

Obituaries

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An untitled 2009 Kananginak piece. As he grew older he began to work on large-scale drawings, taking his inspiration from his younger colleagues.

KANANGINAK POOTOOGOOK, 75, ARTIST

The guiding voice of Cape Dorset artists chronicled the Inuit past

One of the North's original printmakers, Kananginak helped his people prepare for the future



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They closed the Co-op store and the government offices in Cape Dorset on Thursday afternoon for Kananginak's funeral. Despite a bad snowstorm the night before, which had made many roads impassable, 300 people crowded into the community centre for the emotional Anglican service in the Inuktitut language.

Darkness comes early in the Arctic winter, so the mourners used flashlights to wend their way to the cemetery where they placed Kananginak's coffin in a shallow grave, covered it with a blanket of gravel, rocks and snow and marked the mound with a handmade cross. The Inuit artist and respected elder died of lung cancer, at age 75, in an Ottawa hospital on Nov. 23, 2010. He was the artistic hand and the guiding voice of Cape Dorset for more than 50 years.

Even when Kananginak was old and sick, he was moving in new artistic directions personally and helping his people prepare for a future without him. "He spoke about Inuit cultural topics a lot," said Jimmy Manning, recently retired buyer of drawings and carvings for the Inuit owned Kinngait Studios (known through its marketing arm, Dorset Fine Arts).

In his most fervent messages, Kananginak beseeched the Inuit to preserve the Inuktitut language and to keep working together in the Co-op. He also warned that if the market for Inuit art looked as though it was going to collapse, they needed to look ahead at what else was out there and plan for the future. "I guarantee you that he was a very wise man, and he came from a very strong family background," said Manning. "He is going to be missed by a lot of friends around the world."

Kananginak, the only remaining son of Pootoogook (the great traditional leader of the Ikirasak camp), grew up on the land, but made the transition to life in a permanent settlement. He revered the traditions of the past and embraced the future with a strategic intelligence.

The last of the four original Inuit artists who experimented with printmaking with James Houston in the late 1950s, Kananginak was a founding member of the Inuit organized West Baffin Co-op. He served as the inaugural president of the Co-op's board of directors (from 1959-1964) and was instrumental in developing both its graphic arts and stonemaking centre, and in transforming the original shop for hunters and trappers – an alternative to the Hudson's Bay Company store – into a multimillion dollar community owned business. Today the Co-op sells everything from milk to snowmobiles, and manages



Kananginak grew up living in igloos and spending the summer living on the land.

and builds infrastructure and housing projects in the community.

Audubon of the North

Other early Cape Dorset artists, such as Kenojuak Ashevak, are more imaginative and overtly spiritual; Kananginak belongs to a naturalistic and narrative style. He inherited his father's love of drawing, and the documentary skills of his paternal uncle, the renowned photographer Peter Pitseolak (1902-1973). He was proud of his uncle's reputation as a historian, which influenced his own work, according to Terry Ryan, former general manager of the West Baffin Co-Op and the first southerner ever hired by an Inuit organization.

More than most Inuit artists, Kananginak sketched the material culture of the past in detailed drawings of weapons, clothing, and tools. "He liked to draw, he was a good draughtsman and he took a lot of time to do his work," said Ryan. "He was interested in getting things right." He also chronicled the transition from ancient to modern and the effect of southern communications, travel modes and social influences on the traditional Inuit way of life by telling stories in images of Inuit hunting and fishing, watching television, surfing the Internet, riding snowmobiles and consuming drugs and alcohol.

As a hunter and a butcher, he understood the anatomy of the creatures that he killed to feed his family; as an artist, he had the ability to transform that appreciation of sinew and muscle into drawings and carvings that captured an animal's essence. Often called the Audubon of the North, he was particularly good at birds and owls, depicting them so realistically and yet so intuitively that they seem to be staring back at a viewer with a knowing if wary regard.

From his earliest work, captured in the initial 1959 release of Cape Dorset prints, to the mural-sized

coloured drawings of caribou that he made in the last few years of his life, Kananginak was inspired by both the world around him and the one he carried inside his head.

He was born on Jan. 1, 1935 in Ikirasak, a camp located about 85 km. east of Cape Dorset on Baffin Island. He was the ninth son of more than a dozen children born to Josephie Pootoogook and his wife Sarah Ningeokuluk.

In winter the Pootoogooks lived in an igloo, but as soon as the snow started to melt they moved into a canvas tent or a sod house while they trapped foxes to sell the pelts to the Hudson's Bay Company. At its height, Pootoogook's trap line had close to 400 traps and extended over a long stretch of land from one side of Baffin Island to the other.

When Kananginak was seven, his family moved into its first wooden house, but they still went out on the land every summer. That is the way he imagined his life would be. "... all I thought about was growing up to be a man, having a team of fast dogs and being able to get all the game I needed," he recounted in a biographical essay published by the Museum of Inuit Art in 2010. He was still living on the land when he married his wife Shooyoo in 1957, but he soon moved his family into Cape Dorset to help care for his father who by then was old and ill.

That is when Kananginak, age 22, began working for James Houston, the Northern Service Officer for the federal government, doing odd jobs and some carving in the art studio and helping to establish printmaking. "The whole question of printmaking hung in limbo, no one knowing whether the idea would be accepted by West Baffin Islanders," Houston wrote in *Confessions of an Igloo Dweller*.

"We worked to gain the support of Pootoogook and Kiaksuk, those two important elders of the Kingaimiut. I got up my nerve and

went and asked Pootoogook to make me an illustration of something he had been trying to explain to me. He did this and sent the results next morning. I asked his son, Kananginak, to help print his father's drawing of two caribou. ... Pootoogook greatly admired the result, and after that the whole stone block and stencil printing project was off to a powerful start."

At first Kananginak was nervous about drawing and spent more time making prints and then lithographs of the work of other artists and helping to establish the Co-op store with Ryan and local Inuit artists after Houston returned south in the early 1960s.

Ryan had arrived in Cape Dorset aboard the icebreaker C.D. Howe in 1960 to take up a summer job working for Houston. Kananginak and his wife Shooyoo provided his accommodation – their own house – while they joined a group of hunters on the land for the season.

Living in a foil bag

Before leaving Cape Dorset, Kananginak had painted the walls, floor and ceiling of his tiny cabin with the only paint he could find in the small community – iridescent silver. The effect in the summer sunlight was blinding and Ryan later said he was like living in an aluminum foil bag. Nevertheless the two men, who worked together for the next 40 years, became great and good friends.

It wasn't until the early 1970s, when Kananginak was in his mid-30s, that he felt confident enough to give up his job in the studio and become a full time artist. Although he had been represented in almost every print release from Cape Dorset since 1959, he became much more prolific, making carvings, drawings and prints, and showing his work in museums and commercial galleries. In 1977, the World Wildlife Commission released a limited edition portfolio of works, includ-

ing four of his images, and in 1980 he was elected a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Art.

In 1997, then governor-general Roméo LeBlanc commissioned him to build a nearly 6 foot tall *inukshuk* in Cape Dorset, which was then disassembled and shipped to Ottawa, where Kananginak and his son Johnny put it back together again on the grounds of Rideau Hall.

He travelled to Vancouver for the Olympics in February 2010, attended the opening of a solo exhibition of his drawings at the Marion Scott Gallery, received the National Aboriginal Achievement Award for the Arts later in the spring and had another solo exhibition at the Museum of Inuit Art in Toronto from February through May, 2010.

Settled disputes

Until about four years ago Kananginak worked at home in Cape Dorset, but he was finding it more physically difficult to carve and decided to spend more time in the Kinngait Studios. Studio manager Bill Ritchie thinks he also wanted to spend more time with the art community in town because he had things to say to them. "He was a real gentle soul, always settling disputes, just one of those guys who was always there to help out."

The younger artists flocked around him in the studio when he took a break from his own work, according to Ritchie. "Even then he was teaching people how to get along and how to work in groups and not to be isolated and sit by yourself as so many drawers do," said Ritchie. "It was a real communal experience when he was around."

Much as he gave to the younger artists, he also gained something: the impulse to work on large scale drawings, as they were doing. These huge pieces represent Kananginak's final artistic flowering. In fact, his last unfinished drawing was a huge depiction of his father's diesel powered Peterhead, a wooden boat with two masts that was used for hauling soapstone, walrus and whale carcasses. Ritchie can remember Kananginak being so racked by coughing spells while he was drawing the boat that he would have to stop and hold his chest. "He said it was cancer and he was right."

Earlier this year, Kananginak and his wife Shooyoo went to Ottawa and moved into Largo Baffin, a facility housing Inuit people who have come south for medical treatment. He was diagnosed with lung cancer and underwent surgery in October, but he never recovered from the operation.

As family and friends gathered round, he continued to decline. His son Kavavaok Pootoogook described his father as "a kind man," who "taught him to go hunting and how to tie ropes." When asked what he would miss about him the most, Kavavaok said simply: "Everything."

Kananginak Pootoogook leaves his wife Shooyoo, seven children and many grandchildren and great-grandchildren.