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ARNAQARVIK

ARNAQARVIK
A PLACE OF WOMEN

In 1972, a grassroots craft collective called Arnaqarvik ᐊᕐᓇᖅᑲᐅᖅ (a place of women) started in the town of Spence Bay, Northwest Territories, present day Taloyoak, ᑕᓪᓕᐊᑐᖅ Nunavut. Arnaqarvik was a highly experimental venue for local women to creatively hone their skills and tell their stories through fabric and artistic forms of production. Arctic natural dyes became a hallmark of their identity as a collective.

Within the course of two years, Arnaqarvik women were selling their innovative craftwork and fashion across North America. The craft collective lives on to this day through the business of Taluq Designs.

To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of Arnaqarvik, founders and key members of the group partnered with Pitquhirnikkut Ilihautiniq / Kitikmeot Heritage Society to compile and document the group's legacy of artwork and relationships. The team travelled to Taloyoak in October 2021 with an extensive collection of early Arnaqarvik sewing, fashion and dolls to reflect upon their meaning as a community.

ORIGINS

In 1971, Judy McGrath moved from Newfoundland to the northern community of Spence Bay (current day Taloyoak) for her husband's posting as an Economic Development officer with the Northwest Territories Government. Coming from an artistic background in weaving, natural dyes, macramé, and teaching at St. John's Arts & Culture Centre, she took stock of interesting or unique aspects of the local clothing being worn, making note of each one and asking her friend from the community, Arnaoyok ᐊᕐᓇᐅᔪᖅ Alookee, who had made them. The clothing spoke directly to the creativity and limitations of women's local access to materials; one parka, for example, being embroidered with only one colour as the seamstress either had only enough money for one ball of yarn or had unraveled a sweater and reused the yarn for embroidery. Judy and Arnaoyok fielded the idea of locating funding and sourcing diverse materials for the local women to further extend their creativity through work, play, and experimentation as a group.

The first program was built from a $12,000 federal Manpower grant. There was a little house owned by the Department of Fisheries which wasn't in use, so the group got permission to set up a loom up and craft supplies there in 1972. The project was open around the clock to participants, running on a 24/7 basis to accommodate women with families and other obligations, and those who had not worked at a regular job before. In that way the women could put their time in when it best suited them and their families. The main goal of the project was to have space to experiment and play, to see what was creatively possible. The project produced a wide range of craftwork, including finger-weaving, toys, hangings, and fashion. At this early stage, there was little talk of selling items, just giving shape to what was on peoples' minds. Some of the fashions created during the first workshop

were later modeled in New York and became the basis of the business that followed. The group ran out of wool duffle for clothing towards the end of the project so, with unique ingenuity, the ladies made their own fabric by going through the duffle scraps, cutting the pieces into squares, and sewing them together to make 'new' yardage and a stunning parka.

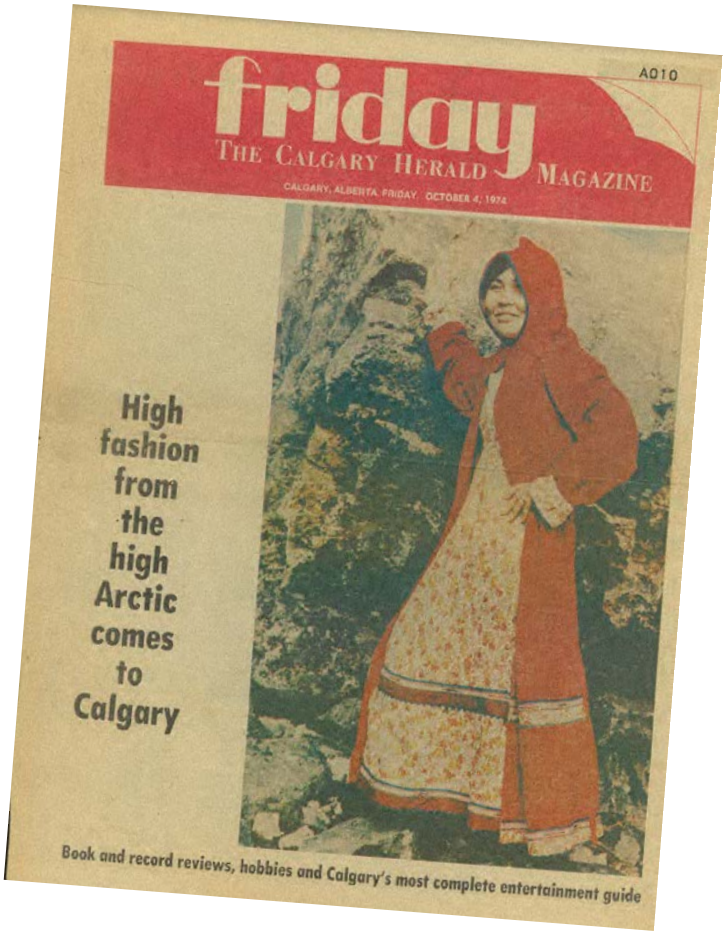
At one point in this process, the Department of Fisheries decided they wanted to use their building again for storage but by this time the ladies had made it their own, taking responsibility for its care. It was their craft shop. After a series of letters by the ladies to fisheries and the government stating as much, the plan to use the building for storage was abandoned. The project continued to operate out of the 900 sq. ft. building with ten women experimenting with natural dyes, sewing all manner of ideas and housing all the supplies needed for the items being made. By the end of the first ten-week program, the women stated they couldn't stop now, as they had even more ideas now than they did when they started. Some of them continued to come to the shop, though they weren't being paid a salary, because they wanted to be there and work together.

A manpower and training grant of $64,000 from LEAP and $30,000 from the NWT government allowed the project to continue in 1973, extending the experimental dye work and training 30 women to make the successful designs from the first project. Some of that funding was used to bring Eva Strickler to Taloyoak to assist with the expanding dye work. Judy and Eva had worked together at the Arts and Culture Centre in St. John's teaching crafts. She was not only a creative and talented craftsperson, but she had a keen sense of science, having worked with one of Europe's largest dye and chemical companies, bringing much needed experience and knowledge to the natural dye work. That same year photographer Pam Harris of Toronto raised the resources to establish a darkroom in the craft shop and taught local residents how to use it.

ON THE RUNWAY

Fashion was a primary focus of Arnaqarvik. Their clothing represented uniquely creative adaptations of Arctic patterns for southern markets and of the highest craftsmanship. The first collection was shown to some markets in the south for evaluation and the response was overwhelmingly positive. The media picked it up, markets in Edmonton, Toronto and Vancouver wanted to carry the work, Calgary wanted a runway fashion show and an opportunity to accompany a Spence Bay carver to his show in New York City gave the fashions unprecedented exposure. Arnaqarvik was asked to design and make nearly 400 outfits for the NWT athletes, dignitaries and fashion show for the Arctic Winter Games in Alaska which also gave the designs impressive exposure across the Arctic. National exposure came from a featured article and photos in The Canadian, a weekend supplement to all the Canadian newspapers.

Over the years, Arnaqarvik clothing was showcased to many different audiences in many different venues from Alaska to Israel.




Curb your
dog
Keep
New York
Clean

NEW YORK

In January 1973 Spence Bay carver artist Karoo Ashevak ᑲᑭ ᐊᓴᖅ had a solo show of his carvings in New York City. He was accompanied by James Eetoolook ᐃᖅᑐᓗᒃ, Arnaoyok ᐊᖏᓐᐅᐅᔪᖅ Alookee and John McGrath ᐅᒥᓕᒃ. Arnaoyok had not be south of Yellowknife before that trip so it was a good introduction for her to the market Arnaqarvik would be working for. All four were wearing Spence Bay fashions and Arnaoyok had taken most of the designs made in the project with her. Photographer Pam Harris, who had visited Spence Bay the year before, also accompanied them, photographing the group in Central Park and around New York, as well as fashion shoots of Arnaoyok wearing the various project pieces at interesting locations around the city. Out in public Arnaoyok received offers to buy the clothes, even from Japanese tourists, but the fashions were prototypes and close to her heart, so she gracefully declined the offers. The group was also scheduled to appear on NBC Today however, unfortunately, they were pre-empted by a sudden news event.

CALGARY

Marmie Hess, a rancher in the Rockies near Calgary, was a passionate educator, art historian, community builder and philanthropist who focused her interest and energy on the Canadian Arctic at a time few others did. She founded the Calgary Galleries in 1970 to showcase aboriginal art and culture and, learning of Arnaqarvik, she travelled to Spence Bay to learn firsthand about the work and to ask if we would create a fashion show of clothing and exhibition of hangings, toys, carvings, and anything else we would like to showcase. She funded the venture and was adamant that all the choices for the fashion show were for Arnaqarvik to make, an artistic freedom the original project was founded upon, but that was often restricted by government and business influences and pressures. Marmie allowed for the excitement and creativity of the earliest project to be relived, this time with a touch of maturity. The ladies concluded the diverse fashion show with an Arctic wedding party with full length wool duffle cape coats and Mother Hubbard dresses and carrying bouquets of Arctic cotton grass and pink sea thrift. Marmie arranged for extensive news coverage of the two-day fashion show and exhibition and provided very useful staff feedback of visitor comments for all the exhibition items. Much of the fashion collection stayed with Marmie who later showcased it at a Jerusalem Hilton fashion show in Israel.

CREEDS

Having established a market with the Inuit Gallery in Toronto to carry Arnaqarvik hangings and dolls, the gallery staff suggested Creeds as an option to carry the clothing. Creeds was a Toronto family-owned high-end women's clothier founded as a furrier in 1916. While the store was known as much for its luxurious interior as its fashions and furs, its owner, Eddie Creed, also had a strong connection to the land through farming, so he was enthusiastic about the Arnaqarvik fashions with embroidered, woven and crocheted natural dye trims. For each coat and parka, we handmade a booklet of photos and information about Spence Bay, the artist who made the garment, the photographer, and the natural dyes, including pressed plants. The relationship was synergistic and collaborative so when Creeds moved to their new location on Yonge Street, they dedicated three of their most prominent street windows to Arnaqarvik fashions and duffle polar bears and Eddie provided a dedicated space in the new store to carry hangings, photographs and anything else we wished to send to them, while earning Creeds exclusive rights to carry Arnaqarvik-made articles in Toronto.

ARCTIC WINTER GAMES

In 1974, Arnaqarvik was provided with its first large contract order: 335 garments for the Northwest Territories athletes at the Arctic Winter Games to be held in Anchorage, Alaska. Three different styles of outfits were to be created for athletes, along with dressy embroidered duffle coats for attending officials and a fashion show. All of this to be created in the three month window before the games began. The seamstresses of Arnaqarvik gamely stepped up to the challenge and the next plane into Taloyoak brought in 1000 yards of melton, 20,000 yards of trim and silk fringe and 15 new sewing machines. The production deadline was ultimately achieved, in large part because of Maudie Ookitook who managed to make one garment every day through several months.

BUSINESS & PRODUCTION

In 1972, most of the employment opportunities in Spence Bay were only available to men and many residents were on Social Assistance. Arnaqarvik became a business venture for the women of the community by turning their skills and creativity into an economic source for them. The women were proud to have their own money and buy things for their families. Arnaqarvik also created an economy for local children, who could collect plants and lichens for dyeing wool in exchange for money. It also provided some income for men who carved caribou antlers for hangings and buttons and buckles for garments.

In the fall of 1972, Arnaqarvik opened as a tentative business in the Department of Fisheries house. At the time, a group of ten women worked with Arnaqarvik creating prototype ideas. The following summer many women and children were involved with collecting plants and lichens for dyes after which a group of 30 women participated in training to produce the successful designs from the previous fall. Many of those designs were created by Arnaoyok Alookee and she became the manager/instructor.

While the initial focus was on producing clothing – mostly coats, Mother Hubbard dresses, and hangings—a small number of women continued with creating new designs through a Canada Council grant obtained to keep fresh ideas flowing into the business. By late 1973, the group received its first major contract to design and produce over 400 outfits for the Northwest Territories athletes and dignitaries going to the 1974 Arctic Winter Games in Alaska.

The program also taught local women the skills of entrepreneurship. Eva Strickler had visited Cuba in 1972 and observed how people who worked extra hard were rewarded by getting time off to go to school. Learning was a badge of honour and accomplishment. The Arnaqarvik group applied the same method to their adult education program. With funding and cooperation from businesses in the south Arnaoyok was able to apprentice in the retail trade, interacting with customers and learning the costs of running a business, as well as visiting the duffle manufacturer and fabric distributors, bringing this knowledge and experience back to share through the education program. When new equipment was purchased and delivered to Arnaqarvik, an instructor was included to teach the proper use and care of the machinery. Arnaoyok also taught the other members about money. She cut out 100 paper pennies and explained what a dollar was made of. The students learned that when they got paid the amount they receive might vary due to quality of work or other factors. They learned why a garment or sculpture they had made cost many times the amount in the southern stores than what they were paid and through adult education, the group was able to reduce mistrust of the 'down-souths'. A Board of Directors was created for Taloyoak Takoyaksak, and the project became the first non-profit organization with their constitution written in Inuktitut. The organization was legalized in Yellowknife, and when the women knew that Taloyoak Takoyaksak belonged to them, they took appropriate ownership. The women were so concerned about overhead cost (heating and utilities were referred to as "the lights") that they took their tea breaks with the lights turned off to save money.

As the residents of Spence Bay had gradually moved from the land only within the previous ten years, the last family moving in 1971, it was a huge leap for the residents to understand the ways of the south and business and a source of pride that Arnaqarvik and Arnaoyok were able to help bridge that chasm for a better understanding of their new world.

DYES FROM PLANTS AND LICHENS

Judy had worked with only a few plants and one lichen in Newfoundland before moving to Spence Bay. The words of a botanist, “You will never obtain dyes from this environment!”, as he departed on the plane she arrived on, left her feeling discouraged. But hope springs eternal and when her children brought her beautiful purple saxifrage from a rocky ridge in the early summer, she tried it for dye and was stunned by the intensity of colour. The snow eventually left the landscape even though it turned out to be the coldest summer in 50 years. With the curiosity and assistance of local children, Judy found patches of different plants located around Spence Bay and tried them for dye. Residents followed the progress with interest, noting the results of the plants that had been tried and then bringing her other kinds of plants not available close to Spence Bay – from their fishing camps and travels on the land. The McGrath home became a lab and the family had to search for dinner among the dye pots and postpone baths due to skeins of yarn soaking in the bathtub. When the first craft project started up in the fall of 1972, the dyed yarns from the summer were made available to the participants. Their unique, experimental adaptations in softly textured blanket weight wool duffle combined very well with the natural colours from the land. Artist Eeteemunga ᐃᑎᒪᓐᓇᖅ began using them for her embroidered hangings and one day added a fuzzy marsh to a hanging. She showed Judy how she had picked apart the yarn, reducing it to fleece, laid it on the duffle hanging and proceeded to anchor it with stitches of complementary yarn. Judy had also dyed fleece along with yarn all summer but hadn’t seen an application for its use until she presented it to a delighted Eeteemunga. Soon all of Eeteemunga’s hangings, toys, vests and life size caribou and seal were entirely covered with this beautiful blend of naturally dyed fleece and yarn, a style uniquely her own.

With training funding in place for a summer of plant and lichen collecting and drying, and the winter for dyeing yarn, the 24/7 principle was once again applied so that the old and new ways could be more compatible. With uluit, scrapers and pocketknives in hand, aided by 24-hour daylight, participants could camp, fish and seal hunt while sharing their plant and lichen collecting and drying hours with other camp members if they wished. From town, they could take their children along for the day to play endlessly on the tundra and help with collecting, providing also a means for the children to make some pocket money. The importance and independence of this to the children was recalled even 50 years later by several of the grown children who are now grandparents. Nearby groups came together for tea breaks, enjoying the gatherings as much as in the days past.

"I could pick flowers for dyes all summer. Even if I didn't like the colours, I would like to pick flowers and plants because it's the most fun we've ever had here. Even the kids are already asking when we are going out picking flowers because they like to play near the water and making fires for fixing tea. It seems like everyone is looking forward each year now to going out and picking flowers. The most fun to pick is 'Popcorn' lichen. It isn't easy to pick, and it is hard to find them but they're the best to find. It makes purple dye which is our favourite colour. At first we couldn't see the lichen at all because they seem hidden on the rocks but now we find them. You have to go all over to get them. We pick all different lichens and it's as if we've never seen them before. If the colour comes out nice, we go back and pick more."

— Arnaoyok Alookee

Fortunately, there is a unique aspect of Arctic plants that intensifies their colours, perhaps it is the 24-hour sunlight and short, intense growing season. A small paper bag of Arctic poppy flowers dyed 19 ounces of yarn, the tiny Mountain Aven yielded intense colour at all stages of growth, and it actually tested positive for fluorescent. Generally speaking, one in twenty-five lichens will produce purple, pink or red dye; however, in Spence Bay we found about one in six produced such colours, including an unprecedented blue. As new plants or lichens were collected, they would be tested, and the colour discussed among the women to determine if more of it should be collected. All of the quantity dyeing was done during the long, dark winter months, simmering on the stove, while participants worked on their crafts and cherished happy memories the plant and lichen aromas brought back to them.

ARCTIC DYE PRIMER

Judy McGrath

During six years of research on arctic dyes I have not been able to find more than three references to dyes ‘used north of the tree line—driftwood bark in Greenland to colour leather, soil near Coppermine to colour leather, and animal blood used to stain fish bones for jewe1ry. In Alaska birch, willow and alder trees have been used for tanning leather, which also dyed the leather a golden colour or brown, but that was done within or very near the tree line. Indians of the Mackenzie area and south made many colours from a large variety of plants and trees and there are a few women who still make some of their own dyes. Almost all plants. lichens, mosses, seaweeds and woods in the arctic can be used successfully for dyes by two basic dye methods and many variations within those two methods.

The most common method is cooking with hot water, used for nearly all flowers, leaves, branches, roots, mosses, seaweed and many lichens. The other method is one of fermentation with ammonia and is used with some lichens, usually to obtain red, pink, purple and blue dye. In the hot water dye method, the colour is extracted from the plant or lichen by simmering it from 20 minutes (flowers) to 24 hours or more (heavy branches or roots). The fibre, usually wool, can either be simmered with the plants or lichens or simmered in the dye water after the plants or lichens have been strained from the water. Well washed fibre can be used with lichens, heather, labrador tea, rhododendron, berry bushes, wintergreen, and branches and roots of willow and birch to obtain good colour without any chemical treatment of the fiber because these nlants contain tannic or other acids which mordant the colour to the fibre. However, for the colour to stay on the fibre from flowers, grasses and leaves it is necessary to treat the fibre with a common mineral called alum (sulphate of aluminium and potassium) before dyeing the fibre. Other minerals can be used on the fibre to produce a change in the original colour. The most commonly used minerals are copper (to make green, olive or brown), iron (to make dark green, dark brown, grey and black), tin (to brighten the colours and push deep yellows towards orange), and chrome (to make rich, warm browns, golds, and rusts). Nowadays, the minerals used are available in fine, soluble, crystal form but years ago when all dveing was done by hand and usually done at home, the effect of these minerals was obtained only by using pots made of tin, copper, and iron and simmering the fibre itl these pots for many hours. Natural dyes can be traced back in history about 5000 years. Commercial dyes, as we know them today, were discovered in 1856.

The fermentation dye method with ammonia is a slow, smelly process but the colours are well worth the trouble. This method is usually used on lichens. Each lichen is made up of several different acids, some of which react to hot water and others, if present, which react to ammonia. Diluted ammonia is added to crushed lichen and with the help of frequent stirring the fermenting solution will begin to turn purple or red within a week or so if the right acid is p~es-.t in that lichen. The fermenting solution is kept at room temperature from 6 weeks to 3 months and stirred frequently. At the end of that time untreated fibre is added to the solution cold or the solution is heated with the fibre and simmered for a few hours.

Often it is worth the trouble of separating the various parts of plants (leaves, flowers, branches, roots) for they usually give different shades or colours of dye. Willow, for instance, gives a light green with catkins, bright yellow with leaves, golden tan with branches, red-brown with the roots, and the tan and brown can be changed to grey with iron, dark green with copper, or rich browns with chrome.

Fibres to consider for dyeing, aside from wool yarn and fleece (as it comes from the sheep) which are the most commonly used fibres, you might try polar bear fur (cut from the hide), musk ox qiviut (the lightest part which is cream colour), fur from dog, white fox, arctic rabbit, winter ptarmigan feathers or feathers from other white birds.

When doing dyes it is a good idea to keep a note book of the plant used, when each dye material was collected, and what you did to get each of the colours in the yarn samples. The dyed samples and notes will be valuable for many years arid especially helpful if you are planning projects for which you wish to dye the fibre. A well-documented notebook will quickly tell you which plants or lichens you will need to collect, which time of the summer, and what methods to use to get the colours you want.

Pressed plants and lichens are useful in many ways. First of all, they can be used in the dye notebook along with the dye samples; secondly, they can be used in a related course of study into general science, what makes trees stop growing at a certain point, how do plants survive in such short, cool summers as the arctic, plant distribution, etc.; and thirdly, they can be used in craft work and made into stationery, place mats, pictures, etc. Pressing plants is not difficult but requires lots of newspaper to do a good job. A press requires a sturdy wooden frame or piece of plywood (for top and bottom) the size of the newspaper (folded) and quite a few pieces of cardboard which can be cut from cardboard boxes and twine or straps long enough to tie around the press. Plants should be checked in about 4 days and the newspaper in the press changed if the plants are still damp. It takes 7 to 10 days to dry the pressed plants.

The finished dyed fibre can be worked into a number of crafts. Embroidery, crochet, finger weaving, loom weaving, knitting, needlepoint, braiding worked into duffle socks, pictures, belts, toques, pillows, quilts, rugs, mitt harnesses, etc.

DOLLS AND PACKING ANIMALS



Most of the women of the Arctic began sewing as children, making simple dolls from scraps to play with, to learn about life and to hone their sewing skills in preparation for keeping their family clothed as adults. Some enjoyed their doll-making so much that they continued to evolve their own unique style and continue making dolls to sell. Some are exquisitely traditional in fur (Eliktaq ᐃᓕᒃᑖᖅ), some are modern-traditional (Peeteekootee ᐲᑎᒃᑰᑎ, Arnaoyok ᐊᕐᓇᐅᔪᖅ Tuluralik, Teresa ᑎᕆᓯ Totalik), some have unique features such as all faces, including babies, carved of antler (Keerook ᕿᕈᒃ), while another is wildly abstract (Arnapsakak), all charmingly describe Arctic life and culture.

The Inuit culture includes stories of humans that could change into animals and then back into human form. Peeteekootee, a very talented artist, was already making soft sculptures of 'Bird Woman' and 'Nuluajuk ᓄᓗᐊᔪᒃ the Sea Goddess' so she was asked if she would try her imagination and skill on an Arctic hare in an amauti or 'packing parka,' carrying a baby hare – as humans do for the first three years of their baby's life. Discussions about the idea at the craft shop were hilarious but Peeteekootee produced an exquisite hare complete with every seam and pattern piece of the packing parka replicated in miniature. She then tried her hand at making a raven and an owl, the two birds that are in the Arctic year around, along with other creatures of the land and sea. Two legends also became part of the series: Nuluajuk, Goddess of the Sea and Thunderwoman. As she designed each packing animal or legend, she taught other ladies how to make them and as each packing animal was completed the maker embroidered her signature in syllabics on the piece. In a conversation fifty years later, Peeteekootee's son ᐸᒥᐅᖅ recalled how he and his sister as children tried hard not to laugh at their parents (their father was a talented carver with a very different artistic style from Peeteekootee) as they argued over how the packing animal should look! All of the packing animals in the series have been registered under the Industrial Design Protection Act.

Peeteekootee also designed a duffle polar bear which was submitted to Design Canada 1974 Craft Awards, and it won first place in the toy category of the competition.



PHOTOGRAPHY

Photographer Pam Harris came to Spence Bay from Toronto as a friend and visitor in 1972 and was surprised by how many local people had cameras but had to wait 2-3 months for their processed photos to return by mail from the south. She thought it would be helpful, if the local people were interested, to be able to control their own processing and she applied to Kodak Canada, National Film Board, Canada Council and the Government of the Northwest Territories for basic equipment and chemicals. She then returned to Spence Bay in 1973 to set up a darkroom and teach anyone who was interested on how to use it. The craft shop was already overcrowded so the bathroom became the darkroom, and we did our best to manage with a 50-gallon water tank, sharing water with the natural dye process, and sometimes carrying buckets of prints or film to the school or elsewhere for rinsing. Fourteen people learned the process of developing film and printing photographs. As an instructional guide, several participants helped make translated cards with diagrams for the photo processing procedures. The school principal, Peter Hyde, stepped up when help was needed after Pam had to leave. He knew the darkroom process and had made sure a fully equipped darkroom was included in the new school being built. He also ordered the school's new darkroom equipment ahead of the school's opening so that it could be used at the craft shop. The darkroom project received contracts to document the natural dye work and the building of the new school as well as requests from publications and government agencies. Ootookee Takolik ᐅᑦᑐᖅ and Selena Tucktoo ᑯᒃᓗ were often called upon to photograph special order fashions before they were sent in the mail and to print photos for garment information booklets for the craft shop. Together they printed 40 photographs of their work which travelled with Ootookee to Toronto to be shown at "Crafts from Arctic Canada" exhibition at the TD Place during the summer of 1974. A short time later Rudi Strickler came to Spence Bay and worked with Steve Alookee ᐊᓗᖅ on photography, including the making of a documentary film. In 2017 the Exhibition and Publication of Photographs class of Ryerson University researched the darkroom project of Spence Bay, producing a publication and exhibition at Ryerson Image Centre in Toronto.

Upon learning about the exhibition and her collection held at the Art Gallery of Ontario Selena Tucktoo responded: "Oh my gosh, I wondered if my pictures were good enough to put on the wall. I started going back to 1974 thinking, "oh, we had fun," and some of them must've been pretty good if you were interested in them. I'm very happy to know the pictures are being put to that use a bit. I was very honoured when I heard about it." And reflecting on their importance to the community she added, "We look a lot at old pictures, even before the darkroom, and we talk about them—how we lived long ago. They tell a good story, and we talk to these younger people about them, and they are pretty interested in the pictures we used to take and how interesting it was to develop them, what kind of chemicals we had to use and how long they had to be in each chemical."

TUSARNIQTUT PROJECT

The Tusarniqtut Project was initiated by Judy McGrath in 1993 in partnership with the Spence Bay Craft Co-op members Bessie Ashevak, Neeveovak Marqniq and Anaoyok Alookee. The project was self-funded and developed as an educational resource to introduce Inuit children to the Netsilingmiut language and traditional Inuit stories. A series of twelve stories were selected by the group and were self-recorded on cassette tapes in 1993. The contents were transcribed into Netsilingmiut script by Janet McGrath, and also translated into English. In 1994, the team developed a series of sewn textile dioramas based on each story. Both the process and final product of these images were self-documented through photography. In 1994, the Inuit Broadcasting Corporation (IBC) offered to provide formal documentation for the Tusarniqtut Project, and in the same year produced professional audio and video recordings of Bessie Ashevak, Neeveovak Marqniq and Anouyok Alookee narrating the stories.

THE LOST NEEDLE

Bessie Asheevak

ᒥᓯᔪᑎ ᐊᓱᐅᔨᐅᓪᓴᖅ

ᐅᓂᖏᖅᑐᖅ ᐱᐊᓱ ᐃᓱᓕ

ᐊᖏᓐᓄᑦ ᒥᖅᔪᑎᒥᓂ ᓴᐅᓱᒪᓕᐅᓴᖅ ᖃᓂᖅᑐᐊᓗᒃ. ᖃᓂᓐᓂᓂᖅ ᖃᓂᖅᑎᑦᓗᒍᖅ ᑐᓗᓴᖅ ᖁᓕᐅᑦᑐᖅ ᑎᖅᒥᐊᖅ ᑕᒃᓴᓂ. ᑕᑦᓱᒪᔪᖅ ᐊᖏᓐᓄᑦ ᑐᓴᓱᓪᓗᒍ ᐊᐱᓚᕆᖅ, “ᑐᓗᓴᓴᐃᐊᖅ ᕿᒃᓱᒪᒃ, ᒥᖅᔪᑎᑕᓗ ᖁᐅᔨᒪᖅᑭᓂᕐᓂᐅᐅᒃ?” -ᒪᒍᔪᖅ. ᑭᐅᑦᓗᓂ “ᓇᐅᒃ! ᓇᐅᒃᓴᓂᓗᒍᖅ. ᑕᑦᓱᒪ ᐊᖏᓐᓄᑦ ᓱᓂ ᑐᖏᓪᓗᑦᓱᐊᖅᑕ, “ᓇᒋᑦᑦᓴ? ᓇᒋᑦᑦᓴᓂᓂᐅᔪᖅ. ᑕᖅᓇᔪᖅ ᑐᓗᓴᖅ ᑭᐅᑦᓗᓂ, “ᑦᑦ ᐃᓗᐊᓂᓗᒍᖅ ᑦᑦ ᐃᓗᐊᓂ, ᑦᑦ ᐃᓗᐊᓂ, ᐃᓅᖅᓂᓂ!” ᐃᓅᖅᓂᓂᐅᓂᓴᓂᓂᐅᔪᖅ ᐅᖅᓯᖅᑐᖅᑎᒃᓴᒪᔪ ᖃᐅᒥᐅᑦᔪᖅ ᐊᖏᓐᓄᑦᑎᑦᑕ ᐃᓗᐊᓂ ᓅᓂᖅᑐᓂᓂᑦᑕ ᑕᑯᓂ ᑭᓚᒪᓂᐊᓂ ᓴᓚᒪᓂᒥ ᑕᑯᓂ ᒥᖅᔪᑎᓇᓗᔪᖅ ᑕᖅᓇ ᑕᑯᓂᓐᓂᖅ. ᑕᔪᓚᒥᐅᔪᖅ ᓱᓇᐅᑯᑯ ᐅᓇ ᐃᓕᓐᓂ ᑐᑭᓯᐅᓕᖅᓴᓗᔪᖅ ᐅᖅᓱᓪᓗᒍ.

A woman had lost her sewing needle and was diligently looking for it. As she was looking for it, there came a raven overhead. The woman called out to the raven, “O big raven up high, perhaps you know where my needle might be?”

But the raven called back, “No! Not a chance!”
The woman called out to the raven again, “Where is it??? Where is it????”

Then the raven crowed , “In the door way! In the door way!”
The woman called up to the raven again and asked, “Just what part of it? Just what part of it?”

The raven repeated, “In the door way! In the door way!” and then added, “Yeeeehh, in the center! Yeeehh, in the center!” With that the raven led her to the spot.

There was a bend in the ledge and the woman looked inside. There in the corner she found her precious needle. She looked at it and commented on how nicely made and fine the needle’s eye


canadian sewing supply

IMPACT

From the very beginning the atmosphere at the craft shop was open, trusting, safe and supportive. As a group, the women spoke out to save the craft shop, lobbied for getting the old school once the new one was built and through discussions around health and social services concerns and issues, they initiated changes in both areas. They even had an unusual influence on a federal election outcome. A fellow from Inuvik, Wally Firth, was running but didn't have the funds to visit the communities so he sent a flyer in the mail to everyone explaining he was born in the Arctic, had hunted, fished, and trapped, and had worked for the Hudson Bay and really felt he could represent the NWT well. The women were impressed that 'he is one of us' and wondered how they could help Wally get elected. We talked about the power of communication, talking with friends, neighbours, relatives, going on local radio, writing notes to other communities. Their efforts resulted in Spence Bay voting 98% for NDP Wally Firth despite the Liberal candidate, while canvassing for votes distributing crates of oranges throughout the town.

Many people who trained at Arnaqarvik or were influenced by being with their mothers while they were working for Arnaqarvik, did go on to work for the government or other organizations. Rather than being protective about keeping their trained personnel, the Arnaqarvik team felt that what they were doing was for the good of the whole community, and that all skills are valuable and transferable – that the craft shop training would elevate confidence and knowledge for the community as a whole. They were proud whenever any of their women or young girls achieved a position with another organization or the government, developed their own craft business, or went on to teach at the school. One, Leona Aglukkaq, was elected as an MP representing Nunavut and became Canada's first female aboriginal Minister of Health and later Minister for the Environment. Leona's mother, Nilaulaaq, was one of the founding members of craft shop; Leona was a little girl clinging to her mother's amauti that carried her baby brother Willy.

The craft shop did stop for a time after 1986, but the skilled women and portfolio of designs were revived again in 1995 through the creation of Taluq Designs. During that closure period the copyright to their Packing Animals had been transferred by territorial government to a craft shop in Holman Island (now Ulukhaqtuuq). With the renewal of Taluq Designs the women wrote a letter to the women in Holman requesting the copyright be returned, they agreed—adding they were relieved—and Taluq Designs has since added to the Packing Animals series.

Arnaoyok Alookee stated: "My husband doesn't mind if I go different places for my work. Some of the women here have trouble with their husbands if they go out to work. It's better if they can work at home when there are still babies around. The women are afraid to lose Judy because most of the women really like what they do and are making more money than their husbands. Some women buy skidoos from the money they make sewing. If they make things properly, we will buy it. In this community they wanted to do handicrafts for a long time but had nobody to help them."

THE ARNAQARVIK PROJECT

Pitquhirnikkut Ilihautiniq / Kitikmeot Heritage Society is a Cambridge Bay based heritage organization dedicated to the revival of Inuinnait language and culture. In 2012, the organization received a large donation of clothing and artwork from Eva Strickler, an anthropologist and key figure behind Arnaqarvik's establishment. In 2017, they also began working with Arnaqarvik co-founder Judy McGrath to document her extensive collection of the group's sewing, craftwork, prototypes and ephemera. The confluence of these two major collections gave rise to ideas for celebrating Arnaqarvik's 50th anniversary.

The Arnaqarvik project began as a partnership between Pitquhirnikkut Ilihautiniq and two of the original collective's founders—Judy McGrath and Arnaoyok Alookee--to celebrate the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Taloyoak women's craft movement. The primary goal was to document and re-connect Taloyoak community to two comprehensive private collections of crafts, clothing, and marketing ephemera highlighting Arnaqarvik's production. Through workshops, interviews, a digital database/exhibit and fashion show, this project makes collections accessible to celebrate and build upon the story of their making, meaning, and impact on local lives. The community documentation, voices and memories resulting from this project will serve as the foundation for future exhibitions of Arnaqarvik artwork.

The Arnaqarvik program focused on four distinct activities:

LOCATING COLLECTIONS

Most artwork created by Arnaqarvik was purchased by individuals outside of Taloyoak. Since 2019, we have worked with public and private collectors across North America to compile a searchable database containing documentation and digitized images/metadata on all known sewing and craft collections produced by Arnaqarvik.

MAKING COLLECTIONS ACCESSIBLE ONLINE

We have created a customized digital platform providing access to all Arnaqarvik records in our database. This platform, accessible through the project website at www.arnaqarvik.ca, encourages user contributions of content and metadata to existing collection records. Users can search through collections and easily upload their additional text, audio or video records. We continue to add new content to the Arnaqarvik platform, and to refine its development.

BRINGING COLLECTIONS HOME

We conducted a week long workshop in Taloyoak designed to showcase and document Arnaqarvik objects. About 250 artworks from the Judy McGrath and Eva Strickler collections were transported to Taloyoak for four days of programming with local schoolchildren, Elders and community members. This work included interviews, lectures and sessions exploring first-hand memories of Arnaqarvik and its importance and impact in the community. A fashion show and photoshoot by Inuk photographer Cora DeVos helped to visually narrate the community's profound relationships with Arnaqarvik artwork.

CREATING A COMMUNITY-DEFINED LEGACY FOR ARNAQARVIK

The Arnaqarvik project focuses on documenting the memories, voices, and stories from Taloyoak community members in preparation for a 50th anniversary exhibition. It is important that the narrative for this anniversary be defined by individuals involved in and impacted by Arnaqarvik's half century of production. We held multiple workshops and recorded interviews with Taloyoak artists, Elders and community members to shape a community defined story regarding the importance and legacy of this artistic venue.

SHARING COLLECTIONS

Of utmost importance to Arnaoyok and Judy was the sharing of the Arnaqarvik collections with the community of Spence Bay/Taloyoak and creating a permanent digital record that can be shared with the world. In order to accomplish that sharing, funds were raised by key members of the group partnering with Pitquhirnikkut Ilihautiniq / Kitikmeot Heritage Society to compile and document the Arnaqarvik's legacy of artwork and relationships into a dedicated website. The team was then able to travel to Taloyoak in October 2021 with an extensive collection of early Arnaqarvik sewing, fashion and dolls along with recording and photographic equipment. The collection of about 250 pieces was made available to all the students from the school in the afternoons and to the adults and particularly interested students in the evenings. Together they explored the work of their relatives, often with sketch books and cameras in hand, and photographer Cora DeVos was on hand to photograph them wearing the garments or, in the case of Peeteekootee's son, holding armfuls of his mother's packing animal designs. The evenings were also an opportunity to share the preliminary results of the website and get feedback on its use from the community. There was also sharing from the community through interviews of their memories of Arnqarvik and sharing their precious items from those early days for us to document and add to the website.

COMMUNITY PHOTOSHOOT

Picturing the past can often be difficult to do.

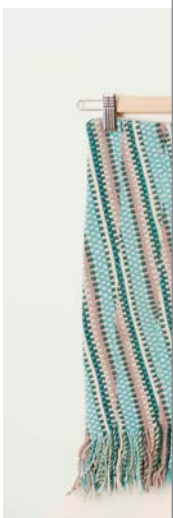
In order to best capture the merger of historical collections and contemporary community, the Arnaqarvik program hired Inuk photographer Cora DeVos to document the proceedings of our Taloyoak workshop. As part of this work, Cora organized a fashion show and photoshoot to better visualize the ways in which Arnaqarvik's artwork continues to resonate in the community. For several evenings, residents of Taloyoak were encouraged to try on and model collection clothing from their mothers, grandmothers, past relatives, and loved ones, breathing new life and meaning back into these outfits. The results speak profoundly to the deep relationship between past and present, and the ability of artwork to built and maintain these connections.

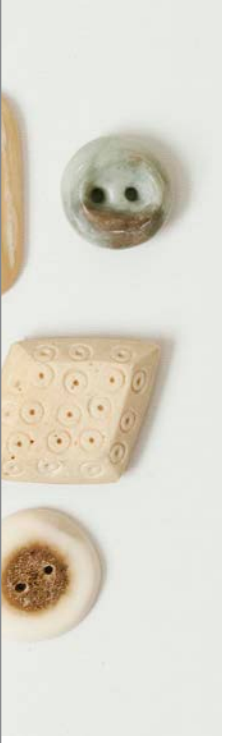
COMMEMORATION

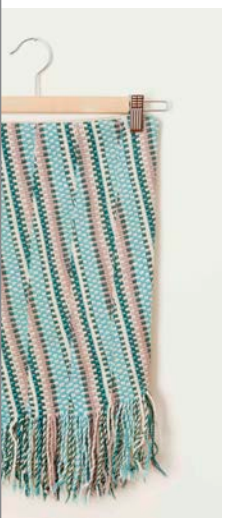
The 50th Year Anniversary Commemoration of the Arnaqarvik project is most certainly about the art works of the early period of time 1972-1985. It involves collecting, recording, digitizing, and making freely available as many images as possible for the community and those interested to see. However, it is also about recording, documenting and exploring the story behind the story—the legacy of people.

The Arnaqarvik project, from its beginnings and from the ways it has morphed over the past fifty years, has paralleled much change in the community. The project emerged at a time when Inuit in Taloyoak were still viably semi-nomadic. Thus, in its first years Arnaqarvik was a place where people began to see how their land-based skills were ideally suited to a land-based craft economy; people could hunt and live on the land and also use those same skills in a wage economy, filling a void that the fur trade crash of the late 1960s created. Arnaqarvik saw the birth of the first settlement council (later to evolve into a Hamlet) and within the walls of Arnaqarvik women shared their questions about what voting was, and they conveyed what they heard to their husbands returning home with fish, seals, and caribou from trips on the land. Within the walls of Arnaqarvik the craft women embraced the importance of their voices and then voiced the needs of their families in the newly establishing settlement. Along with award winning crafts and international attention and interest, within these walls women were also sharing their thoughts and questions on how to prepare some of the strange foods that the Hudson Bay Company sold (that they could now buy), how to resolve conflicts with the health and social services systems, who to speak to about such-and-such, and how their lives in this new situation differed so dramatically from that of their parents and—to how they themselves were raised. Inuit in this region had about 15 years to adjust to what the rest of Canada had 200 years to adjust to, in terms of technologies, changing economies and lifestyles. And behind the scenes of the outsized success of this tiny space with limited means was a community of women and their families—determined to engage with the new economy and the arts world on their own terms. Their resilience was that of hundreds of generations. Their vast skills and innovation were born of necessity, isolation and the strength and continuity of their ancestors.

As north meets south in Arnaqarvik, through the dedication and friendship of Arnaoyok and Judy over five decades—along with the friends they drew in at the time and along the way, the work of the community in integrating worlds that are apart—traditional Inuit way and Western technologies and systems – has continued down to grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great great grandchildren. Some of the influences came way too fast, like English-only TV, English dominant school curriculum, pollution, the impacts of climate change, and the weakening of first language Inuktut—the main vehicle of Inuit knowledge transmission in an oral culture. Yet the craft items of the women and men reach out to the generations over the decades with heartfelt precision like letters home: we are resilient, we are engaged, we are here. The threads, the colors, the artistry, the stories, the shapes all speak of the relationships among people, and—whatever new materials, shapes, venues, and practices arise, there is now a record, a visual memory, that bridges the ancient past with the 1970s project, and there is a hopscotching over time to today—a means of reflection and celebration. With this collection of Arnaqarvik works presented in the 50th Year Commemoration, there are threads that weave through the decades to joyously celebrate a people, a community, their vast creativity, and their resourcefulness in a changing world.







For more information and to explore the collections, visit
www.arnaqarvik.ca

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