

Distinct Carving Styles of the Canadian Inuit

If you think Inuit art of the Canadian North is all about polar bears and walrus – think again. The Canadian Arctic area covers 777,000 square miles and includes thousands of artists whose styles vary as much as the names of their Inuit communities.

However, artists rarely work in isolation. Living in small settlements, common styles and themes have emerged. This article provides an overview of what makes each region's sculpture style special.

Sanikiluaq ▪ Kuujjuaraapik ▪ Inukjuak ▪ Puvirnituk ▪ Akulivik

Sanikiluaq sculptures are popular with art collectors and tourists who favor wildlife sculptures. Birds and marine animals are customary subjects, as well as domestic and camp scenes. In keeping with the wildlife theme, the style is naturalistic, though some artists favor a stylized, angular look.

An unusual argillite stone, which ranges from light green to almost black, is another reason that Sanikiluaq sculptures are so popular.

The **Kuujjuaraapik** style is similar to Sanikiluaq, but includes more domestic and camp scenes. Artists sometimes employ fantasy imagery. Kuujjuaraapik artists use the argillite stone from Sanikiluaq (when available) or grey Arctic Québec stone.

The sculptures of **Inukjuak** are more realistic, featuring domestic and hunting scenes. Mythological imagery is rare. The sculptures have a static, calm feel – wide and curvy.

In the past, Inukjuak artists used inlays like ivory in their sculptures, but this is no longer done. However, they still use a rich green mottled stone quarried from the local area. When an artist uses grey stone, they often darken it.

The **Puvirnituk** and **Akulivik** artists have moved between the two settlements, so these two areas have a similar style. The subject matter – hunting scenes and animals – is considered more masculine. The sculpting style is realistic with an emphasis on naturalistic detail.

Salluit ▪ Ivujivik ▪ Kangirsuk

Like Inukjuak, **Salluit** and **Ivujivik** artists favor domestic and hunting scenes. The style is also more similar to Inukjuak, but this wasn't always the case. At the start of the Inuit art movement in the 1950s, artists here developed a Romanesque-like style that had a monumental, static feel – think large folds of drapery over equally large, bulky bodies. However, this style has died out.

The folk art quality of **Kangirsuk** sculptures comes from subject matter that's rustic and a bit off-the-wall. The artists sometimes blacken the grey stone, which gives the pieces a quaint effect.

Cape Dorset ▪ Kimmirut

Cape Dorset has a large pool of talented artists with varied styles. However, two common themes are:

- Love of naturalism
- Wildlife and the spirit world

Perhaps because of Cape Dorset's long history in the Inuit art world, the style is more showy and dramatic than other settlements. Artists like to work the stone – which ranges from green shades to white dolomite – until it's highly finished. They also take pride in creating pieces that are impossibly thin or delicately balanced.

Like Cape Dorset, **Kimmirut** artists use a variety of stone. Art collectors particularly prize the apple-green or cream-colored shades. While the animal subjects are depicted with a naturalistic style, the smooth, flowing lines and highly polished stone create an elegant effect.

Iqaluit ▪ Pangnirtung ▪ Qikiqtarjuaq

What's different about the sculptures from the **Iqaluit** settlement is that animal subjects – bear, caribou, and musk-oxen – are often in unusual or action poses. And these pieces are even more eye-catching because of their exaggerated proportions. However, Iqaluit does share Cape Dorset's love of elegant lines and dramatic presentation.

Because this area was the administrative center of the former Northwest Territories and because it attracts Inuit from all over the Baffin region, the style is more varied than other settlements.

The **Pangnirtung** artists also favor a dramatic style, though this usually emerges in the larger sizes of the pieces and the subject matter of mythological or shamanic images. Whalebone is a popular medium.

Pangnirtung artists have moved to **Qikiqtarjuaq** and vice versa, so these two communities share a similar style. Qikiqtarjuaq artists also use whalebone, as well as a stone that ranges from light green to dark green or black.

Clyde River ▪ Igloolik ▪ Hall Beach

The **Clyde River** area is famous as the center of whalebone carving in the Arctic – and also for the touch of humor and whimsy artists employ in their sculptures. Subject matter can range from dancing walruses to simple domestic and hunting scenes.

The **Igloolik** style is more similar to Pangnirtung than Clyde River. Artists here use a larger scale in sizes and emotional intensity. However, the stone – which is dynamically

carved – isn't highly polished, so the end result is more realistic and natural. Occasionally, artists use a light green stone from northern Baffin.

Hall Beach also produces powerful, moving works similar to Igloolik, though some artists are known for a softer-edged style that's similar to Clyde River.

Taloyoak ▪ Gjoa Haven ▪ Kugaaruk ▪ Repulse Bay

Taloyoak is another community that uses the whalebone medium – with large, spectacular results. For a long time, work from this area was dominated and influenced by the artist Karoo Ashevak. His work has a dreamlike quality that's also quirky – haunting, but amusing. But as artists began using an assortment of stone and concentrated on developing their own particular styles, a wider variety of styles have emerged.

Gjoa Haven has also been influenced by the Taloyoak style in the human and spirit expressions and distortion of faces and bodies. However, artists are eager to experiment with different media like whalebone, ivory, and musk-ox horn, and they have emerged as dominant in their own right.

The artists still use stone, of course. In the past, they imported a pale green stone, but they now use a local hard stone that ranges from dark green to black.

Kugaaruk and **Repulse Bay** are renowned for small, delicate works in stone, ivory, or antler. The tradition of creating miniatures goes back hundreds of years, when talented Inuit created them as gifts for missionaries and whalers.

Baker Lake ▪ Arviat ▪ Rankin Inlet

Baker Lake has two distinguishing characteristics:

- It's the only inland community in the Canadian Arctic.
- It's famous for large, dynamic sculptures of hunters and animals carved from hard Keewatin stone.

Though the hunter and animal subjects are realistic, the artists portray them abstractly. You'll also see animal-human transformations depicted more often. On the other hand, female artists from this area favor a more delicate style, with domestic scenes like mothers and children.

Working with a hard, local steatite, **Arviat** artists employ little detail and economy of line with their sculptures. It's different from the elegant, flowing style of other communities, yet just as emotionally powerful.

In the Arviat area, family and maternal scenes are the most popular. However, artists here have experimented with antler carvings and produced a variety of whimsical birds and animals, as well as games and hunting scenes. The antler carvings have a folk art quality.

Rankin Inlet is like Iqaluit – a regional center with a wider variety of styles. The artists here work with the dark Keewatin stone, a harder grey stone, or ivory.

Kugluktuk ▪ Holman

The **Kugluktuk** artists have created a realistic style that often depicts traditional camp life, but they incorporate wood, copper, whalebone, or antler material into their sculptures. Some sculptures are of igloos – with detachable tops. These more practical pieces have a descriptive and static feel, as opposed to pieces that feature action scenes. However, the Kugluktuk community also produces sculptures of animals, birds, and humans.

Like Clyde River, the carvings from **Holman** are done in whalebone and feature animal and hunting scenes. This area has also recently experimented with carvings in musk-ox horn that transform beautifully into graceful, long-necked geese.

Summary

Now that you're familiar with the variety of styles in Inuit sculptures, we invite you to visit or return to the [InuitArtPod home page](#), where you can [browse our online gallery](#) or [read more articles](#).

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