

ANNIE POOTOOGOOK'S  
NORTHERN REVOLUTION

ACI's newly released *Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work* reveals how one artist transformed the world's understanding of Inuit art



*Holding Boots*, 2004, private collection



This week, we celebrate the launch of *Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work* by Nancy G. Campbell with excerpts from the publication that highlight key moments in the artist's biography. The life of Pootoogook (1969–2016) tells an important national story, and her career marks a pivotal shift in the world's understanding of contemporary Inuit art. Tragically, Pootoogook's meteoric rise was cut short when she died in 2016, but the legacy of her art remains epic. Here is a look at key moments in her career.

**Sara Angel**

Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

## GROWING UP

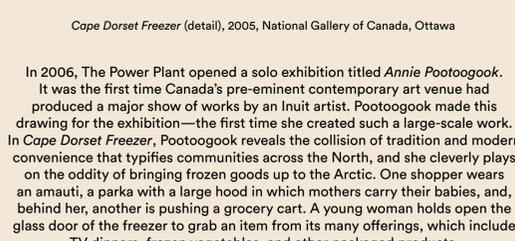


*3 Generations (detail)*, 2004–5, Collection of John and Joyce Price

This early work by Pootoogook references how she grew up in a dynasty of artists. Born in 1969 in Kinggait (Cape Dorset), Nunavut, an isolated hamlet on Dorset Island off the southern coast of Baffin Island (Qikiqtaaluk), she was the third youngest in a family of ten children. Pootoogook grew up near one of the most important centres of art production in Canada, the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative. Both of her parents, Napachie Pootoogook and Egeyvudluk Pootoogook, were artists, as was her grandmother, Pitseolak Ashoona, and uncle, Kananginak Pootoogook.

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## RAPID RISE



*War Is Over (detail)*, 2003, private collection

As early as 1997 Pootoogook's drawings caught the eye of Jimmy Manning, who was then an art buyer at the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative, though many of her peers doubted their commercial viability. Works like *War Is Over*—about the 2003 Iraq war as broadcast via TV news footage—do not visually reflect the dominant subject matter of Inuit art at that time (primarily scenes from nature or stories from Inuit mythology). However, following Pootoogook's first solo show in 2001 at Toronto's Feheley Fine Arts, her career skyrocketed.

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## IN THE SPOTLIGHT



*Cape Dorset Freezer (detail)*, 2005, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

In 2006, The Power Plant opened a solo exhibition titled *Annie Pootoogook*. It was the first time Canada's pre-eminent contemporary art venue had produced a major show of works by an Inuit artist. Pootoogook made this drawing for the exhibition—the first time she created such a large-scale work. In *Cape Dorset Freezer*, Pootoogook reveals the collision of tradition and modern convenience that typifies frozen communities across the North, and she cleverly plays on the oddity of bringing frozen goods up to the Arctic. One shopper wears an amauti, a parka with a large hood in which mothers carry their babies, and, behind her, another is pushing a grocery cart. A young woman holds open the glass door of the freezer to grab an item from its many offerings, which include TV dinners, frozen vegetables, and other packaged products.

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## A NEW VISION FOR INUIT ART



*Dr. Phil (detail)*, 2006, private collection

By 2006, Pootoogook had cemented her reputation as an Inuit artist with a singular vision. This work, one of her most famous, reflects the profound impact television had on Pootoogook's generation and remote community; in 1972, when Pootoogook was just three years old, the Canadian government launched the *Anik A-1* satellite and Southern broadcasting arrived in the North. On the screens in Pootoogook's interiors, she frequently shows media personalities—such as Dr. Phil—or popular programs such as *The Simpsons*. With *Dr. Phil*, Pootoogook acknowledges two cultures colliding and sometimes merging. She also invites Southerners to watch Northerners watching Southerners, igniting a playful engagement with the contemporary world.

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## GLOBAL RECOGNITION

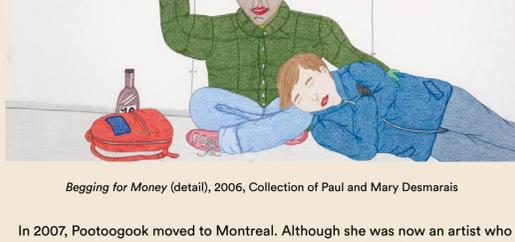


*Balvernie Castle (detail)*, 2006, Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, Halifax

Following Pootoogook's successful solo exhibition at The Power Plant, she was selected to be part of the Glenfiddich Artists in Residence program, located in Dufftown, Scotland. Invited to join emerging and award-winning artists from all over the world and to engage with the historical Scottish setting, Pootoogook drew *Balvernie Castle* in her signature style. Alive and rich in colour, the grass surrounding the decaying in stone is a pure bright green, straight from the pencil crayon box. The stones that make up the castle are red, blue, orange, yellow, grey, and white, each outlined in black Fineliner pen and stacked one upon the other to form the walls. This work is the largest and most detailed of the ones that Pootoogook completed while away from Canada for the first time.

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## SOBEY SUCCESS

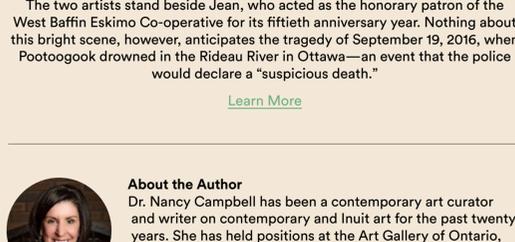


*Sobey Award 2006, 2007*, Collection of Paul and Mary Desmarais

Here Pootoogook shows herself in a transformational life moment: winning the prestigious Sobey Art Award in 2006. Until this date, the Sobey Art Foundation, which selects individuals from regions across Canada as nominees for its prize, lacked a classification for artists from Nunavut and the North. However, the curatorial team created a new regional category, "Prairies & the North," to allow for Pootoogook's inclusion as a nominee. In *Sobey Award 2006*, Pootoogook shows herself at the award exhibition at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. Many—*including Pootoogook herself*—were happily surprised when she was pronounced the winner. As she told *Nunatsiqaq News*, "I was excited.... They like my work, so I was happy." She was thirty-seven years old.

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## DOCUMENTA



*Composition (Hands with Praying Figure) (detail)*, 2006

A year after Pootoogook won the Sobey Art Award, she attracted global attention at *documenta 12*, the famed international art exhibition in Kassel, Germany. Documenta exhibitions are held every five years, and the theme of the 2007 exhibition was to bring "unexpected concurrences" to light by exploring the relationships "between works of art from different decades and cultures in which similar formal patterns have emerged." The curators were looking for artists whose works showed the "migration" of art forms across temporal and cultural boundaries culminating in the art of our postmodern world." Works like Pootoogook's *Composition (Hands with Praying Figure)*, made her a perfect fit.

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## MOVE TO MONTREAL



*Begging for Money (detail)*, 2006, Collection of Paul and Mary Desmarais

In 2007, Pootoogook moved to Montreal. Although she was now an artist who had won global acclaim and her work was commanding higher prices than ever before, her new city became the setting for a difficult time in her life. Pootoogook struggled with substance abuse and abusive domestic relationships. Just a few months after her arrival, Pootoogook's financial situation declined; the funds she received from the Sobey Art Award had been spent, shared, or taken. The work *Begging for Money* comments on the challenges and pain of urban poverty.

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## OTTAWA YEARS



*Untitled (Kenjuak and Annie with Governor General Michaille Jean) (detail)*, 2010, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

After a brief return to Kinggait, Pootoogook moved to Ottawa in January 2008, where she continued to confront personal difficulties and her participation in the art world came to a near halt. An important exception, however, occurred in 2009, when Pootoogook met Canadian Governor General Michaëlle Jean alongside Kenjuak Ashevak. *Untitled* is one of the last complete drawings done by Pootoogook. It shows the artist standing beside Ashevak, who was almost forty years her senior and regarded as a pioneer of modern Inuit art. The two artists stand beside Jean, who acted as the honorary patron of the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative for its fiftieth anniversary year. Nothing about this bright scene, however, anticipates the tragedy of September 19, 2016, when Pootoogook drowned in the Rideau River in Ottawa—an event that the police would declare a "suspicious death."

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## About the Author

Dr. Nancy Campbell has been a contemporary art curator and writer on contemporary and Inuit art for the past twenty years. She has held positions at the Art Gallery of Ontario, the University of Guelph, the McMichael Canadian Art Collection, and The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery. Commenting on why she wanted to write *Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work*, Campbell remarks, "Annie Pootoogook challenged the definition of contemporary art and changed the way Inuit art is received. Only a few artists have profoundly affected the way art is understood in Canada: Annie is one of them."

**Nancy G. Campbell**

Author of *Annie Pootoogook: Life & Work*

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