

The history of a culture

Sarah Treleaven, Financial Post Published: Saturday, July 18, 2009

In 1965, Allen Lambert, then chairman of Toronto-Dominion Bank, sent a committee of 11 experts from across the country to assemble a vast collection of Inuit art -- then a largely unknown body of work -- to display in honour of Canada's Centennial in 1967.

What The original collection consisted of almost 1,000 (since refined to just over 600) sculptures, prints drawings and ceramics (from artists including Johnny Inukpuk and John Tiktak) that capture a unique snapshot of isolated northern communities. The work is extremely intricate and portrays scenes of subsistence existence, depicting everything from hunting and birth scenes to the smooth skin of a seal's head. "This kind of work doesn't exist anymore," says TD curator Natalie Ribkoff. "They were living off the land and were extremely good with their hands."

Showpieces Bear (1964, pictured below) by Pauta Saila is a smooth, simple stone-and-ivory carving of a powerful-looking polar bear baring his teeth, and it's a favourite among those employees who keep a close eye on the markets for all of the obvious reasons. "If any of the bankers could run off with one piece, it would be this one," says Ribkoff.

Starving Ethiopian (1987) by Tutuyea Ikkidluak is one of only a handful of pieces acquired for the collection since 1967. The sculpture represents a male famine victim in Sub-Saharan Africa, demonstrating the influence of television and the shifting expressions of a culture with increasing access to more modern influences.

Where Many of the pieces have been integrated into working spaces, but the Inuit collection is concentrated in a two-storey public gallery -- the first corporate gallery in Canada -- in the lobby of 79 Wellington St. W. in Toronto, part of the TD Centre. Approximately 10,000 people visit the gallery each year -- including many school groups and tourists -- free of charge.

How Individual pieces and whole collections were acquired throughout the Arctic and southern Canada from 1965 to 1967, and the only provision placed on Lambert's experts -- who ranged from curators to professors -- was that the works they select be completed. They worked without a formal budget, and even bought from individual collectors to ensure adequate representation of early works, which typically include many smaller, delicate carvings.

Why Lambert was interested in raising the profiles of both Inuit art and the bank, and he arranged for a cross-country tour of the collection shortly after it was assembled. The purpose of and pride in the collection has taken on more of a public-service component in the intervening years -- both for employees (who, says Ribkoff, have often been influenced to make their own investments in Inuit art) and the public. TD makes an effort to lend to public institutions, including museums and universities, and also maintains a permanent travelling collection of approximately 20 pieces. The onus to share is obvious, says Ribkoff: "It's the history of a culture."