

Notes

¹ Alexander V.J. GAUDIERI, "Foreword," *Construction d'un musée Beaux-Arts / Montréal 1912 / Building a Beaux-Arts Museum* (Montreal: Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 1986), p. 9.

² See, for example, *Art in America*, "Special Section: Museum Blockbusters," LXXVI, no. 6, pp. 18-37, and Douglas CRIMP, "The Art of Exhibition," *October*, XXX (Fall 1984), pp. 49-82.

³ PEPALL, p.83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.35.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.99.

Uumajut: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art

Bernadette DRISCOLL

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Bernadette Driscoll's catalogue *Uumajut: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art* is a disappointing addition to a long line of publications by the Winnipeg Art Gallery on Inuit art. Despite a careful reading, one is left with an overwhelming sense of disjointedness in both the form and the content of the catalogue.

The text of the catalogue is divided into four sections. The first three consist of essays by well-known contributors to the field of Inuit studies: "Ancient Animals: The Dorset Collection from Brooman Point" by Robert McGhee; "Uumajut: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art and Spiritual Culture" by Bernadette Driscoll; and "Animals: Images, Forms, Ideas" by George Swinton. The final section includes three brief interviews with the Cape Dorset artists: Pauta Saila, Joannsie Salomonie and Kiawak Ashoona. Unfortunately, no introduction is given by the curator to explain the relationship of these essays either to each other or to the theme of the exhibition. Left to make these connections, the reader can only conclude that the thin thread tying one section to the next is their shared subject matter: animals.

In the first essay, "Ancient Animals: The Dorset Collection from Brooman Point," Robert McGhee examines a collection of eighty-one objects excavated from a site on the southern tip of Brooman Peninsula occupied by a group of Dorset Eskimos around 1000 A.D. His analysis reveals two points pertinent to the subject of the catalogue. First, forty-eight percent of the carvings uncovered were animal images. Second, he notes that stylistically the representations ranged from naturalistic to highly conventionalized. Here, the need for a covering essay by the curator to tie to-

gether the thoughts expressed in the individual essays immediately becomes evident. A comparative analysis of these diminutive prehistoric sculptures with contemporary pieces would have clearly established both iconographic and stylistic continuities. Surprisingly, none of the excavated pieces was included in the exhibition, precluding any independent visual comparison by the museum visitor. By failing to link both the ideas and the objects examined by McGhee to the rest of the catalogue, Driscoll leaves the essay hanging.

In "Uumajut: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art and Spiritual Culture," Bernadette Driscoll describes the relationship of man and animals in a traditional Inuit society. As the source of Inuit food, clothing and shelter, hunted animals were treated with great respect. Taboos were established to control the time, place and method for procuring game. Amulets representing the spirit, or *inua*, of animals were worn in the belief that the animals' power could be called upon for assistance in time of need. Because of their importance to the survival of the Inuit, animals played significant roles in their myths and legends.

From this description of the traditional relationship of the worlds of Inuit and animals, Driscoll jumps to a description of contemporary sculpture. In the first section of her essay, "Uumajut: Reflection of Life through Nature," and the third, "Uumajut: Sign of Death and Regeneration," this temporal shift works well as she describes how the Inuit have retained a sensitivity to nature that continues to be reflected in their art. However, difficulties arise in the second section, "Uumajut: Symbol of Spiritual Power." It is true that many Inuit artists continue to illustrate the confluence of animal and Inuit worlds as it occurred historically. However, the world of the Inuit has been radically altered socially, politically and economically since their gradual relo-

cation to permanently established communities. A new relationship with the animal kingdom has evolved, as an analysis of the Inuit interviews indicates. All three artists interviewed make reference to the influence of Christianity on their artistic production. Saila says, "I do what the Creator wants me to do." Salomonie points out that the spiritual aspect of Christianity is continuous with their traditional shamanistic religion: "The Inuit were always spiritual." But Christianity has changed the nature of their spiritual relationship to the animal kingdom. Kiawak Ashoona rejects totally the evil spirits connected with shamanism. "When I carve weird-looking creatures this has nothing to do with shamans." Saila still respects the *inua* or spirit of the bear: "I think and feel that the bear has a spirit to be put into the carving." How have Saila's Christian beliefs influenced his concept of *inua* and how is it manifested in his art? Important issues such as these are totally overlooked.

Rather than analyze the art, Driscoll frequently uses it as a starting point for providing the reader with anthropological data that sometimes has little to do with the art object. After a brief description of Tayarak's *Hunter Killing Bear*, Driscoll explains the special status of the hunted bear and the taboos related to its killing. How do these facts relate to Tayarak's sculpture? A poem quoted from Rasmussen describes the personal experience of an Inuk hunter stalking a bear. Both the sculpture and the poem speak more to the physical and emotional elements involved in the confrontation of man and bear, rather than to anything spiritual. Perhaps it would have been more appropriate to analyze Saila's bears, which, as stated earlier, do portray the spiritual.

Consistent with her anthropological approach to art, Driscoll closes the section "Uumajut: Symbol of Spiritual Power" with

a description of the importance of various animals to Inuit spiritual culture. No art objects are analyzed for their relationship to the points discussed. Once again too many questions are left unanswered. Can we sense, as Swinton claims (p.24), an underlying symbolic meaning, i.e., the presence of the animal's spiritual significance in the animal imagery, or must our interpretations always be speculative (as Swinton also claims, p.41)? Jean Blodgett's book on Kenojuak can serve as an example of how sound art-historical research can provide us with some answers to these questions. It is now clear that Kenojuak's birds do not reflect an interest in the spiritual or mythological nature of the species, but rather provide the artist with the means for exploring formal concerns. Perhaps by applying similar research techniques and a sharper visual analysis, Driscoll could have established which of the images actually do represent the spiritual power of the animals portrayed.

A reluctance to formally analyze the imagery arises again in the last section of Driscoll's essay "Uumajut: Harbinger of Adaptation and Change," where she finally deals with the changing relationship between contemporary Inuit and the animal world. Driscoll states that "in . . . *Saddled Musk-ox, Musk-ox in the City and Musk-ox on Sea Ice*, Pudlo projects the musk-ox as a heroic figure and a symbol of the changing times" (p.37). Without visual analysis to support her contention, the validity of the musk-ox as a symbol of change in these prints is highly questionable.

Although Driscoll frequently makes references to specific objects in the exhibition, no plate numbers for the illustrations are included in the text. It was extremely disruptive to have to leaf through all the photographs in order to locate a specific reproduction, especially given that a piece is occasionally discussed in one section and il-

lustrated in another. For example, in "Reflection of Life Through Nature," Kenojuak's *Return of the Sun* is discussed, while the photo was included in the section "Signs of Death and Regeneration."

In the final essay in the catalogue, "Animals: Images, Forms, Ideas," Swinton touches on many important issues: the difficulties in interpreting the iconography of Inuit sculpture; the difficulties in determining the function of prehistoric art; and the weakness of functionalist criticism of contemporary Inuit art. His statement that the innate principles of speech and story-telling are plainly manifested in Inuit art is particularly intriguing. Unfortunately, as with all the points he makes, this concept is not dealt with in any depth.

The problems with *Uumajut: Animal Imagery in Inuit Art* are not the result of a lack of seriousness of intent. The curator appears to have selected the objects for the exhibition with great care; the reproductions are of high quality; the essays in the text are by well-known and respected Inuit scholars; the interviews were conducted with fine artists. However, I question the appropriateness of including only Cape Dorset artists in this section. Most of the problems, I believe, originate with the selection of the theme, which Terrence Heath states in the foreword as being an exploration of "the confluence of Inuit and animal worlds in its forms and its significance." As a theme, it is too broad to be covered effectively in a catalogue of this size. By focusing on a more specific concept, Driscoll and the other contributors to the catalogue would have been able to examine one issue pertaining to the images of animals in Inuit art in detail, rather than touch on so many, so lightly.

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