

Peter Pitseolak at the McCord Museum

Peter Pitseolak (1902-1973), Inuit Historian of Seekooseelak. Photographs and Drawings from Cape Dorset, Baffin Island.
**An exhibition held at the McCord Museum, Montréal,
9 January – 9 March 1980**

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Catalogue: David Bellman (ed.), *Peter Pitseolak (1902-1973), Inuit Historian of Seekooseelak*, Montreal, McCord Museum, 1980. 78 pp., 111 illus., 8 colour plates, \$10.00 (paper).

This important exhibition, comprising 165 photographic prints and graphics by the late Peter Pitseolak of Cape Dorset, marks the acquisition of over 2,000 of his negatives by the McCord Museum, and presents, perhaps, the most serious consideration of an Inuk artist and personality to date. It is accompanied by an excellent and well-illustrated bilingual catalogue, containing extended essays by Dorothy Eber on Peter Pitseolak as historian and photographer and by David Bellman on his graphic arts.

The exhibition, designed by Craig Laberge, is divided into two major galleries: photographs and graphics (Fig. 1). The photographic section contains many of the images already printed in the well-received book *People from Our Side* (by Peter Pitseolak and Dorothy Eber, Edmonton, Hurtig, 1975) as well as new prints from the McCord collection. These photographs, all black-and-white and mostly enlargements, are records of Inuit life and people between 1940 and 1970. For the first decade and a half, Pitseolak photographed family and friends and camp life at Cape Dorset. These very honest portraits and scenes were often posed, with subjects wearing their 'best' clothes, as Pitseolak always tried to get things right, both in the technical, photographic, sense and in the cultural content. As his technique and equipment improved, more of these photographs were taken indoors, often with long exposure times, and the outdoor shots suffered less from over-exposure. In the later photographic period, continuing until his death, Pitseolak became more reflective in his choice of subjects, as Inuit life changed at an even faster pace. Although he continued to take portraits and scenes, he increasingly posed whole scenarios 'for the record.' These included 'pretending' to carry out typical but disappearing hunting, fishing, and domestic narratives known to the older Seekooseelamiut. Photographs from this later period were often used or even created as templates or models for Pitseolak's graphic productions when such arts were encouraged and bought by the local co-operative from 1957 on, under the stimulation of James Houston. Thus for Pitseolak photo-

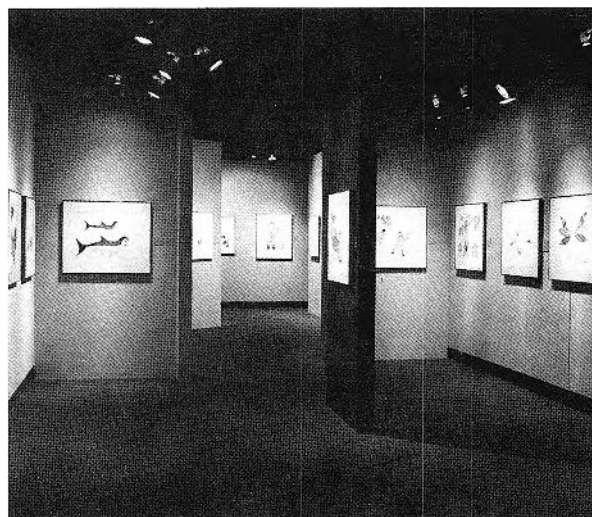


FIGURE 1. *Peter Pitseolak*. Installation view of the graphics section (Photo: McCord Museum).

graphy formed a background to and provides images of his graphic design.

Peter Pitseolak was an *amateur* photographer in the best sense of the word. He loved to photograph, and to pose the people and create the scenes for his images. After learning the techniques of developing and printing from whites and other Inuit, he became the recognized master in his area. Unlike other Inuit, he carefully preserved most of the negatives and prints he ever made over a thirty-year period with seven different cameras. Pitseolak's subject matter and technique, and above all his care and thoroughness, led to the production of clear, bold, and interesting images, with a straightforward sense of composition and sensitive renderings of family and friends. In spite of 'primitive' equipment – box and folding cameras, unmeasured hand-mixed chemicals, developing and printing by candle and oil lamp in igloos and tents – the quality of the prints at the McCord is remarkably high, often with excellent detail and careful use of depth of focus (none of his cameras were 'through the lens' reflex types). Many images are self-portraits, taken by his faithful wife and photographic assistant, Aggeok (Fig. 2), or by himself, using remote control (not self-timer) of the shutter. We are fortunate that Peter Pitseolak was a photographer unburdened with the weight of our self-conscious, image-observing, traditions, for he developed his own tradition, a remarkable, sensitive, and useful record of a past way of life in West Baffin Island.



FIGURE 2. *Peter Pitseolak and family pulling an ujjuk (bearded seal) from its breathing hole, 1944.* Photograph taken by Aggeok with the camera set by Pitseolak. Montreal, McCord Museum (Photo: McCord Museum).

The photographic section alone would have made an interesting and complete exhibition.

Exhibitions of Inuit graphics are now as common in Canada as exhibits of Inuit photography are rare. Yet the second, graphics, part of this show is even more interesting than the first. Peter Pitseolak got his first opportunities to try out these media from John Buchan, a Hudson's Bay Company employee, later the second Lord Tweedsmuir, who in fact opened the exhibition for the McCord Museum. Pitseolak's first graphic period, 1939-42, employed watercolours supplied by his patron, and coincided roughly with the advent of his photography. In both media he developed immediately a strong and characteristic style in portraiture, self-portraiture and familiar scenes, often with frontal composition, perspective, and didactic or idealized content. It was also during this early period that the direct interaction between photography and graphic compositions took place: some of the earlier

watercolours were Inuit figures with magazine photograph faces pasted on in a most amusing way; in both media, repetitiveness became a hallmark, not because Pitseolak was lazy, but because, uninfluenced by our notions of artistic creativity, he believed that if he 'got it right' in one composition, the same image would serve in the next.

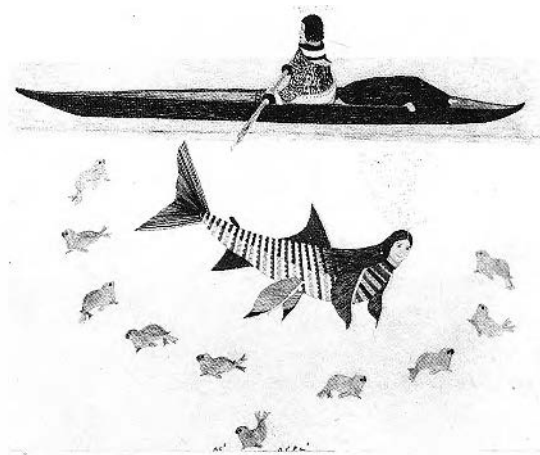
The second graphic period, 1957-70s, was part of the florescence of Cape Dorset arts for commercial print productions under the guidance of James Houston and Terry Ryan. The Inuit were encouraged to submit drawings for purchase by the co-operative, a small proportion of which were translated into stone-cut print series and, recently, lithographs. Peter Pitseolak carried his developed styles into this endeavour, and also engaged in copper-plate engraving and stone sculpture for which Cape Dorset has become justly famous. In the graphic media Pitseolak carried on his photographic traditions of portraiture – often self-portraits and memory portraits of family and long-dead people (Fig. 3) – and Inuit scenes – though more often scenes of past Inuit life and historical and mythological subjects (Fig. 4). In addition he developed new, imaginative, genres portraying the spirit world which could not be captured on film. From his earlier graphics he extended the techniques of the use of photography and repetitive images: he would photograph people in traditional activities, and use the prints as models, or trace them, in his drawings. Again, many images appear again and again in both historical and mythological drawings, even where we know of no photographic originals.

Yet Peter Pitseolak's drawings are characterized by the same attitudes as his photography, the strong urge to 'get things right' and to illustrate for outsiders and younger generations the things he thought important to express. Many of the drawings are accurate renditions of traditional activities; others are series of

FIGURE 3. Peter Pitseolak. *Untitled* (reconstruction of past family event). Graphite, coloured pencil, and felt pen on paper, 50.7 × 65.5 cm. Cape Dorset (Baffin Island), West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative (Photo: McCord Museum).



FIGURE 4. Peter Pitseolak. *Untitled* (myth of Tallilayuk). Graphite and pencil on paper, 50.6 × 65.5 cm. Cape Dorset (Baffin Island), West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative (Photo: McCord Museum).



cartoons, with speech 'balloons' telling narrative stories from Inuit mythology and family and regional history. Unlike many commercially more successful Inuit artists, Pitseolak did not avoid images of modernity or 'reality' in his portrait and historical images: saws, rifles, Peterhead boats, and so on; nor did he consciously change his style or imagery to suit the market. He believed, so he said, that he was 'above' that, because he had things to say that were more important to express – to whites and other Inuit – than mere money. He also expressed resentment, at times, at the financial success and fame of other artists whose more studiously 'primitive' works he considered less accurate, less important, and less honest than his own.

During his lifetime Pitseolak's graphic works did not achieve the fame of many other Cape Dorset artists, such as his namesake Pitseolak Ashoona, his neighbour Qirnuajuak, or his relatives Usuituk and Pautak. Yet among the Inuit population he was considered in the top two or three artists because of his accurately portrayed knowledge, his attention to detail, and his stubborn resistance to known influences of the market. Posthumously he has been increasingly recognized both as an artist and a historical personality, through the works of Dorothy Eber, through the issue of his previously hidden graphics in new lithographic series, and through this major exhibition and its catalogue.

The handsomely produced catalogue contains reproductions of a fair proportion of the photographic

and graphic images in the exhibition, enhanced by excellent texts. Dorothy Eber, who worked extensively with Peter Pitseolak and his materials, tells of her experiences with him and of his family's recollections of his character and early photographic experiences. David Bellman analyses Pitseolak's graphic expression, paying particular attention to his imagery and to his later efforts to record the spiritual and mythological side of Inuit life. The catalogue could only have been bettered by expansion with additional texts by others who knew Pitseolak in his earlier life, such as Lord Tweedsmuir, James Houston, or Terry Ryan.

The exhibition and its catalogue signify a new level of maturity in Canada's consideration of her Inuit artists. This is not a selling or a promotional exhibition, indeed it is not based on Pitseolak's graphic arts alone. The subject matter is more 'the man and his works,' a 'visual archive,' and a more rounded and penetrating consideration of the total personality. This more critical, at least more honest, accounting presents the artist and his manifold works in a more totally human way – yet this is as it should be and the way that Peter Pitseolak himself would have wanted it: an accurate record of part of the human scene – and Pitseolak's character and works are strong enough to benefit from, indeed they may have inspired, this deeper examination.

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Printmaking in Canada

Printmaking in Canada: The Earliest Views and Portraits/Les débuts de l'estampe imprimée au Canada: vues et portraits. An exhibition held at the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, 18 April–25 May 1980; circulated to the McCord Museum, Montréal, 11 June–13 July; Public Archives of Canada, Ottawa, 25 July–1 September.

Catalogue: Mary Allodi, *Printmaking in Canada: The Earliest Views and Portraits/Les débuts de l'estampe imprimée au Canada: vues et portraits*, with contributions from Peter Winkworth, Honor de Pencier, W.M.E. Cooke, Lydia Foy, Conrad E.W. Graham; Toronto, Royal Ontario Museum, 1980. 244 pp., 113 illus., \$5.00 (paper).

For some time now, Mary Allodi, with encouragement and assistance from her associates, has been ferreting out views and portraits *printed in Canada* prior to 1850.

The Eleventh Annual North American Print Conference held at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) provided the occasion for Allodi to present her research by way of this major exhibition of 104 Canadian-produced prints and a handsomely designed, fully illustrated, bilingual catalogue – both firsts of their kind. The Museum Assistance Programmes of the National Museums of Canada (NMC) gave a substantial grant towards the realization of the exhibition and catalogue, both of which were compressed into a hectic one-year period. NMC should be heartily commended for its choice. It is a shame, however, that an exhibition of this quality and importance is only to be circulated in the 'Golden Triangle,' but the agreement of thirteen institutional and a handful of private lenders was necessarily secured prior to approval of the NMC grant. Had there been sufficient lead time to confirm bookings in the Western and Atlantic Provinces, additional