
Art Making in Pangnirtung: A Collective Vision

by Deborah M. Hickman

On the afternoon of August 22, 2002 an unveiling took place in the hamlet of Pangnirtung (Panniqtuuq) on Baffin Island, Nunavut. In the Peoples' Community Centre, seven weavers revealed to their friends, neighbours and families the result of their labours of the past eight months; a ten foot high by twenty-two foot wide tapestry designed to hang in the lobby of the Legislative Assembly in Iqaluit. This article describes events leading up to the installation of the tapestry which is a gift to the people of Nunavut from the Uqqurmiut Inuit Artist's Association.

Based on a watercolour by Pangnirtung artist Joel Maniapik, the tapestry features a sensual landscape of rolling hills under a huge arctic sky touched by the peach tones of sunset. An inukshuk, which in translation means "like a person", stands in the foreground. Dwarfed by both the land and the inukshuk are the small figures of grazing caribou and approaching travelers. The mural conveys the idea that in the arctic everything and everyone has a place. It looks to Inuit cultural roots for a strong future. Titled *Back Then* by the artist, the mural tapestry was ceremoniously installed in its permanent place on September 10.

This tapestry is significant for several reasons. For the weavers themselves it is a remarkable achievement. By far the biggest and design-wise the most demanding tapestry produced by the Tapestry Studio in its thirty-two year history, its production signifies a return to the use of the studio's twelve foot wide tapestry loom purchased in 1991 for the weaving of *Our Ancestors Land is Our Land Now*. Commissioned by the Department of Economic Development of the territorial government for the Unikaarvik Visitors Centre in Iqaluit, that seven foot by

eleven foot tapestry provided the experienced weavers with their first collaborative weaving experience.

Tapestry weaving in Pangnirtung has always been a collective activity. The source of the artwork, the drawing, is the work of one artist while the interpretation of the drawing into the medium of tapestry and the weaving itself, is done by another artist. The annual selection of the drawings from the large numbers purchased from artists in the community by the Studio and held in an on-site archives is done collectively. Until 1991 the tapestries were of a size which made it possible to weave them on individual looms – one weaver per loom. With the first commissioned piece for installation in a public building and the purchase of the large loom, the weavers for the first time sat side by side across an upright loom. Up to ten weavers can be accommodated. The manner of working in the studio shifted to resemble that of the European atelier from the fifth century until present times. "This collaborative method of working is common among tapestry studios throughout the world. With the making of *Our Ancestors Land is Our Land Now*, the Pangnirtung tapestry weavers have joined the ranks of such well-known studios as the Victorian Tapestry Workshops in Melbourne Australia and the Edinburgh Tapestry Company in Scotland, studios that employ weavers as artists-craftspersons to interpret the artwork of others (some weavers are designers as well) in tapestry."¹

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**Weavers, Geetee Maniapik on left and
Jeannie Naloolak on the right**
(Courtesy of the Uqqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts)

This move to a fully collaborative working process is significant as it is truly in keeping with Inuit values. Inuit have traditionally placed more importance on the survival of the group over the individual. The harshness of the climate necessitated interdependence among people. Each depended on the skills of the other for survival. A traditional marriage for example involved the hunting skills of the man supporting the woman while the sewing skills of the woman enabled the man to hunt in life threatening conditions. Women worked together, scrapping and preparing skins to sew, enjoying the camaraderie of the group. Weaver Igah Etoangat reflects on this within the studio: "Twenty-five years at the Tapestry Studio does not seem like a long time, as I really like the camaraderie of the group of women who work here."²

The process of creating the mural tapestry for the Legislative Assembly was collaborative throughout. It began in 1998 when the Legislative Assembly was under construction and ideas were being discussed as to how to fill it with art. Members of NACA (Nunavut Arts and Crafts Association) initially asked to locate art for the building, suggested that a very large tapestry would enhance the huge foyer wall facing the doors to the Assembly. It was this wall that the weavers began to dream about as a future home to the biggest tapestry to be made in the history of the Pangnirtung Tapestry Studio. The making of the tapestry was eventually to be funded as a training process for the Studio as commissioning work is part of its plan for economic self-sufficiency. The funding bodies included: the federal department of Indian and Northern Development; Kakivak Association's Governance, Capacity Building and Accountability program; the depart-

ments of Education and Sustainable Resources government of Nunavut; the Nunavut Development Corporation; the Legislative Assembly of Nunavut; the Uqqurmiut Inuit Artists' Association. The tapestry would be installed in the Legislature as a gift to the people of Nunavut.

In 1998/99 artists in Pangnirtung began to work on drawings for the design. Blueprints of the space were obtained so that the space could be envisioned and drawings made to scale. The funding was finally put into place towards the end of 2001. Excitement began to build in the Studio as the weavers pondered the selection of the design, finally settling on a landscape by Joel Maniapik.

Maniapik's watercolour design, though a departure from the coloured pencil, graphite and marker drawings of the first two decades of tapestry making, were not new to the weavers as the basis for their tapestries. In 1992 weaver Leesee Kakee selected a watercolour by Maniapik which was to become the bestselling *Approaching Storm*. Made in a limited edition of ten, as are all of the tapestries, it was followed by thirteen more tapestries based on the artwork of Maniapik over the next nine years. The interpretation of watercolour painting into tapestry poses different challenges requiring different solutions. The weavers rose to the challenge, expanding their roster of techniques and palate of colours. Colour was particularly challenging. A wide colour palette of fine persian yarns was imported and single strands were plyed together creating the fifty-five different blends required to capture the many hues of Maniapik's painting.

The next big challenge was the making of the cartoon - the scaled-up actual sized design on brown paper which serves as a blue print from which the weaver work. In recent years the cartoons have been made by scanning the drawing, projecting it on a wall and tracing the lines. But a 10' x 22' projected image was too big to work with, the watercolour strokes blurring through projection. The solution was found by scanning the painting, painstakingly enlarging each square inch 200% and printing 297 separate sheets in colour which were glued onto a brown paper background. This created a full colour cartoon, which, when colour coded with fifty-five blended colours, resembled a huge paint-by-number painting. The last challenge belonged to the team of seven weavers who worked side by side across the ten foot wide span of warp for six months to complete the twenty-two foot wide tapestry.

The reaction of the people of the community of Pangnirtung, the gasps of delight and appreciation, was indicative of the success of the finished piece. A similar reaction met the tapestry, when it was unveiled in the foyer of the Legislature in Iqaluit on September 10, by several hundred town residents as well as members of

the Legislature including premier Paul Okalik and host for the evening Peter Kilabuk, minister of Education and MLA for Pangnirtung. Joel Maniapik who resides in Iqaluit working for Nunavut Arctic College was present as were Geetee Maniapik, head weaver on the project and Anna Etuangat a tapestry weaver. Unfortunately, due to bad weather, Chairperson of the Uqurmiut board Jacopie Maniapik and the other five weavers of the tapestry, Jeannie Nakoolak, Kawtysie Kakee, Igah Etoangat, Geela Keenainak and Leese Mary Kakee were not able to attend the evening's celebration.

Significant an achievement in itself, this tapestry can be seen as much more than a splendid piece of art. The collaborative process employed in the creation of *Back Then* is philosophically in keeping with the history of the Uqurmiut Inuit Artists Association (UIAA).

The story of Uqurmiut (which translates as "the people of the leese") is the story of the collective spirit at work in a community.

The Uqurmiut Centre, built and owned by the UIAA, is more than just a building where the people of Pangnirtung find employment as artists and artisans. It grew out of the determination of the printmakers of Pangnirtung who, in 1988, after fifteen years of support, primarily by the Arctic Co-operatives Limited, lost both their funding and their home in the Pangnirtung Co-op. In the introduction to the 1992 catalogue of prints, then Chairperson Rose Okpik, wrote:

Five years ago we were told that the Print Shop had to close. It could no longer be supported by the Co-op, nor by the Government. Many of us were determined that the Print Shop would not be closed, or, at least, that this would not be a permanent situation. This is why we formed the Uqurmiut Inuit Artists Association. We needed an organization that was not wholly dependent on outside funding, and whose priorities would be those of the artists of this community. We needed an organization that the Inuit of Pangnirtung would own and control, that could provide support for artists like the print makers, because outside support had failed them.³

The UIAA was formally incorporated in April 1988 and to the present day has been directed by an Inuit board of artists, all residents of the community. Initially all were printmakers and drawers, but it soon grew to include sculptors, weavers, sewers and arts supporters. Money was raised locally through bingos and other community events and through funds from both the federal and territorial governments. The Uqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts was opened on May 31, 1991 housing a



Weavers: Leese Mary Kakee, Anna Etuangat, Igah Etuangat, Geela Keenainak, Geetee Maniapik, and Kawtysie Kakee

(Courtesy of the Uqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts)

weaving Studio (replacing the old 'Weave Shop' occupied by weavers since 1969) offices and a gallery and retail store. The former 'Weave Shop', attached to the new building, became the temporary home of the printmakers. Printmaking resumed there under the auspices of the UIAA, issuing a collection in 1992 with financial assistance from several levels of government as well as corporate sponsorship. But as Okpik says, it was more than the financial backing which brought back printmaking:

None of this financial support would mean anything if it were not for the print makers themselves, and their determination to see the Pangnirtung Print Shop revived. They always said that if they had their own print shop, then they could be self-reliant.....the print makers have proved their point. The Print Shop is again a lively and exciting place to be in, and people are happy to work there. And here we have a new Community Print Collection, the first in four years!⁴

The determination reflected in that statement has seen the Uqurmiut through many struggles. The fire of March 1995 which destroyed the temporary print shop, the presses and some of the drawings was a great blow but did not diminish the determination of the print makers to issue their annual collection and in record time attract enough money to open a brand new equipped shop in 1997. In an article by former print making advisor John Houston, about the fire and the creation of that collection, he quotes Jacoposie Tiglik:

We hope that printmaking will continue for our children and our grandchildren...we shouldn't take it for granted,

seeing how easily it can be lost.... This is what we can do while we're able. And many qallunaat (non-Inuit) have heard of us now. If we can be determined and of one mind, we can succeed.⁵

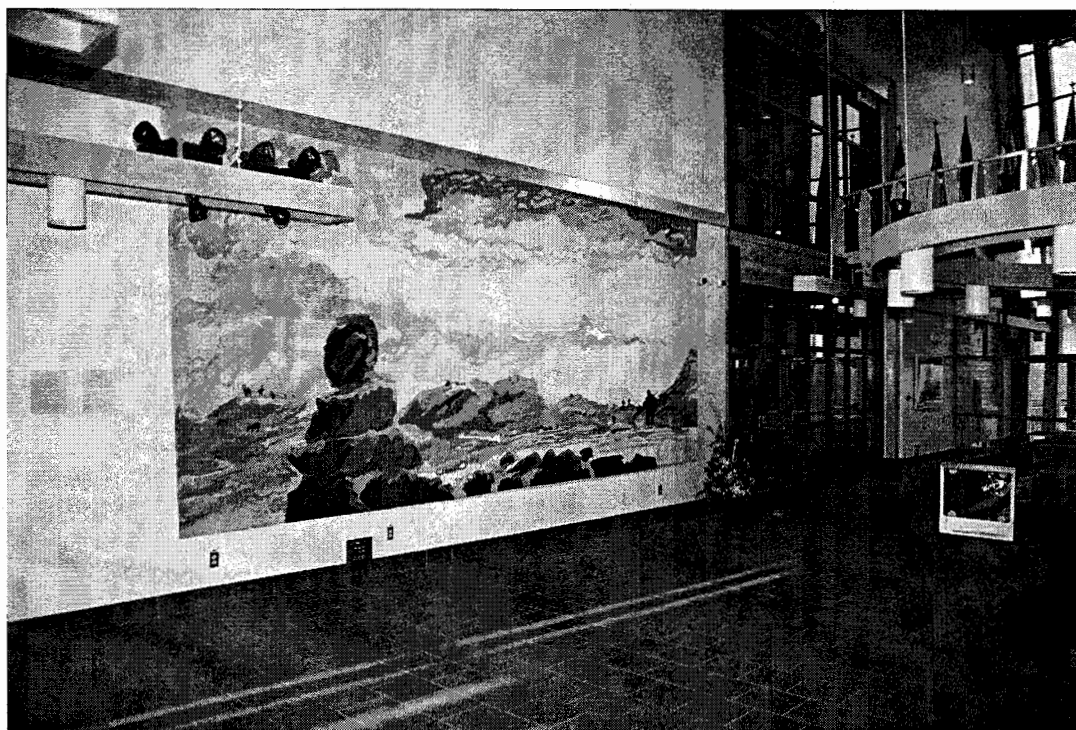
The Uqurmiut Centre for Arts and Crafts stands on a slight rise facing the beautiful Pangnirtung fiord. Its two round buildings resemble tents on the land, tenaciously holding tight to the ground on which they sit. The buildings themselves designed by Iqaluit architect Keith Irving are in themselves reflective of the spirit of collaboration that is Uqurmiut, not only metaphorically but in the way in which they were designed. Irving met with members of the Uqurmiut board and various artists in Pangnirtung over a period of months to come up with a design which satisfied everyone involved; culturally, aesthetically and practically. In an interview with Robert Enright, Rose Okpik and Keith Irving discussed the satisfying process which eventually led to a home for Uqurmiut. In Okpik's words:

We were full of dreams of it. We could see that building right there, even before he (Irving) finished the drawing. We were so happy talking about that building. We were only planning to get a print shop. We didn't realize that we were going to get something that big. It came out of our own culture and we were so happy that finally we were going to show meaning to the people in the community.⁶

Like the buildings, *Back Then* is a bigger-than-life testimonial to what the determination of the people of this small hamlet of twelve hundred people can achieve when they work together. The weavers, now with their third commission under their belts, look forward to more to come. They know that as a team they can weave just about anything and that their strength is in their collective skill and vision. Master weaver Geela Keenainak explains "I don't place importance on myself as a weaver but on the group as a whole. I really enjoy it when we work together on a commission."⁷

Notes

1. Deborah M. Hickman, "Tapestry: A Northern Legacy." In *Nuvisavik the Place Where we Weave*, Canadian Museum of Civilization, McGill-Queen's University Press, University of Washington Press, 2002, p. 49.
2. *ibid.* p. 193.
3. Rose Okpik, From the introduction, *The Pangnirtung Community Print Collection*, Uqurmiut Inuit Artists Association, 1992, p. 7.
4. *Ibid.* p. 8.
5. John Houston, "Art and Soul", *Equinox* No. 81, 1995 p. 81.
6. Robert Enright, from the interview "Shaping Conversation", *Border Crossing*, 1992, p. 91.
7. Deborah M. Hickman, *op. cit.* p. 194.



"Back Then" woven tapestry by the Pangnirtung Tapestry Studio installed in the Nunavut Legislature
(Nick Newberry)