

SCULPTURE OF THE INUIT

George SWINTON

McCelland and Stewart Inc., 1992

288 p., 39 col., 870 b/w illus., \$45.00
soft cover

George Swinton's *Sculpture of the Inuit* published in 1992 and recently released in paperback, is a revised and updated edition of his *Sculpture of the Eskimo*, 1972. It continues the encyclopedic survey of Inuit carving first catalogued in his classic work *Eskimo Sculpture* of 1965.¹ This updated publication has a melancholy tone, evoking a nostalgia for an earlier time in Inuit contemporary art; a time of different sensory involvement, when sculpting meant "hearing" the stone and good work was sensuously tactile.

The addition of 33 pages to *Sculpture of the Inuit* unfortunately neither does justice to many of the artists working since 1971, nor to the one million carvings produced since that time. Swinton states that both for economic reasons and time constraints, it is no longer possible to produce the kind of comprehensive image bank which was the foundation of the 1972 work. Instead he aims to provide the reader with an overview.

To the 825 photographs in the 1972 publication, 83 new images have now been added representing a cross-section of post-Contemporary carvings. Swinton considers changes in style and technique as well as in sub-

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The classic work, revised and updated

ject matter; particularly useful are his updated attributions carried out with painstaking care. Meticulous attention is given to the spelling of artists' names and localities. These have been cross-referenced in the "Index of Artists" which also lists the old names, a useful tool for research purposes.

In *Eskimo Sculpture* from 1965, Swinton established the paradigm within which contemporary Inuit carving would be considered, and one that continues to inform his most recent writing. In this earlier work, Swinton approached Inuit sculpture from an unprecedented position. He destabilized the ethnological category in which Inuit carving had generally been placed. As a result, the generalizing tendency to group the carvings within anthropological spheres of collective

styles and characteristics has been replaced by an emphasis on individual artists. Swinton displayed critical judgment that was much needed in the formative years, a time when Inuit sculpture was threatened by a plethora of kitsch. And it is his 'critical eye' which has been particularly influential in formulating the parameters of the good, the bad and the indifferent in Inuit sculpture.

Swinton arrived in Canada from Austria in 1939. Like the many prominent figures who were instrumental in molding American Modernist art, he was displaced by the Second World War and was searching for permanent values in a quickly changing world. In many ways his experience with Inuit art parallels what was occurring in American culture in the 1940's. James Clifford in his article "*On Collecting Art and Culture*"² describes a community of refugees in a highly chaotic New York City, trying to make sense of a world of incongruities and drawn to 'primitive' sites because of their stability and permanence as representations of universal and transcendent values: "Specific places - Rio, Fire Island, New Brazilian cities, Indian sacred sites - appear as moments of intelligible human order and transformation surrounded by the destructive, entropic currents of global history."³ For example Claude Lévi-Strauss, André Breton, Max Ernst and André Masson, and others, became passionate collectors of pre-

Columbian, Indian, Oceanic, Japanese, Northwest-Coast Indian and Eskimo artifacts. In a renowned exhibition at the Betty Parsons Gallery, they brought together pieces from their private collections and artifacts from the American Museum of Natural History: "By moving the museum pieces across town, the Surrealists declassified them as scientific specimens and reclassified them as art."⁴ What had begun as an avant-garde fashion in 1920's Europe, established the category of Primitive art in America with a market closely tied to the Modernist aesthetic. By the 1940's and 50's, these ideas had become institutionalized and the correspondence between Modernist and Primitivist was widely assumed in the avant-garde world.

Swinton's interest in Inuit sculpture began in 1950 shortly after the work first appeared on the southern markets.⁵ In 1954, he accepted an academic position at the University of Manitoba School of Art. In Winnipeg he met the long-time editor of *The Beaver*, Clifford Wilson, and began a significant association with the Hudson's Bay Company, the main purchaser of carvings in the Arctic in the 1950's. Swinton first ventured North in 1957. This was the beginning of a long involvement with the Inuit, a relationship which has been one of respect for their culture, accompanied by a continuous effort to mediate between Inuit art producers and the

southern mainstream.

Intrinsically involved in all aspects of the study of Inuit carving during those seminal years of the 1950's and 1960's, Swinton brought both an artist's sensibility and a critic's connoisseurship to a relatively little-known field. His is an aesthetic judgment based in a Formalist and Idealist philosophy and situated within the conventions of Modernist art history. Swinton substantiates this position in his writings of 1965: "strangely enough, without being able to define it, we are able to recognize art whenever we encounter it - provided we are sensitive to it and sufficiently open-minded,"⁶ and "yet, when we speak of art, we think of specific transcendent qualities that may be obtained consciously or subconsciously, individually or collectively, traditionally or defiantly, from an unpredictable combination of object and image, idea and imagination, fiction and dream, content and form."⁷

It is essential, however, to acknowledge that George Swinton, though Idealist in his role as critic, was well aware of the impact on Arctic life due to interference from the South, including his own. The often-times hesitant and unorganized nature of Swinton's writing is perhaps due to his awareness of the effect his opinion might have, and therefore has resulted in his unwillingness to present a closed history. He has made it clear that his

interpretations are personal and intuitive, based on a familiarity with Inuit life, its myths and traditions and his own background as an artist. It is characteristic of Swinton's method that he has consistently used the personal pronoun "I" throughout his writings. While this is expected in the postmodern period, it was most unusual in Canadian art writing of the 1950's and 1960's.

Typical of his approach is the new section titled "Musings," placed towards the end of *Sculpture of the Inuit*. In its somewhat distracting meanderings, this segment appears out of context and somehow snipped from a greater body of ideas, perhaps the discarded cards of another chapter. Much of this section would have been more appropriately integrated with the chapter "Changes 1971-1992," with much of the information on pages 246 and some on 247 placed in the "Foreword" for greater clarity.

Swinton describes a new generation of artists influenced by Southern attitudes to art: "it became important **how** sculpture looked rather than **what** it said."⁸ He attributes these changes, which set the post-Contemporary period apart from the Contemporary, to training in Southern art schools with their emphasis on experimentation. Swinton argues that much of the sculpture of the past twenty years is gargoyle-like, bearing qualities of "spook" versus "spirit," and cre-

ated more from "fury" and "fun" than from a position of solemn sacredness.

In characterizing post-Contemporary carvings, Swinton describes an emerging tendency to reclaim ancient myths and traditions as narrative content for the new sculpture. While he notes that the spirit world is the most favored subject for this new art, he makes a distinction between the use of ancient traditions and real belief: "The supernatural world is not a part of their religion but thrives because it is so closely attached to their profound and unsentimental feelings for nature."⁹ He calls these new works "irreverent," marked by a "loss of innocence" and produced with a self-consciousness which is different from that of both traditional sacred art and art of the early Contemporary period.

The front and back cover images may reflect Swinton's personal preference and suggest what could be seen as the best of the new work. On the front cover *Mother and Child, Bird and Drum* of 1975 by George Tattaniq and on the back, *Shaman Changing*, 1984 by David Ruben Piqtoukun share an emphasis on shamanic meaning. Stylistically both these sculptures are composed of unembellished broad areas of simplified shapes, unencumbered by fussy detailing. These pieces point to a continuation of Inuit tradition within the aesthetic defined by Swinton's large and important body of work on Inuit sculpture. It seems particularly

worth considering Swinton's reference to a change in the sensory-ratio evidenced by some of the new post-Contemporary work. The gargoyle frenetic imagery of the new sculpture is highly vision-oriented, part of the postmodern media world. This particular new tendency is additive, complex in materials and large. In contrast, the two sculptures on the cover carry the traces of an ancient knowledge of the world removed from vision. They also fit quite comfortably within Modernist aesthetic parameters.

In describing the changes which have occurred since 1971, Swinton has evoked the Contemporary period by further defining what was at stake, and what may be lost. There is a wistful note to the two new chapters and a sense of his not being sensually involved with much of the work. While Swinton is emotionally removed, he remains considerate of the Inuit position, defending their right to be part of a less local world. Swinton's particular views of the emerging post-Contemporary trends will have enormous effect on current Inuit art and *Sculpture of the Inuit* will no doubt replace its predecessor as the authoritative source in the field of Inuit sculpture.

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Notes

- 1 George SWINTON, *Eskimo Sculpture* (Toronto, Montreal: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1965).
- 2 James CLIFFORD, "On collecting Art and Culture," *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russel Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha, Cornel West (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990).
- 3 CLIFFORD, 156.
- 4 CLIFFORD, quoting from Edmund Carpenter, "Collecting Northwest Coast Art" in Bill Holm and Bill Reid, *Indian Art of the Northwest Coast* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1975), 10.
- 5 Darlene WIGHT, *The Swinton Collection of Inuit Art* (Winnipeg: Winnipeg Art Gallery, 1987). This catalogue of an exhibition of his collection of Inuit art is a good source of biographical information on George Swinton.
- 6 SWINTON, 12.
- 7 SWINTON, 15.
- 8 George SWINTON, *Sculpture of the Inuit* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Inc., 1992), 271.
- 9 SWINTON (1992), 262.