

Large print exhibition text



Arctic
culture and climate

Sponsor's statement

We believe that by understanding the past, we all have the opportunity to define the future. With the Citi exhibition **Arctic: culture and climate** the Museum uses its collection and that of significant lending institutions to demonstrate how human resilience and ingenuity have helped the inhabitants of the Arctic region to survive and thrive. However, the exhibition also highlights the challenge that we face with the changing climate.

It is a challenge that we must all address and, as a global bank, we play an essential role in financing a sustainable economy. We are committed to financing and facilitating clean energy, infrastructure and technology projects that support environmental solutions and reduce the impacts of climate change, on rich and diverse communities such as those that inhabit the Circumpolar Arctic.

Lead supporter

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Please note

This exhibition contains a film that includes the hunting of animals by Arctic Peoples.

There are materials that include reindeer fur and other animal parts. Please ask a member of staff for further details.

Audio: Songs and sounds from Indigenous Arctic Peoples

There are sounds of singing, music, dancing, laughter, people playing games and chatting.

Duration: 9 minutes

Arctic culture and climate

Indigenous Arctic Peoples are on the frontline of global climate change. The Arctic is warming at more than twice the rate of anywhere else.

Research predicts that Arctic summers will be ice free within eighty years, affecting us all by altering weather patterns worldwide.

Arctic Peoples have lived with slow, natural climate variability and seasonal weather for 30,000 years. Through adaptation, innovation and collaboration they have persevered in the face of dramatic environmental and social disruption. How might their resilience help us jointly face the challenge of rapid climate change today?

Arctic: culture and climate

Community partners

We are particularly grateful to the Indigenous Arctic leaders, scholars, artists, educators, hunters, herders and seamstresses who have generously shared their knowledge and stories to help create this exhibition.

Image caption: Sarahmee Akoomalik

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Image caption: Tatiana Argounova-Low

Sakha

Yakutsk, Sakha Republic, Russia and
Aberdeen, Scotland, United Kingdom

Image caption: Delano Barr

Inupiat

Shishmaref, Alaska, USA

Image caption: Neil Colin

Gwich'in

Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, Canada

Arctic: culture and climate

Image caption: John and Pearl Goodwin

Inupiat

Kotzebue, Alaska, USA

Image caption: Karlin Itchoak

Inupiat

Nome, Alaska, USA

Image caption: Sheila Katsak

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Image caption: Rhoda Katsak

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Image caption: Joanasie Mucpa

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Image caption: Mary Mucpa

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Arctic: culture and climate

Image caption: Faye Ongtawasruk

Inupiat

Wales, Alaska, USA

Image caption: Regilee Ootoova

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Image caption: Georgina Pewatoaluk

Inuit

Mittimatalik, Nunavut, Canada

Image caption: Caroline Snowshoe

Gwich'in

Fort McPherson, Northwest Territories, Canada

Image caption: Eduard Zdor

Chukchi

Neshkan, Chukotka, Russia

Map caption: Siberia is divided by the Ural

Mountains and three main rivers – the Ob,

Yenesei and Lena. Rivers flow north in the Arctic.

Chukchi

There are two groups of Chukchi living in the Russian Far East. Herding Chukchi travel inland through the treeless tundra with their reindeer, which supply them with milk, meat and hides to make clothing, such as this girl's parka and mittens. Coastal Chukchi live in settlements along the coast, hunting walrus, whales and seals for ivory, meat and hides. The two groups intermarry and trade. Historically, they also traded with Arctic Peoples living on the other side of the Bering Strait, the stretch of water separating Russia and Alaska, USA.

Chukchi, Russia – 1996
Donated by The Sosland Foundation
British Museum

Evenki

Evenki hunt and herd reindeer across a large part of north-central Siberia in Russia. This reindeer-skin shaman's cloak is decorated with iron and copper plates, imbued with spirits for assistance and protection.

Circumpolar views

To journey to the spirit world, a shaman entered a trance by hitting a wooden reindeer-hide drum with a beater, such as this wood and mammoth-ivory one. 'Shaman' is from the Evenki word šamán (one who knows). Nowadays, many Evenki are Christians, but incorporate both animism, the belief that all things are animate, and shamanism into their practice.

Cloak, Evenki, Russia – before 1849;
drum, Evenki, Russia – before 1908;
beater, Evenki, Russia – before 1931
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Nenets

The lives of Nenets revolve around reindeer herding in the Yamal Peninsula in north-west Russia. Throughout the year, they travel great distances with their large migrating herds, relying on reindeer fur to keep them warm. This woman's winter coat, mittens and boots are made from late-autumn reindeer hide, when the animal's fur is at its thickest and has the best insulation.

Circumpolar views

The importance of reindeer is reflected in the intricate trim, depicting reindeer antlers.

Nenets, Russia – before 1934
British Museum

Khanty

Khanty hunt, fish and herd reindeer throughout the Ob river basin in north-west Russia. After the Russian conquest of Siberia in 1586, Khanty became one of the first Arctic Peoples to encounter ‘southerners’, non-indigenous settlers and travellers in the Arctic. Khanty readily incorporated trade beads into their clothing, as on this headband. Similarly, this woman’s woollen coat, embellished with a pewter and beaded trim, was influenced by Tartars, their non-Arctic southern neighbours.

Khanty, Russia – before 1898
Donated by Sir Henry Hoyle Howorth
British Museum

Sámi

Sámi of northern Scandinavia and north-west Russia express their identity through traditional clothing. Each community has specific colours, patterns and designs for clothing, bootstraps and knives with reindeer-bone handles. This man's felt outfit of tunic, trousers and hat worn during the winter was commissioned by a visitor to the area. While Sámi are predominately associated with reindeer herding, Sea Sámi rely on hunting and fishing.

Sámi, Norway – 1945–55;
Sámi, Norway – before 1931
Costume bequeathed by Harry Ely;
knife donated by Alban Head
British Museum

Circumpolar views

The Arctic is the most northerly place on earth. Centred on the North Pole, its southern border is the Arctic Circle. With wide annual temperature fluctuations, the Arctic has two distinct types of landscape – tundra, a treeless ecosystem, and taiga, coniferous forests. Today, four million people live within the eight Arctic nations of Russia, USA, Canada, Greenland (Denmark), Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland. Of those, 400,000 are Indigenous Peoples with ancestral ties to the Arctic. They share many cultural traits, and have been trading and communicating with one another across the Circumpolar North for thousands of years. These Arctic Peoples belong to over forty different ethnic groups, many of whom are represented in this exhibition. Their distinct identities are reflected in the costumes displayed here.

Map caption: Map of the Arctic's Indigenous Peoples showing the rate at which the summer sea ice is predicted to melt over the next 100 years.

Circumpolar views

The names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the British Museum.

Inuit – Kalaallit

This woman's sealskin costume reflects the long history of connections between the Kalaallit, Greenland's largest Inuit group, Europeans and global trade. Worn on formal occasions, this national costume incorporates Greenlandic traditions, like sealskin sewing, with the embroidery, beading and lacework of northern Europe. To make such intricate outfits, professional seamstresses need numerous skills, such as dyeing, cutting and sewing tiny patches of sealskin, as seen on the boot trim.

Kalaallit, Greenland – 1934
Donated by Henry and Rosi Fulda
British Museum

Gwich'in

Gwich'in live in the taiga forests of Alaska and north-west Canada.

Circumpolar views

Their economic and spiritual reliance on caribou (wild reindeer) is as strong today as it has ever been – their ancestral homeland is within the migratory route of a caribou herd. Caribou-hide summer outfits, like this man's one, were embroidered with porcupine quills to appeal to 'southerner' collectors of the early 20th century from outside the Circumpolar North.

Gwich'in, USA/Canada – before 1914

Donated by Frances Kitson

British Museum

Inuit – Yupiit and Inupiat

Louisa Kanuk (died 1992), Kipnuk, Alaska

Nancy Myers (1941–2014), Kivalina, Alaska

Inuit groups living across the Arctic regions of the Bering Strait, North America and Greenland share cultural traits, like hunting sea mammals and caribou (wild reindeer). These parkas, made by seamstresses from different Alaskan communities, reflect the range of local and traded materials and how Yupiit and Inupiat influence one another's designs.

Circumpolar views

The Yupiit woman's parka is made from 100 ground squirrel hides, chosen for their lightness, beauty and durability. The Inupiat child's parka includes muskrat, beaver and otter fur. Both hoods are trimmed with wolverine fur, which does not absorb moisture, so will not freeze against the face.

Woman's parka, Yupiit, USA – 1950–73;
child's parka, Inupiat, USA – 1993
British Museum

Map caption: Aleut, Yupiit and Inuit groups share a common language family, shown here in orange.

At home with the ice

Audio: Sled dog travel in Greenland, 2016

There are sounds of the sled as it moves across the ice.

Duration: 20 seconds

© Acacia Johnson

Dog sled

Ice and snow facilitate mobility. Sleds enable people to travel easily and for long distances over frozen landscapes. Made from imported wood, this contemporary sled has plastic runners. Its frame is lashed together with nylon cord instead of nails. These hard-working vehicles need to be flexible enough to withstand the constant jostling created by travelling over rough terrain, such as across crevices or on drifting sea ice.

Inughuit, Greenland – before 1985

British Museum

Audio: An Arctic seasonal soundscape

There are sounds of wind, melting ice, rivers, birds, snowmobiles, boats, dogs and different Arctic animals.

At home with the ice

Duration: 24 minutes

Freight sled and stick

Sleds are designed for specific kinds of snow and ice. The boat-like shape of Sámi sleds enables them to float through the deep powdery snows of Scandinavia. This birch sled was pulled by a single male reindeer. Herders used the wooden stick for balance and to direct the reindeer. Until recently, Sámi travelled to their winter rangelands in convoys of sleds transporting both people and possessions. Now they use snowmobiles.

Sled, Sámi, Sweden – before 1929;
stick, Sámi, Sweden – made by Johan Johansson Nutti
(about 1884–1935), Karesuando, before 1920
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge

Image caption: Travelling by Sámi sled, 1674.

© Johannes Schefferus

At home with the ice

Panel on the wall behind

At home with ice

For 30,000 years, Indigenous Peoples of the Arctic have made warm and hospitable homelands out of ecosystems of ice. This is what all Arctic Peoples have in common. Ice is fundamental to their lives, serving as building material for roads and temporary shelters, enabling freedom to travel widely and providing access to bountiful worlds. Permafrost, frozen soil, which acts as bedrock in the Arctic, is thawing fast. Without it, roads are sinking, structures are collapsing and solid ground is giving way. If the Arctic is ice free within eighty years, what will happen to these rich ways of life centred on the cold?

On foot

Arctic Peoples designed specific footwear for walking on different kinds of frozen surfaces.

At home with the ice

Essential for moving through snowdrifts and grainy snow, snowshoes, like these wooden ones from western Alaska (1), distribute the wearer's weight to stop them from sinking. By contrast, these Chukchi crampons (2) of walrus ivory were tied beneath shoes, providing stability on snow that had thawed and frozen again. The reindeer-fur soles of the Sámi boots (3) were sewn with the fur ends pointing towards the toe to create friction and stop the wearer from slipping.

(1) Probably Yupiit, USA – about 1904;

(2) Chukchi, Russia – before 1855;

(3) Sámi, Sweden – made by Kristina Utsi

(dates unknown), Tärnaby, Sweden, about 1960

Snowshoes donated by St George Littledale; crampons donated by Sir John Barrow; boots donated by Eva Howell
British Museum

Pulling seals

As year-round inhabitants of the Arctic, seals are a reliable source of food and raw materials for both Inuit and Chukchi. 'We're from the High Arctic', explains Inuit seamstress Regilee Ootoova.

At home with the ice

‘We rely on what’s available to us. We rely on seals even today for clothing and food. Our sealing tradition is a whole system.’ Seals maintain and return to the same breathing holes in the ice throughout the year. Hunters wait at these holes and once they have retrieved a seal, use drag lines (4, 5), like these of ivory and seal hide, to pull their load home. Seals become almost weightless as their freezing fur glides across the ice.

(4) Probably Yupiit, USA – before 1855;

(5) probably Inupiat, USA – before 1869

Donated by Haslar Hospital (4); donated by Henry Christy (5)
British Museum

Image caption: An illustration of an Inupiat pulling seals across the ice, early 20th century.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Accessing icy seas

Angokwazhuk, ‘Happy Jack’, (1875–1918),

Seward Peninsula, Alaska

At home with the ice

For Inuit the flow edge, where open water meets the ice fastened to the shoreline, is one of the most fruitful areas for hunting. It is where migrating sea mammals and birds congregate in spring. This walrus-ivory tusk (6) engraved by 'Happy Jack', a celebrated Inupiat artist, shows how they placed their boats and kayaqqs on sleds to reach these animals.

(6) Inupiat, USA – early 20th century

Given by the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine
British Museum

Snow tools

Inuit no longer live in igloos, but still occasionally build them while hunting. Men cut large blocks of packed snow using their snow knives, like this Inupiat ivory one engraved with a whaling scene. Igloos are built from the inside with each block cut to fit exactly. On completion, a wooden snow shovel is used to fill in the cracks, adding strength and insulation.

Knife, Inupiat, USA – before 1871;
shovel, Inuit, Canada – before 1898

At home with the ice

Knife donated by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks;
shovel donated by David T. Hanbury
British Museum

Some people cutting up seal, others making a kayak, 1985

Lucassie Tukalak (born 1917), Puvirnituk, Quebec

Packed or hardened snow is a vital source of building material for Arctic Peoples. They use it to make wind breaks, shooting targets and igloos, one of the most well-known Inuit innovations.

Igloos were built on either ice or land. This intimate stonecut print shows how seasonal life is centred around the igloo as a family cook, build a kayaq and butcher a seal.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Image caption: Netsilingmuit Inuit practised on targets made of packed snow. Photograph taken by Knut Ramussen, 1920s.

© National Museum of Denmark

At home with the ice

Image caption: Interior of an Eskimaux snow-hut by Captain G.F. Lyon, 1822.

© Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, with permission

Image caption: Tatigat pulls aside the snow brick over the igloo door at dusk, Iglulik, Nunavut, 2010.

© Bryan and Cherry Alexander

Ice cellar, 2019

Inupiat of northern Alaska preserve large chunks of whale meat in underground ice cellars dug deep into the permafrost, a thick layer of frozen soil.

The permafrost is melting due to global climate change. As these natural fridges rapidly disappear Inupiat are left with nowhere to store their traditional food, a vital part of their identity.

© Katie Orlinsky

There's Another One, 2012

Andrew Qappik (born 1964), Nunataq, Nunavut

At home with the ice

This drawing (1) captures the richness of life beneath the ice and its significance for the people who depend on it. Ice fishing is a favourite pastime and a means of harvesting food. Conveying the dynamic relationship between animals, humans and ice, Qappik underlines the enormity of what will be lost if the Arctic sea ice melts away due to climate change.

(1) Inuit, Canada

British Museum

(2) Inuit, Canada – made by Abraham Oolalak

(dates unknown), Iglulik, Nunavut, 1984;

(3) Chukchi, Russia – before 1855;

(4) unknown, Russia – before 1970s

Sieve donated by Sir John Barrow

British Museum

Ice-fishing

Arctic Peoples used a variety of tools to access the fish beneath the ice. The fisherwoman in Qappik's print (1) uses a three-pronged spear similar to this one (2). To scoop away slush from ice fishing holes, Chukchi used sieves.

At home with the ice

The one here (3) has a frame of reindeer antler with a mesh of baleen strips. Baleen, sourced from whales, is flexible, fibrous and does not freeze, so the sieve holes remain ice free. Another widespread technique was to place wooden fish traps (4) in holes cut into frozen rivers, like this Siberian model.

(2) Inuit, Canada – made by Abraham Oolalak (dates unknown), Iglulik, Nunavut, 1984;

(3) Chukchi, Russia – before 1855;

(4) unknown, Russia – before 1970s

Sieve donated by Sir John Barrow

British Museum

Family sewing and building kayak, 1969

Mtarjuk Attasie Nappaaluk (1931–2007),

Kangiqsujuaq, Quebec

This soapstone and bone sculpture (5) depicts the true story of a family who became stranded on pack ice. Resourcefully, they hunted seal for food and materials to build a kayaq that they paddled to safety.

At home with the ice

This early 20th-century tale, depicting sea ice as both dangerous and bountiful, explains how the environment helps those who respond to hardship with respect, ingenuity and improvisation.

(5) Inuit, Canada

Donated by James and Alice Houston

British Museum

Fresh drinking water

Many Arctic Peoples prefer to get their drinking water from icebergs, composed of frozen fresh water from glaciers, or springs. This walrus-ivory straw (6) was used for drinking while travelling. Kept inside, the Tunumiit wooden bucket (7) from eastern Greenland was filled with fresh ice chunks that were left to melt. It has an ivory straw fitted into its rim.

(6) Inuit, Canada – before 1824;

(7) Tunumiit, Greenland – before 1941

Straw donated by William Edward Parry

British Museum

At home with the ice

Quote:

‘To live in a boundless landscape and a close-knit culture in which everything matters and everything is connected is a kind of magic. Like generations of Inuit, I bonded with the ice and snow.’

Sheila Watt-Cloutier, Iqaluit, Nunavut, 2015

Material matters

Arctic Peoples are very skilled at using the materials available to them. Look at how many things can be made from one caribou (wild reindeer).

Do any of these surprise you?

Take this opportunity to look at some of the different materials you will see in the exhibition.

Materials

These materials have been obtained from reindeer herds in Sweden, Norway, Finland and the UK. They are by-products of herds farmed primarily for their meat, but no part of the reindeer goes to waste.

At home with the ice

tent

fishing line

parka

socks

trousers

thread

sleeping bag and mattress

kayaq

drum

scraper

harpoon line

foreshaft

bow and arrow

caribou hide

antler

bucket

At home with the ice

femur

binding and struts

mittens

boots

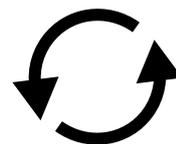
bag

Image caption: Using a scanning electron microscope, Museum scientists have magnified a caribou hair to reveal a structure that looks like bubble-wrap. This traps hot air, which keeps the animal very warm, as well as anyone wearing clothes made from caribou fur.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Young explorers look!

As you walk around the exhibition look for this symbol.



It tells you that the object used to be something else. Can you work out what?

At home with the ice

For example, a bag made from dried fishskin used to be a fish.

Kaktovik, Alaska, 2015

Brian Adams (born 1985), Anchorage, Alaska

Marie Rexford prepares **muktuk**, frozen whale skin and blubber, from the photographic series **I am Inuit.**

Inupiat, USA

© Brian Adams

Seasonal lives

Those living outside the Circumpolar North often imagine the Arctic as barren. Although there are lean seasons corresponding to the dark winter months, these alternate with periods of extraordinary abundance. Summer's continuous daylight generates phenomenal growth in sea algae as the ice recedes, attracting whales and walrus. As the snow melts, plants spring to life, producing berries, greens and mushrooms that support reindeer, caribou (wild reindeer) and migratory birds. Arctic Peoples thrive by harnessing this abundance to carry them through winter. Community life and spiritual ceremonies are also structured seasonally, but as global climate change increasingly disrupts seasonal patterns, such long-established ways of life are becoming compromised.

Nunavut Qajanartuk, 1992

Kenojuak Ashevak (1927–2013), Baffin Island,
Nunavut

Seasonal lives

The shape of Ashevak's lithograph reflects the circular pattern of Inuit lives. In **Our beautiful land** she shows how transportation, housing, clothing and animal relationships change with the seasons and how community life is intricately connected to climate. This was an important commission for the artist. It commemorated the Inuit Land Claim Agreement of 1990, which created the Canadian province of Nunavut – 'our land' in the Inuktitut language.

Inuit, Canada
West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative

Map caption: The creation of Nunavut, Canada's newest and largest province, has increased self-governance for Inuit of north-east Canada.

Arctic Foliage, 1974

Hatti Akilak (1938–2010), Qamani'tuaq, Nunavut
This wall-hanging celebrates the robust tundra plants that rapidly grow in the 24-hour summer sunlight of the Arctic.

Seasonal lives

Akilak used vivid felted wool and embroidery thread to layer contrasting colours and shapes, representing the plants.

Inuit, Canada

Donated by The British Museum Friends
British Museum

**Film: Summer greens in Chukotka,
Russian Far East, 2015 and 2017**

This film shows *Rhodiola rosea* being harvested to make Arctic sauerkraut, *Rumex arcticus* being mashed to make a savoury condiment and a family sharing a meal.

There are sounds of people chatting in Russian throughout and of food being cut up.

Duration: 1 minute, 10 seconds

Scan the QR code or visit

britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to listen.



© Igor Pasternak and Sveta Yamin-Pasternak for their research project

Aging with Change: Food Arts in the Bering Strait.

Seasonal lives

Film: Inupiat food values, 2017

Felicia AukaDee Nayokpuk of Shishmaref, Alaska, prepares seal meat and oil.

There are sounds of chopping as AukaDee prepares the food.

Duration: 1 minute, 10 seconds

Scan the QR code or visit britishmuseum.org/arctic-content to listen.



© Sarah Betcher of Farthest North Films for a research project **Birnirk prehistory and the emergence of Inupiaq Culture in Northwestern Alaska, archaeological and anthropological perspectives.**

Animal relations

Arctic Peoples have always relied heavily upon animals. As part of that dependency, they maintain close and reciprocal relationships with them.

Animals are recognised as fully aware, non-human persons with whom they share a morality and consciousness.

First discoveries

Herders view their reindeer as individuals with distinct traits and skills, while hunters know that animals will give themselves up only to those who treat them respectfully. Both herders and hunters believe that when properly treated the souls of taken animals will be reborn, keeping them infinitely renewable.

Quote: 'To remain who we are we must continue to eat what we do.'

Anders Oskal, Guovdageaidnu/Kautokeino, Norway, 2017

Hunting gifts

Leonie Qrunnut (dates unknown), Iglulik, Nunavut
Arctic Peoples describe hunting as the giving and receiving of gifts, not the killing of animals. The caribou used to make this hunting outfit gave itself willingly to the hunter, who presented the hide and meat to his wife. By sharing the meat with her community and making clothes for her husband, she mediates between hunter and animal.

Seamstresses symbolically regenerate the prey in their sewn garments, made to resemble caribou to ensure future hunting success.

Inuit, Canada – before 1985

British Museum

Wooden travel chest

The base and lid of this chest were made from single pieces of wood that were steamed and bent into shape. Painted with alder-bark dye, it was used to store crockery during seasonal journeys to hunting grounds and reindeer pastures. The oval shape and lid, attached with bone hinges sewn with reindeer hide, protected the delicate china within.

Khanty, Russia – before 1954

Donated by the Wellcome Institute for the History of Medicine

British Museum

Preparing and serving meals

Fish and meat are prepared in a variety of ways. In western Alaska food was served and eaten from wooden utensils and bowls painted with hereditary family designs.

Seasonal lives

Before propane stoves were adopted, Inuit boiled food in soapstone kettles over a flame. Today, accessing traditional foods is a concern for Arctic Peoples. Vernae Angnaboogok, advisor for the Inuit Circumpolar Council, explains that ‘traditional foods, such as bowhead whale, beluga and seal, berries, willows and greens provide medicines and healing important to our wellbeing’.

Spoon, Yupiit, USA – before 1888;

bowl, Yupiit, USA – before 1949;

kettle, Inuit, Canada – before 1904

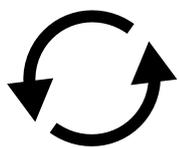
Spoon donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale;

bowl purchased with Art Fund support;

kettle donated by Sir Wilfred Thomason Grenfell

British Museum

ArtFund



Find me: bag

What did I used to be?

Resourceful artists

Arctic Peoples try to use the non-edible parts of animals they hunt in imaginative and innovative ways.

Seasonal lives

Such resourcefulness results from necessity – materials are sometimes sparse – but it is also a widely shared ethical position, ensuring that no part of the taken animal is wasted. The practice of using the whole animal focuses artistic creativity to generate beautiful objects.

Narwhal tusk

Greenland – before 1939

Sculpture of a narwhal with ivory tusk, 1987

Mathew Saviadjuk, (born 1950), Kinngait, Nunavut

Inuit, Canada – soapstone, walrus ivory

Reindeer-antler spoon

Sámi, Sweden or Norway – before 1927

Woman's apron

Dolgan, Russia – before 1877, reindeer hide, glass beads, uranium beads, brass, ivory, metal

Baleen basket with walrus-ivory handle, 1952

Marvin Peter (1911–1962), Utqiagvik, Alaska

Inupiat, USA

Fishskin bag

Yupiit, USA – before 1888, salmon-skin, caribou throat-fur embroidery, seal oesophagus skin

Eider duck-feet bag

Zipporah Innuksuk (1923–2008), Iglulik, Nunavut

Inuit, Canada – 1990s

Duck down, feather and skin rug

Kalaallit, Greenland – before 1992

Narwhal tusk donated by Irene Marguerite Beasley;

Seasonal lives

reindeer-antler spoon donated by Mrs J.E. Birch;
fishskin bag donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale
British Museum

Image caption: Cutting baleen from the mouth
of a bowhead whale, Alaska, 1939–59.

© Anchorage Museum, Ward Wells Collection: B83.91.
S4393.420

Sympathetic powers

Clothing and tools are often given animal characteristics to endow the wearer with protection and specific powers. The hood of the Nenets child in the etching depicts reindeer ears, symbolically transferring the animal's hardiness to the child. The Aleut leader who wore this visor decorated with sea-lion whiskers had the animal's potency transmitted to him while hunting. Each whisker represents a successful hunt.

Print, France – Habit of a Samoyede Woman & Child subject
to Russia in 1768 after Jean-Baptiste
Chappe D' Auteroche, 1768–72;
visor, Aleut, USA – late 19th century
Visor purchased with Art Fund support
British Museum

ArtFund

Man making a kayak and a woman making clothes, 1986

Levi Qumaluk (1919–1997), Puvirnituk, Quebec

Animals are the main source of food and materials for many Arctic Peoples, as depicted in the everyday scene of this stonecut print. The artist shows meat cooking on the kettle, fish about to be cut, a man making a sealskin kayaq cover and a woman sewing seal and caribou fur.

Inuit, Canada

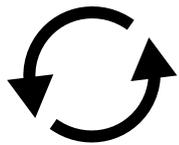
British Museum

Celebrating seasons

Ceremonial life in the Arctic follows the rhythm of the seasons. For some Arctic Peoples observances of gratitude take place during winter. In ceremonies involving masked dancing and drumming, animals are honoured and thanked for giving up their lives.

Seasonal lives

Sakha of north-east Russia mark the beginning of their year with a summer festival asking the gods for favourable weather and plentiful pastures.



Find me: drum

What did I used to be?

Winter celebrations

In the past, Inuit communities would gather for celebrations in winter after food had been procured and processed. Such events involved elaborate masked dances accompanied by wooden drums covered with walrus-liver membranes. Some drum handles were elaborately carved to represent the shaman's spirit helpers. This wooden one has fox teeth and beaded eyes.

Drum, Inuit, Canada – before 1898;
handle, Inupiat, USA – before 1855
Drum donated by David T. Hanbury;
handle donated by Sir John Barrow
British Museum

Seasonal lives

Masked performances

These Inupiat, Yupiit and Tunumiit wooden masks were made and worn for ceremonial dances focusing on ritual purification, honouring animals and offering gratitude to various spirits. Shamans played important ceremonial roles, sometimes using spirit masks to ensure a prosperous future. Mask dances and other celebrations were also performed as wintertime entertainment.

Inupiat, USA – before 1921;

Yupiit, USA – 1940s;

Tunumiit, Greenland – before 1944

Inupiat mask donated by Estelle W. Fuller through Art Fund;

Tunumiit mask donated by Irene Marguerite Beasley

British Museum

ArtFund

Image caption: Yupiit men, possibly from Hooper Bay, Alaska, perform a mask dance, mid-20th century.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Festive food

Today, Sakha still celebrate the **yhyakh** by making special food and drink. Fermented mare's milk is given as an offering to the gods. It is circulated amongst guests in a **choron**, a large wooden goblet. Enormous amounts of meat, wheat porridge and berries with whipped cream are prepared and then stored for serving in birchbark containers stitched together with horsehair.

Goblet, Sakha, Russia – before 1927;
container, Sakha, Russia – before 1896
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Protecting animals

An important deity celebrated during the **yhyakh** festival protects horses, ensuring that herds prosper. As pastoralists, Sakha used to depend on their horses for transportation, food and milk, so horses were decorated to honour this important god. Seamstresses would sew fur covers like these from cow, horse and bear, embellishing them with beads and fabric.

Seasonal lives

Sakha, Russia – before 1910
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Summer festival of the yhyakh

This mammoth-ivory model represents the **yhyakh**. Held around the summer solstice, it marks the return of summer and is the most important annual festival for Sakha of north-east Russia. The festival also provides an opportunity to thank the gods for weather that enables successful cattle and horse breeding, as well as hay cutting. The figures in the model are shown participating in games and competitions, while a shaman conducts a ritual, reciting prayers and making offerings.

Sakha, Russia – before 1867
British Museum

Women's festival clothing

Special festive clothing and jewellery are worn to the **yhyakh**. In the 19th century, women wore locally made silver necklaces and fur hats to show their social status, important in their hierarchical society.

Seasonal lives

Necklace, Sakha, Russia – 1875;
hat, Sakha, Russia – before 1903
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Image caption: Traditional yhyakh festival dress for women and horses, 1890s.

© American Museum of Natural History Library

Film: The yhyakh festival, 2012

Summer festival celebrated in the Sakha Republic, Russia.

This film is silent.

Duration: 1 minute, 40 seconds

© **Yhyakh** directed by Ellei Ivanov for Sakha National Broadcasting Company; **The dance of life** directed by Eduard Novikov

Hunting and herding

There is no tradition of agriculture in the Circumpolar North, so historically Arctic diets and livelihoods have relied on a combination of herding, hunting and fishing, following seasonal patterns of animal migrations.

Seasonal lives

Today, Arctic Peoples work in various industries, including energy, fishing and tourism, as well as in education and other government sectors.

Most, however, also maintain connections with the traditional economies of hunting and herding.

Seasonal weather patterns determine when and how hunting and fishing activities take place.

While men typically hunt and herd, women play equally essential economic roles, preserving food and making clothing.

Autumn, 2004

Stanislav Il'key (1967–2011), Uelen, Chukotka

This print shows a reindeer being lassoed after returning from the freedom of summer pastures.

Herders use the autumn roundup to identify and mark new calves. They also count and move the

reindeer to nearby winter pastures of lichen, which the reindeer access by pawing through the snow.

Chukchi of the Russian Far East mark the end of summer with a special celebration that reunites herders with their reindeer.

Seasonal lives

Chukchi, Russia

'Autumn', 2004, Stanislav Viktoro Il'key,
Anchorage Museum Collection

Winter reindeer camp

Nenets reindeer herders of Siberia live in conical tents of reindeer hide. Following the annual migration of their reindeer, they travel hundreds of kilometres between the winter and summer rangelands. This mammoth-ivory model portrays aspects of life in such a winter camp – a woman gives birth, herders do business with a Russian fur trader and dogs and reindeer rest, mindful of the ever-present threat of wild wolves and bears.

Russia – before 1860s

Donated by Louis Colville Clarke

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge

Film: Nenets reindeer herding in the Yamal
Peninsula, 2015

There are sounds of strong winds and commands from herders as they instruct the reindeer.

Duration: 1 minute, 10 seconds

Seasonal lives

Scan the QR code or visit
britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to listen.



© Research film by Dmitry Arzyutov

Film: Nenets herder Anisii Okotteto driving
reindeer sled, 2018

There are sounds of reindeer hooves crunching
on snow, the jangling of reins and the occasional
commands of Anisii, the herder.

Duration: 1 minute

Scan the QR code or visit
britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to listen.



© Robert Losey, Tatiana Nomokonova and Dmitry Arzyutov
for their anthropological and archaeological research project
in the Yamal Peninsula.

Herding and climate

Along with a knife, bags for personal amulets, fire
starters and tobacco hang from this 19th-century
belt made in the style of northern Khanty or Nenets.

At home with the ice

Knives are essential tools for reindeer herders. Men use them for castration, slaughter, to score their unique ownership marks into the ears of calves and as protection against predators. Climate change, however, has become a bigger threat. In 2016 in the Yamal Peninsula of Siberia, 2,349 reindeer died after ingesting anthrax spores released by the melting permafrost. Grazing reindeer keep the tundra ecosystems healthy and diverse.

Khanty or Nenets, Russia – before 1898
Donated by Sir Henry Hoyle Howorth
British Museum

Snow goggles

In winter, moonlight reflecting on snow and ice gives surprising amounts of illumination. In the spring, because sunlight reflecting on these surfaces is so bright it can cause blindness, people wear snow goggles to protect their eyes. This Dolgan example from north-central Russia is made of reindeer skin and decorated with beads.

At home with the ice

It would have been worn by a man when riding reindeer across the coniferous forests of the taiga.

Dolgan, Russia – before 1879
British Museum

Riding reindeer

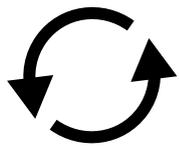
Dolgan of north-central Russia train some reindeer to be ridden. Men and women use different saddles. The white reindeer-fur padding on this wooden woman's saddle made it comfortable for both rider and animal. Women use the stick to push branches aside when riding through the thick taiga. It also helps them mount and dismount quickly. Reindeer wear harnesses when pulling sleds or being ridden. The time involved in making this Dolgan example decorated with cloth and beads, expresses the value placed on reindeer.

Saddle, Dolgan, Russia – before 1929;
stick, Dolgan, Russia – before 1980;
harness, Dolgan, Russia – 1840s–70s
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera); British Museum (harness)

At home with the ice

Image caption: Evenki women riding reindeer and using riding sticks, 1932.

© Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge



Find me: saddlebag

What did I used to be?

Carrying supplies

Evenki, who live in the Siberian taiga, have herds of less than 50 reindeer. When hunting wild reindeer or sable they ride reindeer instead of using sleds, which become entangled in the trees.

To transport their equipment and food they use saddlebags, like this pair of reindeer-hide and birchbark bags. The Sakha reindeer-hide saddlebag was probably used on horses.

The cross, embroidered using thread made from the throat hairs of reindeer, is a symbol representing the four cardinal wind directions.

Birchbark bag, Evenki, Russia – late 19th century;
hide bag, Sakha or Evenki, Russia – before 1878
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera) (birchbark bag); British Museum

At home with the ice

Image caption:

Pack reindeer with Evenki herder, 1927.

© MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Kivalina, Alaska, 2007

Brian Adams (born 1985), Anchorage, Alaska

Sylvester Swan Jr. tomcod fishing, from the series

Disappearing villages.

Inupiat, USA

© Brian Adams

Seal breathing holes

This toolkit was used to hunt seal during winter.

Hunters waited hours at breathing holes, their harpoon (1) and line (2) resting on a prop (3), for one chance to catch their prey. Timing was critical.

Harpoons were thrust blindly into these holes, as the seal was often blocked from view by a build up of snow. Hunters placed swan down seal-indicators (4) over the hole itself or floated slender sticks of caribou antler (5) in the snow and ice covering it.

At home with the ice

When a seal approached, these hunting aids moved and alerted the hunter. Muskox-horn scoops (6) were used to remove newly formed ice from the holes.

(1–6) Inuit, Canada – 1920s
National Museum of Denmark

Image caption: Inuit hunter ready to strike at a seal breathing hole, Gordon Miller, 2006.

© Gordon Miller

Learning to hunt

Children learn adult skills by playing with small replicas of their parents' tools. The ivory foreshaft of this child's toy harpoon (13) depicts the head of a polar bear with eyes and nostrils of inset baleen.

(13) Inupiat, USA – before 1826
British Museum

Waterproof whaling suit

This is the only complete whaling suit (12) of its kind in the world.

At home with the ice

It was worn by a brave Kalaallit hunter from Greenland to jump from his boat onto a sleeping whale to harpoon it directly. He crawled into the sealskin suit through the central hole, making it watertight by pulling the hole closed. The suit could be inflated through a tube on the chest, providing warmth and buoyancy during this dangerous activity.

(12) Kalaallit, Greenland – before 1834
National Museum of Denmark

Charming whales

Wooden harpoons rested on props (9) attached to the front of the skin boat, ready to be thrown by the harpooner when a whale presented itself to the crew. Spare points (10) for the harpoon heads were kept in a box, like this one shaped like a whale (11), which doubled as a charm to attract the pursued mammal. The abundant supplies of food and materials produced by one whale enabled whale-hunting communities to settle permanently.

At home with the ice

Today, whales remain nutritionally and culturally central to Inupiat of Alaska, who identify themselves as the 'People of the whales'.

(9) Yupiit or Inupiat, USA – before 1933;

(10) Inupiat, USA – 1825;

(11) Inupiat, USA – before 1855

Prop purchased from Mrs Bathurst

(through the J.R. Vallentin Fund);

point donated by Augustus Wollaston Franks;

box donated by Sir John Barrow

British Museum

Hunting whales

Inuit ancestors began hunting whales 1,000 years ago, using sophisticated toggle-headed harpoons launched from crewed skin boats. On piercing the flesh, the harpoon head (7) separated from the foreshaft and shaft (8) to rotate, or toggle, anchoring itself to the animal's body. A float or buoy was attached to the harpoon head by a rawhide line. Designed to create drag, the float tired the whale when it dived below the surface. This technology is still used today.

At home with the ice

(7) Inupiat, USA – before 1944;

(8) Inuit, Greenland – before 1930

Harpoon head donated by Irene Marguerite Beasley;

shaft donated by A.K. Hemming

British Museum

Image caption:

The different parts of a toggle-headed harpoon.

point

foreshaft

harpoon head

shaft

line

float

Hunting aids

Amulets, like these miniature ivory tools (1), would have been worn by the hunter or a relative for his protection and good fortune. Hunting among Arctic Peoples entails different levels of communication with animals. As shown in this linocut print (2), *Hunter's Dream* by Inuit artist Andrew Qappik (born 1964), dreaming was one way of communicating with animals.

At home with the ice

Some Arctic Peoples interpret their dreams to predict hunting success.

(1) Inuit, Canada – before 1855;

(2) Inuit, Canada – 2012

Amulet donated by Sir John Barrow;

print donated by Nunavut Arts and Craft Association

British Museum

Hunting with a bow and arrow

Caribou (wild reindeer) are usually hunted during summer and early autumn when they congregate in large herds. Before rifles were adopted, communities often hunted caribou together.

They built two converging lines of stone cairns along known caribou routes. As the animals approached the cairns, the women and children scared them towards the hunters hiding where the two lines converged, ready with their bows (3).

Arrows (4) were engraved with ownership marks and stored in hide or wooden quivers (5).

The ivory wrist-guard (6) protected the hunter's forearm from the backlash of a sinew bowstring.

(3) Inuit, Canada – before 1888;

At home with the ice

(4) Alutiiq, USA – before 1888;

(5) Alutiiq, USA – before 1888;

(6) Inupiat, Alaska – before 1921

Bow, arrow and quiver donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther,
Lord Lonsdale

British Museum

Arrow straightener

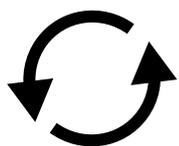
Carved in the shape of a caribou fawn, this ivory tool (7) was used to straighten arrows that had become warped through use. There are butchery instructions engraved along its top, a reminder of the fundamental significance of hunting, which was to supply loved ones with food.

(7) Inupiat, USA – early 19th century

Purchased with Art Fund support

British Museum

ArtFund



Find me: sled

What did I used to be?

Ice scratcher

Mimicking animals is an important hunting skill.

At home with the ice

Before rifles were adopted, a hunter would have to get close to his prey. The seal claws, bound with sinew to one end of this driftwood ice scratcher (8), enabled him to emulate a seal sunning on the ice. The familiar noise calmed his prey, lulling it back to sleep, so he could approach it unawares.

(8) Inupiat or Yupiit, USA – before 1860s
Donated by Augustus Wollaston Franks
British Museum

Seasonal hunting

Animals migrate with the seasons, affecting hunting patterns. As birds migrated north during the spring, Inupiat hunters used this bird harpoon (9), designed to hit multiple birds simultaneously. During summer, hunters used clubs, such as this Inupiat one made from walrus jaw (10), when they needed an unpunctured seal hide. Today, sea ice conditions and animal migrations are shifting due to climate change, disrupting hunting schedules and success.

(9) Inupiat, USA – before 1825;
(10) Inupiat, USA – before 1925

Embracing weather

Harpoon donated by Augustus Wollaston Franks
British Museum

Embracing weather

Climate is prevailing weather conditions over time. All people experience climate as weather. Based on living with weather and the stories they tell about it, Arctic Peoples have always had a profound relationship with weather. It affects every aspect of their lives – the food they eat, the clothing they wear, the histories they share, how children are raised and family members loved. Until recently Arctic Peoples were able to predict, prepare for and harness weather to support their seasonal lives. Global climate change is making generations of knowledge obsolete, undermining a relationship developed over thousands of years.

Embracing weather

Safeguarding fruitful weather

Arctic Peoples' reciprocal relationship with weather has been carefully negotiated and nurtured in ceremonies involving offerings and prayers, as well as dances displaying gratitude to these weather spirits. Masks representing spirits, like **Negeqvaq**, the North Wind, were worn during ceremonial celebrations at the start of winter to summon the colder weather required for productive hunting.

Yupiiit, USA – about 1900

Fondation Beyeler, Riehen/Basel, Beyeler Collection

Gratitude for good weather

Ceremonial mats are used during the **yhyakh**, a summer festival of the Sakha of north-east Russia, when they thank their gods for the sun's safe return. While singing a ritual prayer, the shaman stands on the mat, resting his offerings on it. This one is made of cow hair and trimmed with black bear fur.

Sakha, Russia – before 1896

Embracing weather

Donated by Kate Marsden
British Museum

Image caption: A shaman kneels on a mat holding a **choron**, a wooden goblet, surrounded by participants during the **yhyakh** festival.

© I.G. Federov and P.K. Vasiliev, 2012

Four Winds

The blue felt hat represents an origin story about an encounter between spirits and a **noaidi**, a Sámi spiritual expert. Long ago, Sápmi was too windy for Sámi to live there. A **noaidi** lulled the four Wind spirits to sleep with his singing, capturing them in his hat. Upon waking, they protested violently, pulling his hat in four directions. In return for their release, they agreed to take turns blowing, making Sápmi habitable.

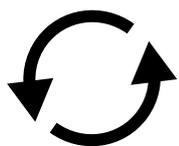
Sámi, Norway – 1945–55
Bequeathed by Harry Ely
British Museum

Embracing weather

Encountering weather gods

The images drawn with alder-bark pigment on this wooden and reindeer-hide drum depict encounters between a **noaidi**, a Sámi spiritual expert, and various gods, including Fertility and Thunder. During the 1600s, **noaidi** were tried for witchcraft by Protestant reformers and their drums burned, acquired by private collectors and eventually sent to museums.

Drum, Sámi, Norway/Sweden – before 1681;
drumstick, Sámi, probably Sweden – before 1868
Drum bequeathed by Sir Hans Sloane
British Museum



Find me: sail

What did I used to be?

Using sails

For long umiaq journeys, Inupiat harnessed wind power by hoisting large square sails made from strips of sea-mammal gut sewn together with sinew. Researchers do not know whether sails were in use in the Arctic before contact with 'southerners'.

Embracing weather

On reaching north-west Alaska for the first time in 1818, however, European explorers noted gut sails in use. This one was collected by the British Royal Navy almost 10 years later.

Inupiat, USA – before 1826

Donated by Frederick William Beechey

British Museum

Image caption:

An umiaq under sail off the coast of Alaska, 1915.

© Courtesy of USGS

Flexible skin boats

Umiacs are sturdy driftwood-framed boats covered with seal or walrus hides. They were used on long journeys and for hunting walrus, whales and seals, the animals on the front of this model. Unlike the inflexible ships of European explorers, umiacs are designed to work with, rather than fight, Arctic weather. During a storm, the crew would retreat to shore, pull their light boats out of the water and flip them upside down to create shelter.

Embracing weather

Whenever sea ice advanced, umiaqs were placed on small sleds and transported to the next area of open water.

Inupiat, USA – before 1855
Donated by Sir John Barrow
British Museum

Image caption: Print, **Cutting into Winter Island, Oct. 1821**, by Captain G.F. Lyon, depicting British ships in the Arctic, 1824.

© Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, with permission

Image caption: An umiaq used as shelter off the coast of Alaska, USA, 1902–3.

© Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives, #44,826-A

Knowing weather

For Arctic Peoples, weather is not an obstacle that must be resisted or overpowered, but a tool to be harnessed. Wind, precipitation, humidity and temperature all have properties that can be used to make life easier.

Embracing weather

Wind, for example, dries food, aids transportation and helps navigation. Hunters and herders use this knowledge to predict when it is safe to travel or to improve their hunting success. Today's unpredictable weather patterns caused by climate change mean that these methods, learned over thousands of years, are no longer reliable, making hunting and travelling increasingly dangerous.

Animals and weather, 1992

George Flowers (1924–1998), Hopedale, Labrador

The many years that artist Flowers spent observing caribou as a hunter informed the expressive behaviour he depicted in this carving. The animal is lifting its nose, alerted by potentially dangerous smells or sounds. Joanasie Mucpa, an Inuit hunter, explains 'caribou can hear better in the wind. When hunters approach them, they choose a route following a caribou so that they won't be smelled or heard upwind'.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Embracing weather

Wet winter hazards

Johnny Kavik (born 1943), Sanikiluaq, Nunavut

As one of the few birds that does not migrate south in winter, the rock ptarmigan is valued by Inuit. It features in their cuisine, legends and art, such as this serpentine sculpture from 1992.

Ptarmigan dig through snow for vegetation with their fluffy feet. Climate change has increased winter rain, which then freezes, producing a thick layer of ice through which ptarmigan, and reindeer, cannot access food, causing mass starvation. In 2014, over 40,000 Nenets reindeer starved to death on the Yamal Peninsula, Russia.

Inuit, Canada

Bequeathed by John Pawson Haggart

British Museum

Animal instinct

This mammoth-ivory carving depicts dogs pulling a sled. The artist has placed a dog, perhaps injured, inside the sled, reflecting the special relationship that exists between drivers and their dog team.

Embracing weather

Dogs are particularly important because they can find their way home in all weathers. Reminiscing about the 1930s, Inupiat Elder Delano Barr stresses how ‘their dog team was their lifeline. Whenever there was a blizzard a dog was really better than a human. They depended on them so much. They always made sure there was food for the dogs’.

Probably Khanty, Russia – before 1867
British Museum

Loons and Seal in Ocean Swell, 1986

Pudlo Pudlat (1916–1992), Baffin Island, Nunavut

Hunters and herders study animal behaviour when making weather predictions. For example, some Inuit and Gwich’in use the loon’s call of ‘qaqqaqaa’ to forecast wet weather. In this stonecut print, Pudlat shows how loons and seals behave in sudden stormy weather.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Embracing weather

Designed to protect

Kayaqs (1) have been used in the Arctic for nearly 4,000 years. Early Arctic ancestors designed them to deal with all kinds of weather, including high seas. To remain dry, even if capsized, Inuit and Aleut hunters would tie their waterproof gut-parka around the kayaq's cockpit and then pull their hood and cuffs tight. This kayaq has an additional sealskin skirt to layer over the kayaqer's parka.

(1) Aleut, USA – 1800s
British Museum

Image caption: In **The Sea Otter Dart** North American artist Bill Holm (born 1925) depicts an Aleut hunter in a kayaq, 1995.

© Bill Holm

Harpoon toolkit

Throwing boards (2) enabled one-handed hunting out at sea, even in rough waters. Hunters could steady their kayaq with a paddle (3) in one hand, while using the other to hold a throwing board with a harpoon (4) balanced upon it.

Embracing weather

Throwing boards added distance and power to the harpoon's trajectory. The harpoon was attached to a line of plaited sinew (5), along with a float (6) made of sealskin. As the harpoon tip entered the otter, walrus or seal it swivelled, or toggled, fixing it in place. Once secured, the catch could be pulled through the water or strapped to the kayaq.

(2) Aleut, USA – before 1810;

(3) Aleut or Yupiit, USA – before 1825;

(4) Alutiiq, USA – before 1888;

(5) Alutiiq, USA – before 1888;

(6) Yupiit, USA – made by Matti Henderson
(dates unknown), 1950–90

Harpoon and sinew donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther,
Lord Lonsdale

British Museum

Image caption: Illustration of an Inupiat engraving showing seal floats in use, early 20th century.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Embracing weather

Kayaqing gloves

Used in Greenland for hunting and kayaqing competitions, each of these contemporary sealskin gloves (7) has two thumbs. This novel design removes the need to match the correct glove with the correct hand when every second counts.

(7) Kalaallit, Greenland – 1994
British Museum

Sun protection

The seal hunter who wore this wooden visor (8) to block out the sun's glare also used it as a decoy. From a distance, the pursued animal would see only another seal, paying little attention to the hunter concealed beneath. Delano Barr, an Inupiat hunter, recalls that 'as the sun comes up in the horizon or [when] it's shining, to get near an animal, hunters approach them from under the sun because that animal is not going to look towards the sun. That was their expertise'.

(8) Alutiiq, USA – before 1778
British Museum

Embracing weather

Film: Inupiat Elder Delano Barr talks about climate change in Shishmaref, Alaska, 2019

Duration: 2 minutes

Scan the QR code or visit
britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to listen.



© Sarah Betcher of Farthest North Films for a British Museum curatorial research project, **Climate change and its impacts on the material lives of Inupiat in Northwest Alaska.**

Protective skin

Flora Nanuk (1925–2004), Hooper Bay, Alaska
Gut parkas are versatile garments. Nanuk, who made this one (9) of bearded-seal gut in 1992, wore it while berry picking. She had reinforced and sealed the seams by incorporating blades of beach grass. Should any moisture enter the seam, it was absorbed by the grass strand, which expanded to tighten the seam and keep the wearer dry. It also protected her from the summer's persistent mosquitos.

(9) Yupiit, USA
British Museum

Bad weather

Part of understanding Arctic weather is knowing when to stay inside to avoid dangerous conditions. These indoor times are used resourcefully. Hunters and herders make and mend tools ready for good weather or share knowledge with the next generation through storytelling. In the past, people entertained themselves with gambling and games. They even kept fit during the long winter nights through indoor physical training competitions. Extended bad weather, however, can cause hardship and even starvation. In such cases, the shaman negotiated with the spirit world on behalf of the community for productive weather conditions.

Continued influence

Rachel Uyarashuk (dates unknown), Iglulik, Nunavut

Made in 1988, this parka is based on one worn by Qingailisaq, a renowned Inuit shaman, at the beginning of the 20th century.

Embracing weather

He saw its design during a vision. Since that time, Iglulik seamstresses have made replicas for museums and family members. In 2015, one of Qingailisaq's relatives recognised the design on a trendy sweatshirt. Shocked that it had been used without permission, she successfully campaigned for it to be taken off sale.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Shamans' kit

Shamans performed essential roles throughout the Arctic, including remedying and predicting weather. The two masks, from a set of tools belonging to a Nganasan from north-west Siberia, were hung from a skin tent during shamanic rites. Both represent ancestors and acted as guardian spirits. The mask with a brown-bear tooth embodies a male, while the one with a copper plate on its forehead denotes a female. The headdress of iron-alloy antlers would have been worn by a Sakha or Evenki shaman in north-central Siberia.

Embracing weather

Masks, Nganasan, Russia – late 19th – early 20th century;
headdress, Sakha or Evenki, Russia – late 19th –
early 20th century
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Carving ivory

Walrus ivory continues to be a favoured material for carving. Its durable and smooth surface is perfect for engraving. These items, a comb and visor ornament, were probably carved indoors while men shared stories, waiting out the weather.

Comb, Inuit, Canada – before 1861;
ornament, Aleut, USA – before 1861
Donated by Henry Christy
British Museum

Engraving stories

As men carved and fixed tools during storms, they told stories about the weather, animals and hunting. Used across the Arctic to start fires or drill holes, these bowdrills from the Bering Strait highlight connections between storytelling and carving.

Embracing weather

Their walrus-ivory handles are engraved with personal and generational stories, detailing the seasonal activities of people, animals and supernatural beings.

Drill and mouthpiece, Yupiit, Alaska – before 1888;
handle, Inupiat, Alaska – before 1925

Drill and mouthpiece donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther,
Lord Lonsdale; handle donated by Herbert Charles Coleman
British Museum

Image caption: Inupiat man using a bowdrill,
Alaska, about 1950.

© Trustees of the British Museum

Carving out time

Men used crooked knives, like this one with a metal blade and spruce-root handle, to shape wooden bowls, sled runners, boat spines, drums and utensils. Like so many Arctic tools, it is carefully engineered, spreading the force and tension from the wrist to the forearm. John Goodwin from Kotzebue, Alaska, explains carving 'was a favourite pastime for Inupiat. When they are just sitting, they carve.

Embracing weather

They do a lot of talking. Every time you go to someone's house, they're carving something, fork, spoon... When the weather's nice, they stay outside'.

Yupiit, Alaska – before 1888

Donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale
British Museum

Playing games

These ivory carvings belong to games that were played across the North American Arctic. When thrown like dice, the 24 pieces depicting different species of bird, land upright or on their side. Each position and bird was awarded specific points. Similar figures have been uncovered from archaeological sites dating back at least 1,000 years. Like the cup-and-ball game, the ivory piece with holes in it was played to improve dexterity.

Inuit, Canada – before 1847

Donated by Sir John Barrow
British Museum

Embracing weather

Keeping fit

This sealskin ball stuffed with reindeer hair was a traditional way for people to stay fit during the long winter nights. To develop or maintain strength and endurance, Siberian Yupik and other Inuit groups would hang a ball from the ceiling and kick at it from a seated position. Hosted by different Arctic communities every two years, these contests continue today as the international World Eskimo-Indian Olympics (WEIO).

Siberian Yupik, USA – before 1954

Donated by Dr Robert Bruce Inverarity

British Museum

Image caption: Deseray Cumberbatch of Inukjuak, Nunavik, won first place in the women's One-foot-high Kick event at the WEIO, 2017.

© Mark Lester/Dispatch News & Anchorage Daily News

Hunters, Dogs and Walrus, 1966

Parr (1893–1969), Baffin Island, Nunavut

Embracing weather

When storms kept hunters inside, men would gather and tell hunting stories to share their expertise across the generations. When Parr retired from hunting in 1961, he began to depict such stories in his drawings, such as this one (above right).

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Hunger, 1983

Simon Tookoome (1934–2010) Back River,
Nunavut

Here (right), the artist expresses what it feels like to be hungry, based on his own experience during the 1950s when the caribou disappeared. 'We were left waiting and many died of hunger. My family... survived on fish... I left the igloo and I knelt and prayed... Then five healthy caribou appeared on the ice and... I was able to kill them with little effort. I was so grateful, that I shook their hooves as a sign of gratitude because they gave themselves up to my hunger.'

Embracing weather

I melted the snow with my mouth and gave them each a drink. This is the traditional way to show thanks’.

Inuit, Canada

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge

Weather proofing

Tailored clothing is essential preparation for Arctic weather, so seamstresses are cherished for their expertise. They design and make clothes that keep their family warm and dry, while enabling freedom of movement and moisture to escape. To create waterproof garments, they sew tight stitches that only partially pierce the hide, avoiding leaks. The choosing, preparing and sewing of materials requires knowledge of animal hides and of weather properties. Skilled practitioners apply particular techniques under specific sets of weather conditions, such as wind or humidity, to achieve functional and beautiful garments.

Embracing weather

Tools for processing hide

Seamstresses across the Arctic use scrapers to remove fur and to stretch and soften hides for sewing. Scrapers were originally made from a variety of local materials, such as this one with an engraved ivory handle and jadeite blade. Stone blades were replaced as metal became widely available during the early 20th century. Long-handled scrapers, like the driftwood one here lashed with spruce roots, provided leverage for long hours of work. Handles were usually carved by fathers or husbands to fit the hands of their daughters or wives, who in return used the scraper to fashion bespoke clothes.

Engraved scraper, Yupiit or Inupiat, USA – before 1949;
metal-bladed scraper, Yupiit or Inupiat, USA – before 1944;
long-handled scraper, Yupiit, USA – before 1888
Engraved scraper purchased with Art Fund support;
metal-bladed scraper donated by Irene Marguerite Beasley;
long-handled scraper donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther,
Lord Lonsdale
British Museum

ArtFund

Embracing weather

Boots and liners

These sealskin boots demonstrate the range of textures and colours produced when hides are subjected to different weather conditions and scraping techniques. Seamstress Mary Mucpa explains that during autumn ‘the skins freeze at night and thaw in the day... and that, plus the sun, makes them softer as they dry’. The innermost layers of hide can also be scraped away to reveal a paler coloured hide, as seen in the boot uppers. Here, the seamstress has added texture and colour by embroidering the woollen liners.

Inuit, Canada – 1994, liners made by Leonie Qrunnut (dates unknown), Igluluk, Nunavut
British Museum

Smoked hides and dried grass

These Gwich'in boots were decorated with caribou fur and glass beads. The moose hide had been scraped clean, washed, soaked in a tanning solution and then strung up on a wooden frame over a cool smoky fire.

Embracing weather

This process, combining the cooler temperatures of autumn with wood from the taiga, creates a soft velvety hide, smelling of wood smoke. The beach grass that grows along the shorelines was woven into mats and socks, like this pair.

Boots, Gwich'in, USA – 1993, made by Elizabeth Cadzou (1936–2019), Venetie, Alaska;
socks, Yupiit, USA – before 1888

Socks donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale
British Museum

Quote: 'Climate change has effects on our subsistence lifestyle. We have to adjust our times to the weather.'

Delano Barr, Shishmaref, Alaska, 2019

Film: Seamstress knowledge in Mittimatalik, Nunavut, 2015–16

Since 2015, women in the Canadian Inuit community of Mittimatalik, Nunavut, have been working to document on film sealskin processing and sewing techniques.

Embracing weather

There is conversation in English and Inuktitut, an Inuit language, as well as sounds of a knife being sharpened, scraping hide and stepping on dried sealskin.

Duration: 2 minutes, 15 seconds

You can also visit britishmuseum.org/arctic-content to listen.

© Produced by Sheila Katsak and Nancy Wachowich;
camera by Sheila Katsak, Nancy Wachowich and Gro Ween;
edited by Melisa Costinea

Beating Clothes, 2004

Elena Il'key, (1947–2007), Uelen, Chukotka

This print depicts the everyday task of beating fur clothing with a snow knife. If snow and ice crystals are not removed before going inside, they melt and soak the clothes, ruining their insulating qualities.

Chukchi, Russia

'Beating Clothes', 2004, Elena Tukkaevna Il'key,
Anchorage Museum of History and Art

Embracing weather

Snow beater

Inuit seamstress Mary Mucpa explains why a snow beater is essential. 'Snow on the clothing makes it wet. The caribou parka was a very important part of our clothing. We had to take care of them ... If stored in a cold place, folded carefully and put away dry, a good parka could last longer than two years.' This one is made from caribou antler and has a sealskin grip.

Inuit, Canada – before 1855
Donated by Sir John Barrow
British Museum

Dry storage

When this salmon-skin bag embroidered with caribou-hair was collected in western Alaska during the 1880s, these beautiful waterproof items were common and households would own several. Given to newly married Yupiit women, they were mainly used for storing and keeping clothes dry. While these bags are much rarer today, the tradition of sewing fishskin is once again emerging as an important art form throughout Alaska.

Embracing weather

Yupiiit, USA – before 1888

Donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale
British Museum

 **Wall hanging, about 1973**

Jessie Oonark (1906–1985), Qamani'tuaq,
Nunavut

Turning to wool, felt and embroidery thread in the late 1950s, Oonark used her skin sewing expertise to create a new Inuit art form. She made textiles combining traditional symbolism with bright contemporary colours. Using visual puns, such as transforming the handle of an ulu, a woman's knife, into a female face, Oonark explored themes of women's identity. The plaits of the central human/fish figure are woven around wooden sticks, a trend popular among women of the Hudson Bay region of Canada in the early 20th century.

Inuit, Canada

Lent by Her Majesty The Queen

Embracing weather

Ulus

An ulu is ‘the woman’s most important tool... used for cooking, cutting meat, skinning seals and cutting and marking patterns for sewing. When I am preparing food, I feel weak without it’, explains Mary Mucpa, a seamstress from Mittimatalik, Nunavut. While regional styles and materials vary, all ulus share the elegant crescent shape designed to reduce wrist fatigue during long hours of processing food and hides. The stone-bladed one, probably from western Alaska, was used to split fish and would have needed frequent sharpening – a man’s task. The Inuinnait used local copper for their ulus, like the one here with a muskox-horn handle.

Stone ulu, Yupiit or Inupiat, USA – before 1869;
copper ulu, Inuit, Canada – before 1835
Donated by Henry Christy
British Museum

Waterproof material

Seal gut is waterproof and breathable, but requires care to process and maintain.

Embracing weather

It must be cleaned and scraped with a blunt tool, like the ivory scraper here carved with seal and human faces. Tubes of gut are then dried and cut into strips before being sewn together with sinew. When exposed to extreme cold and windy conditions gut becomes white and supple, so is often used for decorative or ceremonial parkas. Over time, the bright white turns yellow, like this one decorated with dyed seal gut and fishskin. 'Summer gut', made during warmer weather, is yellow and less flexible.

Scraper, Inupiat, USA – before 1826;

parka, Yupiit, USA – before 1930

Scraper donated by Augustus Wollaston Franks
British Museum

Keeping warm

Filled with seal oil, soapstone lamps provided Inuit across North America with light and heat. Lamps were owned by women, who maintained smoke-free fires by tending a moss wick placed on a raised ledge at the lamp's centre.

Embracing weather

They are widely featured in Inuit oral histories and stories, reflecting their importance for creating warm and hospitable homes.

Inuit, Canada – before 1967

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute,
University of Cambridge

Alexie's parka, about 1968

Katie Albrite (dates unknown), Kwigillingok, Alaska
Skin garments are expressions of love. Albrite's husband harvested the sea otter fur used on the trim of this raccoon-fur parka that she made for their ten-year old son. She carefully cut and aligned the nap of the fur, sewing together each patch to make an exquisite trim. Trim patterns are often passed down through families.

Yupiiit, USA

British Museum

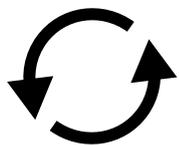
Needle cases

Such cases protected fragile needles of bird bone or ivory, like these.

Embracing weather

Seamstresses would place them into a sealskin cord that passed through an ivory tube, pulling on the cap to uncover them when needed. Such cases were attached to a belt along with other sewing tools, such as ulus, awls, hooks and whetstones.

Needles, Yupiit, USA – 19th century; beaded case, Yupiit or Inupiat, USA – before 1855 and 1930s
Needles donated by John Putnam;
beaded case donated by Haslar Hospital
British Museum



Find me: toddler's suit
What did I used to be?

Toddler's suit

Children's clothing is often sewn from young animal hides. This is made from caribou fawn taken in summer when the fur is lightweight. Inuit seamstress Mary Mucpa explains this type of onesie is worn 'when it is too cold to take off to go to the toilet. It has a split on the bottom... I remember wearing one as a child. It was windproof, but as soon as I sat down it would split apart'.

Embracing weather

Inuit, Canada – 1980s
British Museum

Young woman's outer parka

Seamstresses expressed their creativity in the functional garments they made. Beautiful clothing indicated a successful marriage, as it was the husband's hunting ability that supplied the hides and sinew. This elegant parka of caribou fur (right) was probably worn on special occasions. For added warmth a plainer parka was worn underneath with the fur against the body.

This ingenious method of insulation relied on an in-depth knowledge of fur properties – caribou fur retains body heat as it is hollow. The loose fit of the top parka enabled ventilation.

Kalaallit, Greenland – before 1860s
British Museum

Newtok, Alaska, 2008

Brian Adams (born 1985), Anchorage, Alaska
Lucy tending to her laundry, from the series

Disappearing villages.

Inupiat, USA

© Brian Adams

Climates of the past

The first Arctic Peoples settled in Siberia at least 30,000 years ago. Since then, the Arctic climate has gradually shifted several times, with each shift taking hundreds or thousands of years. This naturally occurring climate variability contrasts with the human-caused climate change of today, which is happening rapidly and within a single generation. The earliest Arctic Peoples responded to these climate shifts with cultural adaptation, material innovation and social collaboration. By studying their resilience, we can begin to understand how to live through such change and perhaps improve our collective response to today's global climate emergency.

Kivalina, Alaska, 2007

Brian Adams (born 1985), Anchorage, Alaska

From the series **Disappearing villages**.

Climates of the past

Inupiat, USA

© Brian Adams

Quote: 'I wonder how many people these tools fed. I say 'thank you' to these tools because they fed somebody and helped them survive.'

Barbara Weyiouanna, Wales, Alaska, 2008

Northern innovations 30,000 years ago

Recent excavations along the Yana River in north-east Siberia revealed the remains of a sophisticated hunting culture highly adapted to life in the far north about 30,000 years ago. Yana people exploited the eastern Siberian steppe, a large flat treeless grassland, which supported large animals, such as woolly rhinoceros and mammoths, along with horses, bison and reindeer. They made beads, jewellery and decorated objects, leaving behind a remarkable assemblage of the first Arctic art.

Climates of the past

Image caption: Yana Rhinoceros Horn excavation site, Siberia, Russia 30,000 years ago

Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy of Sciences

Using mammoth tusk

30,000 years ago the Siberian Arctic was a grassland with no trees. Instead of wood, early Arctic Peoples used mammoth tusks in resourceful ways, helping them live well in the cold weather. They made tools, but they also carved jewellery and art.

tusk

hunting spear

beaded necklace

needle

house post

art

ladle

Adapting to change

9,000–15,000 years ago

Climates of the past

About 15,000 years ago at the end of the last Ice Age, rising temperatures triggered a major climate shift. Taiga, coniferous forests, began to grow and spread, replacing the grassy steppe and contributing to the demise of larger mammals, such as mammoths. Arctic Peoples adapted to these changes and opportunities over a period of 6,000 years. Some crossed into North America for the first time, making smaller tools that could be carried easily while on the move. Others in Siberia invented sleds as a new way to travel, breeding dogs to pull them.

Image caption: Irwin Sluiceway excavation site,
north-central Alaska, USA
11,000 years ago

United States National Park Service,
Western Arctic National Parklands

Image caption: Agiak Lake and Matcharak Lake
excavation sites,
north-central Alaska, USA
4,000–6,000 years ago

Climates of the past

United States National Park Service,
Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve

Image caption: Zhokhov Island excavation site,
Siberia, Russia
9,000 years ago

Institute for the History of Material Culture, Russian Academy
of Sciences

Map caption:

Map showing the Bering land bridge 12,000 years ago, in comparison with modern coastlines.

From Siberia to Alaska

12,000–14,000 years ago

Sea levels were much lower by the end of the Ice Age, exposing Beringia, an area of land linking Siberia to Alaska. The early peoples who moved across into Beringia and North America encountered unfamiliar plants and animals.

Climates of the past

No longer able to rely upon larger mammals, like mammoths, they mostly relied on hunting wild reindeer with spear points (1) attached to wooden shafts. The tools and knowledge developed by early peoples enabled them to successfully colonise these new landscapes.

United States National Park Service, Western Arctic National Parklands

Hunting caribou together

6,000 years ago

The people who settled in the northern Alaskan mountains introduced a collaborative hunting technique requiring seasonal gatherings of groups, who shared the work and harvest. They placed stone markers along the migration routes of wild reindeer, channelling them towards a lake. By swimming or using kayaks, hunters were able to spear the wild reindeer with points, like these of quartz (2) and sandstone (3), mounted onto shafts. This was practised across the Arctic until about 100 years ago.

Climates of the past

United States National Park Service, Gates of the Arctic
National Park and Preserve

A tool for every task

4,500–6,000 years ago

One of the groups that migrated from Siberia into Alaska designed many types of highly specialised tools, such as this knife blade (4) for hunting and processing fish, birds and mammals. They also used endblades, projectile points chipped from chert cores (5). Microblades, small sharp flakes of stone, were used to engrave antler and bone objects, like this caribou-bone of unknown function (6). They were also slotted into sharpened pieces of antler to make spear or harpoon points with minimal use of materials – ideal for a highly mobile people.

United States National Park Service, Gates of the Arctic
National Park and Preserve

Testing resilience

1,000–4,000 years ago

Climates of the past

Since the end of the last Ice Age 15,000 years ago, the climate warmed gradually, causing glaciers in the far north of Canada and Greenland to melt. The first settlers of this newly opened region, known as Pre-Dorset people, developed a successful lifestyle adapted to the North American Arctic, powered by a sophisticated maritime hunting toolkit. By AD 1400, however, their successors, the Dorset people, had completely disappeared. Archaeologists and Inuit oral histories suggest a warmer climate and territorial competition for resources with Inuit ancestors might have caused this demise. They left behind a body of thought-provoking art.

Image caption: Matcharak Lake excavation site,
north-central Alaska, USA
4,000 years ago

United States National Park Service,
Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve

Image caption: Foxe Basin excavation site,
Nunavut, Canada

Climates of the past

1,000–2,000 years ago

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge

Cultural continuity

2,000–4,000 years ago

As the first settlers, known as the Pre-Dorset people, spread across the North American Arctic, they used a consistent set of tools. This toolkit included burins (1), thin stone tools for engraving bone and wood, and microblades (2), used like disposable knives. Over time, these people developed into specialized sea hunters known by archaeologists as the Dorset people. They hunted ringed seal and walrus at breathing holes on the sea ice using toggle-headed harpoons (3). They also made scrapers from wild reindeer antlers, sometimes fitted with haematite blades (4).

United States National Park Service, Gates of the Arctic National Park and Preserve (1,2); Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge (3,4)

Climates of the past

Miniature art

2,000 years ago

Dorset people developed a distinctive style of miniature and figurative art, previously unseen, leaving us to speculate about their spiritual world views. With astounding realism and power, their artists carved bone, wood and ivory to create amulets and pendants depicting parts of animals, such as this wild reindeer hoof (5) and mandible (6), a polar bear (7) and a walrus head (8).

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge

Creativity and competition

1,000 years ago

About 1,000 years ago, the Dorset people had an intense period of creativity, which included these playful figures of adults and children (9, 10). Artists used burins and microblades to gouge out the engravings on the maskette (11) and wand (12), both of wild reindeer antler.

Climates of the past

After producing significant amounts of art the Dorset people disappeared, having failed to cope with a naturally shifting climate and competition for resources with Inuit ancestors. Was such artistry an attempt to combat this double threat through spiritual means?

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge

Inuit Ancestors

AD 700–1300

Within 50 years Inuit ancestors had quickly spread from Alaska to Greenland, eventually expanding into the territory of Dorset people. There were several reasons for this. As well as retaining tried and tested tools, like this needle case (13), they improved upon others. By adding a float and line to the toggle-headed harpoon, they could now hunt whales and therefore support larger communities. The nose and brow of this wooden maskette (14) is shaped like a whale's tail.

Climates of the past

It is from Point Hope, Alaska, a community whose origin story describes how a whale's body became their homeland.

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia

Global exchanges 1,500–2,000 years ago

About 2,000 years ago, at various places across the Arctic and for different reasons, the collective wealth of cultural groups improved. This led to population surges, the adoption of more settled lifestyles and an increase in trade and creativity. During this period, the people living on the Yamal Peninsula in north-west Russia increased their prosperity by domesticating wild reindeer and developing a copper-casting technique. Simultaneously, colder climates around the Bering Strait between Siberia and Alaska caused an increase in maritime nutrients, enabling the peoples there to specialise in hunting and trading sea mammals.

Climates of the past

As hubs of cross-cultural collaboration, these regions produced strong artistic traditions.

Image caption: Ust' Polui excavation site, Yamal Peninsula, north-west Russia

1,500–2,000 years ago

MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Image caption: Ekven excavation site, Chukotka, Russia

1,500–2,000 years ago

MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Image caption: Point Hope Ipiutak excavation site, Alaska, USA

1,500–2,000 years ago

National Museum of Denmark

Siberian trade

2,000 years ago

Climates of the past

About 2,000 years ago, several communities gathered at Ust' Polui, a settlement near the Ob River in Siberia, to trade and conduct ceremonies. Craft workers at this economic epicentre produced a variety of goods, including antler tools, like this spoon (1) depicting a moose. They also worked with bronze and iron as shown by the warrior figure (2) and bird of prey carrying a bear (3). Archaeologists suggest their metalwork is an example of status art, indicating that different social classes were beginning to emerge.

MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Reindeer domestication

2,000 years ago

Within this cross-cultural hub, new economies were developing. Reindeer harness parts, such as these (4), the earliest evidence of reindeer domestication, were found at Ust' Polui. Carved from antler, they were lashed together with rawhide.

MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Image caption: A contemporary Nenets reindeer harness, also from the Yamal Peninsula, Russia, shows how those from Ust' Polui were possibly used.

© Robert Losey, Tatiana Nomokonova and Dmitry Arzyutov

Warriors

2,000 years ago

The people of Ust' Polui had a well-established military tradition. The whalebone breastplate (5) is engraved with a warrior wearing a helmet and sword. Nearly 30 different pieces of armour (6), made from the antlers of wild reindeer and individually engraved, were excavated.

Archaeologists suggest they belonged to individuals and were offered during funeral rites.

Military preparedness possibly arose in north-west Russia to protect trade routes, which stretched as far as China.

MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Bering Strait walrus hunters

1,500 years ago

Fierce storms brought nutrients from the Bering Strait sea beds to the surface, attracting large numbers of migrating sea mammals to this narrow stretch of water. Hunters changed their focus from seals to large walrus, which provided ivory and food, as well as hides for boats and houses. To better suit larger prey, they modified their harpoons by adding an ivory piece on the end (7) to counterbalance the heavy foreshaft (8) bearing the toggle-head (9).

MAE RAS (Kunstkamera) (7,8);
National Museum of Denmark (9)

Ivory art

1,500 years ago

These walrus hunters used ivory for a variety of tools, all richly carved with figures, like this polar bear-shaped adze handle (10) and animal-shaped ulu handle (11).

Climates of the past

Other tools were engraved with shape-shifting animals (12), as well as with curvilinear designs, such as the handle with a link (13), the ornament (14) and goggles (15). These complex artworks of interlocking polar bears, seals and humans suggest that communities were trying to understand or even control the forces of the universe.

National Museum of Denmark (10); MAE RAS (Kunstkamera) (11–14); Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia (15)

Trading ivory for iron

1,500 years ago

Such intricate artistry required engraving tools of iron (16). The wealthy walrus hunters of the Bering Strait traded ivory for iron with people from the Sea of Okhotsk and the rivers of eastern Siberia. One artistic style to emerge from northern Alaska was the carving of ivory links (17).

Climates of the past

This time-consuming process required the removal of material from one long tusk, rather than forging the links together. Was this honouring or imitating iron chain links?

National Museum of Denmark

Diverse cultures

1,500 years ago

The different groups who lived in the Bering Strait influenced one another's artistic traditions. The Old Bering Sea groups lived on islands within the Bering Strait and along the coastline of Chukotka, Russia. They carved many human figures. Some were stylised women (18), while others portrayed women cradling creatures (19) or men in athletic positions (20). The Ipiutak culture of northern Alaska carved pieces that, when seen from a different angle, reveal a different animal or human (21).

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia (18,19); MAE RAS (Kunstkamera) (20); National Museum of Denmark (21)

Climates of the past

Social status

1,500 years ago

Wealth created by an abundance of walrus and through trading ivory for iron seems to have led to social inequality. Some of the excavated graves, possibly those of leaders and shamans, contained elaborate ivory carvings, like this slat mask (22), depicting symbols of transformation between humans and animals. Contemporary comparisons indicate these were expressions of shamanic power. Early Inuit culture emerged from within this cross-cultural epicentre of creativity and economic strength.

National Museum of Denmark

Barrow, Alaska, 2013

Brian Adams (born 1985), Anchorage, Alaska

David Taylor, from the series **I am Alaskan.**

Inupiat, USA

© Brian Adams

Film: Packing babies, 2019

Georgina Pewatoaluk, Sheila Katsak and Skylar Katsak demonstrate how babies and toddlers are placed in, and removed from, amautis. An amauti is a parka with a baby carrier built into the hood.

Duration: 2 minutes

Scan the QR code or visit
britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to listen.



© Nancy Wachowich and Amber Lincoln for the British Museum curatorial research project, **Material weather strategies: an analytical framework for circumpolar collections.**

Amauti, 1984

Madeline Auksaq (born 1938), Iglulik, Nunavut
Auksaq made this amauti, a parka with a baby carrier built into the hood, for her daughter. Sheila Katsak, a seamstress from Mittimatalik, Nunavut, explains that ‘amautis let me pack my babies and go. Babies get excited when amautis come out. It means a trip.

Resilient norths

When I was expecting my first child, it was my mother who knew I needed one. Amautis are functional and required in raising children. I will keep on sewing amautis for my daughters and teaching them to sew them’.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Resilient norths

Like their ancestors before them, Arctic Peoples show the same resilient strategies when facing change. Over the last 300 years, they have responded to the challenges associated with European exploration, colonial governance and global trade through adaptation, innovation and collaboration, as well as resistance. Today, Arctic Peoples are working to maintain their autonomy and wellbeing. They are confronting global climate change with this same resilience, so they can continue to live life on their own terms – on the ice, in the cold and with the weather.

Bering Strait map

The black pigment contours on this sealskin map represent the coastlines of Siberia and Alaska, enveloping the Bering Strait. The map details the annual movements of Chief Teo, a Siberian Yupik whaling captain and trader who travelled extensively throughout this area, witnessing warfare between Inupiat and Chukchi and visiting indigenous trade fairs. By the 1860s, North American whalers, Russian fur traders and settlers and British naval officers were using the region's well-established indigenous trade networks. These contacts presented new trading opportunities, but also prompted episodes of conflict and resistance.

Siberian Yupik, Russia – 1850–65
Pitt Rivers Museum

Colonial encounters

The first Arctic Peoples to have sustained contact with Europeans were Sámi of northern Scandinavia and north-western Russia in the early 13th century, as they lived closest to Europe. By the 16th century, European imperial agents were in contact with the Indigenous Peoples of Siberia and North America. One of the last places to be reached was East Greenland in the late 19th century.

Such encounters were often fraught with tension, but many 'southerners' were impressed with the innovative technologies they witnessed. Arctic inventions, such as anoraqs and kayaqqs, were adopted worldwide, while Arctic Peoples also incorporated European goods into their daily life.

Englishmen in a skirmish with eskimos, 1585–93

John White (born about 1550), English

This print (right) depicts one of the earliest encounters between Inuit and European explorers.

Resilient norths

It shows the crew of English explorer Sir Martin Frobisher in 1577 on Baffin Island shooting Inuit, who are resisting with bows and arrows. Afterwards, afraid of capture, wounded Inuit threw themselves off the cliffs to their deaths, while their relatives fled in kayaks, unable to help.

London, England
British Museum

Arnaq with her son Nutaaq and Kalicho, 1585–93

John White (born about 1550), English

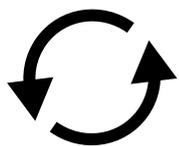
The central print shows the boy, Nutaaq, peeking out from the amauti of his mother Arnaq. In the print on the left, Kalicho, an Inuit man, stands holding a paddle and a bow. Frobisher abducted all three and took them to England for an audience with Queen Elizabeth I. They neither met her nor returned to their homes on Baffin Island in Canada. Within months of arriving in England, Kalicho died from injuries sustained during his capture, while Arnaq and Nutaaq died from measles.

Resilient norths

London, England
British Museum

Image caption: John Sakeouse, Inuit whaler and artist painted by Alexander Nasmyth in Edinburgh, 1797–1819.

© Scottish National Portrait Gallery



Find me: sled

What did I used to be?

Sakeouse and John Ross, 1819

John Sakeouse (1797–1819), Kalaallit, Greenland

This drawing depicts two British naval officers trading with Inughuit of north-west Greenland assisted by Sakeouse, a young Kalaallit man from southern Greenland. After stowing away on a whaling boat and living in Scotland, he joined an 1818 Royal Naval voyage to Greenland under the command of Sir John Ross, the explorer. The first encounter between the two groups was peaceful, largely because Sakeouse could translate.

Resilient norths

Noting the resourceful use of the limited materials available to the Inughuit, the officers traded for this sled (behind case) of narwhal and caribou bone, driftwood, and sealskin.

Drawing from illustrated book, **A voyage of discovery, made under the orders of the Admiralty, in His Majesty's ships Isabella and Alexander, for the purpose of exploring Baffin's Bay, and enquiring into the probability of a north-west passage** by John Ross, London, John Murray, 1819; sled, Inughuit, Greenland – about 1818

Sled donated by Sir Joseph Banks

Item on loan from the House of Commons Library (book);
British Museum (sled)

Untitled drawing of named Iglulingmuit, 1821–22

Toolooak (dates unknown), Baffin Island, Nunavut

In 1821 William Parry led an expedition attempting to discover the Northwest Passage, a sea route linking the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

Overwintering near Baffin Island, Canada, Parry met with Inuit, who shared essential information about local resources and the environment using illustrations.

Resilient norths

Toolooak, a boy, who visited the crew regularly with his parents, drew these animals, sharing the local Inuit language names for them.

Inuit, Canada

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge

Image caption: The boy Toolooak also sketched the officers, 1821–22.

© Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge, with permission

Itmalick and Apelagliu, interviewed aboard Victory, 1830

Sir John Ross (1777–1856), British

The scene depicted in this watercolour is of five men aboard a ship commanded by Sir John Ross, an Arctic explorer. Two are Inuit – Itmalick draws on the map, while Apelagliu observes. Ross is standing to the right. Without the collaboration of Inuit, who shared food and knowledge of local weather and geography, Ross might not have been the first European to reach the Magnetic North Pole.

Resilient norths

From illustrated book, **Narrative of a second voyage in search of a North-west passage: and of a residence in the Arctic regions during the years 1829–33**, by John Ross, London, A.W. Webster, 1835

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge

Sketches of life in Igdlorpait, 1895–1904

Isak of Igdlorpait (1866–1903), Greenland

These annotated watercolours are based on the artist's observations of daily life in southern Greenland and his memories of hunting trips at the beginning of the 20th century. They show how Greenlanders were incorporating Danish culture, economies, building styles and religion into their ways of life.

Kalaallit, Greenland

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge

Innovative designs

‘Southerners’ also adopted Arctic technologies. Toggle-headed harpoons, like this Yupiit one of ivory and brass, made hunting sea mammals more effective. Working with Inupiat whalers from the 1850s onwards, commercial whalers from New England, USA, readily adopted this design because it increased their success. Kayaqs, popular among outdoor enthusiasts, derive their name, shape and design from the Inuit skin boat, demonstrated by this west Greenlandic model.

Harpoon, Yupiit, USA – before 1900;
model, Kalaallit, Greenland – before 1860
Harpoon donated by Reverend Selwyn C. Freer;
model donated by Henry Christy
British Museum

Image caption: Lewis Temple, an African-American blacksmith, made an iron version of the Inuit toggle-headed harpoon in the 1840s, which quickly became standard whaling equipment.

© New Bedford Whaling Museum

Integrating traded materials

Arctic Peoples readily incorporated 'southerner' materials into their tools and garments. When Europeans first arrived in the Bering Strait, they traded beads for furs. Yupiit and Inupiat added beads to their stone and ivory lip adornments. Similarly, imported thread enabled seamstresses to introduce new embellishments to traditional clothing. The maker of these reindeer fur and sealskin boots embroidered a traditional Chukchi design using colourful silks rather than dyed sealskin strips.

Lip adornment, Yupiit, USA – possibly 1800–99;
boots, Siberian Yupik, Russia – before 1790
Boots donated by Sir Joseph Banks
British Museum

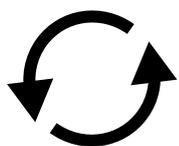
Popular trade items

Tobacco was a popular import among Arctic Peoples. It became an important part of sacred ceremonies for Chukchi, who mixed it with reindeer hair to produce vivid hallucinations. They kept it in special pouches, like this reindeer-hide one.

Resilient norths

Arctic Peoples also made pipes to trade with visitors to the region. This ivory pipe featuring Chukchi, Koryak and Siberian Yupik designs was collected thousands of kilometres west near Siberia's Yenisei River.

Pouch, Chukchi or Siberian Yupik, Russia – before 1850;
pipe, Siberian Yupik or Chukchi, Russia – before 1880
Pouch donated by Sir John Barrow;
pipe acquired with assistance of the Christy Fund
British Museum



Find me: bucket

What did I used to be?

Ivory and wood bucket

Due to thick sea ice, Tunumiit of east Greenland did not encounter 'southerners' until the 1880s. The Danish explorers were impressed by Tunumiit wooden objects decorated with small ivory animals, like this bucket. Such objects were designed to encourage the return of seals, walrus and whales, as numbers were dwindling due to commercial whalers.

Resilient norths

This style quickly became popular with colonial administrators, supplying a much-needed source of income for Tunumiit.

Tunumiit, Greenland – 1884

Donated by S. Peterson

British Museum

Film: Piita Irniq making this Inuksuk, 2019

At the quarry there are sounds of lorries and in the workshop there is the sound of stone being pounded.

Duration: 2 minutes, 45 seconds

Scan the QR code or visit

britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to listen.



© Trustees of the British Museum

We are thankful to the High Commission of Canada in the United Kingdom and to Gallagher Group Ltd (quarry) for their support of this project.

Silent Messenger, 2019

Piita Irniq (born 1947), Lyon Inlet, Nunavut

Resilient norths

‘Inuksuk is a silent messenger for Inuit, a voiceless land marker. It symbolises the survival of Inuit. When I am around inuksuit I am never scared because I know my ancestors survived here for thousands of years and will continue to survive for thousands more. [This inuksuk] will give the people here an opportunity to learn how we have innovated and survived since time immemorial.’

Inuit, Canada – Kentish ragstone
British Museum

Image caption: Nunavut’s flag designed by Inuit artist Andrew Qappik has an inuksuk, a symbol of hope, at its centre.

Samoyed chiefs

Nikolay Leontyevich Shakhov (1770–1840),
Cossack

Russia concentrated its colonial administration in towns and fortresses, often at the confluence of large rivers (second left). To protect their fur tribute, towns were surrounded by high fences and turrets.

Resilient norths

Another governing tactic was to appoint indigenous leaders as colonial representatives, such as Nenets leaders shown here (left), to encourage allegiance to the empire.

Russia – 1830–40
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Annexing Siberia

Nikolay Leontyevich Shakhov (1770–1840),
Cossack

Painted onto cotton linen, these watercolours depict life for the peoples of Siberia's Ob River Valley under Russian state control. They show how the state annexed indigenous lands to collect tax in the form of fur, an integral part of Russia's economy. The artist, a Russian administrator living in Siberia, shows Khanty fishing and procuring winter pelts (right). The painting (second right) of Ob-Obdorsk (now Salekhard) shows the Russian Orthodox Church within a fortified area, aiming to convert locals and playing a key role in Siberia's colonisation.

Many people incorporated Christianity into their traditional beliefs, which they still retain, whether they were forcibly baptised or willingly converted.

Russia – 1830–40
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Governing the Arctic

After initial exploration into Arctic regions, ‘southerners’ moved in to stay. They divided the Arctic into colonial states, largely seeking fur resources. Each nation introduced policies to control Arctic Peoples’ economies and movements. State-sponsored religions worked to convert Indigenous Peoples and create ‘ideal citizens’. As part of this conversion, local belief systems were denounced and banned.

To maintain their cultural values and traditions amid such social disruption, Arctic Peoples used traded materials in innovative ways and adopted new technologies, such as snowmobiles and guns. In many cases, they resisted colonial power through subversive means.

Enforced economies

This Alutiit kayaq model has three seats, a necessary innovation for transporting Russian dignitaries around the Aleutian Islands. Highly regarded for their sea hunting and navigation skills, Alutiit and Aleut were forced to hunt for the Russian-American Fur Company. While the men were away for extended periods hunting sea otters and northern fur seals, their families were left behind, often to starve. To generate income women would sew gut-skin parkas like this one, incorporating the style of a Russian officer's cloak and hat with traditional materials and techniques.

Model, Alutiit, USA – before 1795;
clothing, Aleut, USA – before 1869
Model donated by Archibald Menzies
British Museum

Tracking time

Russian Orthodox missionaries, who first arrived in Alaska in 1794, were strong opponents of the Russian-American Fur Company's treatment of Indigenous Peoples.

Resilient norths

Many Aleut converted to Christianity. In order to track the church's religious schedule, one such convert made this ivory and driftwood peg calendar. In Siberia, after the Russian Revolution of 1917, once-independent hunters and herders were employed to fulfil state quotas for meat and hides. While on the land, they tracked their working days on this ivory calendar, which doubled as a handle for the sealskin bag.

Calendar, Aleut, USA – before 1888;
bag, Siberian Yupik, Russia – before 1926
Calendar donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale;
bag donated by Mrs L.C. Smail
British Museum

Reclaiming identity

A cow horn gives this Sámi 'foremother's horn hat' its distinctive shape. Made of cloth and wool, Sámi women of northern Norway stopped wearing these hats during the 1870s because some Lutheran missionaries considered them an embodiment of the devil. As part of recent revitalisation movements, Sámi women have started making and wearing them again as symbols of colonial resistance.

Resilient norths

Sámi, Norway – before 1919

Donated by Miss Noel

British Museum

Image caption: Sámi woman wearing a ‘foremother’s horn hat’, Karasjok, Norway, 1857–73. Photo by Marcus Selmer.

© National Library of Norway

Hidden meanings

Decorated with beads and felted wool, this reindeer-skin bag was made by the Southern Sámi of Sweden. The central cross exemplifies how historic Sámi symbols merged with Christian ones after they began to convert during the 17th century. The cross motif relates to both Christianity and representations of sun deities that were painted onto the drums of Sámi spiritual experts even after their persecution in the 1600s.

Sámi, Sweden – before 1996

Donated by Miss A.S. Luck

British Museum

Changing faces

Originally, this brass and copper alloy mask was a Russian Orthodox icon. During the 19th century, an Evenki from northern Siberia reworked it into a mask of their community's protective patron-spirit. It was probably attached to a tree trunk with the mouth over a hollow, enabling the patron-spirit to be fed. Was this an act of resistance to enforced conversion, the incorporation of saints into Evenki spirituality or a resourceful use of materials?

Evenki, Russia – 1600–1899
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Shaman's cloak and drum, 1960s

This reindeer-skin cloak with bear and wolf trimmings belonged to Tubiaku Kosterkin, a renowned Nganasan shaman. The Soviet state persecuted shamans from the 1930s until the 1980s. Despite imprisonment, Kosterkin continued to perform shamanic rites widely.

Resilient norths

Before he presented this cloak and drum to a museum in Saint Petersburg, Russia, he neutralised it by detaching the ceremonial plates, which embodied his shamanic powers. Kosterkin died in 1989.

Nganasan, Russia – before 1970
MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Image caption: Shaman Tubiaku Kosterkin and his wife Balaku, who assisted him, during a shamanistic ritual, 1972.

© Gracheva Galina/MAE RAS (Kunstkamera)

Guardian spirit

This wooden Evenki figure was a personal spirit that protected households from tuberculosis and other introduced diseases that devastated indigenous communities. During the Soviet period, when the state persecuted shamans, Evenki and other Arctic Peoples continued to feed their patron-spirits in secret.

Evenki, Russia – before 1882
British Museum

Quote:

‘Our traditions are strong and we have adapted in the past. Let us hope we can do so once again.’

Aqqaluk Lynge, Aasiaat, Greenland, 2009

Imposed Migration, 1986

Pudlo Pudlat (1916–1992), Baffin Island, Nunavut

In this lithograph, a walrus, a polar bear and a muskox hang from a military helicopter. During the Cold War (1947–1991), the Canadian government asserted its sovereignty in the far north by relocating Inuit families there. Pudlat captures the tragic absurdity of this 1953 programme, requiring families to learn to live in a completely different environment. They suffered hunger, extreme cold and poverty. In 2010, Canada apologised for this treatment.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Interior and Exterior, 2003

Annie Pootoogook (1969–2016), Kinngait, Nunavut

Resilient norths

During the 1950s and 1960s, Arctic Peoples in Canada were placed in administrative villages. This print recounts the artist's memories of growing up in Kinngait, one such settlement. Arctic Peoples respond to 'southerner' conveniences, like running water, electricity and central heating, with mixed feelings. They make life easier, but the loss of a life lived on the land and generations of colonial rule have caused widespread depression and addiction.

Inuit, Canada – 1987

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute, University of Cambridge

Yesteryear's Seasons

(Norway Forced To Quit Whaling), 1973

Joseph E. Senungetuk (born 1940), Wales, Alaska

This woodcut print depicts a variety of whaling boats. The newspaper headline refers to the international pressure that ended Norwegian whaling in the 1960s, but also threatened a traditional subsistence lifestyle.

Resilient norths

Here, the Inupiat artist asserts the right of cultural groups to continue hunting. While commercial overharvesting of whales was a major concern for Inupiat, 'southerner' conservation efforts to ban whaling jeopardised their cultural autonomy and access to food.

Inupiat, USA
British Museum

Technological resistance

During the 1950s, the Canadian government tried to restrict Inuit from travelling within their homelands by sending their children away to residential schools and sometimes killing their dog teams. Arctic Peoples resisted by adopting faster transportation. Snowmobiles enabled them to travel to hunting grounds, but quickly return to the villages. The owner of this one customised it to better suit local conditions, replacing the plastic seat with one of seal fur and repairing the windscreen with sinew.

Canada – before 1986
British Museum

Adopting new tools

Arctic Peoples readily adopted equipment that allowed them to continue traditional livelihoods, like hunting and herding. Rifles, introduced by 'southerners' to facilitate the fur trade, were actively sought by Arctic Peoples because they made hunting easier. To carry the new tools they adapted the basic design of their bags, such as this sealskin gun case and cartridge belt, but retained the traditional materials and motifs.

Gun case, Inuit, Canada – 1986;

belt, Tunumiit, Greenland – before 1931

Donated by Quintin Theodore Petroc Molesworth Riley

Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar Research Institute,
University of Cambridge

Film: Anaiyyun: prayer for a whale, 2017

In this film by an award-winning director Kiliiii Yüyan, the Utqiagvik community of northern Alaska pray, celebrate and honour the nourishment provided by a single bowhead whale.

There are sounds of communal praying, dancing and celebrating.

Resilient norths

Duration: 2 minutes

Nanai, Chinese-American, USA

Scan the QR code or visit
britishmuseum.org/arctic-content
to read a transcript of the film in the
exhibition large print guide.



© Kiliii Yüyan

Transcript

00.00–01.10: [GEESE IN FLIGHT; SEA LAPPING AGAINST THE SHORE; WAVES; SAIL FLAPPING IN THE WIND; STRONG WINDS; ICE CRACKING AND MOVING; SKIDOO ENGINES; WHALE EXPELLING AIR THROUGH ITS BLOWHOLE]

01.11–01.26: **whale hunter:** [PRAYS IN INUPIAQ, ONE OF 20 INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES SPOKEN IN ALASKA]

01.27–02.05: **Inupiat Elder:** [LEADS A COMMUNAL PRAYER] [AMERICAN ACCENT]

Thank you for this day, for the gift of the whale.

[PAUSE] And we thank Thee that the wisdom and knowledge of whaling has been passed down to our younger people and they have respect for this great animal. Look at what you have right in front of you. This is stuff that people are going to eat all winter. And we're being blessed [by] the whales that give themselves.

02.06–02.30: **children:** [LAUGHING] and **choir:** [♪ HYMN IN INUPIAQ ♪]

Arctic collaborations

Living in the Circumpolar North means that Arctic Peoples are on the frontline of global climate change, leading the way in raising awareness and finding solutions for their communities and others.

Resilient norths

They are approaching this in the same way they have met other changes and challenges in their long history – by adapting, innovating, collaborating and resisting. These displays were curated by two Indigenous Organisations, each one identifying the most pressing threat that climate change brings to their community. Both case studies demonstrate the customary tenacity and resilience of Arctic Peoples.

The Shishmaref Erosion and Site Expansion Coalition

We the Kigiqtamiut and Tapqagmiut Inupiat of Shishmaref have lived successfully in Alaska for thousands of years.

Indigenous

In collaboration, we push for solutions that give us authority over our future and lead the way for others to consider their response to sea-level rise.

Adapt

Without shore fast ice to protect the coastlines, fall storms wipe out many metres of land each year. Storms are so dangerous that either we build flood protection and sea walls or we relocate, at great financial and emotional expense.

Erosion

We demonstrate how to stay strong and united as we search for answers to the biggest challenge of the 21st century.

Our knowledge and values have helped us adapt to a dynamic coast but recent extreme climatic changes have eroded our coastline, putting us at risk.

Inuit Circumpolar Council – Alaska

Resilient norths

We are Inuit. We live a hunting culture. Our food is the lifeline that connects us to our ancestors, to our existence and all that we are.

Food security and sovereignty

‘We are getting the maktak ready to serve during Thanksgiving. We caught this bowhead whale ... We are allowed three —our quota.’

Marie Rexford, Kaktovik, Alaska

‘We are going to go change our clothes and then go clean our guns now.’

Charlie Katchatag, Shaktoolik, Alaska

Hunting rights

‘Our favorite way to eat duck is duck soup. First, we pluck it, gut it, skin it and save the gizzard and clean it.’

Resilient norths

Charlie Katchatag, Taylor Kulukhon
with Keenan Jackson, Shaktoolik, Alaska

All ICC – Alaska photos © Brian Adams

The ocean is freezing up late, sea ice is declining. We are facing thawing permafrost, increase in contaminants and invasive species. All impact our food security.

Healthy ecosystems

A holistic understanding of the Arctic can only be achieved by equitably and respectfully bringing Indigenous Knowledge together with science.

Arctic adventures

Like all of us, Arctic Peoples use storytelling to pass on skills, knowledge, morals and experience.

Look closely at the sealskin map in the case to your left. What stories do you think the map is telling?

Resilient norths

Now create your own short story using the pictures you can see.

Who will be in your story? Where will it take place and what will happen? Be as creative as you like!

Share your story with us using #ArcticExhibition

animals

people

places

actions

Resilient heritage

Today, Arctic Peoples are transforming their heritage to meet their needs and to determine their futures. They have revitalised dancing and gaming practices, sharing them with a global audience. Informed by their storytelling and artistic traditions, they have developed innovative markets to support hunting and herding activities.

Resilient norths

They have collaborated across national boundaries to safeguard their sovereignty. Such efforts help communities thrive despite fraught colonial histories and climate threats.

Forbidden celebrations

Before Yupiit and Inuit converted to Christianity, they performed mask dances for both secular and spiritual reasons. Drums, like this organ-skin one rimmed with wood, accompanied songs and celebrated successful hunts, related myths, passed on knowledge and honoured animals and spirits.

By the 1920s, missionaries had banned mask dances, so the songs, dances and knowledge were no longer passed down to the younger generations.

Tunumiit, Greenland – before 1939
Donated by Irene Marguerite Beasley
British Museum

Reviving traditional dances, early 1980s

Paul Tiulana, (1921–1994), King Island, Alaska

Resilient norths

From the 1980s onwards, Yupiit and Inupiat began to revive the mask-dancing traditions that had been banned by missionaries for 60 years. Elders, including Tiulana, brought together their communities to remember and learn songs. These contemporary walrus masks made of wood are worn when Inupiat perform a powerful dance, imitating the animated motions and sounds of this culturally and economically important animal.

Inupiat, USA
Donated by Paul Tiulana
British Museum

Image caption: Inupiat dancers perform the Bull Walrus Dance at Teller Dance Festival, King Island, west Alaska, 2009.

© Amber Lincoln

Transforming traditions, 2019

Mary George, (born 1942), Newtok, Alaska
Roy Watson, (dates unknown), Bethel, Alaska

Resilient norths

Surviving the harm caused by missionaries and the deliberate policies of the US government to eliminate indigenous culture, Yupiit and Inupiat have reclaimed and transformed their drumming and dancing traditions. They are now popular state-wide events. The flowing caribou throat and otter fur tufts on these women's fans emphasise the graceful movements of the dancers. Similarly, the imitation owl feathers on the men's fans exaggerate their energetic movements. Today, they merge these traditions with their Christianity.

Yupiit, USA
British Museum

Image caption: On his visit to Alaska in 2015, former President Barack Obama performed with a Yupiit dance group. Photo by Pete Souza.

© American Photo Archive/Alamy Stock Photo

Contemporary yhyakh, 2019–20

Fedor Markov (born 1948), Sakha Republic

Resilient norths

This wood and mammoth-ivory model is a contemporary depiction of the **yhyakh**, the summer festival at which Sakha thank their gods for the return of the sun. The festival was banned during the Soviet era (1917–1991), but since 1991 Sakha have restored such historical beliefs and practices. Nowadays, **yhyakh** festivals are large, well-attended events. Markov, the artist, used the model displayed earlier in the exhibition for inspiration.

Sakha, Russia
British Museum

Image caption: Fedor Markov assessing a mammoth tusk to make this artwork, 2019.

© Tatiana Argounova-Low

Market innovations

Julie C. Dock (born 1940) Kipnuk, Alaska

Edna Mathlaw (dates unknown), Mekoryuk, Alaska

Mary P. Smith (dates unknown), Mekoryuk, Alaska

Resilient norths

Yupiiit basketry is ever evolving. For centuries women wove bags from beach grass (left) to store food or clothing. During the 1880s, the Moravian missionaries encouraged them to make more robust coiled baskets for external markets. Still of beach grass, these could be decorated more easily, as demonstrated by the puffin design, appealing to collectors and tourists alike.

More recently, resourceful women of Nunavak Island, Alaska, have been collecting segments of nylon fishing rope washed up on the coastlines of western Alaska. They unravel this free material, then crochet the twine into sturdy and colourful bags.

Grass bag, Yupiiit, USA – 1987;
puffin basket, Yupiiit, USA – 1980s;
nylon bag, Yupiiit, USA – 1992
British Museum

Still storytelling

Arctic Peoples have strong storytelling traditions. One example is this ivory story knife that, even today, Yupiiit fathers make for their daughters.

Resilient norths

Girls use them to draw pictures in sand, mud or snow, while simultaneously narrating the story. Today, oral histories and storytelling traditions are incorporated into many different forms of art and performance, including carving, printmaking and dancing.

Yupiit, USA – before 1888

Donated by Hugh Cecil Lowther, Lord Lonsdale
British Museum

Bears & Owls, 1968

Kenojuak Ashevak (1927–2013), Baffin Island,
Nunavut

The career of Ashevak, a notable Inuit artist, reflects the history of printmaking in the Arctic. In 1957 James Houston, a government arts administrator, experimented with different printmaking methods in collaboration with sculptors from Kinngait on Baffin Island. They used the local serpentine, a green stone, to make low-relief printing blocks.

Resilient norths

Using this Japanese printmaking technique, the group produced their first print run in 1959 to much acclaim. Part of that collection, Ashevak's work was immediately popular. She and the other artists formed the still successful West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative.

Inuit, Canada

Bequeathed by John Pawson Haggart

British Museum

Carving soapstone

Inuit have a long tradition of carving soapstone tools and toys. In 1948, the Canadian government formed a guild to promote Inuit arts. Canadian artist James Houston was sent north to buy ivory and soapstone sculptures for an exhibition. Within a few years galleries were selling 'Inuit art', like this dancing bear and owl, to avid collectors. The new market gave men a financial alternative to the unpredictable fur market.

Resilient norths

Today, contemporary sculptural artists like Alex Alikashuak (born 1952) from Neultin Lake, who carved *Faces*, are inspired by all kinds of art forms, including 20th-century European art.

Bear, Inuit, Canada – made by Jonasia (dates unknown), 1960–80; *owl*, Inuit, Canada – maker unknown, 1960–80; *Faces*, Inuit, Canada – before 2010
Bear and owl bequeathed by John Pawson Haggart
British Museum; Lent by the Polar Museum, Scott Polar
Research Institute, University of Cambridge (*Faces*)

After carrying the man, the tired giant slept, 1986

Lukassie Tukalak (born 1917), Puvirnituk, Quebec

Tukalak is a founding member of a print workshop in Puvirnituk. Since the 1960s, six Inuit communities have developed printmaking practices. While each has a distinctive style, they all print on Japanese paper. Puvirnituk carvers work directly onto stone, as here, rather than from drawings. Tukalak depicts an episode from a traditional tale about perseverance using both words and images, typical of Puvirnituk's narrative style.

Resilient norths

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Playful Sedna, 1986

Kakulu Sagiatak (born 1940), Kinngait, Nunavut

This print depicts Sedna, a powerful Inuit spirit living at the bottom of the ocean. When she was younger her father threw her overboard. As she pulled herself back into the kayaq he cut off her fingers, which turned into seals, walrus, whales and fish. Her sacrifice bestowed Inuit with abundant sea animals, but she withholds them if they are disrespected. In the light of global climate change, some Inuit artists consider that Sedna's hair has become tangled up with rubbish and needs to be combed out by shamans.

Inuit, Canada
British Museum

Poonk Timertik Inua, 1987

Lawrence James Beck (1938–1994), Seattle

Resilient norths

After years as an abstract sculptural artist, Beck turned to his Yupiit family history in western Alaska for inspiration. **Punk Walrus Spirit** is made from a rubber tyre, a metal hubcap and bits of scrap metal. This combination of materials and histories transforms perceptions, revealing that resourcefulness can be born in the most unexpected of places.

Yupiit, American-Norwegian, USA
Anchorage Museum of History and Art

Reflections on climate change

Embassy of Imagination, a socially engaged art practice

'This artwork honours the actions and responses to climate change that have long been led by Inuit communities, informing and inspiring the rest of the world. Global decisions and industrial practices continue to threaten ecosystems and the breadth of human expression. As we collectively face an uncertain climate future, we need immediate change and accountability. Through heartfelt collective efforts, Atigiit, Silapaat, aims to empower young people, as it is their generation who will inherit the burden of a climate forever changed. We are calling for reciprocal global action and solidarity during this time of transformation.'

The artists wish to acknowledge the support of:
Peter Pitseolak School, Attagoyuk Ilisavik,
Canada Council for the Arts,

Reflections on climate change

Kinngait District Education Authority, Pangnirtung District Education Authority, The Japanese Paper Place, Paperhouse Studio, Hamlet of Pangnirtung, Indigenous Services Canada, ARCTICConnexion and the Prairie Climate Centre.

Image caption: Artists from Kinngait, Nunavut, wear their sewn and printed parkas made with the help of Ooloosie Ashevak and Moosie Manning, and Elders Siita Saila and Nikotai Qimirpik, 2019. Left to right, back row: Janine Manning, Kunu Pudlat, Siita Saila, Cie Taqiasuk, Alexa Hatanaka, Saaki Nuna, Nikotai Qimirpik; front row: David Pudlat, Iqaluk Quvianaqtuliaq

© Patrick Thompson, Embassy of Imagination & PA System

Image caption: Young artist learning the gyotaku fish-printing method on a fishing trip at Iqalugajuk, near Kinngait, Nunavut, 2020.

© Patrick Thompson, Embassy of Imagination & PA System

Reflections on climate change

Image caption: Char ice-fishing excursion led by Elder Quvianaqtuliaq Tapaungai and hunter Ettula Adla, Kinngait, Nunavut, 2019.

© Alexa Hatanaka, Embassy of Imagination & PA System

Atigiit, Silapaat, 2019–20

This artwork was made collaboratively and inter-generationally by young artists and knowledge-keepers from Kinngait, Pangnirtung, Toronto and Winnipeg, Canada. It is made from **washi**, Japanese paper, and south-east Asian fibres that have been sewn into silapaas, thin outer parkas. This combination of Asian paper and Inuit clothing practices reflects the entwined histories of printmaking and the global challenge of climate change. Each silapaa's design was printed onto paper using found objects and blocks of linoleum carved by the young artists.

Watch the project in progress at britishmuseum.org/arctic-content

Inuit, Canada

Reflections on climate change

Acquisition supported by the Onaway Trust, the PF Charitable Trust and the High Commission of Canada in the UK

An Embassy of Imagination project by: students of Attagoyuk Ilisavik and Peter Pitseolak School – Mary Alikatuktuk, Ooloosie Ashevak, Natalie Baird, Flora Shum, Cie Taqiasuk, Nicotye Qimirpik and PA System (Alexa Hatanaka and Patrick Thompson); knowledge-sharers Eena Kullualik, Poisy Alogut, Adamie Ashevak, Ashoona Ashoona, Siita Saila, Andrew Qappik, Jaco Ishulutaq, Amie Ishulutaq, Jesse Arnaqqaq, Lasaloosie Ishulutaq, Madeleine Qumuatuq, Maggie Lucy Kilabuk and Julien Wallot-Beale – in collaboration with Panguit Land and Climate Program, Panguit District Education Authority and Kinngait District Education Authority.

Kinngait student lead artists: Moe Kelly and Kunu Pudlat.

Panguit student lead artists: Damien Ishulutaq and Myra Young.

Reflections on climate change

Kinngait student participants: Aggiu Ashevak, Janine Manning, Annie Oshutsiaq, Christine Adamie, David Pudlat, Davidee Killiktee, Dennis Hayward, Iqaluk Ainalik, Iqaluk Quvianaqtuliaq, Ivan Koperqualuk, Johnny Samayualie, Lily Ashoona, Luke Jr Aningmiuq, Manumekalla Shaa, Mia Saffa Manning, Miazie Samayualie, Kilabuk Pitsiulak, Moosie Bell, Napatchie Pitsiulak, Ning Qavavau, Joanasie Atsiaq, Katsua Saila, Qavavau Mangitak, Saaki Nuna, Salomonie Ashoona and Tommy Quvianaqtuliaq.

Pangnirtung student participants: Lorraine Akulukjuk, Benjamin Qaqqasiq, Sylvia Akalukjuk, Nigel Qumuatuq, Monica Veevee, Andrea Kullualik, Iris Soudluapik, Sheila Akulukjuk, Laura Nuvaqiq, Mikibi Nakashuk, Madison Alivaktuk, Elijah Michael, Rhoda Nashalik, Moses Kooneeloosie, Douglas Michael, TerryLynn Keenainak, Nigel Evvik, Abigail Mosesee, Olivia Kilabuk, Joanne Nowdlak, Caitlyn Maniapik, Annie Ishulutaq, Joemie Michael and Stacey Alivaktuk.

Reflections on climate change

Quote:

'I love going out on the land and sea ice because I love fishing and learning new skills. It makes me feel like a true Inuk.'

Kunu Pudlat, aged 14

Quote:

'It's important for kids to learn sewing and enjoy it, so that they can provide warm clothing for themselves, their families, and earn income.'

Ooloosie Ashevak, Kinngait seamstress

Kivalina, Alaska, 2007

Brian Adams (born 1985), Anchorage, Alaska

Kivalina sea wall, from the series

Disappearing villages.

Inupiat, USA

© Brian Adams

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Quotes from books used within the exhibition come from:

EALLU, 2017, Food, Knowledge and How We Have Thrived on the Margins, Guovdageaidn/ Kautokeino: International Centre for World Reindeer Husbandry

Judith Nasby, 2002, Irene Avaalaaqiaq: Myth and Reality, Montreal and Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press

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Sheila Watt-Cloutier, 2015, *The Right to Be Cold: One Woman's Story of Protecting Her Culture, the Arctic, and the Whole Planet*, Toronto: Penguin Random Books

Seasonal soundscape

Bernie Krause

US National Park Service, *Natural Sounds and Night Skies*

Welcome soundscape

Alaska Native Heritage Center

Ergyron Ensemble

Galina Veretnova

Lusi Kuni

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