

Other carvings, many of them representing inanimate objects, were made to be put on the graves of the dead. A model sled, kayak, or harpoon on a man's grave; miniature cooking pots, lamps and sewing kits on a woman's grave, would serve the deceased just as well in the land of spirits as would their originals, which were usually too valuable to the living to be lavished on the dead.

CARIBOU BY AMIDILAK, KOGALUK RIVER, EAST COAST HUDSON BAY

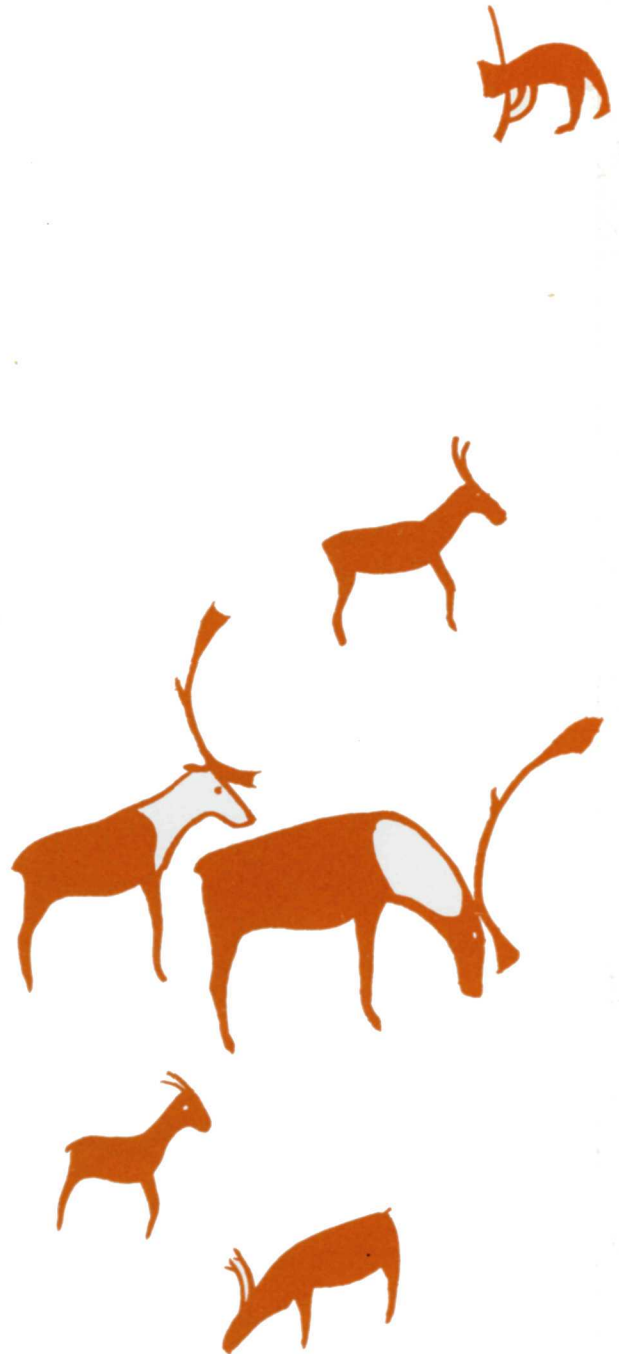


N ESKIMO carving is made to be examined at close quarters, to be touched and fondled. It is not intended to be put on a pedestal and examined from a respectful distance. Since it is small, it can be passed from hand to hand while friends and visitors exclaim and comment, admire and praise the artist. For this reason every aspect of the object such as the paws of a bear, the underparts of a caribou are carefully carved and polished. When it is finished, it is wrapped and put away in a piece of soft skin. It will be produced again only when a visitor arrives.

The art of the Eskimo is personal, created for the artist's satisfaction, not just for commercial ends. So it must remain. The Canadian Government and the Canadian Handicrafts Guild wish above all that this art should continue to flourish as a strong, fresh, unspoiled impression of these vigorous people of the Canadian north. They hope, however, to provide the means for the Eskimo to share his artistry with the world he never sees.

But to the Eskimo the carving will remain a simple thing, an accomplishment to be belittled before friends, a possession to be treasured only privately, an object to be shown when a visitor inquires:

"Has one made any new carvings lately?"



'CARIBOU' INCISED DRAWING ON IVORY



WOMAN AND CHILD BY MUNAMEE, NUVOODJUAK, BAFFIN ISLAND

# ESKIMO SONGS

As Translated by Tegoodligak, South Baffin Island

## Aii Aii

I think over again my small adventures  
When with the wind I drifted in my kayak  
And thought I was in danger  
My fears  
Those small ones that seemed so big  
For all the vital things  
I had to get and to reach  
And yet there is only one great thing  
The only thing  
To live to see the great day that dawns  
And the light that fills the world.

## Aii Aii

The Great sea has set me in motion  
Set me adrift  
And I move as a weed in the river  
The Arch of sky  
And mightiness of storms  
Encompasses me  
And I am left  
Trembling with joy.

## Aii Aii

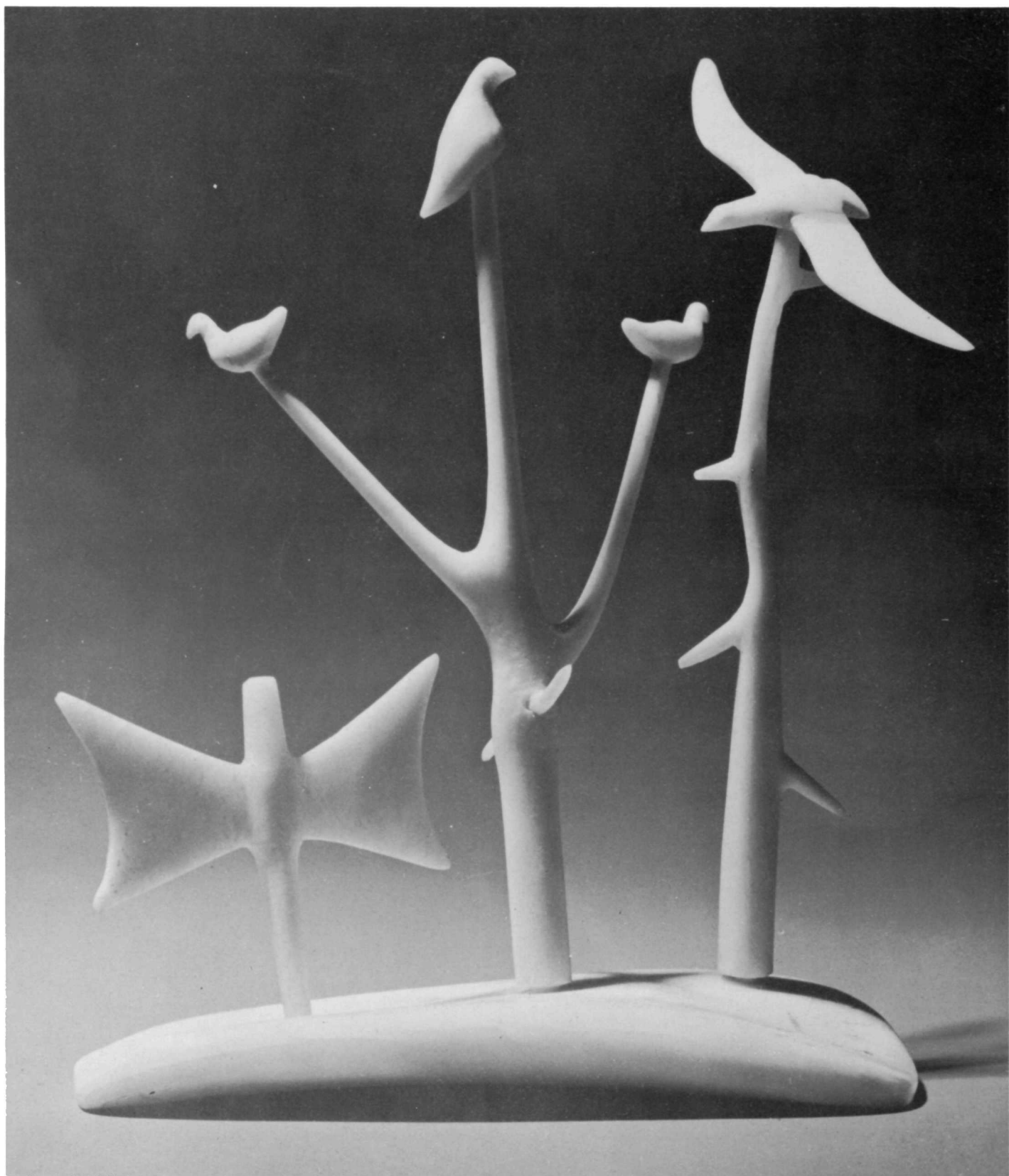
I walked on the ice of the sea  
Wondering I heard  
The song of the sea  
And the great sighing  
Of new formed ice  
Go then go  
Strength of soul  
Brings health  
To the place of feasting.

## Aii Aii

I return to my little song  
And patiently I sing it  
Above fishing holes in the ice  
Else I too quickly tire  
When fishing upstream  
When the wind blows cold  
Where I stand shivering  
Not giving myself time to wait for them  
I go home saying  
It was the fish that failed—upstream.



ESKIMO DRAWING OF DANCE HOUSE



BIRDS IN A TREE—IMPRESSION OF CARVER WHO HAS NEVER SEEN A TREE—ITTORCHIAK, FROBISHER BAY, BAFFIN ISLAND

