

The Lore of Inukshuks

An Arctic Heritage in Stone

Inukshuks, the mysterious Inuit-made sentinels of the tundra, seem to capture the indomitable Arctic spirit. They're fast becoming a symbol of the North, used both in art and in logos and other commercial designs. But the real messages of inukshuks have a fascination of their own, as artist Angus Cockney discovered when he began a search for his heritage. Angus Cockney

It was early July. The sun's heat rose and blurred the tundra. The wind was brisk and the sky was blue. My slow, steady pace was a reminder of my middle age. Sweat was beading down my forehead as I paused to catch my breath before my next uphill stride. I glanced at the summit: it was not far.

I turned and looked down at the expanse of tundra, water and ice. I was high above Iqaluit, the administrative centre of Canada's Eastern Arctic. Feeling rested, I took my next step uphill. I wondered what lay beyond the crest.

On the top of the hill, I had a 360-degree view of this vast region. In Frobisher Bay, I saw boats waving in and out of the ice-floes. To the south, the yellow buildings of Iqaluit Airport contrasted with the dark brown colour of the tundra. I had no difficulty locating the abandoned Distant Early Warning site to the west. Its radar monoliths stood tall, like skyscrapers. Once needed to monitor the Cold War, the station now must defend itself against the Arctic elements.

I looked north. There was something in the distance, high on another hill. It looked like man, but it didn't move. Curiosity compelled me to hike across the tundra for a close-up look.

My discovery was a pile of rocks, which the Inuit called an inukshuks. In a land that is almost featureless, it is not difficult to spot these figures from a distance. Being from the Western Arctic, I had no knowledge then of what this inukshuk might mean. I turned and made my way back to Iqaluit. Although I had gained physical enjoyment from that hike, my mind was restless. I wanted

answers. I'd seen pictures of inukshuks in magazines, and on posters, and in a variety of artworks.

I returned to Yellowknife. Standing in the airport while everyone grabbed his or her luggage in haste, I stood still and pondered artist Ken Kirby's huge wall mural of an inukshuk. I wondered if Ken knew the meaning of what he had painted.

Two weeks later, I was commissioned to erect a large inukshuk to be placed outside Webster Galleries in Yellowknife.

As I began construction of the inukshuk, spectators both taunted and applauded the project. People stopped, talked, and disappeared. Kids stared, at times with expressions that asked, "What's that?"

Then I met Simeonie Aulaqiaq, an Inuk from Pangnirtung on the east coast of Baffin Island. Simeonie had read in the weekly newspaper about my "Project Inukshuk." Simeonie talked to me about the traditional knowledge behind the inukshuks. I listened intently as Simeonie, in a soft voice, began to explain.

"The interpretations of inukshuks differ slightly from region to region. In the Baffin region, the traditional meaning of an inukshuk has to do with direction. You have to take into account the location of an inukshuk, whether it is on land or near the coastline.

"An inukshuk on land with two arms and legs means there is a valley, and at the end of the valley, you are able to go in two directions. The same inukshuk near the sea means there is a channel, and at the end of the channel, you will be able to go in two directions.

"An inukshuk on land with no arms, but both legs, means there is a valley that allows for a one-way passage. The same inukshuk by the sea means there is a channel that allows for one-way passage.

"An inukshuk with no arms and legs is simply a guide for a hunter in unknown territory. When you stand beside one of these, you should be able to see the same kind of inukshuk somewhere in the distance."

I interrupted Simeonie. “The most common interpretation I’ve heard about inukshuks is that they were used in the hunting of caribou,” I said.

Simeonie smiled and nodded. “When hunting caribou on open tundra,” he said, “the Inuit erected a series of inukshuks with both arms and legs. These inukshuks would be about 100 yards apart. Men would be waiting at the end of the line, while women drove the caribou along the line of inukshuks. The women were careful not to enter the line, because this would upset the spirits. Children would stand beside the inukshuks to provide some movement because the caribou, at times, sensed the inukshuks were not people.”

I mentioned that the last explanation was an example of unity in the Inuit culture. In order for the Inuit to survive, there was no room for individuality. Furthermore, the use of inukshuks is an example of the resourcefulness of the Inuit. I thanked Simeonie for the insights he had provided.

Having never experienced our traditional lifestyle, I must learn about Inuit culture by reading books and watching videos. My education makes me strong in today’s society, but has resulted in a weakness in my own Inuvialuit culture. For example, I am unable to speak my own native language. Learning about inukshuks has given me a greater understanding of our people.

ANGUS COCKNEY is an artist and businessman who is based in Yellowknife for much of the year. His specially created inukshuk can be seen in front of Webster Galleries in Yellowknife.