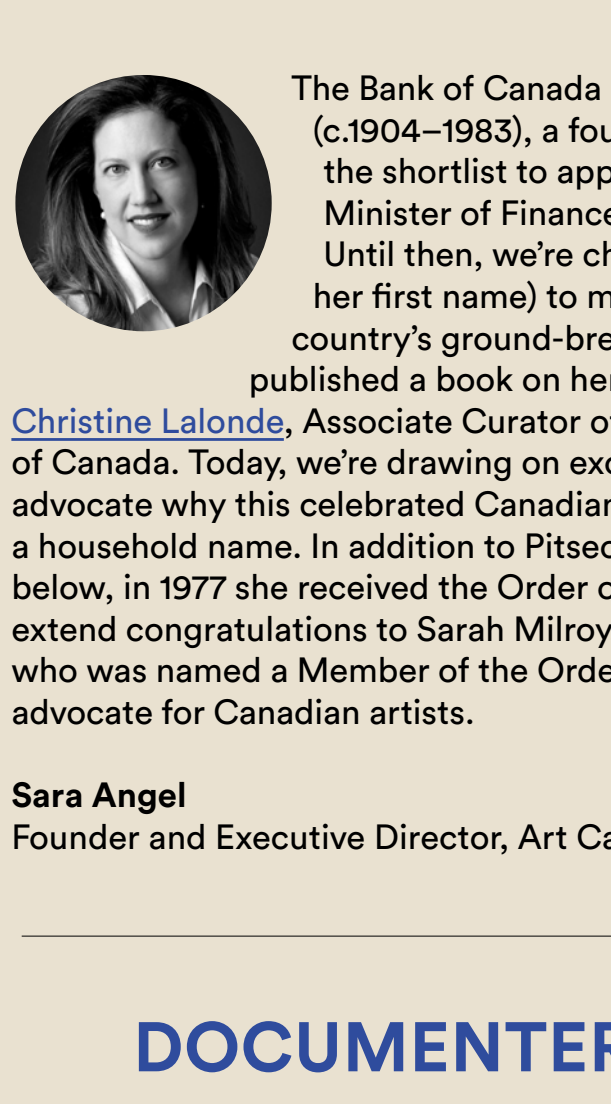
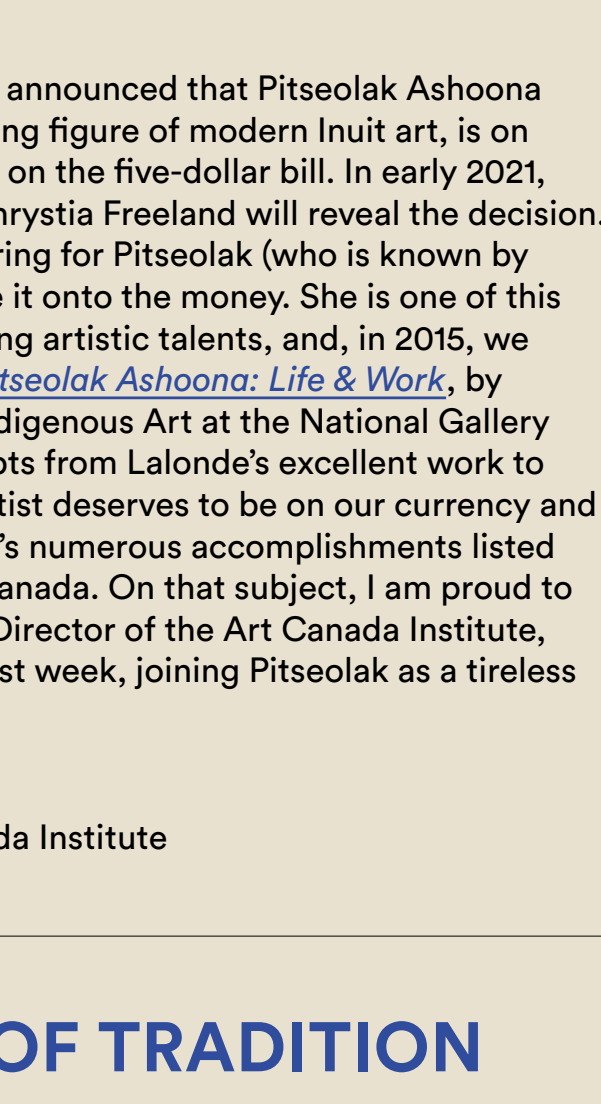


ON THE MONEY PITSEOLAK ASHOONA

The great Kinngait (Cape Dorset) artist Pitseolak Ashoona is a contender for being the face on our next five-dollar bill. As the Royal Canadian Mint deliberates on this decision, we're offering our reasons why she deserves the honour.



Pitseolak Ashoona, *The Eyes of a Happy Woman*, c.1974, National Gallery of Canada



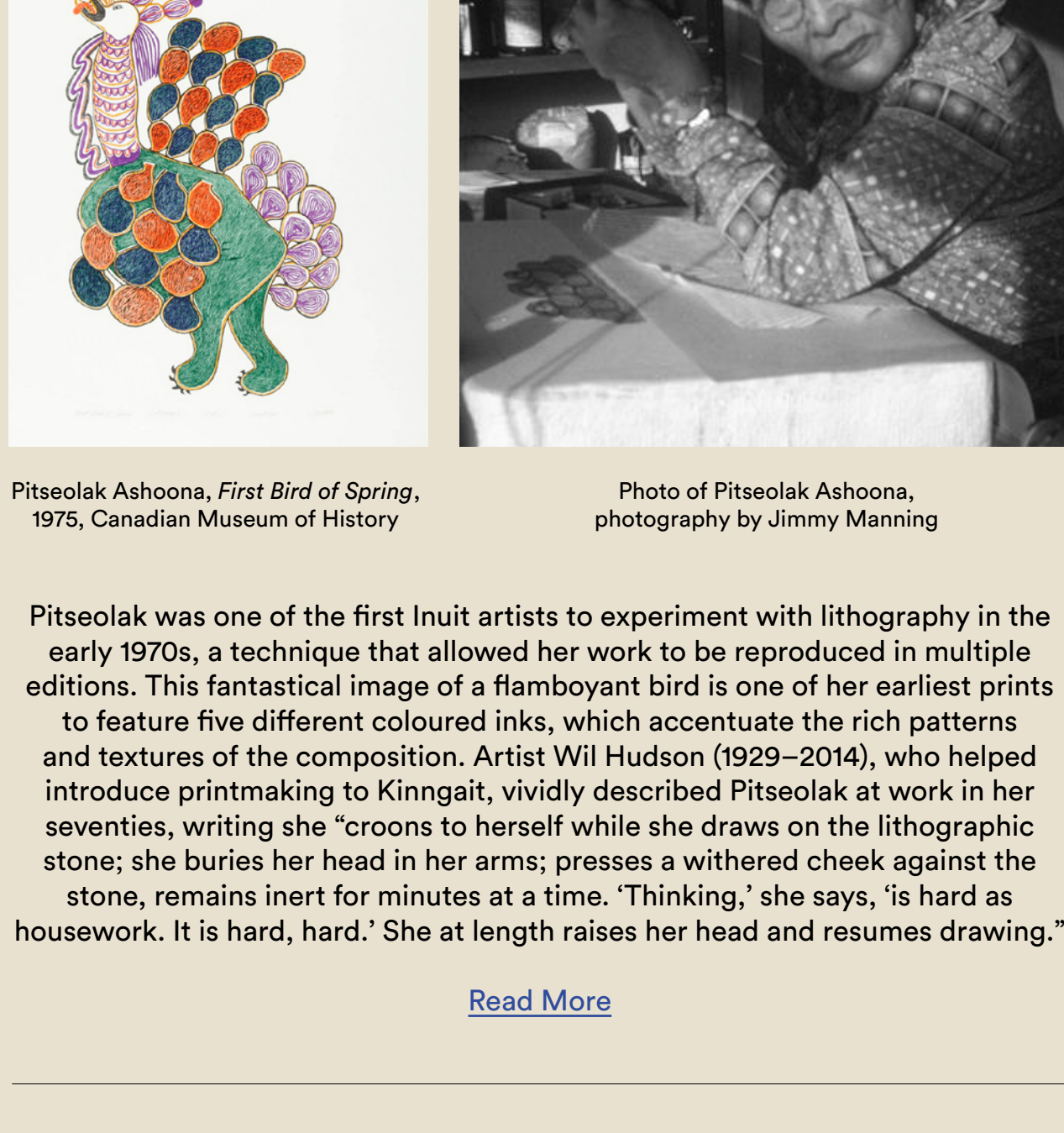
Pitseolak Ashoona in Cape Dorset, 1968, photograph by Norman Hallendy



The Bank of Canada has announced that Pitseolak Ashoona (c.1904–1983), a founding figure of modern Inuit art, is on the shortlist to appear on the five-dollar bill. In early 2021, Minister of Finance Chrystia Freeland will reveal the decision. Until then, we're cheering for Pitseolak (who is known by her first name) to make it onto the money. She is one of this country's ground-breaking artistic talents, and, in 2015, we published a book on her, *Pitseolak Ashoona: Life & Work*, by [Christine Lalonde](#), Associate Curator of Indigenous Art at the National Gallery of Canada. Today, we're drawing on excerpts from Lalonde's excellent work to advocate why this celebrated Canadian artist deserves to be on our currency and a household name. In addition to Pitseolak's numerous accomplishments listed below, in 1977 she received the Order of Canada. On that subject, I am proud to extend congratulations to Sarah Milroy, a Director of the Art Canada Institute, who was named a Member of the Order last week, joining Pitseolak as a tireless advocate for Canadian artists.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

DOCUMENTER OF TRADITION



Pitseolak Ashoona, *Summer Camp Scene*, c.1974, National Gallery of Canada

Born in the first decade of the twentieth century, Pitseolak lived in semi-nomadic hunting camps throughout southern Qikiqtaaluk (Baffin Island) until the late 1950s. In the masterfully rendered *Summer Camp Scene*, c.1974, she records her vivid memories of the joy and liveliness of camp life and the traditional practices, knowledge, and values it sustained. Amidst a hilly landscape, a family is preoccupied with daily activities, while friendly travellers emerge from the valleys in the background. Seated at the entrance of tents are two women enjoying an idle moment of conversation. Meanwhile, a man equipped with a harpoon is on the lookout for sea animals at the top of a mount.

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INNOVATOR OF TECHNIQUE



Pitseolak Ashoona, *First Bird of Spring*, 1975, Canadian Museum of History



Photo of Pitseolak Ashoona, photography by Jimmy Manning

Pitseolak was one of the first Inuit artists to experiment with lithography in the early 1970s, a technique that allowed her work to be reproduced in multiple editions. This fantastical image of a flamboyant bird is one of her earliest prints to feature five different coloured inks, which accentuate the rich patterns and textures of the composition. Artist Wil Hudson (1929–2014), who helped introduce printmaking to Kinngait, vividly described Pitseolak at work in her seventies, writing she “croons to herself while she draws on the lithographic stone; she buries her head in her arms; presses a withered cheek against the stone, remains inert for minutes at a time. ‘Thinking,’ she says, ‘is hard as housework. It is hard, hard.’ She at length raises her head and resumes drawing.”

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A GIFT FOR HUMOUR

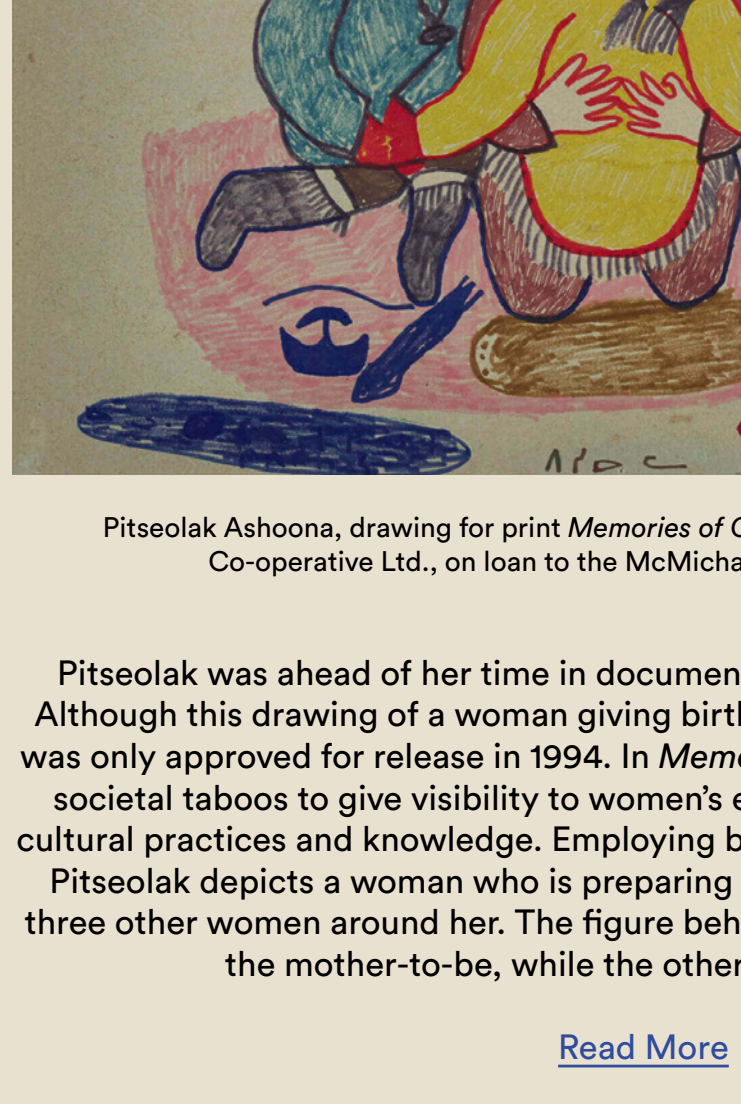


Pitseolak Ashoona, *The Critic*, c.1963, National Gallery of Canada

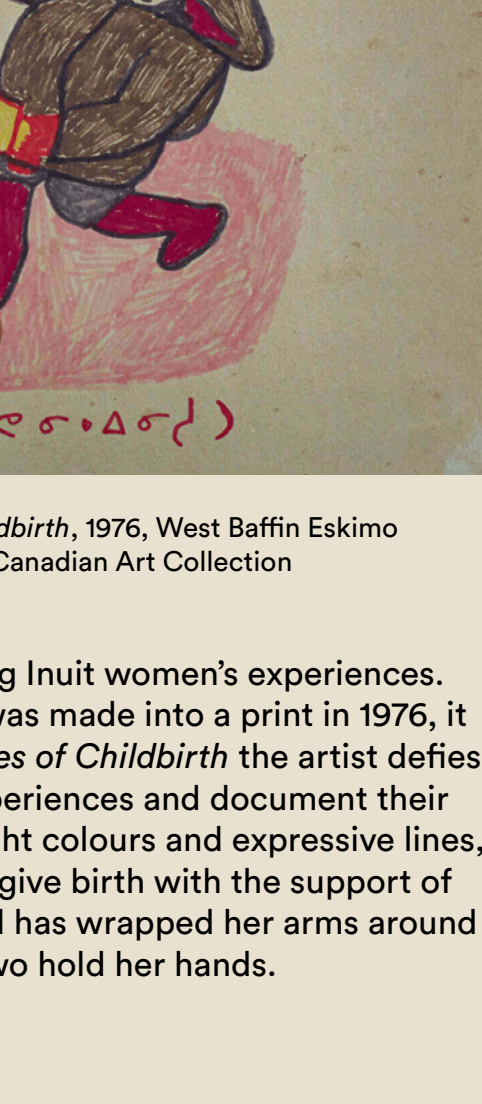
This comical line drawing is one of Pitseolak's early commentaries on the art world and an image that reveals her love of laughter. Hoping to exchange a bird for an artwork, the stern “critic” on the left, with long, wiry hair on his face and head, points to one of two drawings being presented by the pair of genial women. As Christine Lalonde writes, “Many in the first wave of Inuit artists were unaware of the art world and did not consider themselves artists as such. Pitseolak was an exception: she included images of her own drawings in her artwork, and she often spoke of herself as an artist.” Pitseolak often returned to the theme of drawings within drawing as a means of reflecting on her practice.

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BEST-SELLING AUTHOR



The first edition of *Pictures Out of My Life*, published in 1971, features Pitseolak's *In summer there were always very big mosquitoes*, 1970

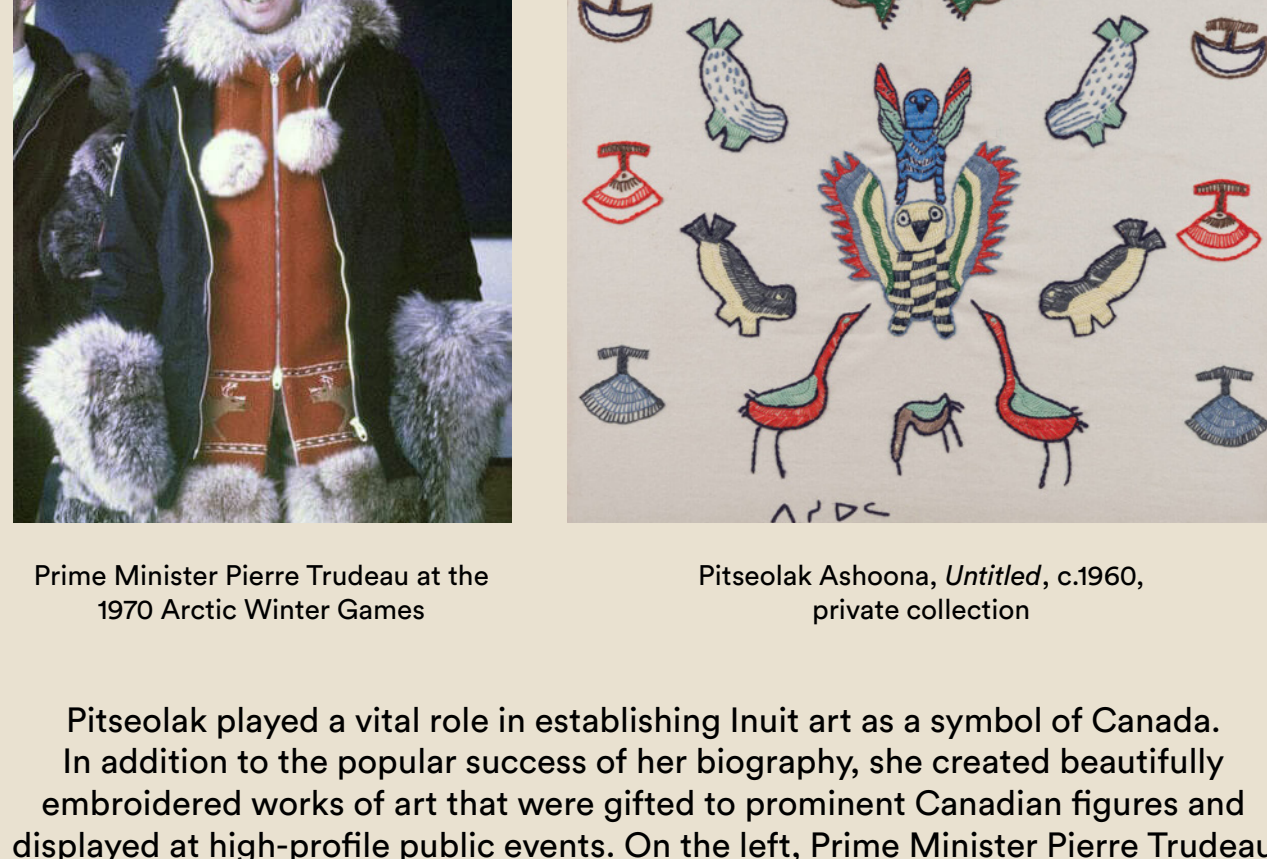


Newspaper clipping illustrating the wide press coverage for *Pictures Out of My Life*

With her best-selling book, *Pictures Out of My Life*, Pitseolak offered a personal insight into Inuit culture, a change from most documentation of the North, which took an anthropological perspective. Written in collaboration with Dorothy Harley Eber, Pitseolak's biography features texts in both English and Inuktitut—a rare achievement in publishing at the time—that countered prevailing perceptions of Inuit culture as lacking in individuality. The celebrated personal memoir explores what Pitseolak described as her “unusual life, being born in a skin tent and living to hear on the radio that two men landed on the moon.” To date, *Pictures Out of My Life* remains the primary resource on the artist. In 1973, the National Film Board of Canada made a film adaptation.

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CHRONICLER OF ADVERSITY

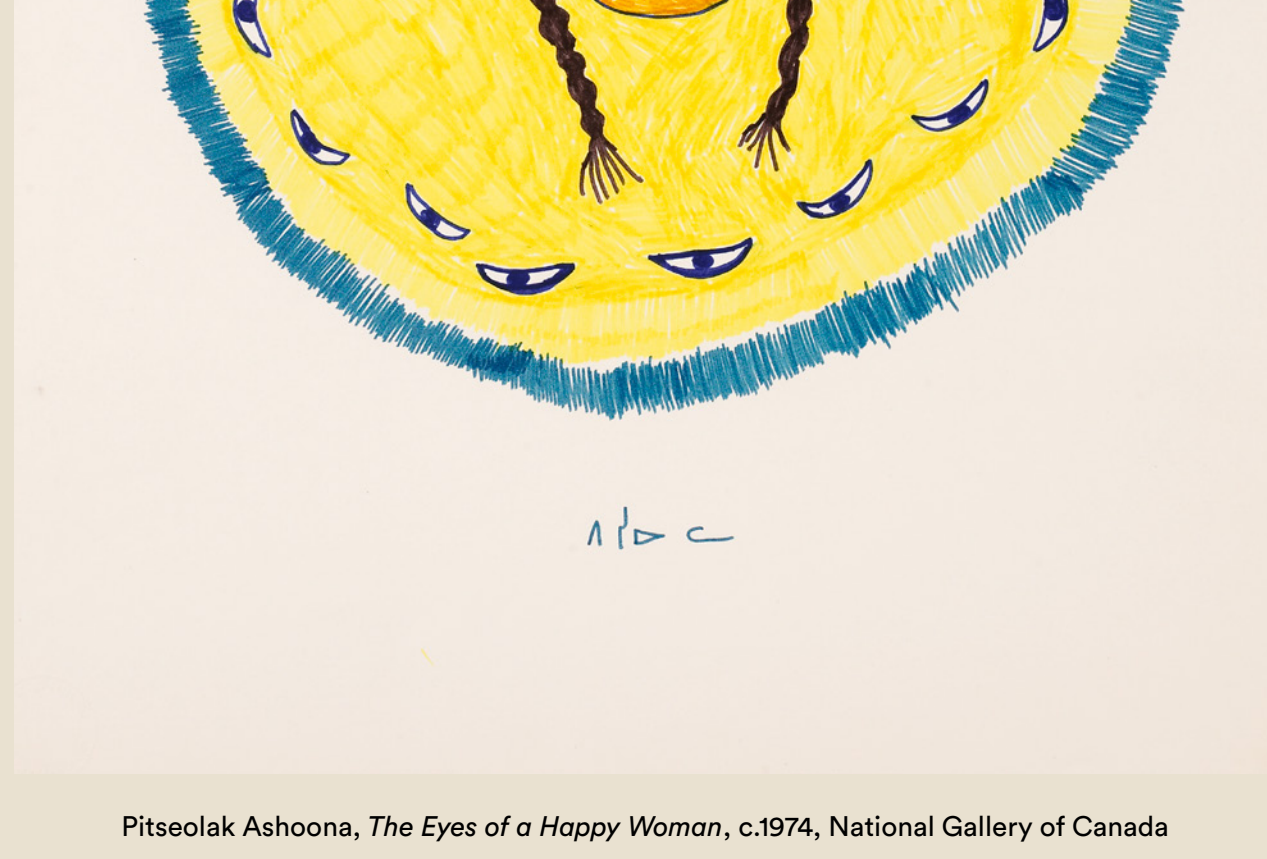


Pitseolak Ashoona, *Legend of the Woman Who Turned into a Narwhal*, c.1974, National Gallery of Canada

Although beautiful, this image presents a picture of pain. In two vertically stacked scenes Pitseolak features the Inuit legend of a woman who turned into a narwhal—a story that alludes to domestic abuse. In the upper left portion of the work, the artist writes: “These are Pitseolak's drawings. Every few days she would manage to be patient enough from the beatings she received from her husband. One day by the sea she was about to be beaten again. So she prepared to jump into the sea. At that moment all the narwhals rose to the surface of the water in front of her.” The woman leaps into the water, but instead of drowning, she is transformed into a narwhal. In the process, her long braid of hair magically morphs into the narwhal's tusk.

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TACKLER OF TABOOS

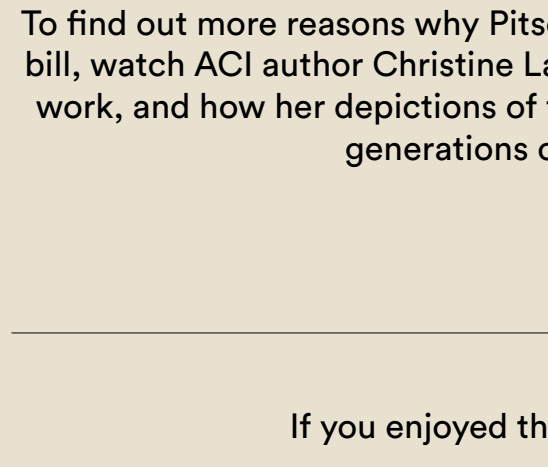


Pitseolak Ashoona, drawing for print *Memories of Childbirth*, 1976, West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative Ltd., on loan to the McMichael Canadian Art Collection

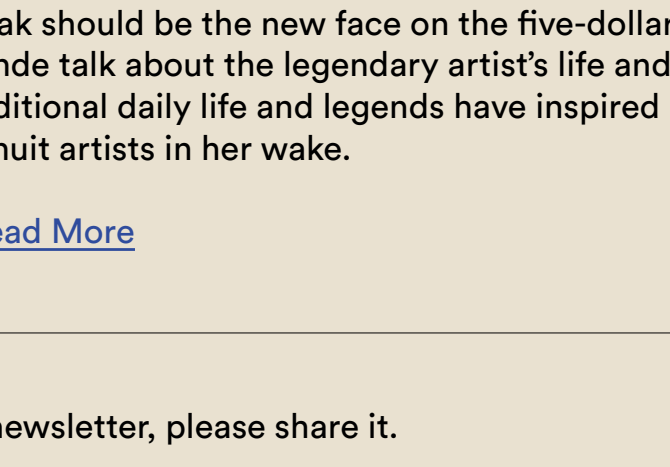
Pitseolak was ahead of her time in documenting Inuit women's experiences. Although this drawing of a woman giving birth was made into a print in 1976, it was only approved for release in 1994. In *Memories of Childbirth* the artist defies societal taboos to give visibility to women's experiences and document their cultural practices and knowledge. Employing bright colours and expressive lines, Pitseolak depicts a woman who is preparing to give birth with the support of three other women around her. The figure behind has wrapped her arms around the mother-to-be, while the other two hold her hands.

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MATRIARCH OF ART



Annie Pootoogook, *Playing Nintendo*, 2006, private collection

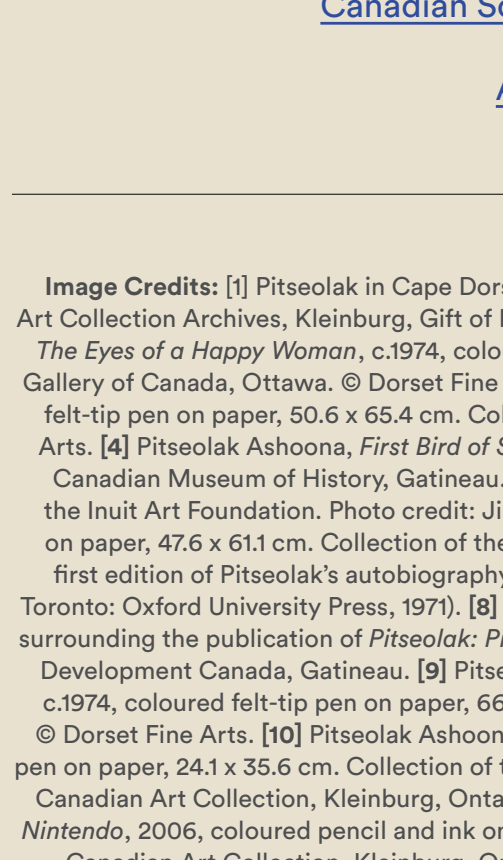


Shuvina Ashoona, *Composition (People, Animals, and the World Holding Hands)*, 2007–8, Collection of Edward J. Guarino

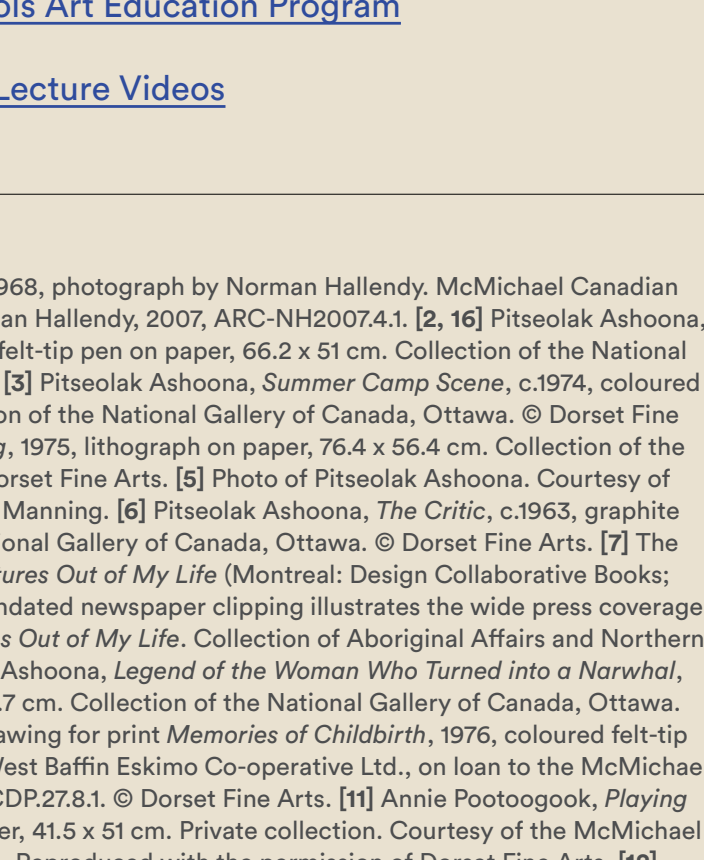
Pitseolak was a mentor to many, including more than a dozen grandchildren and great-grandchildren who became artists. Today her legacy continues through the works of internationally renowned talents [Annie Pootoogook](#) and [Shuvina Ashoona](#) (her granddaughters). She influenced Pootoogook to explore more personal subject matter in her drawings, as in *Playing Nintendo*, 2006, while Pitseolak's interest in preserving traditional knowledge and values is reflected in such images by Shuvina as *Composition (People, Animals, and the World Holding Hands)*, 2007–8. James Houston, who introduced printmaking to the Inuit in the late 1940s, remarked: “In Pitseolak we have the nucleus of a remarkable artistic family whose members play an important part in the artwork of Cape Dorset.”

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ADVOCATE OF THE NORTH



Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau at the 1970 Arctic Winter Games



Pitseolak Ashoona, *Untitled*, c.1960, private collection

Pitseolak played a vital role in establishing Inuit art as a symbol of Canada. In addition to the popular success of her biography, she created beautifully embroidered works of art that were gifted to prominent Canadian figures and displayed at high-profile public events. On the left, Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau is pictured in a parka made by Pitseolak, at the 1970 Arctic Winter Games in Yellowknife. On the right is a rare embroidered pictorial cloth featuring birds, sea animals, and ulus (a cutting tool) that was made by Pitseolak in the 1960s and presented to George Edwin Bell Blackstock, the Canadian Consul in New Orleans, by Alma Houston, an instrumental figure in the promotion of Inuit art.

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OPTIMISM AND JOY

Pitseolak Ashoona, *The Eyes of a Happy Woman*, c.1974, National Gallery of Canada

The Eyes of a Happy Woman, c.1974, illustrates Pitseolak's desire to express the hope and happiness of her art and life despite its hardships. In this ebullient portrait, a smiling woman's face is surrounded by crescent-shaped eyes, which float within a yellow circle framed by a blue border. The work's title suggests that the many eyes all belong to the woman, and that happiness is born out of openness to seeing life from different perspectives. For Lalonde, this drawing perfectly “sums up [what] Pitseolak ... wanted us to carry away ... from her artwork.”

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CHRISTINE LALONDE ON PITSEOLAK ASHOONA

ACI ART TALKS

ACI author
CHRISTINE LALONDE
on Canadian artist

PITSEOLAK ASHOONA

To find out more reasons why Pitseolak should be the new face on the five-dollar bill, watch ACI author Christine Lalonde talk about the legendary artist's life and work, and how her depictions of traditional daily life and legends have inspired generations of Inuit artists in her wake.

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