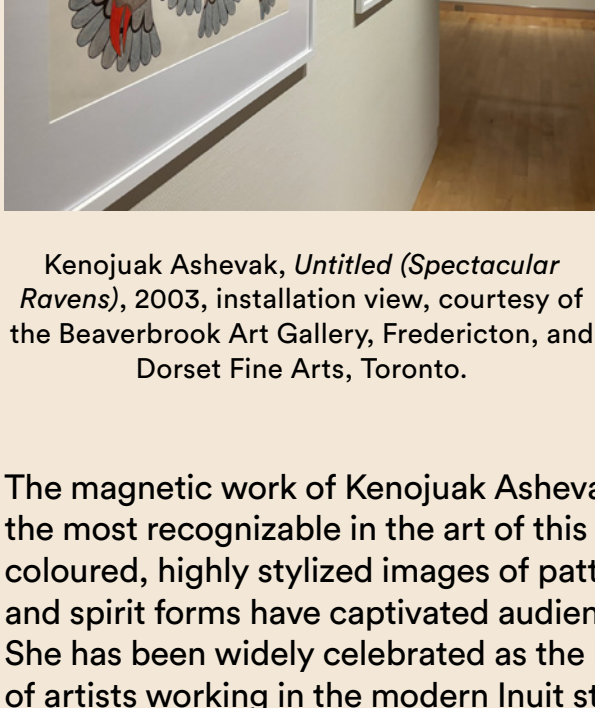


MARCH 22, 2024

ON VIEW: KENOJUAK ASHEVAK  
GRANDMOTHER OF INUIT ART

*The touring exhibition Kenojuak Ashevak: Life and Legacy is now on view at the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Fredericton. We spoke to its Curator of Indigenous Art, Emma Hassencahl-Perley.*

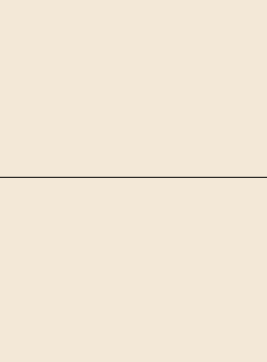


Kenojuak Ashevak, *Untitled (Spectacular Ravens)*, 2003, installation view, courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto.



Kenojuak Ashevak, photograph by Ansgar Walk.

The magnetic work of Kenojuak Ashevak (1927–2013) is among the most recognizable in the art of this country: her vividly coloured, highly stylized images of patterned animal, human, and spirit forms have captivated audiences for decades. She has been widely celebrated as the leader of a generation of artists working in the modern Inuit style, and her contribution is the subject of [Kenojuak Ashevak: Life and Legacy](#), a multi-city retrospective exhibition featuring drawings from the latter part of her career (1994–2013), which is on view at Fredericton's Beaverbrook Art Gallery (until April 1). For this week's newsletter, ACI interviewed Emma Hassencahl-Perley, Curator of Indigenous Art at the Beaverbrook.

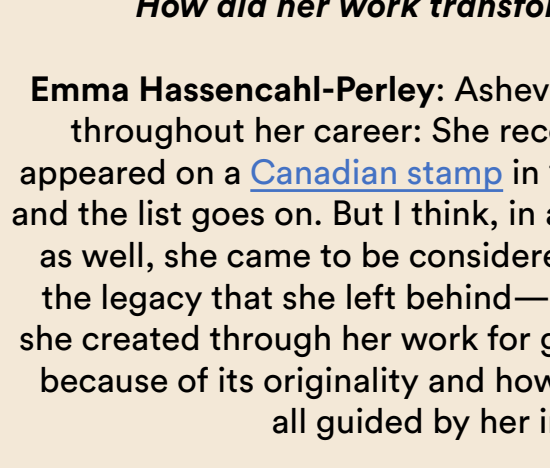


Emma Hassencahl-Perley, Curator of Indigenous Art, Beaverbrook Art Gallery

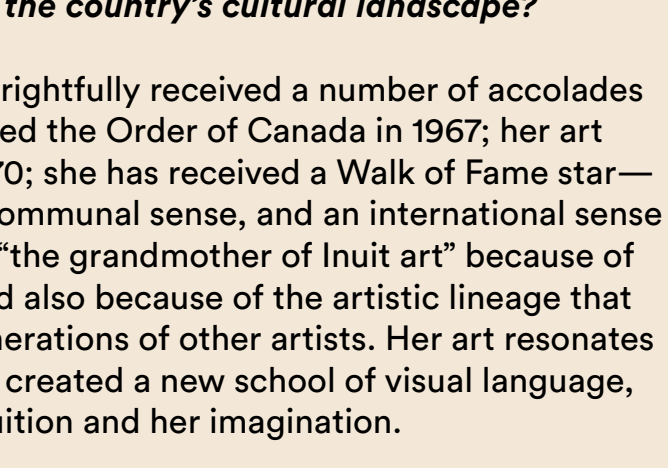
**Emma Doubt**

Director of Programming, Art Canada Institute

## AN ICON IN CANADA



Postage stamp featuring Kenojuak Ashevak's *The Enchanted Owl*, 1960.



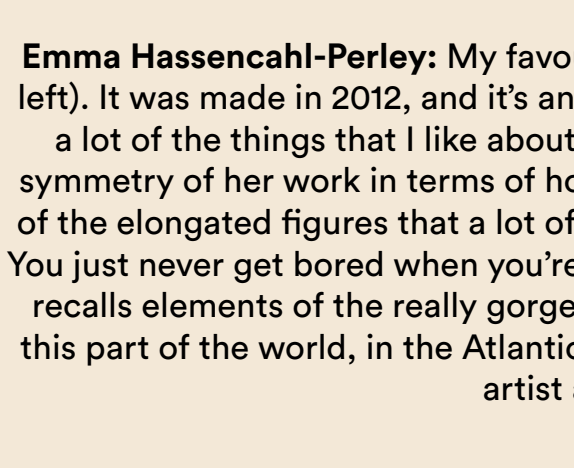
Kenojuak Ashevak's *Owl's Bouquet*, 2007, highlighted on a commemorative \$10 bill, courtesy of Bank of Canada.

**Q: Kenojuak Ashevak's art is so famed that it appears on currency. How did her work transform the country's cultural landscape?**

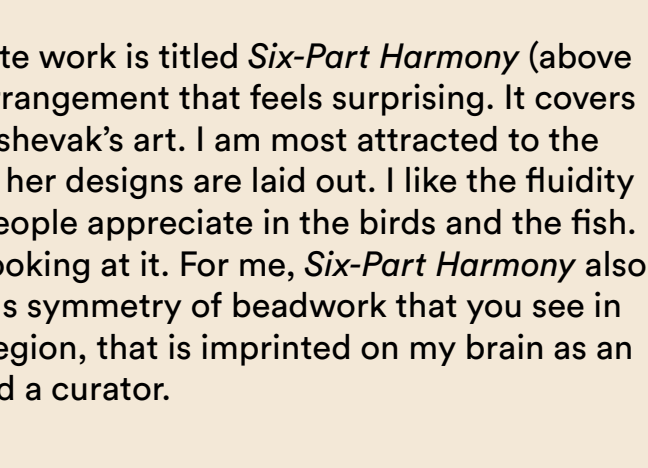
**Emma Hassencahl-Perley:** Ashevak rightfully received a number of accolades throughout her career: She received the Order of Canada in 1967; her art appeared on a [Canadian stamp](#) in 1970; she has received a Walk of Fame star—and the list goes on. But I think, in a communal sense, and an international sense as well, she came to be considered “the grandmother of Inuit art” because of the legacy that she left behind—and also because of the artistic lineage that she created through her work for generations of other artists. Her art resonates because of its originality and how it created a new school of visual language, all guided by her intuition and her imagination.

[For more on Ashevak on the commemorative Canadian \\$10 bill](#)

## SYMMETRY AND SURPRISE



Kenojuak Ashevak, *Six-Part Harmony*, 2012, installation view, courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto.

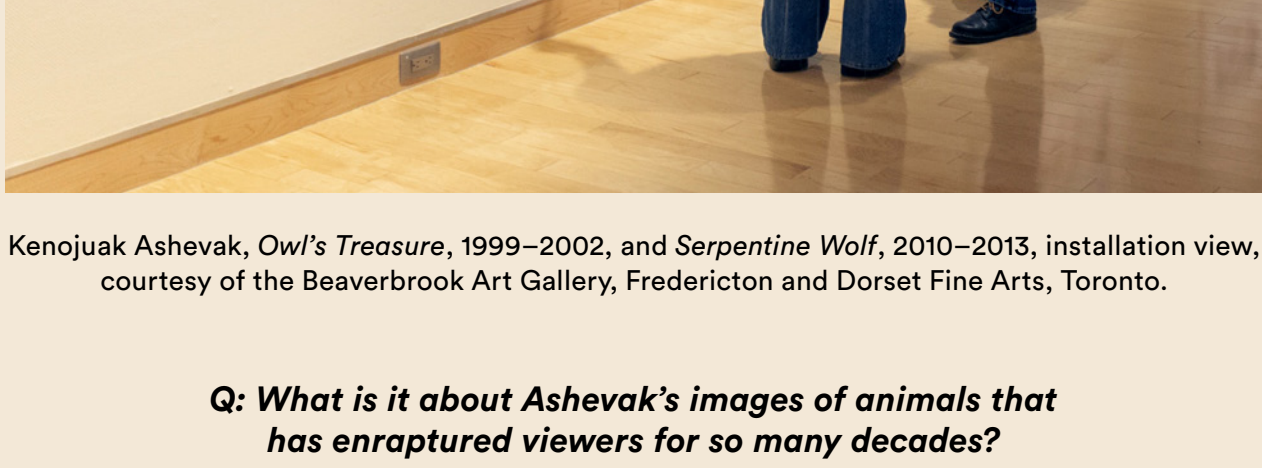


Kenojuak Ashevak at Kinngait Studios, 2012, courtesy of the *Globe & Mail*.

**Q: What inspires you most about Ashevak's work, and what piece in the exhibition particularly captivates you?**

**Emma Hassencahl-Perley:** My favourite work is titled *Six-Part Harmony* (above left). It was made in 2012, and it's an arrangement that feels surprising. It covers a lot of the things that I like about Ashevak's art. I am most attracted to the symmetry of her work in terms of how her designs are laid out. I like the fluidity of the elongated figures that a lot of people appreciate in the birds and the fish. You just never get bored when you're looking at it. For me, *Six-Part Harmony* also recalls elements of the really gorgeous symmetry of beadwork that you see in this part of the world, in the Atlantic region, that is imprinted on my brain as an artist and a curator.

## ANIMAL LIFE



Kenojuak Ashevak, *Owl's Treasure*, 1999–2002, and *Serpentine Wolf*, 2010–2013, installation view, courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto.

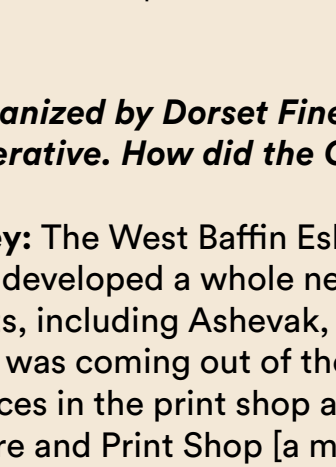
**Q: What is it about Ashevak's images of animals that has enraptured viewers for so many decades?**

**Emma Hassencahl-Perley:** Animals are integral to traditions of oral storytelling in many Indigenous cultures. Each story brings a different lesson or captures moments of history. I also think animals reveal characteristics about our own personalities. The recurring animal in Ashevak's work is the owl, which might tell us something about who she was, or how she saw herself—because the owl holds a lot of wisdom. They're observant, they're clever. They're truth-seeking beings. It could also be that she observed these animals on the land, or moving in and out of camp. She could have hunted some of these animals as well. I think her work reveals a deep respect that she has for the animals she portrays.

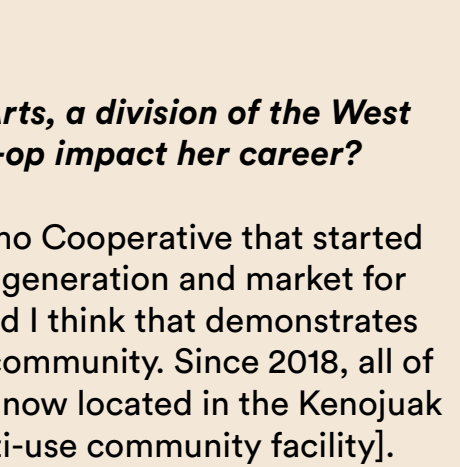
**Share this newsletter with friends who love Canada's art, or invite them to [sign up here](#) for our weekly dispatch.**

WEST BAFFIN ESKIMO  
COOPERATIVE

Exterior façade of Kenojuak Cultural Centre and Print Shop, Kinngait, photograph by Alison Boyce, courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative.



Interior of Kenojuak Cultural Centre and Print Shop, Kinngait, courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative.

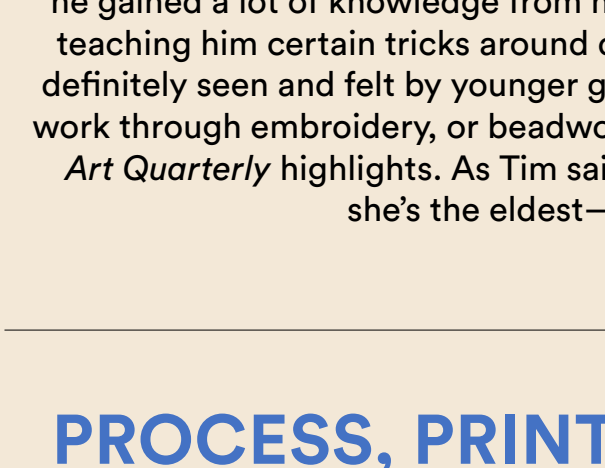


Kenojuak Ashevak, courtesy of CBC.

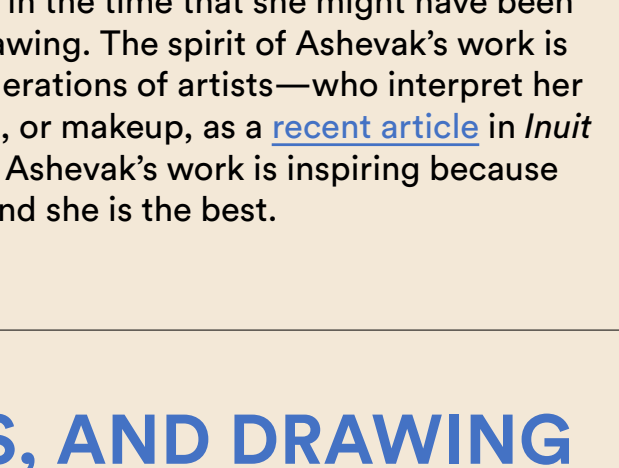
**Q: The exhibition is organized by Dorset Fine Arts, a division of the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative. How did the Co-op impact her career?**

**Emma Hassencahl-Perley:** The West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative that started in Kinngait in the 1950s developed a whole new generation and market for Indigenous art and artists, including Ashevak, and I think that demonstrates the breadth of talent that was coming out of the community. Since 2018, all of the offices and studio spaces in the print shop are now located in the Kenojuak Ashevak Cultural Centre and Print Shop [a multi-use community facility]. I think that naming this newly established space after Ashevak demonstrates her profound impact on her community, as well as on the global arts more generally. Indigenous women artists being monumental in this way is vital because of the ways in which the art history canon has been exclusionary. So, I was thinking about what it must mean in a larger sense.

## INFLUENCE &amp; LEGACY



Oolooisie Saila, *Festive Owl*, 2021, courtesy of Nanoq Inuit Art.

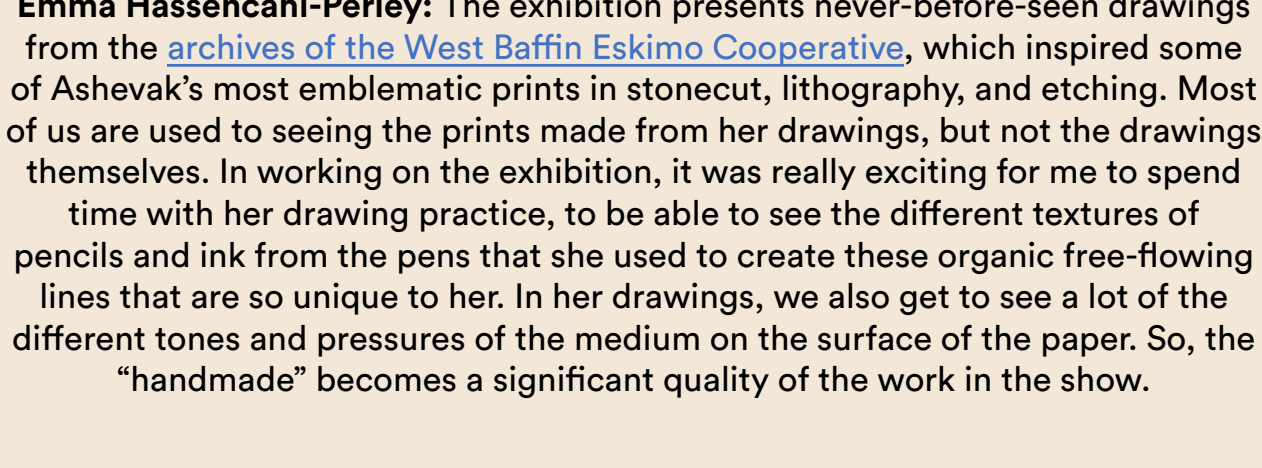


Tim Pitsiulak, *Tattooed Whale*, 2016, courtesy of First Arts, Toronto.

**Q: Tell us about how Ashevak's career influenced successive generations of Inuit artists.**

**Emma Hassencahl-Perley:** I read a quote by Ashevak's nephew Tim Pitsiulak (1967–2016). He was talking about his work and what influenced it, and he said that he was inspired by Ashevak's entrepreneurship. I love that, and I think that he gained a lot of knowledge from her in the time that she might have been teaching him certain tricks around drawing. The spirit of Ashevak's work is definitely seen and felt by younger generations of artists—who interpret her work through embroidery, or beadwork, or makeup, as a [recent article](#) in *Inuit Art Quarterly* highlights. As Tim said, Ashevak's work is inspiring because she's the eldest—and she is the best.

## PROCESS, PRINTS, AND DRAWING



Kenojuak Ashevak, *Untitled (Spectacular Ravens)*, 2003, installation view, courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto.

**Q: What is unique about the exhibition and how does it offer insight into Ashevak's work?**

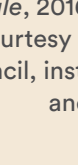
**Emma Hassencahl-Perley:** The exhibition presents never-before-seen drawings from the [archives of the West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative](#), which inspired some of Ashevak's most emblematic prints in stonecut, lithography, and etching. Most of us are used to seeing the prints made from her drawings, but not the drawings themselves. In working on the exhibition, it was really exciting for me to spend time with her drawing practice, to be able to see the different textures of pencils and ink from the pens that she used to create these organic free-flowing lines that are so unique to her. In her drawings, we also get to see a lot of the different tones and pressures of the medium on the surface of the paper. So, the “handmade” becomes a significant quality of the work in the show.

## THANK YOU TO OUR BENEFACTORS

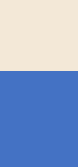
The ACI is a not-for-profit educational charity that receives no government financing or public support. Our work is made possible by an important circle of [friends, patrons, and benefactors](#).

If you would like to support our important work, please see [this page](#).

Follow us on social media



Facebook  
artcaninstitute/



Instagram  
@artcaninstitute



X (formerly Twitter)  
@artcaninstitute

Image Credits: [1] Kenojuak Ashevak, *Untitled (Spectacular Ravens)*, 2003, ink and coloured pencil, installation view. Courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto. [2] Kenojuak Ashevak. Photograph by Ansgar Walk. Courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative. [3] Postage Stamp featuring Kenojuak Ashevak's *The Enchanted Owl*, 1960. Collection of Canada Post. Courtesy of Canada's National History Society. Postage stamp © Canada Post 1970. [4] Kenojuak Ashevak's *Owl's Bouquet*, 2007, highlighted on a commemorative \$10 bill. Courtesy of Bank of Canada. [5] Kenojuak Ashevak, *Six-Part Harmony*, 2012, ink coloured pencil on paper, installation view. Courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto. [6] Kenojuak Ashevak at Kinngait Studios, 2012. Courtesy of the *Globe & Mail*. [7] Kenojuak Ashevak, *Owl's Treasure*, 1999–2002, ballpoint pen, felt tip pen, coloured pencil, and *Serpentine Wolf*, 2010–2013, felt tip, coloured pencil, installation view. Courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto. [8] Exterior façade of Kenojuak Cultural Centre and Print Shop, Kinngait. Photograph by Alison Boyce. Courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative, Kinngait. [9] Interior of Kenojuak Cultural Centre and Print Shop. Kinngait. Courtesy of West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative. [10] Kenojuak Ashevak. Courtesy of CBC. [11] Oolooisie Saila, *Festive Owl*, 2021, lithograph, 57.2 x 73 cm. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. Courtesy of First Arts, Toronto. [12] Tim Pitsiulak, *Tattooed Whale*, 2016, silkscreen on black paper, 76.2 x 113 cm. Reproduced with the permission of Dorset Fine Arts. Courtesy of First Arts, Toronto. [13] Kenojuak Ashevak, *Untitled (Spectacular Ravens)*, 2003, ink and coloured pencil, installation view. Courtesy of the Beaverbrook Art Gallery, Fredericton, and Dorset Fine Arts, Toronto.