

Living in Lake Harbour, a tiny isolated community on Baffin Island, for four years was very fulfilling in many different ways. The numerous events that I experienced there have left me with a great respect and admiration for the Inuit, and their way of life. In addition, it left me with a great affliction; a love of soapstone carvings. I say "affliction" because the need to attain a beautiful piece of art became paramount in my life. I found myself becoming obsessed with what other people would refer to as "a hunk of rock."

It all began two weeks after my arrival to this snow-covered tundra community. I was doing my shopping at the local Hudson's Bay store, since the weekly plane had just brought in the order of partially frozen vegetables, to which we had become accustomed, having lived in other remote northern locations. A beautiful young woman with softly Oriental features and deeply bronzed skin approached me to inquire if I would be interested in seeing a walrus tusk that her father had carved. Not knowing what to expect, but nonetheless interested in finding out, I said "Sure!" She then introduced herself as Elisapee Itulu and said she would bring it over after work.

Around seven o'clock that evening, Elisapee arrived, quite exhausted, protecting the tusk beneath her duffle parka, much as a mother protects her baby from the elements. As she disrobed I realised why her breath was short- what she exposed was a tusk

that was fifty centimeters high mounted on a finely carved polished slab of greenish black soapstone that measured fifteen centimeters in height. In all this scrimshawed masterpiece weighed no less than twenty-five pounds and Elisapee had carried it about half a kilometer. As I inspected it and discovered the fine detail in the faces of the Inuks, the minute feathers so perfectly placed on each of the owls' wings, the whiskers that brought the seals to life, and the realistic gait in the stance of the lone caribou, there was no question that I would buy this carving. The fact that it cost the equivalent of two weeks' work did not affect my decision. From then on, I was hooked!

Within the next two weeks, I was invited to Elisapee's father Davidee's house, who, I soon discovered, was the last scrimshaw artist in the Baffin region. His own personal history, which he recounted to me through his son, Jimmy, as translator, and over many cups of tea and bannock, was no less interesting than his original carvings. He had been born "on the land" as everyone who was over fifty years of age in the Baffin was, and he and his family followed the caribou herds until settlements were formed and their nomadic lifestyle was discarded. His family settled in Cape Dorset, a community on the south western shore of Baffin Island, and one that is now famous for incredibly talented artists. When a Carvers' Co-operative was formed there in the 1960's, he was one of the contributing artists and many of his

original carvings are now displayed in the Museum of Man in Ottawa. He was especially proud of that accomplishment since he felt it made "hadlunas", better known to you as non-Inuit of southern Canada, realise that the Inuit were making an important contribution to the rest of the country. They did not just live in their igloos and eat raw meat in the frozen north, as he had heard many southerners believed. *i.e. whites?*

Getting to know Davidee heightened my curiosity in the soapstone carving industry that was the economical backbone of Lake Harbour. As the days grew warmer with the approach of spring, I would take afternoon walks and would often hear the tapping of the wedge-shaped hammers on rock. If a carver saw me from within the confines of his plywood carving shack, he would motion to come in. Once inside, I would watch in admiration as an animal would emerge from what appeared to be a large chunk of rock. Often there was no more communication than the feelings our eyes expressed, since many of the older carvers could neither speak nor understand English. They all found it very entertaining that I was so intrigued by their work but also, I learned later on, were flattered by my interest. There was one carver, Simeonie Aqpiq, that I found very interesting and with whom I was able to communicate quite well. Between his broken English and my limited Inuktitut we managed to carry on some very stimulating conversations and he taught me a lot about the carving history of

Lake Harbour in the process. He is an avid carver and hunter and is world known for his jet-black and pure white carvings of animals in motion. He told me of the soapstone quarry one hundred kilometers down the coast where everyone collected their stone and also of a smaller outcropping he had discovered ten kilometers from town, that is unique to Lake Harbour.

Six months or so after my arrival to Lake Harbour, a job at the local Co-operative came up and I was nominated for the position. I was excited with the prospect of working with the artists and the incredibly beautiful carvings they produced but I was also apprehensive about accepting it because I had seen my predecessor, Kolola, often being scolded for offering too little money for a carving. One thing I had in my favour, was that I was not related to anyone there as Kolola was but something I had going against me was that I was a woman in a strongly male environment. Ultimately my love of the carvings won out and I accepted the job. The next months were full of what I like to term as "learning experiences", as well as many very positive experiences. I discovered that it didn't matter that I was an outsider; if a carver was upset about a price, she yelled at whoever was responsible for it! By the same token, if she was pleased about it you received praise throughout the community. (I use "she" since one woman comes to mind as never being satisfied and always yelling at me!) For the most part, we were able to

negotiate a fair price for all involved and nobody would have to feel cheated.

Now I was in my glory! From morning to night I was surrounded by these carvings that I was so obsessed with. The option to buy some for myself was a continual temptation and often my entire paycheque would be devoted to my addiction! Ivan was incredulous the days I arrived home empty-handed and began to question whether we hadn't been better off financially, before I began this job. I insisted that they were a "good investment" to make him feel less anxious about the situation, and that seemed to calm him, although I knew all the time that I would never part with any of them. Our house became a favourite after-store-hours stop for carvers of all ages because they knew I always kept money on hand for those late-night sales!

Four years later, when we decided to move to a new location I had a collection of carvings by every person that carved in Lake Harbour at the time that I lived there. Each one has a special meaning to me, as I remember the situation in which I bought it and the individual that carved it. Now Ivan is even grateful for my obsession, although I can't say that I've converted him yet!

Johanne this is excellent. Because of your specific experiences and your writing ability I think you should at least consider the possibility of trying to get published. I wouldn't be surprised if there were some *books & magazines that* were *→*