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Relating to animals
North American Arctic
The indigenous people of the North American Arctic rely on animals for every aspect of their physical and spiritual wellbeing. They manage their relationship with animals in order to survive.

The culture of Arctic Peoples – known as the Thule culture – originated in Alaska 1500 years ago and spread eastwards through Canada and into Greenland. Arctic people developed an extremely sophisticated hunting technology based on ancient knowledge of sea mammals. One of their most important weapons was the toggling harpoon used to kill seals, walrus and whales. This main source of food is complemented seasonally by fishing, and hunting caribou and migratory birds.

Tätigat, an Inuit hunter, his breath frozen into his beard. Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada.

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Relating to animals

Surviving the elements

Animal skins and fats provide Arctic people with warmth and food.

Clothes, made of animal skin, are traditionally worn in two layers and are carefully constructed for insulation. Boots are the most important article of clothing. They are made by women using a sewing technique that ensures that the needle never fully perforates the animal skin. Any hole or tear in the clothing could be fatal as it would let in cold and moisture. Clothes are often decorated with animal designs as a way of paying tribute to the animals whose skin is used to make them.

People eat animal fat to provide the essential calories needed for survival, and seal oil was used until recently in lamps to provide heating for the home.

Inuit children of the Taqqaugaq family dressed in caribou skin clothing. Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada.

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Objects displayed here

1 **Woman's sealskin amauti**
Various styles of women's hooded parkas (*amautiit*) are used across the American Arctic. The large hood and shoulders allow a child to be carried inside the amauti. Children are carried in this way from birth until about four years old. The design and decoration of this amauti are characteristic of the eastern Canadian Arctic. Up to seven sealskins would have been needed to make this parka.

Am1972,Q.4 amauti, 1790-1890; Am1921,1004.19 trousers and Am1921,1004.20.a-b boots, 1880-1900. All Inuit, probably from Labrador or Nunavik, eastern Canadian Arctic.

2 **Girl's caribou skin all-in-one suit**
Caribou skin is still preferred for winter clothing in Native communities in the Canadian Arctic. It is warmer and more comfortable than any manmade materials. This girl's all-in-one is made of an inner and an outer suit, with mittens. The inner suit has the fur facing the wearer's skin and the outer suit has the fur facing out.

Am1986,19.18.a-d Iglulingmiut, around 1985, Igloolik, Nunavut, eastern Canadian Arctic.

3 **Stone lamp and kettle**
The lamp was used to burn seal oil with a wick of dry grass. This was the only source of heat and light in a snow house. The kettle was suspended above the lamp and used to melt ice for drinking water and to slowly cook stews or soups.

Am1905,−.122 lamp; Am1905,−.121 kettle. Both Inuit, 1800s, Labrador or Nunavik, eastern Canadian Arctic.
In the Arctic transport is essential to take hunters to their prey.

In winter, hunters can travel great distances by dog sled and snowmobile to reach seal and walrus breathing-holes that can be many miles away. The extreme cold makes travelling in this way possible when the sea, rivers and lakes freeze over. In summer, when the ice melts, kayaks or boats are used for fishing and hunting caribou.

Leah, an Inuit woman, carries her baby on her back in an amauti (hooded parka). Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada.

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Dog Sled (top shelf)

This sled, which would have been pulled by a team of dogs, is made of wood tied together with baleen (a fibrous material from the upper jaws of certain species of whale). Its runners are shod with whalebone to reduce friction and make the sled easier to pull. This type of Alaskan sled has a high bed to keep the passengers clear of soft snow and rough ice. Today people travel by motorised skidoo, but dog sleds are still used occasionally.

Am1855,1126.354 Inupiat, before 1853, Nuvuk (Point Barrow), Alaska.
Umiak and paddles

Umiaks are large open boats used to transport people and supplies. They are also used for hunting walrus and whales, especially in the spring. The frame is made of driftwood with a covering of walrus or seal skin. This small umiak is probably a model, though it is so well made it might have been used by a child.

Am1991,0.2 umiak; Am1890,0908.112 kayak paddle showing hunting scenes; Am1890,0908.110 kayak paddle

Inupiat whale hunters paddling an umiak, made from wood and skin. Point Hope, Alaska.

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Hunting technology

Arctic weapons are highly sophisticated.

The traditional weapon for hunting sea mammals is the toggling harpoon – a recoverable weapon attached to a line. It was launched with a spear-thrower. The harpoon head would sink into the prey's flesh, toggling or twisting sideways, and the prey was then hauled in.

Bows and arrows, made of driftwood and reinforced with animal sinews, were also used. Today guns are mostly used for hunting.

Nukagpianguaq in his kayak demonstrates how to use a spear-thrower to hurl his harpoon. North-west Greenland.

© B&C Alexander/Arcticphoto.com
Spear-throwers

Spear-throwers increase the speed and range a spear can be thrown by extending the leverage of the thrower’s arm. Spear-throwers were first used about 30,000 years ago. They were largely replaced by bows and arrows in North America from about 2000 years ago. They were used in the Arctic until the 1900s for specialised purposes, such as hunting from kayaks.

Weapons are often decorated with animals to indicate respect for the prey and to entice it to the hunter. The sea otters carved on these spear-throwers could represent spirit-helpers who increase the effectiveness of the weapon.

Am1896,·.469; Am1896,·.472 Southern Alaska; Am1921,1014.108 Alaska, 1800s.

Objects displayed here

6

Detail of sea otter carving on spear-thrower.

Jocelyne, an Inuit girl, holds some ptarmigans that her father has shot for food. Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada.

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7 **Toggling harpoon**

Toggling harpoons were used throughout the Arctic for thousands of years. The harpoon head, made of ivory with a stone or metal blade, detaches from the shaft inside the animal. When the line attached to it is pulled, the harpoon head twists and ‘toggles’ in the muscle, making it almost impossible to pull loose. The line may be attached to a bladder float, or it may be pulled in by the hunter. The toggling harpoon was used mainly to kill sea mammals such as whales, walrus and seals.

Am1890,0908.157 harpoon head, Yup’ik or Inupiat, Alaska; Am1930,0106.1.a harpoon shaft, Inuit, Greenland.

8 **Bird spears**

These spears, or darts, are made of wood with two barbed ivory points at one end and three barbed points in the middle. They are used with a spear-thrower for hunting birds. The butt of the spear is tipped with a piece of ivory that fits the notch of a spear-thrower.

Am1896,-.445; Am1896,-.446 Western Arctic.

Drawing showing how a toggling harpoon works.

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Left: Caribou trot across a frozen lake on their Spring migration. Yellowknife, Canada.

Right: Kanguk (Eunice) Palluq from Igloolik, warmly dressed in a parka while out on a hunting trip. Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada.
Relating to animals

Respecting animals

For Arctic people, humans and animals are equal – all have the same kind of soul or ‘life essence’ (inua).

This creates the predicament that, in order to survive, people must kill other creatures that are like them. Recognition of this dilemma lies at the centre of hunting practice, which is based upon respect and reciprocity. The hunter will only succeed if the animal chooses to give its life as a gift in return for moral and respectful behaviour on the part the whole community. For example, after a seal has been killed fresh water is poured into its mouth so that its soul will not be thirsty, and it will tell the other seals of the respect shown to it.

Kigutikaarjuk, an Inuit hunter, skins a caribou he has shot on Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada.

© B&C Alexander/Arcticphoto.com
Bows, quiver and arrows
Bows were first used in North America about 2000 years ago. In the Arctic they are usually made of driftwood or bone. Because these materials are not always ideal, they are backed with an adjustable sinew binding to add strength, stability and power to the bow. The cap of the wooden quiver is decorated with a scene showing a sea mammal hunt. Wooden quivers were used in kayaks, skin quivers were used when hunting on land. These particular arrows have detachable harpoon heads, connected to the arrow shaft by a sinew cord. Arrows were made with different types of point, depending on the prey.

Am1890,0908.15 bow; Am1890,0908.19.a quiver; Am1890,0908.19.b-e arrows; Am1900,0411.22.a bow; Am1900,0411.22.b caribou skin bow case + quiver
**Women’s knives (uluit)**

These crescent-shaped women's knives (uluit) have copper blades and bone handles. They can also be made with stone or iron blades. The ulu is one of the most important Inuit tools. It is used in all aspects of food and skin preparation. The ulu is essential for making skin clothing. Making clothing is always women’s work and a task vital to the survival of the entire community.

Am1855,1126.326; Am1855,1126.327
Copper Inuit, 1800s, Victoria Island, Canadian Arctic.
**Knives**

These bone-handled knives have blades made from cold beaten copper. Arctic people have used local sources of copper for 3000 years. Copper and iron were also traded in the Arctic from about 1000 AD from the Norse settlements in Greenland, and from the 1500s from European whalers and fur traders.

Am1855,1126.331; Am1855,1126.332; Am1855,1126.334 copper and bone; Am1855,1126.324 iron and bone, Copper Inuit, 1800s, Victoria Island, Canadian Arctic.

**Object in focus**

13 **Man’s winter outfit, made by Leonie Qrunnut (top shelf)**

This man’s winter outfit consists of an outer parka (*qulittaq*) and an inner parka (*atigi*), inner and outer trousers, mittens and several layers of footwear. All the garments, except the sealskin boots, are made of caribou skin.

The inner layer has the fur turned inwards towards the body. The outer layer has the fur outwards. Warm air is trapped between the two layers of clothing and the body. They are made to fit loosely for ventilation and air circulation, and to prevent sweat or moisture building up and freezing in the clothing.
In the Canadian Arctic caribou is the preferred material for making winter clothing. It provides better insulation against the cold than seal hair. Seal hair is used for boots to keep the feet dry because it is much more water-repellent.


Thomasie Nutarariaq sitting inside a snow house. Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada.

Flora Nanuk, Hooper Bay, Alaska, 1992, modelling a seal-gut parka on display here. She made the parka in the 1980s to use while berry picking.

Photo: J. King
Gut parkas
These waterproof coats were usually made from the intestines of sea mammals – seal, sea lion, walrus or whale. They could be secured around the hatch of a kayak, making them ideal for travelling in Arctic waters. These coats were highly prized by European sailors and explorers as they were much lighter and more effective than Western oilskins. Gut parkas were often worn by shamans during ritual performance. They were associated with feasts and rituals that related both to the dead and to spring renewal. They were powerful garments that protected the wearer against both the elements and misfortune, and they attracted animals to the hunter.

Am1992,05.6.a Flora Nanuk's parka, 1980s; Am1890,0908.4, 1800s, south-west Alaska.

14 Racoon and otter skin parka (top shelf)

Am1990,16.15, 1960s, Yup’ik, Alaska.

15 Rabbit skin and white textile parka (top shelf)


16 Red fox skin and coloured textile parka (top shelf)

Sealskin bags
These beautifully made and decorated bags were used to store and transport skin clothing.

Am1855,1126.19; Am1855,1126.21
Copper Inuit, 1800s, Victoria Island, Northwest Territories/Nunavut, Canadian Arctic.

Shamanism

Shamans were once essential for the survival and wellbeing of Arctic communities.

Shamans are men or women who have the particular ability to communicate with other-than-human-persons. These may be, for example, animals or the personified forces of disease, or weather. Shamans are especially important in ensuring that animals continue to give themselves as gifts to hunters. Without a shaman to intercede and negotiate with these powers, a human community is vulnerable to disease and starvation.
Masks

In the Arctic, masks are never a disguise intended to hide the identity of the wearer – instead they reveal an inner truth. Arctic people have a shamanic understanding of the world, in which nothing and no one can be known by their appearance – only by their actions. Any being or thing can potentially be, or can appear as, anything else. Masks can show the moment of transformation from human-like to animal-like, or they can show the multiple nature of all beings. Ordinary people can use masks to invoke animal spirits and show respect to animals. Shamans can use masks to become other, powerful beings.

Central mask: Am1890,0908.9
Clockwise from the bottom:
Am1855,1126.169 drum handle figure; Am,.2080; Am1944,02.1;
Am1976,03.80 whalebone; Am1979,Q.84;
Am1976,03.82; Am1929,1218.1

Objects displayed here

The Igloolik shaman, Qingailisaq, wearing the original parka that inspired the replica on display here. Around 1902.
© Mystic Seaport, Photography Collection, Mystic, USA, 1966.339.68
Drum

Drums were a shaman’s most important tool. They were used in ritual performances throughout the Arctic to enable a shaman to enter a trance state in order to communicate with other-than-human-persons. This one is made of caribou skin with their hair removed stretched over a bentwood frame. Today they are used at feasts and drum dances, held in large communal snow houses, and at community festivities in autumn and winter.

Am1900,0411.18 Caribou Inuit, about 1890, central Canadian Arctic.

Replica of a shaman’s parka, made by Rachel Uyarasuk

The original parka, now at the American Museum of Natural History, was collected on the west coast of Hudson Bay in 1902. It was made for the shaman Qingailisaq after he met a group of caribou-people (other-than-human-persons who take the form of either caribou or people). The parka commemorates this encounter and was made to look like the clothes worn by these beings. In one version of the story, the shaman killed one of the caribou-people, who turned into a woman giving birth to a boy. The small figure on the chest represents this boy. The open hands on the front are said to protect the wearer from harm.

Am1994,06.24.a Iglulingmiut, about 1989, Igloolik, Nunavut, eastern Canadian Arctic.
Nujappik, an Inuit man from Ammassalik, East Greenland, drumming and singing, about 1905.

Photo: William Carl Thalbitzer

Portraits above (left to right)

Noah Piugaatuk
Igloolik, Nunavut, Canada
1992
© B&C Alexander/Arcticphoto.com

Girl from Igloolik
Nunavut, Canada
1992
© B&C Alexander/Arcticphoto.com

Koo-tuck-tuck
(Qqajuittuq)
Fullerton Harbour
Hudson Bay
about 1903–1905

Children
Baffin Island, Nunavut, Canada
1987
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