

MAY 10, 2024

GERMAINE ARNAKTAUYOK'S ART IS A SINGULAR DEPICTION OF MOTHERHOOD

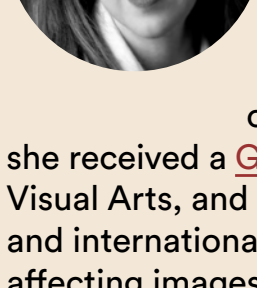
To mark Mother's Day this Sunday, May 12, we take a look at the work of Inuk artist Germaine Arnaktauyok, whose timeless images have mesmerized audiences for decades.



Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother and Child*, n.d., courtesy of Inuit Gallery of Vancouver.



Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother and Child*, n.d., courtesy of CBC.



Inuk artist Germaine Arnaktauyok (b.1946) is best known for her paintings, drawings, and prints exploring the subject of motherhood, a profound source of creative inspiration for her. In these two works (above), both titled *Mother and Child*, we get a strong sense of the physical closeness and intense love of the mother-child relationship depicted, generating feelings of warmth and tenderness. Arnaktauyok's work also focuses on women's roles in the myths and legends of the Arctic. In 2021, she received a [Governor General's Award](#) for Artistic Achievement in Media and Visual Arts, and her work is held in numerous museum collections both in Canada and internationally. In this week's newsletter, we explore Arnaktauyok's deeply affecting images of motherhood.

Sara Angel
Founder and Executive Director, Art Canada Institute

MOTHER EARTH



Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother Earth*, 2007, courtesy of Mutual Art.

Originally rendered with coloured pencil and ink, Arnaktauyok's imaginative *Mother Earth*, 2007—shown above as a coloured etching—is emblematic of her practice. In it, a woman wearing an amauti is poised on her hands and knees on the surface of the Earth. A fetus lies in a terrestrial womb just underground, almost ready to surface and to be born. The drawing envisions a powerful unity between the human mother and Mother Earth. Arnaktauyok [once explained](#), "There is a very unusual kind of story that, in the old days, women didn't get pregnant.... The Earth was like a mother and if you wanted to have a baby, you had to look for it..."

FROM MOTHER TO MOTHER



Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Throat Singing*, 2006, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

In Arnaktauyok's beautiful drawing *Throat Singing*, 2006, she depicts a mother passing the tradition of Inuit throat singing on to her daughter as a younger child rests—perhaps absorbing the lesson too—in the daughter's facing each other. Inuit throat singing traditionally involves two people, usually women, facing each other and performing an intimate vocal call-and-response where they use their throats, bellies, and diaphragms to create rhythmic sounds. The mother-to-daughter passing of this Inuit musical tradition down through generations is all the more vital because of the attempted erasure of cultural practices like this one by missionaries and other colonial forces.

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THE MOTHER AND HER AMAUTI



Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother and Child*, n.d., courtesy of Inuit Gallery of Vancouver.



Germaine Arnaktauyok, *You Will Have My Father's Name*, 2010, courtesy of Steinbrueck Native Gallery.

An ingenious Inuit garment, the amauti allows for physical closeness between mother and child—which conserves body heat amid the Arctic cold—with the large pouch safely holding the baby on the mother's back, leaving her hands free. The amauti is a recurring motif in Arnaktauyok's work. For example, in *Mother and Child* (above left), the duo float inside an impossibly capacious and ornately decorated amauti, while in *You Will Have My Father's Name*, 2010, the artist depicts herself with her young daughter Amber inside the garment.

As in many of Arnaktauyok's images, mother and child gaze fixedly into each other's eyes.

Learn more about the amauti [here](#)

MYTHOLOGICAL MOTHER



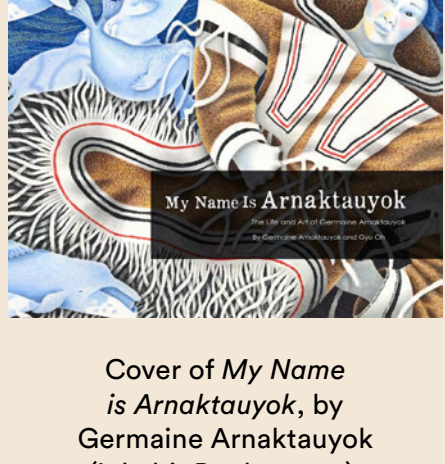
Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Sedna, Ruler of All Sea Animals*, 1994, Winnipeg Art Gallery.

In Inuit mythology, Sedna is the goddess of the sea and the mother of sea animals. Often depicted as mermaid-like, Sedna is a powerful figure who appears frequently in Inuit art. Her story is passed down orally through storytelling, which varies between communities: she is known by many names including Taleelayo ("the one down on the sea bottom") and Nulijuk ("mother of all the beasts"). In Arnaktauyok's *Sedna, Ruler of All Sea Animals*, 1994, Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery (2019-316). [8] Commemorative coin featuring Arnaktauyok's *The Drummer*. Photo courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mint. [9] Cover of *My Name is Arnaktauyok*, by Germaine Arnaktauyok. Courtesy of Inhabit Books. [10] Germaine Arnaktauyok. Photo courtesy of CBC.

MORE ON GERMAINE ARNAKTAUYOK



Commemorative coin featuring Arnaktauyok's *The Drummer*. Photo courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mint.



Cover of *My Name is Arnaktauyok* is Arnaktauyok, by Germaine Arnaktauyok (Inhabit Books, 2015).



Germaine Arnaktauyok, photo courtesy of CBC.

Arnaktauyok's work is widely disseminated in Canada and has made an impression on countless people. You may have an Arnaktauyok in your home without having realized it: a widely circulated commemorative Canadian \$2 coin from 1999 features her striking design *The Drummer* (above left). Arnaktauyok is also the author of several books about her life and art including a colouring book for young people, *Inuit Spirit*, and *My Name is Arnaktauyok* (above centre), which details her upbringing in Igloodik, NU, as the eldest daughter in her family, her years attending a residential school in Chesterfield Inlet, and her coming-of-age as an artist beginning in childhood.

Learn more about the commemorative coin [here](#)

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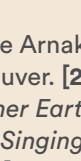
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Image Credits: [1, 5] Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother and Child*, n.d., 33 x 27.9 cm, Edition AP of 50. Courtesy of Inuit Gallery of Vancouver. [2] Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother and Child*, n.d. Courtesy of CBC. [3] Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Mother Earth*, n.d., coloured etching, 63.5 x 54.7 cm. Courtesy of Mutual Art. [4] Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Throat Singing*, 2006, pen and ink, 32.4 x 39.4 cm. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery. Photo by Ernest Mayer. [6] Germaine Arnaktauyok, *You Will Have My Father's Name*, 2010, etching & aquatint, 60.9 x 78.7 cm. Courtesy of Steinbrueck Native Gallery. [7] Germaine Arnaktauyok, *Sedna, Ruler of All Sea Animals*, 1994. Collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery (2019-316). [8] Commemorative coin featuring Arnaktauyok's *The Drummer*. Photo courtesy of the Royal Canadian Mint. [9] Cover of *My Name is Arnaktauyok*, by Germaine Arnaktauyok. Courtesy of Inhabit Books. [10] Germaine Arnaktauyok. Photo courtesy of CBC.