

The Dancing Bears of Inuit Art

Inuit art has been introduced to the non-Arctic world for several decades now and has enjoyed a nice climb in stature as a fine art form. Throughout the years, Inuit stone carvers have changed their artwork a bit as a result of market feedback and demand. Generally speaking, they managed to make artistic changes in response to the market without losing the northern Arctic spirit of their Inuit art form. Inuit art stone carvings have become larger and more polished compared to those early primitive looking carvings that made their debut in the commercial art market years ago.

One of the later innovations in stone carvings from the Inuit art world was the dancing bear. The Inuit carvers from Cape Dorset in Nunavut sometimes added humor and play into their artwork. They gave animals such as polar bears some human like characteristics. Instead of carving polar bears only in walking positions or other poses often seen in the natural wild, the carvers began to make the bears in upright positions standing on one hind leg. This pose represented the polar bear in a happy state of dancing and celebration. Some carvers claim that dancing bears represent a form of shamanism and transformation between a human and a bear. But the market generally sees these carvings as happy bears.

The dancing bear carving elevated the skill requirement of the Inuit carver because the entire stone carving had to be balanced on one leg of the bear without toppling over. This balancing act in carving was not a project for the beginning carver. Because of the skill level required to carve a dancing bear, the price of such an Inuit carving would generally be a bit higher compared to a comparable walking bear. The Inuit art market has accepted this fact and collectors are willing to pay more for nice dancing bear carvings as evidenced by their popularity.

Other Nunavut communities such as Iqaluit also have carvers who produce excellent dancing bear carvings now. Some carvers have demonstrated such wild imaginations by adding drums made of caribou antler to bear carvings resulting in drum dancing bears. Talk about giving a wild animal a human characteristic! Others have turned other Arctic animals such as walruses and seals as well as objects such as the Inuit inukshuk into balancing dancing versions. A few carvers have produced dancing bears which have the ability to balance on either the right or left hind leg. In an effort to elevate the skill levels and artistry even further, polar bears have been carved in handstanding positions balancing on both or even one front paw. Sometimes these are known as diving bears.

Interestingly enough, the Inuit carvers in some regions such as Nunavik (northern Quebec Arctic) and the western Arctic have not added dancing bears to their subjects portfolios. They have chosen to focus and excel on other aspects of Inuit art such as hunting scenes involving human subjects or miniature Inuit camps using ivory. The dancing bear carvings are generally produced in the central Nunavut region but it will be interesting to see if other Arctic regions will produce their own versions of balancing carvings as a result of market demand.

Short note about the author

Clint Leung is owner of Free Spirit Gallery (www.FreeSpiritGallery.ca), an online gallery specializing in Inuit Eskimo and Northwest Native American art including carvings, sculpture and prints. Free Spirit Gallery has numerous information resource articles with photos of authentic Inuit and Native Indian art as well as free eCards.

Author: Clint Leung

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