Introducing the Newest Curator of Inuit Art:

A Dialogue between Native arts studies professor Janet Catherine Berlo and Canadian Museum of Civilization Inuit art curator Norman Vorano

In September of 2005, Norman Vorano was appointed curator of contemporary Inuit art at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC). IAQ invited Janet Berlo, his former dissertation director at the University of Rochester in New York, to speak with him about his interests in Inuit art, his plans, and his views about the field. The following is an abbreviated version of their dialogue, which took place in person and electronically.

JCB: I know you are extremely gratified to have been appointed to this top curatorial spot, Norm. When did CMC first create the position of curator of Inuit art, and who were your predecessors in the position?

NV: Yes, I’m absolutely thrilled. Odette Leroux, who trained in art history at the Université de Paris, was hired in 1978 as the first curator of Inuit art at the CMC. Her last exhibition at the museum was the groundbreaking IsuNanuq: The Artistic Expression of Nine Cape Dorset Women in 1994 (which involved Mame Jackson and Minnie Aodla Freeman as co-curators). Even after a decade,
Isuma"at is still travelling the world, a testament to its success. Maria von Finckenstein, who replaced Odette in 1997, continued in the position until the summer of 2005. Maria's 2002 exhibition on the Pangnirtung weaving studio, Nunaq untranslated: The Place Where We Weave, is still going strong, and will likely continue to tour for years to come. I have huge shoes to fill.

To backtrack for a moment, this brief historical sketch belies the museum's long involvement with Inuit art. In the late 1920s, Diamond Jenness, who was the head of the Anthropology Division at the National Museum of Canada (before it was called the Canadian Museum of Civilization), worked briefly with the Canadian Handicrafts Guild to develop and market "Eskimo crafts." Nothing came of this, owing mostly to the difficulties of arctic travel at the time. During the contemporary period, Dr. Jacques Rousseau, former head of the museum, bought Inuit carvings from the Canadian Handicrafts Guild on an annual basis. The purchases started in 1953 and continued every year for many decades. Then, in 1968, the National Museum appointed Dr. William Taylor as its new director. Taylor was a strong supporter of Inuit art and further strengthened its presence within the museum by pushing for two new curatorial positions dedicated to Inuit and First Nations arts.

JCB: How did you come to be interested in Inuit art? I know that you were brought up in Timmins, in northern Ontario, and at York University you studied both studio art and art history as an undergraduate.

NV: As a child, I spent hours and hours painting and drawing. It just seemed natural to study the practice, theory and history of art in university. However, the more I studied art history in university, the more alien it felt. I think it was because I grew up in a small, blue-collar town and, even today, art history is overwhelmingly metrocentric, European, and bourgeois. As I grew to understand my own socio-economic background, conventional art history seemed increasingly distant and almost socially irrelevant.

By contrast, Inuit art is woven into those trusted, romantic myths about the North and "Canadianness." Being from northern Ontario, I confess I was not immune to the lure of those myths, at least initially. And I noticed that in spite of its popularity — or perhaps because of it — Inuit art was sorely neglected in the universities. The exclusion of Inuit art from university art history made visible for me a range of other art-historical exclusions, mainly class-based, that had a direct bearing upon my own personal investment in art history. It seemed like a way to study art that was meaningful for me and socially relevant for many other people.

With some exceptions, Inuit art has mostly been ghettoized from discussions of Aboriginal art history and Canadian art history — Berlo

Janet, you trained as a historian of Mesoamerican art and were a prolific scholar in that area before moving to Native North American arts. How did that switch come about? Was Inuit art the first area in which you worked?

JCB: I was always interested in the indigenous arts of North America but never had the opportunity to take courses, for none were taught at my undergraduate or graduate institutions. But in my first full-time teaching position, at the University of Missouri in 1979, I was expected to be the all-around "primitive person" as we were so quaintly called then. So I was actually self-taught in Native North American arts. My first foray was in 19th century Plains Indian graphic arts. It wasn't long before I left the world of 6th century Mesoamerica behind, in favour of the last 150 years of Native and Inuit art!

Actually, I have your Canadian tax dollars to thank for my involvement in Inuit art history. In the early 1980s, the Canadian Consulates in the U.S. began a grant program to entice more Americans not only to study Canadian topics but also to teach courses on them in American universities. I received a travel grant from the Canadian Consulate in 1984 to study contemporary Northwest coast and Inuit art. Two things affected me very profoundly, and made me want to learn more about the intriguing world of Inuit art. The first was Jean Blodgett's brilliant exhibit Grasp Tight the Old Ways at the Field Museum in Chicago in the spring of 1984. I was knocked out by the quality of the works. For example, Aqanjaijuk Shaa's Figure With Ulu (1967). Those powerful expressive hands!

Moreover, the curatorial focus on artistic individuality interested me. Of course this was not revolutionary; it's a straightforward art historical approach. But it was news to me that some northern artists had such complex oeuvres. This was also my first encounter with Inuit drawings. To discover that they were often far more interesting than the prints released for sale, was revelatory. The Klameter collection had marvelous drawings by Parr, Pitsolok, Janet Kigusiuq, Pudlo, and others.

The second thing was an Inuit print that I felt compelled to study further and to own: Napachie Pootoogook's wonderful Drawing of My Tent (1982 Cape Dorset Collection). This led to my subsequent study of her drawings, then held at the McMichael (Berlo 1993, 1999). The Canadian Consulate continued to be very good to me, awarding me grants five more times over the next 14 years, to conduct the research on Inuit art that I published in IAQ and elsewhere (e.g., Berlo 1989, 1990, 1995).

This was a long answer to your question, but I think it illustrates
how sometimes it is simply serendipity that leads to great changes in our career paths or intellectual interests.

NV: I'll bet that's the case for most non-Inuit who work in this area: the serendipity factor. This should come as no surprise, given the fact that Inuit art gets so little exposure within most universities, forcing curious students to approach it by accident, or obliquely. In the mid-1990s, when I took my survey course of Canadian art history at York University, we did not examine Inuit or First Nations arts. My initial interest in Inuit art began — rather serendipitously — during a class I took on museums and representation taught by Karen Stanworth, herself a specialist of 19th and 20th century visual culture in Canada and the United States. (Although Jenn Blodgett periodically taught a class on Inuit art at York, we never overlapped.) It was at that point that I decided to pursue the study of Inuit art at the University of Rochester under your direction.

JCB: How curious that Inuit art history was not a major emphasis at York. They have a fine collection of Inuit art!

NV: It is a scandal that a major university in Toronto — one of the most cosmopolitan, multi-ethnic cities in North America — does not teach more ethnically diverse arts, including African/Caribbean, South Asian, Mesosamerican and, of course, Native North American art history. The York student body is reflective of the metropolitan diversity; why not the curriculum?

JCB: Indeed! So many of the artistic traditions you mention, like Inuit art, shed light on major issues of interest in visual studies today. In terms of my own work, I began to realize only in retrospect that serendipity often interlocked with my underlying intellectual preoccupations. Some of the works to which I was drawn in visual terms, such as Napachie's Tent, also illuminated issues of gender, cross-cultural communication, and reflexivity. And

I began to notice that particular issues play out in different times and places in remarkably similar ways. Although their colonial contexts are quite different, the urge for cross-cultural communication is similar in late 19th century Plains ledger drawings and in late 20th century Inuit drawings. The sense of what Louise Pratt has called "auto-ethnography" is remarkably similar, with individuals striving to record their lifeways at times of rapid social and cultural change. The vast archive of drawings from Cape Dorset is unparalleled in world art — thousands of drawings by one individual, and this multiplied by many individuals. But it is still remarkably underutilized for what it can tell us about art and culture in the North in the second half of the 20th century.

NV: Most collections of Inuit and historic First Nations arts are underutilized by researchers and students today. Perhaps this is symptomatic of the apparently tense relationship — or mutual skepticism — between universities and galleries. If you recall, this was the topic of a Clark Art Institute symposium in 1999 (Haxthausen 2003).

JCB: And I think it speaks to an increasing polarization between object-oriented studies and the lack of hands-on training with objects on the part of many young university-trained scholars. They may be theoretically fluent but stymied in the presence of actual works of art — present company excepted, of course!

NV: As a result, many senior scholars who are soon to retire feel that the study of historic First Nations art (and to a lesser degree Inuit art) has entered a critical phase today. The loss of "traditional" art historical skills, such as connoisseurship, has effectively produced a generation of young scholars who cannot identify the techniques of production, materials, and, ultimately, individual artists or their home communities. It is important to understand the material differences between, say, a Tlicho-made caribou jacket and a Tutchone-made jacket, not for empty taxonomic purposes but, rather, to understand land occupation, seasonal migration or trade patterns. The proper identification of material culture has played an important role in strengthening land claims.

JCB: As we talk, you are in the final stages of completing your dissertation on the marketing and reception of Inuit art in the 1950s and 1960s. What major insights has this work of the last two years given you that you will bring to bear on your new position?

NV: As a field, Inuit art has been and continues to be overwhelmingly dominated by non-Inuit specialists talking and writing about Inuit people. This is not entirely the case with other First Nations arts, where an increasing number of First Nations people are now writing art history and critical discourse. While we have made great strides in coming to understand the complexities and politics of cross-cultural representation, people working in the field of Inuit art, myself included, should work more actively to draw Inuit into the cultural sector as art historians, critics and curators. I think there are ways to do this as a curator. Over the past year, I have been involved with the Cultural Industries Training Program, an education program for urban Inuit run by the Inuit Art Foundation in Ottawa. More directly, I will work with the CMC's Aboriginal internship program, which trains First Nations and Inuit people to work in the museum and cultural sector. And of course I will work as consultatively as possible on future exhibitions, to have Inuit artists and community members collaborating as active participants in the creation of exhibitions. I hold Isamutak up as a model (Freeman 2000).

JCB: If not in its infancy, the study of Inuit art is only in its early adolescence. As in other marginalized fields of art history (African art, Native North American art), scholars have tended to come from other fields. There are very few individuals who hold a Ph.D. in Inuit art history: Mame Jackson does (University of Michigan, 1985), but she works
For the longest time, much writing on Inuit art was either implicitly or explicitly arguing for the legitimacy of Inuit art as art. I think we have thankfully moved past that era, but there are still hierarchies and biases that govern the reception of Inuit art — Vorano

in other regions now. Marybelle Mitchell’s PhD was in sociology, though her focus was on Inuit cooperatives. Most of the people who have made contributions in this field have either come from other disciplines or hold a master’s degree. I’m thinking of George Swinton and Jean Blodgett, as examples from successive generations of scholars, but I think it continues to be true.

NV: George Swinton was actually an artist by training, a Viennese émigré who fled Nazi occupied Austria and received a bachelor of arts at McGill and later studied at art school. He pioneered the study of Inuit art in art history departments in Canada in the early 1970s, and trained many students. In terms of my cohort, Shannon Bagg is completing her PhD dissertation on museum exhibitions of Inuit art, working with Lynda Jessup at Queen’s University. Previously, Shannon trained with Mame Jackson at Carleton. Christine Lalonde did her graduate work with Mame, as did Jill Barber and a few others. At Concordia University in Montreal, Joan Ackland trained a number of students who had an interest in Inuit art, although Joan is herself a specialist in First Nations art. Carleton University in Ottawa remains a hub of activity, and there are always a few students in the graduate and undergraduate program with an interest in Inuit art. However, the department doesn’t always have someone to teach it, especially at the upper levels.

JCB: Your PhD, though not strictly speaking in art history, has been

focused on the study of Inuit art. I know that you don’t consider yourself an art historian per se. In your mind, what does the transdisciplinary field of visual and cultural studies bring to the field of Inuit art studies that has been lacking?

NV: As I see it, the rise of visual and cultural studies has precipitated at least two significant changes in the way art historians go about their business. First, it has greatly expanded the types of objects they now investigate to include a fuller range of things that make up our visible world. Today, many studies take seriously the ephemeral arts: television, photographs, popular images, crafts, book illustrations, and other objects long denigrated by traditional art history. This is of obvious importance for the study of historic First Nations/Inuit arts, which were historically deemed artifacts or crafts and excluded from the art historical canon. I wonder if you would agree with this, but it seemed that as a result of art history’s system of valuation, for the longest time much writing on Inuit art was either implicitly or explicitly arguing for the legitimacy of Inuit art as art. I think we have, thankfully, moved past that era, but there are still hierarchies and biases that govern the reception of Inuit art.

JCB: Yes, it seems to me that a field does not mature until it gets past the point of always needing to argue for its legitimacy as art. For example, it seemed that for decades in Native North American art, publishers wanted every book to be a survey, to introduce the idea of Native art history, rather than to build on prior work by providing in-depth studies of particular issues and artists. I think that we are at the point where, just as historians of Albrecht Durer or Emily Carr are able to assume a certain sophistication on the part of their readers, so should historians of Inuit and Aboriginal art, and move beyond generalities.

NV: However that requires a certain density of research — legions of Durer or Carr scholars. At the last Native American Art Studies Association
(NAASA) Conference in Phoenix, AZ (October 26–29, 2005), out of 75 presenters, I was the only person who discussed a topic relating to Inuit art. It was a monologue.

JCB: I would hazard a guess that if we looked back to the previous NAASA meeting in 2003, you were the only speaker representing Inuit art history there, too.

NV: You’re right, I was the only person there discussing Inuit art in 2003. I don’t have my program from 2001, but I’ll bet it was the same situation. I will propose a panel on Inuit art for the next NAASA conference, to be held in Fairbanks, Alaska in 2007. But, to return to my previous point, the other significant change that has come about as a result of the emergence of visual and cultural studies is that art historians have become more aware of the processes through which we become subjects in the visual world. That is to say, there has been a shift in emphasis away from the study of objects and towards the study of “subjects,” or more properly, the processes by which we have become subjects in the world. Many books that fall under the rubric of visual and cultural studies are interested in notions of power, and how different social classes, ethnicities, genders and sexualities are subjected to (and resist) dominant social orders through visual culture.

Visual and cultural studies is continually changing: it is less a discipline in the traditional sense and more of a rubric of study. There has been a very productive discussion between art historians and anthropologists in recent years, exploring exchange theory, materiality and globalization. This gives us opportunities to broaden our outlook and understand how culture is produced within those large networks of exchange, media and immigration. Since the 1970s, anthropologist Nelson Graburn has been one of the lone scholars doing this kind of work in the area of Inuit art, and his work really anticipated much that is going on in anthropology/art history today, including the work of Fred Myers, George Marcus, Ruth Phillips and Christopher Steiner. I wonder if we can reverse your question and ask “What can the field of Inuit art history bring to visual and cultural studies?”

JCB: I can respond to this best by looking at your dissertation, from which I have learned so much. When it is published, it will interest historians of modernism, of museum representation, and of trans-national studies. You’ve given the readers of IAQ a peek at your chapter on modernism and Inuit art (Vorano 2004). But I defer to you. After all, I am still unabashedly an art historian; you’re the scholar of visual and cultural studies!

If not in its infancy, the study of Inuit art is only in its early adolescence

– Berlo

NV: Okay, fair enough. People working in visual and cultural studies have done a marvellous job of “discourse analysis,” owing much to Edward Said’s Orientalism and the flood of critical work that it has spawned (in fact my own dissertation is very much within this trajectory of analysis). However, this approach has generally shunned the notion of fieldwork, usually the domain of anthropologists. On the other side of the spectrum, for over 30 years now, it has been de rigueur for historians of Inuit art to travel north and interview artists, liaise with community collaborators, and visit sites of production. At least methodologically, visual and cultural studies may benefit from the type of work done in the field by historians of Inuit art.

JCB: I could not agree more. For all its talk of “distinct subjectivities,” and “the other,” sometimes cultural studies scholars seem loath to move beyond their texts and theoretical constructs and actually deal with real art objects and living, breathing makers of objects, especially those from traditions other than their own. But I’d like to return to something you said above that I can’t let pass by unremarked. It seems to me that, far too often, visual and cultural studies scholars set up art history as a kind of straw man or foil against which they contrast their new approaches. Perhaps my training was unusual for its era, but my course as a college freshman in 1970 was “Hindu Temple Art,” taught by a Marxist art historian. In grad school, I studied Pre-Columbian art with George Kubler, and took courses with names like “The Transatlantic Tradition of African Art” and “Mambo!” with the great Africanist Robert Farris Thompson. We studied “non-canonical” forms such as performance and craft. I won’t belabour this, but it seems to me that over the past 40 years, one’s vision of art history as either Euro-centric or global has depended entirely upon where one studied. Of course, I do agree that art history as a discipline certainly has marginalized — and in some cases continues to marginalize — certain subfields, including indigenous arts. But it is important to recognize the circumstances in which such work has been part of the art historical enterprise. Otherwise we homogenize the past, and ignore its subtleties.

NV: Yes, your response really problematises the very notion of “mainstream.” I hasten to add that, in addition to the “old art history” canard, the other overused rhetorical device is the excessively polarized “art versus artifact” debate, which now flattens rather than expands our understanding of the ways institutions exhibit Inuit and Aboriginal art today. I suppose, though, that continues to have a heuristic value.

JCB: In your dissertation research of the last several years, you have been assiduously tracking the representation of Inuit art in museum and gallery contexts and in what you call “the public imaginary.” Tell us a little about that.
NV: My interest comes in part from my overall dissatisfaction with the way standard art history has dealt with modernism, in spite of continued efforts to expand the canon of modern art and challenge the exclusionary ideologies of modernism (both of which were done in the name of radical critique). Inuit art has yet to be afforded a space within this discussion. We need only look at fairly typical examples of this supposed modernist revision. Thomas Crow’s 1996 book, Modern Art in the Common Culture, purports to understand the linkages between popular and fine arts, yet Crow’s interest in the popular arts serves to shore up the ranks of well-established, canonical modern artists. And another example closer to home — Serge Guilbaut’s 1990 Reconstructing Modernism, Art in New York, Paris and Montreal 1945–1964 — re-opened the debate about the reception of post-war modernism without mentioning First Nations or Inuit artists. Rather disquietingly, there seems to be a wilful exclusion of First Nations and Inuit art on the part of many art historians, although I believe there are positive critiques and interventions coming from the peripheries.

JCB: I agree completely about this “wilful exclusion.” Many scholars have written about the modern in recent years with no regard for Aboriginal or other non-mainstream modernisms (Doss 2003, Corn 1999, Wood 2004). But this is beginning to change, with scholars of Latin American, African-American and Native American studies publishing their take on a more cosmopolitan modernism (Sims 2003, Mercer 2005, Bernstein and Rushing 1995, Limon 2004, Lowe 2004, Anthes forthcoming.)

NV: Those are great counterexamples. To relate this to my own historical research, one does not have to look very hard to see that audiences in the 1950s and 1960s used various ideologies of modernism to grasp Inuit art. Inuit and non-Inuit modern art were exhibited in the same museums, sometimes side-by-side. For instance, audiences compared Akeeaktshuk with Henry Moore and Osuitok to Epstein. These links are important, not only for the sake of understanding the reception of Inuit art, but also to understand the growth of modernism itself. So, a part of my own research project is to map the discursive boundary between the “mainstream” art world — again, there’s that word! — and the world of Inuit art. Over the past 30 years, I believe the gradual collapse of humanism in the cultural avant-garde served to inadvertently sideline Inuit art. Indicative of this is the fact that Canadian Art, a magazine that once published very important articles on Inuit art in the 1950s, virtually abandoned the world of Inuit art in the late 1970s.

JCB: Exactly! Although I am not sure how inadvertent it was. And similar tales can be told of many mainstream
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- Vorano

art journals that published essays on Native art and artists as early as the 1920s and 1930s, and then neglected them for decades. A moment ago, you talked about “a shift in emphasis away from the study of objects and towards the study of subjects.” But you are a curator of objects. What are some of the ways to incorporate the study and appreciation of remarkable objects into an approach that is mindful of various subjectivities?

NY: As an art curator, I ultimately have to be responsible to the artists I am exhibiting or researching. This means, consulting with them in order to most faithfully represent their intentions, œuvre and aims. But I must also be sensitive to (and responsible to) the source community, which may have a different set of interests at stake. Finally, there is the wider professional world to which I have obligations: the field of art history, visual studies and museum studies. In the past, curators very often privileged the needs of the academic community over the needs of source communities or artists, using objects to illustrate their own aesthetic, historical or scientific points without the input of the appropriate agents. Dialogue is central to museum programming and research today. In fact, the collaborative process itself is becoming the locus of museum-related research, a notable shift from yesterday when the museum was thought to be a neutral vessel.

JCB: Shouldn’t there be room for all sorts of interpretive strategies? When I published my essay on Napachie in Unpacking Culture (Phillips and Steiner 1999), discussant Nelson Graburn took me to task for attempting “to understand the motivations of a Canadian Inuk artist solely through the examination
of her work in a museum collection” (Graburn 1999: 346). Obviously, he felt that without doing fieldwork in the artist’s community, I was doing little more than projecting my own intentions onto her, a legitimate anthropological concern. But historians of arts of the past do not have the luxury of interviewing artists, and both they and contemporary art critics know — although it is anathema to say so in some circles today — that artists do not necessarily have the final word on the meaning(s) of their works. Sometimes the outsider — or the insider who has a grasp of a bigger, or at least a different picture — can contribute something to the discussion. That being said, of course I am tremendously grateful at the far more in-depth and collaborative studies of Napachie’s work carried out in recent years (Blodgett 1999; Ryan and Wight 2004). And now that Napachie is gone, we cannot turn to her anymore, so we had better be fluent in examining her work in museum collections.

**NV:** But an underlying issue here is of voice, isn’t it? Who is invested with the cultural authority to speak for/about whom? Less directly, Graburn’s criticism points to a sometimes uneasy proximity between anthropologists and art historians. The former, in my view, tend to reduce the task of reading images to the simple process of asking a privileged community insider, or to a compiling of the sum total of community viewpoints. As Fred Myers pointed out (1994: 11), for many anthropologists art criticism is thought to be external to the object and is unable to grasp the “real” intentions of the producer’s work. On the other side of the spectrum, art historians are known to use artworks as a springboard for their own subjective ruminations. The most famous example of this is Walter Pater’s description of the Mona Lisa in the nineteenth century: “She is older than the rocks among which she sits, like the vampire, she has been dead many times....”

**JCB:** How do you intend to maintain a transcultural conversation in your role as curator at CMC? Is there a mandate for that at the museum?

**NV:** Yes. The CMC was at the table along with the Canadian Museums Association and the Assembly of First Nations during the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples in Canada in the early 1990s. The Task Force provided a set of guidelines, the aim of which is to involve Aboriginal peoples in programming and research within the museum. The Task Force recommendations guide many activities at the CMC, placing an emphasis upon Aboriginal training, consultation and community involvement.

I am fortunate in that we have a very large Inuit community in Ottawa. I hope to attract a number of Inuit students into our Aboriginal Training Programme to work with me on exhibition-related research, as other CMC curators do. What a lot of curators have done when starting a large project involving a community was to ask: “What are your needs?” The result of one’s research may not be a standard exhibition per se. Judy Thompson, a western Subarctic ethnologist at the CMC, has worked over the past number of years with Owichin women to re-create traditional caribou clothing. This project arose out of a perceived need within the community to repatriate the knowledge contained within museums, not the artifacts — although they did work very closely with museum artifacts.

**JCB:** Of course it is still very early in your tenure as curator of Inuit art. You probably have not had time yet to review all of the collections, but are there aspects to the collections that have surprised you? Gaps that you hope to fill? Is there a collecting budget?

**NV:** At the moment, there is no permanent space dedicated exclusively to Inuit art, although it is woven into the First Peoples Hall [a long-term exhibit dedicated to the contributions of First Peoples in Canada]. Inuit art is frequently exhibited in the temporary exhibition spaces. There are several small, wall-case exhibits of Inuit art on display now as well. In terms of large exhibition spaces, there are four temporary spaces up for grabs, either from exhibitions generated from within the museum or from outside the museum. We do “compete” with other departments, but I’m not sure if that is exactly the right word. There has been some interdepartmental collaboration in the past, and there is ongoing discussion among curators about the future uses of space. I will, of course, press for a long-term exhibition space for contemporary First Nations and Inuit art.
JCB: The lack of an acquisitions budget and permanent exhibition space surprises me. Ironically, just last night, while reviewing some early issues of IAQ, I came across Dorothy Speak's article "A Collection Without Parallel Sees The Light of Day" (1989). She celebrates the fact that "Now, in the new museum, Inuit art has room to breathe in its own 3,000-square-foot exhibition area," which she calls "a generous space" (4–5). But in terms of 10,000 items, it is actually a medium-sized space, and now you tell me you don't even have that. I guess the notion of "permanent space" is not as permanent as it used to be.

I'd like to quote further from Speak's article and ask you to respond to it in terms of your own research agenda as well as current museum mandates. She wrote: "Now that it has a permanent exhibition hall for Inuit art, the CMC can no longer be content to mount only intermittent blockbuster surveys. The time has come for the museum to curate significant exhibitions of Inuit art on a consistent basis, in keeping with its mandate not only to collect and preserve, but to educate. Indeed, a national institution of CMC's stature has a responsibility to contribute meaningfully to scholarship on Inuit art and to broaden public appreciation of it. If it is to use its impressive new exhibition space to advantage and if it is to fully utilize and expose its rich collections, the museum must be willing to devote more resources to research and exhibitions. Taken as a whole, the Inuit archaeological, ethnographical, historical, and contemporary collections of the museum are without parallel in the world. With such a collection at its disposal, the CMC has a unique opportunity to bring a full and resonant picture of Inuit artistic expression to the public and to expand our understanding of this important segment of Canadian art" (Speak 1989: 8).

NV: Such unbridled optimism could only have come during that high-point of museum funding in Canada, in the late 1980s. So much has changed since then, not the least of which was the Task Force on Museums and First Peoples. Museums across the country saw their budgets slashed in the early 1990s, which precipitated a reorganization of museum financing and a greater dependency upon revenue generation. For better or for worse, the CMC is a large corporate institution involving many players, often with different visions of what a national museum ought to be. Increasingly, marketers, public programmers, designers, retailers and publishers are involved from day one in exhibition planning. Needless to say, research and education may not be high on everyone's agenda, and potential exhibitions are weighed not only on their research merits but, also, on their perceived capacity to generate income. In its 2004 report to the House of Commons, the Canadian Museums Association stated that most museum funding rested at roughly 1972 levels (CMA 2004: 7). The reality of today's museum requires that curators be more strategic when using their limited resources.

JCB: Norman, where do you think we stand in terms of the study of Inuit art and visual culture, now that we are a few years into the 21st century? I was so pleased last fall to see the marvellous sales exhibit of brazen, non-traditional drawings by Napachie Pootoogook and her daughter Annie at Feheley Fine Arts in Toronto. It followed on the heels of the superb exhibit of Napachie's work mounted by The Winnipeg Art Gallery in 2004 (Boyd and Wight 2004), but I think it makes a different statement when a commercial gallery begins to focus on some of the non-traditional themes that have interested academics.

NV: Feheley consistently promotes sophisticated artists; they, along with a small group of other galleries, are, in my view, the tastemakers in Canada. Good galleries tend to keep abreast of the academic world and also the Inuit art world. They have to navigate both.

JCB: And the fact that the Power Plant Gallery in Toronto, known for its interesting and tough contemporary exhibitions, has just mounted an exhibit of Annie Pootoogook's drawings is particularly interesting. Do you think this means that we now have a more sophisticated buying and gallery-viewing public that is ready to see and comprehend Inuit art as something deeper and more complex than simply owls and fishing scenes? With some exceptions, Inuit art has been mostly ghettoized from the discussions of Aboriginal art history and Canadian art history. Do you think that the Power Plant show is a sign that these walls are beginning to crumble?

NV: There is definitely a younger audience buying Inuit art now, and people are looking for different, unorthodox things. A Power Plant exhibit can really put a validating stamp on certain artists, especially those artists whose work might not be easily accessible. The Annie Pootoogook exhibition wasn't the first showing of Inuit art there. Last year they had an exhibit titled Images of Justice: Sissons/Morrow Collection, which included sculptures published in the similarly titled book by Dorothy Harley Eber several years earlier (Eber 1997).

Perhaps things are changing. It will be interesting to see what the art press does with Annie Pootoogook. The "rediscovery" of Inuit art by the Canadian press seems to happen ever few years, in cycles. We are at a high-point now. In a recent globe and mail article, reporter James Adams proclaimed: "Inuit art: This is where it's at." Wow, Inuit art is finally "where it's at" — but we knew it all along, didn't we? ☹

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