

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SERPENTINITE TO CAPE DORSET CARVERS

### Kiugak Ashoona, a Master Carver

Cape Dorset is located on the south coast of Baffin Island in Nunavut, part of the Canadian Arctic. Kiugak Ashoona was born in 1933 and grew up in camps on southern Baffin Island. He began carving in the late 1940s and has had the longest artistic career of any artist currently living in Cape Dorset. He has received many honours during his career, including a National Aboriginal Achievement Award in 1997 and the Canada Council for the Arts Molson Prize in 1999. In 2000 he was inducted as an Officer of the Order of Canada. A solo exhibition organized by the Winnipeg Art Gallery is the first retrospective study of his artwork. It includes 30 serpentinite sculptures dating from 1952 to 2008, three of which are pictured here.



Kiugak Ashoona  
*Natturalik and Young Eating Fish*, c. 1990 (47 × 62 × 18 cm)  
Green serpentinite stone  
Collection of Alaska on Madison

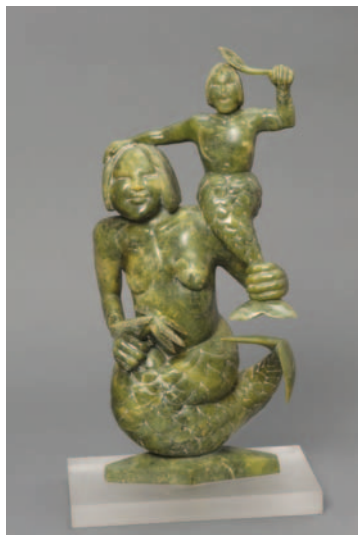
In the beginning, Kiugak made ivory carvings. At that time stone was not considered an appropriate material for carving, and this is revealed by the Inuktitut word for stone, *uqquisiqsaq*, or “material for making pots.” However, in 1951 sculptures began to be exported to southern markets, and the use of stone rather than ivory was encouraged. Kiugak was one of the first of the South Baffin Island Inuit to sell carvings to the Hudson’s Bay Company for export to the Canadian Guild of Crafts in Montreal. He remembers picking up very hard, coarse stone from the shoreline to



Kiugak Ashoona  
*Earth Mother*,  
1966-1967  
(51 × 63 × 18 cm)  
Green serpentinite  
stone  
Collection of John  
Comrie and Salina  
Shrofel

make his carvings. Other people began carving soon after, including Kiugak’s brother, Qaqaq Ashoona, as well as Osuitok Ipeelee and Sheokjuk Oqutaq, who are known internationally for their sculptures.

In 1954 an excellent carving stone was discovered at a site Inuit know as Tatsituuq on southern Baffin Island at Aberdeen Bay. In the 1960s, stone of a nearly pure jade green to a greenish black colour came to define the sculpture by Cape Dorset artists. As the sources became depleted in the 1970s, carvers began quarrying at a large new site at Korok Inlet,



Kiugak Ashoona, *Taleelayuk and Young*,  
1986, (43 × 20 × 15 cm), green serpentinite  
stone, West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative Ltd.

known as Kangisukutaq,<sup>1</sup> located 100 miles east of Cape Dorset. During a Nunavut government project in 2010–2013 (Nunavut Carving Stone Deposit Evaluation Program), it was estimated that up to 1 million pounds of serpentinite stone is produced annually for carvers from South Baffin and Iqaluit.

The Nunavut Carving Stone Program is a project led by the Government of Nunavut’s Department of Economic Development and Transportation in collaboration with the Canada-Nunavut Geoscience Office, the University of Manitoba, and Natural Resources Canada. Its primary goals are to verify the quality and size of hand-mined carving stone deposits and to identify new deposits throughout Nunavut. A total of 45 carving

stone deposits have been defined so far, most of which contain serpentinite. These findings suggest that Nunavut carvers will have sufficient resources of carving stone for many years to come.<sup>2</sup>

**Darlene Coward Wight**

Curator of Inuit Art, Winnipeg Art Gallery

1 Information provided by sculptor Aqjangajuk Shaa to M. A. Beauregard

2 Information provided by M. A. Beauregard, Minerals & Petroleum Resources, Department of Economic Development & Transportation, Government of Nunavut

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