

Sapangat: Inuit Beadwork in the Canadian Arctic

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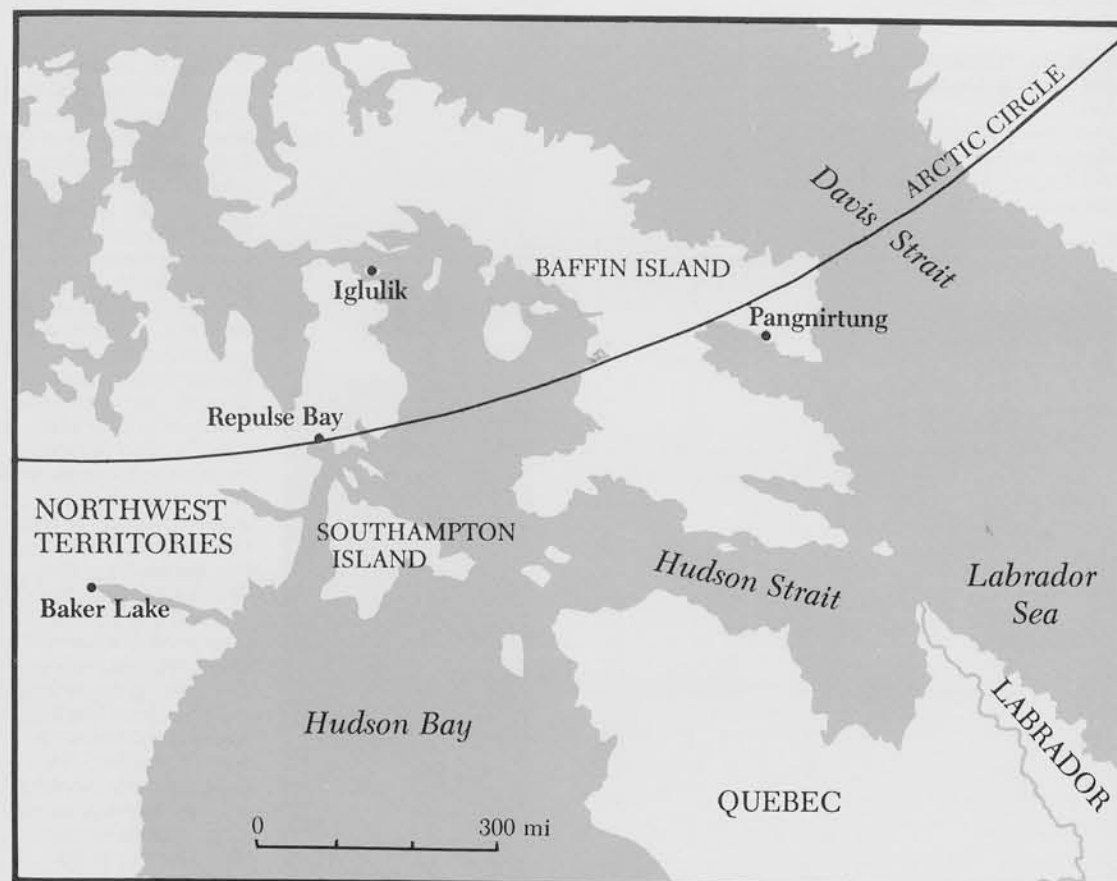
The advent of European exploration introduced the brightly colored glass bead to the Inuit (Eskimo) seamstresses of the Canadian Arctic. Known in the eastern Arctic as *sapangaq* or 'precious stone' (Dorais 1983:52), the seedbead became a highly desired trade item and, when worn in quantity, was considered a sign of prestige and wealth. In his *Journal* (1824), the British explorer Captain George Lyon noted that beads were already widely used by seamstresses at the time of the expedition's arrival in Iglulik, Northwest Territories, in 1821 (Fig. 2). The value accorded these tiny chips of colored glass is revealed in



1
Young woman's *qulittaq* (outer parka) made of caribou fur. Aivilingmiut, collected on the west coast of Hudson Bay, 1938. The Bishop Marsh Inuit Collection, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, Winnipeg, Canada.

3 (opposite page)
Portrait of Niviatsianaq (Shoo-fly). Photograph taken by A. P. Low, 1903-04. Public Archives Canada (PA 53548). Beaded parka collected by Captain George Comer, now in the collection of the American Museum of Natural History.

2
Map of Baffin Island and the Hudson Bay region.



Lyon's recollection of a woman and her child carefully searching an abandoned trading site for beads which may have been dropped or overlooked in the day's negotiations (1824:128). The Commander of the expedition, William Parry, described the exact uniformity with which colored strands of beads were arranged on the women's parkas, and wrote that "... many of the [women], in the course of the second winter, covered the whole front of their jackets with the beads they received from us" (1824:497).

With the intensification of European exploration and trade throughout the 19th century, beads became more readily available, a factor which encouraged the development of distinct regional styles of beadwork. Along the coastal areas of south Baffin Island, Labrador and Arctic Quebec, beads were hung in long strands from a strip of scraped sealskin and then draped from shoulder to shoulder across the chest. The beads were strung in a sequence that created a series of horizontal color bars across the front of the parka. Seamstresses in the eastern Arctic also incorporated other objects obtained from traders in the decoration of their parkas: tiny weights of cast metal decorated the outer edge of the parka around the front flap and back tail; tags from tobacco cans were often hung at the end of a strand of beads; and foreign coins were attached to beaded pendants and hung in a vertical column down the middle of the long back tail. Perhaps the most curious form of decoration found in the eastern Arctic was the vertical column of pewter spoon bowls attached to the apron flap (*kiniq*) of the woman's parka. With the handle removed, the metal stub of the spoon bowl was drilled and sewn to the parka, pointed end up; its shape is reminiscent of a bird's egg. The shape of the spoon bowl, its placement of the *kiniq*, and exclusive use on the woman's parka suggest that this form of decoration is more than simple ornamentation — it is also a symbolic reference to fertility.

The style of beadwork decoration which evolved along the west coast of Hudson Bay was distinct from that further east. Among the coastal and inland groups of the central Arctic, beadwork patterns were first worked out on stroud, an imported woolen material, which was then attached to the parka. The placement of beadwork closely followed the fur decoration of the outer parka (*qulittaq*) illustrated in Fig. 1. The portrait of Niviatsianaq (Fig. 3) shows that the inserts of white fur (*pukiq*) covering the chest and marking the shoulders, wrists, and hood in Fig. 1 have been replaced by beadwork which conforms in both its design and placement to the traditional fur decoration of the outer parka. In addition, the narrow fringes of white fur hanging below the



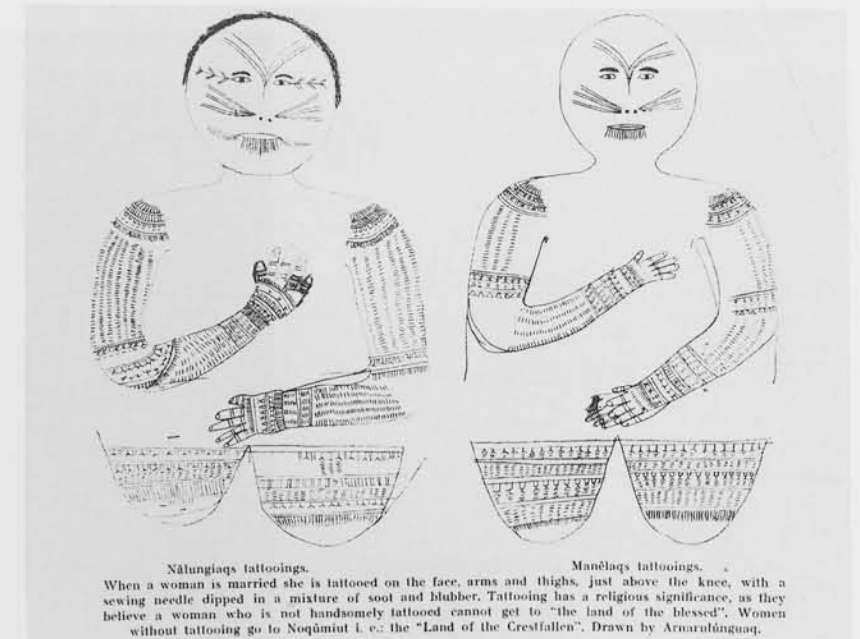
breast panels and from the shoulder inserts on the fur parka have been replaced by long strands of multi-colored beads arranged in a uniform sequence of colors. Although beadwork was also practiced on the parkas of men and children in the central Arctic, it reached its most elaborate and highly conventionalized form in the woman's parka. The discussion which follows is therefore restricted to the beaded decoration of the woman's parka along the northwest coast of Hudson Bay.

The Woman's Parka

It seems essential at the outset of this discussion to describe the basic design of the woman's parka and its existence as a functional and symbolic reference, within Inuit society, to woman's maternal role. Known as the *amautik*, the woman's parka takes its name from the carrying pouch (*amaut*) which is designed to carry a baby and is located in the back of the parka. The carrying pouch may be

enlarged to accommodate a growing infant just as the womb itself expands to envelop the maturing fetus. The broad shoulders of the central Arctic *amautik* reinforce the maternal function of the parka's design by permitting an infant carried in the pouch to be slipped over the mother's shoulder to the breast while still protected under the parka. The most explicit reference to the *amautik*'s symbolic function, however, is the front apron flap (*kiniaq*), which is found exclusively on the woman's parka in the Canadian Arctic. Certain linguistic terms associated with the act of giving birth assist our understanding of the *kiniaq* not only as a design element but also as a formal allusion to procreation: *kinersertoq*, a woman awaiting childbirth; *kinerservik*, the snowhut where a woman delivers her child (Rasmussen 1931:258). Furthermore, the form of the *kiniaq* and its stylistic change across the Canadian Arctic confirm its symbolic function (Driscoll 1980:14-15; 1983:100-105).

4
Five women on board ship, Cape Fullerton, Northwest Territories. Photograph taken by A. P. Low, 1903-04. Public Archives Canada (PA 53606).



Traditionally, the *amautik* is worn in two layers: an inner parka (*atigi*) and outer parka (*qulittaq*). The inner parka, made with the fur facing the body, is worn year-round, while the outer parka, designed with the fur facing out, is worn during the coldest period and especially while traveling. As illustrated in Fig. 1, the decoration of the outer parka is a play of the rich dark fur of the caribou contrasted by bands of white fur taken from the caribou underbelly. The broad bands of white fur highlight the design elements of the *amautik*: the *kiniaq*, the back tail (*akuq*), shoulders (*tui*), chest (*saa*), hood (*nasaq*), and the wrists. In contrast to the outer parka, the inner parka was decorated with personal amulets representing the individual's quest for magico-religious assistance. As Danish ethnographer Knud Rasmussen notes, a woman's amulets were worn more often for her son (actual or anticipated) than for the woman herself: an owl's foot to give a boy powerful fists; the head and feet of a loon to give him luck when salmon fishing; the ears of a hare to give him powerful hearing; or perhaps the vertebrae of a young seal to make him a good seal hunter (1931: opp. 274).

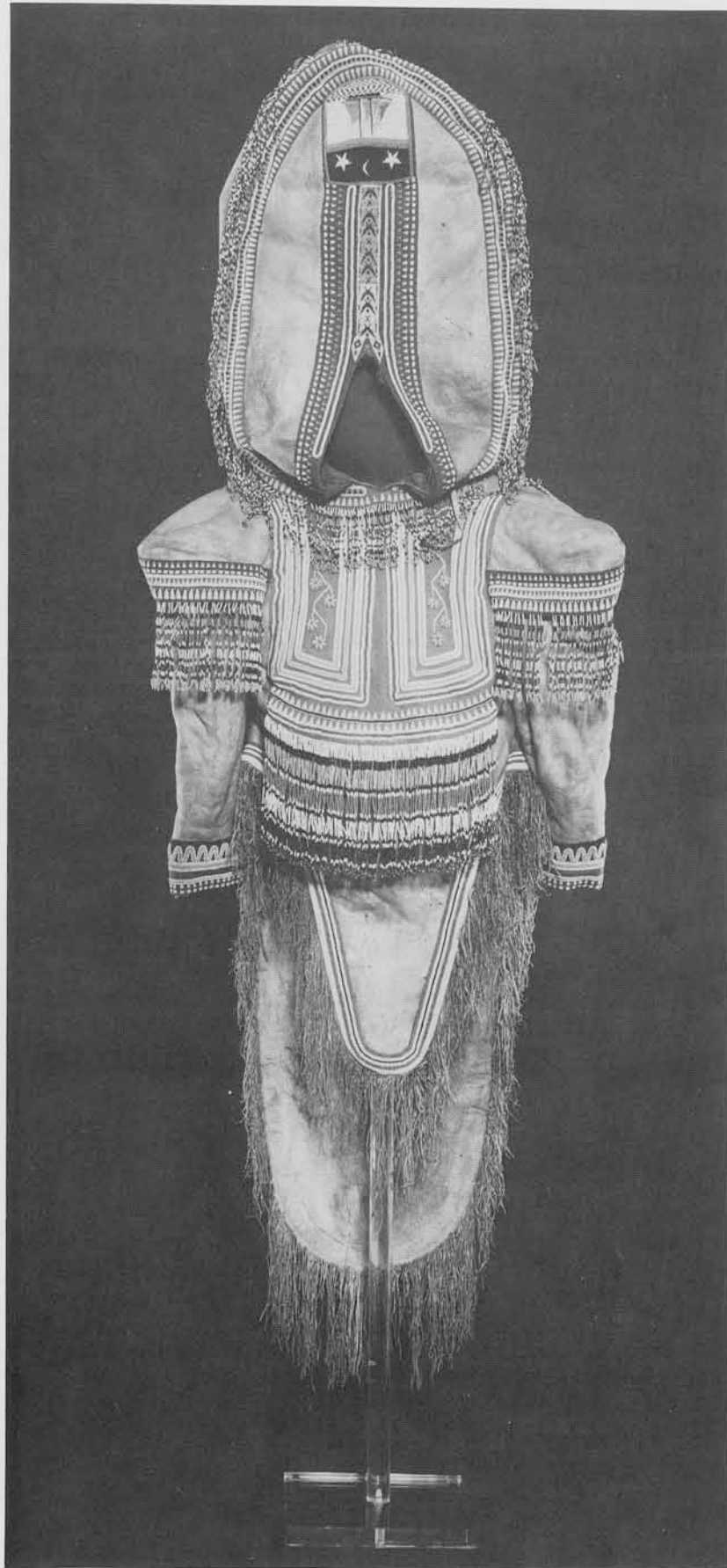
During the late 19th century, beadwork decoration became popular among the Aivilingmiut, Qaernermiut, and Padlimiut seamstresses along the west coast of Hudson Bay and replaced the traditional amulet decoration of the inner parka. The photograph taken by the Canadian explorer A. P. Low (Fig. 4) illustrates the conventionalized style of beadwork practiced by Aivilingmiut women. The chest covering of red stroud is divided into bisymmetric rectangular forms with an edging of beads to enclose three sides of each panel.

The abstract or iconographic designs within each panel are the invention of the individual seamstress. A thick fringing of beads hangs from the chest panel, creating color bars of varying widths across the front of the *amautik*. Although there is some variety evident in the choice of colors (e.g. yellow being substituted for white, or dark blue used in place of black), the alternation of light and dark colors and the variation in the widths of the color bands are rigorously followed (Rhoda Karetuk, personal communication, 1983). The slender foretooth of the caribou is attached to the end of each strand of beaded fringe.

Broad wrist cuffs are evident on three of the parkas in Low's photograph (Fig. 4) and each cuff is marked with rows of triangles along a series of tiered groundlines. The decoration of the hoods also shows this layering of horizontal groundlines and the repetition of simple geometric motifs. The tiered pattern parallels the traditional tattoo patterns practiced by Inuit women until well into the 20th century. As evident in Fig. 5, tattoo marks encircle the joints of the shoulder, elbow, and wrist with a repetition of geometric motifs fixed to multiple rows of horizontal groundlines. The triangular motif repeatedly used in the beadwork patterns of the Aivilingmiut (Fig. 4) is evident in the tattoo markings of the woman on the right in Fig. 5. Moreover, the long vertical columns of short lines connecting each joint may be seen as the prototype of the long fringes of beads which hang from the beaded bands encircling the shoulders.

In Inuit traditional culture, the custom of tattooing held deep religious significance. As related to Rasmussen, a woman who was not handsomely tattooed could not get to "the land

6
Beaded woman's *atigi*
(inner parka). Collected by
Captain George Comer,
Repulse Bay, Northwest
Territories. Purchased,
1913. Collection of The
University Museum, Uni-
versity of Pennsylvania
(NA 2844).



of the blessed"; instead, unadorned women were destined for Noqumiut, the "land of the crestfallen" (1931: opp. 312). Tattooing testified that a woman was willing to endure pain for the sake of beauty. In the beadwork decoration of the woman's *atigi*, the inner parka which formerly carried an individual's amulets, the formal convention of tattooing was preserved. In fact, the same implements used to practice tattooing, the needle and thread, were used as well in beadwork decoration. (It is noteworthy that none of the women photographed by Low in Fig. 4 are tattooed; and, in fact, the tattooing shown in Fig. 3 is mere surface marking used to replicate facial tattooing for the sake of the photograph [Journal of Captain George Comer 1903-1904].)

This relationship between beadwork and the traditional pattern of tattooing suggests that beadwork may have some reference to magico-religious function. In addition to the beadwork placed over the chest and around the shoulders and wrists, the hood designs on the Aivilingmiut parka show extremely elaborate renderings. The basic pattern is strictly conventional, with a broad vertical strip extending down the center of the hood and ending with a beaded rectangular emblem of the seamstress's own design. A series of beaded oval shapes is often arranged along this vertical strip. This motif may represent animal (caribou?) vertebrae (Marsha Twomey and George Swinton, collection catalogue notes, Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature). In my own examination of several beaded parkas in museum collec-



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Back view of Fig. 6.

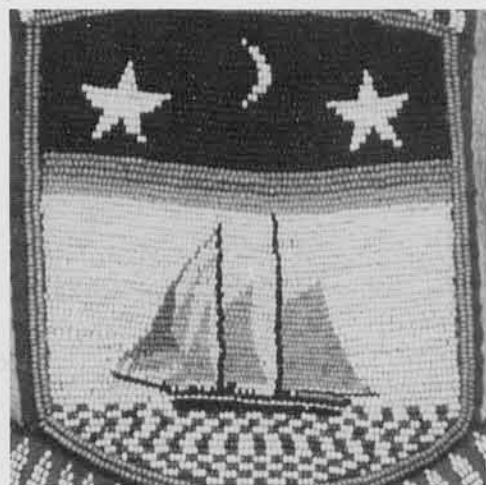
tions, this vertebrae design appears quite frequently although its stylistic rendering differs from parka to parka. In fact, the design may be seen quite clearly in Fig. 4 on the hood of the woman to the far left. The hood decoration on this parka also exhibits an abstraction of the skeletal ribcage of an animal in the emblem ending the hood design.

References to animal skeletal forms have been identified by Mircea Eliade as especially important in hunting cultures for "... bones represent the final source of life, both human and animal, the source from which the species is reconstituted at will" (1964:159). Eliade also states, "... the animal's bone symbolizes the mystery of life in continual regeneration and hence includes in itself, if only virtually, everything that pertains to the past and future of life" (1964:165). The repeated occurrence of this vertebrae motif on the *amautik* reveals the woman's pivotal role in the spiritual activity surrounding the hunt. Although not recognized as an active participant in the hunt, the woman was obligated to follow a strict formula of taboos, especially during her menses and in the period preceding and following childbirth, in order not to jeopardize the male pursuit of game. In its design as well as its decoration the *amautik*, therefore, incorporates functional and symbolic references to the regeneration of both human and animal life. This dual function of the *amautik* is recognized by George Swinton when he writes, "The *amautik* became magic—the magic of life" (1980:24).

A Beaded Parka in The University Museum Collection

The University Museum has three beaded *amautit* (plural of *amautik*) collected in the early 20th century. In examining one of these (Fig. 6), one recognizes the same strict adherence to convention in the placement and pattern of the beadwork as illustrated in Figs. 3 and 4. The divided front panels show four circular forms dropped like pendants from a zigzag line of white beads. The bottom edge of the stroud is marked with a double row of white triangular forms repeated across the front. Strands of beaded fringe hang from the bottom edge of the panel in the following color pattern: white, black, yellow, black, white, red, white, black, white, black, white, black and white. The tiny brass balls which have replaced the traditional pierced foreteeth of

the caribou at the end of each strand of beads allude to the rising importance of the trader and the declining importance of the hunt. This shift is also evident in the decoration of the vertical strip along the center of the hood (Fig. 7). In place of the traditional vertebrae design appears a narrow woven band of beadwork with a repetition of a thunderbird image. This motif, which seems more related to Indian beadwork, suggests that the band may have been purchased from a trader or perhaps that the thunderbird image was imitated from an imported design. The rectangular emblem at the base of the hood is an exquisite reference to the whaling era. This graphic image of a double masted ship with sails unfurled anchored under a dark Arctic night recalls a pivotal moment in the history of the Canadian Arctic (see box below).



Captain George Comer was an accomplished whaling master and seaman. Between 1875 and 1919, he made fourteen separate voyages to the Arctic, often traveling to Hudson Bay in the *Era*, a topsail schooner. In addition to whaling and trading, Comer made ethnographic and archaeological collections, and experimented with photography and sound recordings.

Comer's anthropological accomplishments are being studied by Fred Calabretta, of the Tomaquag Indian Museum, Exeter, Rhode Island. Calabretta recently visited The University Museum to study the Comer holdings of Inuit materials. He examined the parka collected by Comer and suggested that the schooner beaded on the hood may be a representation of the *Era*. Calabretta noted that the Inuit in the Hudson Bay region were well acquainted with the schooner and fond of its master.



Concluding Remarks

A comprehensive study of beadwork, including a complete inventory of beaded parkas in museum collections, has yet to be carried out. However, as a preliminary finding it may be stated that the beaded parka of the central Arctic bridges the gap between two important eras of Inuit history. In its formal conventions the beaded parka recalls archaic forms of tattooing and jointmarking as well as the importance of the skeletal design, while its decorative motifs and the objects used for decoration emphasize the increasing importance of outside trade and contact.

Today, only a few seamstresses in scattered communities carry on the art of beadwork decoration. Some work from memory, while others draw on vintage photographs or the verbal descriptions of relatives. In 1972 Marion Tuu'luq of Baker Lake created the beaded parka illustrated in Fig. 8 at the request of Arts Advisor K. J. Butler. Although retaining the bisymmetric division of the front panel, Tuu'luq breaks with convention in her bold handling of the decorative features.

The design and decoration of clothing has played a vital role in the development of contemporary graphic art among the Canadian Inuit. Today, graphic artists in the communities of Baker Lake, Eskimo Point, Rankin Inlet, Cape Dorset, Pangnirtung, Homan Island, and elsewhere continue to expand this artistic tradition through the media of wall hangings, tapestries, drawings, and prints.

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Marion Tuu'luq, Baker Lake, Northwest Territories. Photograph by K. J. Butler.

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Bernadette Driscoll (here pictured with Jonathan Flood; photo by Françoise Bouchard) is Associate Curator of Inuit Art at The Winnipeg Art Gallery, a position she has held since 1979. She completed her Master's degree at Carleton University with a detailed study of the Inuit parka as the subject of her thesis. Her recent publica-

tions include: *The Inuit Amautik: I Like My Hood To Be Full* (1980); *Inuit Myths, Legends and Songs* (1982); and *Baker Lake Prints and Print-drawings* (1983). Driscoll is continuing her research on beadwork in the Canadian Arctic and would appreciate receiving information, photographs, or comments regarding this topic.