

INUIT ART

Visionary Inuit artist Kenojuak Ashevak dies at 85

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The Inuit had been communing with the natural and spiritual world for thousands of years by drawing and carving images. They had no concept that they were making art, however, until southerners, such as the artist and dealer James Houston, travelled to the North in the late 1940s and recognized the beauty of the objects they were making. In the past 60 years, the world has come to recognize and revere Inuit art and artists, none more so than Kenojuak Ashevak, the premier artist and guiding visionary who died Tuesday of lung cancer at her home in Cape Dorset.

“She was the star of the Dorset artists but she was also a national icon transcending Inuit art,” said her long-time dealer and friend, Pat Feheley, of Feheley Fine Arts. Ms. Ashevak’s art was “the backbone” of the annual collection of prints from Cape Dorset, Ms. Feheley said, noting her work appeared in most releases stretching from 1959 until 2012.

“Everybody knows the image of the *The Enchanted Owl* and everybody knows her name,” but “what mattered to her most was to make the picture beautiful,” Ms. Feheley said. “It was all a desire to create what was in her head, but to do it in a beautiful way.”

Ms. Ashevak is only one of many artists represented in *Creation and Transformation: Defining Moments in Inuit Art* that will open later this month at the Winnipeg Art Gallery as part of its centennial celebrations. Curator Darlene Coward Wight, who assembled the exhibition and edited the accompanying book of essays, said Ms. Ashevak “was a huge influence because she was so successful very early on.”

The artist’s ascendancy was “particularly telling for women,” said Ms. Wight, because she lived in a community in which most of the artists had been male. “She certainly served as a role model ... because she was so prolific. She made art all the time.”

One of the artists she influenced is her nephew, Tim Pitsiulak, who is also part of the Winnipeg show. “She is my inspiration,” the self-taught artist told *The Globe* in 2011, praising his aunt’s style and technique and the way “her birds have action and movement.” Even though their art is very different – his work belongs more to a documentary tradition while hers is spiritual and decorative – he learned how to become an artist and the importance of sitting there every day in front of a blank piece of paper from the example of

her extraordinary work ethic. “She started art back home with some people and those people who were drawing with her aren’t around any more.”

Born in an igloo in the southern part of Baffin Island in 1927, Ms. Ashevak learned traditional embroidery skills from her grandmother. Part of that dwindling generation who made the transition from nomadic cycles of feast and famine to life in permanent settlements, Ms. Ashevak mirrors that evolution in art that is both ancient and contemporary.

“She had her own wonderful sense of design,” said art dealer and collector John Houston, who first met her when he lived in the Arctic with his parents, James and Alma. “She was like my aunt,” he said, commenting that when he heard the news of Ms. Ashevak’s death, he had an image of a balloon that was full of air and, as it slowly deflated, he realized that “Canada just shrank.”

He sees Ms. Ashevak’s work as an essential step in “Canada’s push to be recognized on its own terms,” pointing out that *The Enchanted Owl* – “this beautiful, bold, red-and-black image on a white field” – which she produced in 1960, predated the graphic image of a red maple leaf on a white field that Canada adopted as its national flag five years later. “When you look at the two of them side by side, it is pretty uncanny how they have a lot of the same bold energy,” he said, arguing that her art is “an inextricable part of our self-image as Canadians.”

Her influence transcended the arts. She was also a mentor and an adviser, said Jimmy Manning, who remembers how she brought carvings and drawings into the Inuit-owned co-op to sell as far back as the mid-1960s. Later he travelled with her as a translator when she was invited to artistic events throughout Canada and internationally.

Besides admiring her as an artist, he remembers how, as an elder, she extolled Inuit values and traditions and encouraged younger generations to stay in school and to preserve the Inuktitut language. “We aren’t going to be living forever,” she would tell her friends and family, “so you have to learn to stand on your own.”

And that is the question that mourners are asking themselves even as they make arrangements for her funeral in Cape Dorset: How do we carry on without the woman and the artist who has shaped our lives and our vision?