

Arctic Journeys, Ancient Memories:

SCULPTURE BY
ABRAHAM ANGHIK RUBEN
AT THE SMITHSONIAN

by Rocco Pannese

Abraham working at his studio on Salt Spring Island, British Columbia. The unfinished sculpture is titled, *Thor's Story*.
Media: Brazilian soapstone,
Size: 100.0 x 77.6 x 51.0 cm.
Photo: Lou Ruffolo



**ARCTIC JOURNEYS,
ANCIENT MEMORIES:**
Sculpture by
Abraham Anghik Ruben
was presented at the
Smithsonian's National
Museum of the American
Indian from October 5, 2012
to January 2, 2013. Notably,
Abraham Anghik Ruben is
the first contemporary Inuit
sculptor to be given a
one-man show at this
institution.

The exhibition was curated
by Bernadette Driscoll
Engelstad and contributed
a scholarly essay for the
exhibition catalogue. The
exhibition featured 23 large
sculptures that have never
been seen outside Canada.
The sculptures are created
in soapstone, ivory
and whalebone.



Shaman's Dream
2011
Bronze 1/9
78.5 x 36.5 x 51cm
Private Collection, Toronto

The Artist

Born into a nomadic Inuvialuit family, Ruben's early years were spent among the many small camps that were scattered along the coast, where game and trapping was plentiful. These encampments consisted of ten or so families subsisting on hunting for caribou, moose, muskox, game birds and waterfowl.

His father William Ruben, whose Inuinnaqtun name was Esoktak, was a great hunter and trapper, able to supplement his family income in order to buy goods at the Paulatuk [formerly Letty Harbour] trading post in the Northwest Territories run by the Roman Catholic Missions in the 1930s. To the east at Cape Parry, another outpost was managed by the Hudson Bay Company.

Ruben's mother, Bertha Thrasher, gave birth to sixteen children, of which fifteen (nine boys and six girls) survived — a remarkable 94 per cent survival rate for that time in so remote a place. She raised the children in the Christian faith, but also passed on to them Inuit beliefs and traditions. Both of Ruben's parents were instrumental in ensuring these beliefs were integral to their children's upbringing, for they felt that since Inuit's beliefs are based on how humans and nature interact with each other in order to survive the nomadic way of life, it was very important to keep them alive and forever present.

Ruben's parents were responsible for his education. He was taught Inuit myths and legends, the land and its subtle rhythms and its animal life. At the age of 12, a boy was traditionally initiated into the skills needed for hunting and trapping, while young girls assumed training from their mother and aunts. Even children's games were designed to develop their capabilities, strength and powers of observation to function adequately in their environment.

All life skills in an Inuit camp were learned by watching and mimicking the activities of the elders and older siblings, thus honing what neuroscientists describe as mirror neurons, which current research in the field purports to demonstrate to be the starting block for all thinking processes in the human mind: something that may shed some light on how a nomadic community, in less than one generation, could produce a staggering number of accomplished sculptors.

Ruben's memories of these early years left an indelible mark in his psyche and are eloquently expressed in this insightful recollection.

My earliest memory as a child was the day I became fully conscious of being alive. It happened on the beginning of my second spring. I had walked away from our tent and had gone to a nearby pond fed by a small spring. I had crouched down on my knees and looked into the pond. As I stared into the pond, the whole area within my sight of vision seemed to become crystal clear and bright with light and colour. The sound of spring birds also came into focus. It seemed that a heavy shroud of fog had been lifted from me. I became at that point aware of being alive. This memory was to be forever etched into my conscious being. Throughout my childhood I had similar experiences and always the most vivid of dreams, dreams of being in other worldly places and meeting people and being in the dream world.



Abraham putting the final touches to *Beckoning the Skies*, downstairs at the Kipling Gallery. Media: Brazilian soapstone, Size: 82.0 x 74.0 x 23.0 cm. Photo: Lou Ruffolo

Into the New World

2011
Oregon Soapstone, Brazilian Soapstone
50 x 102 x 30.5 cm
Collection of PowerOne Capital Markets Ltd.



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The powerful and suggestive forces of nature, particularly as they are expressed by that unique and incomparable Arctic landscape, mingled with that human expression ethnographers and anthropologists have described as animism, or the infusion of spiritual elements in all things in nature. Surely they were entrancing and everlastingly engraved in this youngster's mind.

The emotions evoked by natural events, coupled with the oral tradition of Inuit culture, a culture emerged from their dependence on the animal life and the shaman as guardian for the well-being of the vulnerable community, were surely as equally vivid and powerful as those evoked by the legends of the early Christian martyrs to a Mediaeval child.

These emotions came alive, as in a shamanic vision, when Ruben discovered, during his stay at the University of Alaska, his Alaskan ancestral roots. His great-grandparents had been keepers of the ancient shamanic tradition, and his grandparents, Akapark and Kagun were renowned Alaskan shamans.

My mother was given initiations at an early age and this continued throughout her life. She was able to integrate the best of her shamanic upbringing with the best that Christianity had to offer to her life and circumstances. My father became to me the essence of what is known in the West as 'the salt of the earth'. He had an innate understanding of all life within and without. People sought his advice and company. My parents' influences still have a potent impact on my life, both on my personal and artistic level. They have been the pathway to my past and the light to my future.

The abrupt intervention of the Canadian Government, with the creation of The Ministry of Northern Affairs and

National Resources in 1953, to replace the former Ministry of Resources and Development (1950-53), in its benevolent intention to provide an education to all Canadian citizens, [read: civilizing primitive native Canadians] removed Ruben and his younger brother to a residential school from 1959 to 1970.

They were not very pleasant years and left indelible emotional and cultural scars. They may have been institutions of learning, but the backing of an educational system based on the principle of "spare the rod and spoil the child" was not too congenial for these Inuit youngsters who had been raised within a culture that believed children were reincarnated elders, be it as the father, the mother, or loved ones; therefore to be treated with love and reverence — a concept incomprehensible and generally alien to the colonizers at that time.

Upon leaving, or rather, upon running away from the residential school, the North Star directed his way a little further westward to Fairbanks, to the University of Alaska.

I had the good fortune to be at the right place at the right time... In November 1970, I went for a tour to the University of Alaska. As I wandered off to the fine arts building and to the art studios, I looked through a small studio window where I could see the students working at their various workstations. I knew at that moment that this was where I wanted to be.

His Work



But carving and printmaking at Paulatuk had not been a very strong activity in the 1950s. The Distant Early Warning Line project (DEW LINE), intended to dissuade Russian intentions of attacking the North-American Continent, brought to the Western Inuit communities a marginal income, which, as in the past, supplemented their traditional way of life.

Art icon James Houston's project of teaching printmaking to the Inuit and embellishing their carvings for a possible southern market, did not find as receptive a community in Paulatuk as it did elsewhere. Nevertheless, though carving was barely a marginal activity at camp, Ruben realized that his call was to become a professional artist. He had tried his hand in making small tourist carvings for cash since he was on his own and had to make a living, but the allure of the studios and the work produced by the students captured his ancestral imagination. After inquiring into who was responsible for the department, he was informed that Ronald Senungetuk was the artist in charge.

He found Senungetuk in his office, introduced himself and expressed his interest in what he viewed happening in the studio. Ruben was informed that all the students were from Alaska and had received previous training in their respective fields. This previous training was a must before becoming one of his students.

They came to an agreement that resulted in Ruben's permission to attend studio sessions. Ruben's formal training began in the summer months of June and July of 1971, and again from August 1974 to July 1975. His primary interest and training was in design and the use of tools, the integration of old and new materials and techniques and styles.

Under the tutelage of his teacher he developed as an individual, and his life became meaningful, both in his artistic endeavours and personal relevance. Senungetuk had a tremendous and lasting influence on his artistic and personal life. "He took a gamble on me as a lost 19 year old looking for himself," remarks Ruben. The pupil did not repay his teacher poorly for his efforts: as he did not remain a pupil only. They became friends and today they continue to share their respect for one another.

In the spring of 1977, at the age of 25, six years after he had stepped into Senungetuk's office, Ruben was given a solo show at Pollock Gallery in Toronto. Both in presence and versatility he captivated Jack Pollock's and Eva Quan's interest with *carvings* that in Ruben's hands had become sculptures.

There was something unusual and refreshing in Ruben's work: its unmistakable cultural elements, the presence of an historical past and the sheer scale of his work. For

Opposite page:

Thor 900 AD

2009

Bronze 1/9

81 x 58.5 x 46 cm

Collection of Nick and Elaine Tsimidis



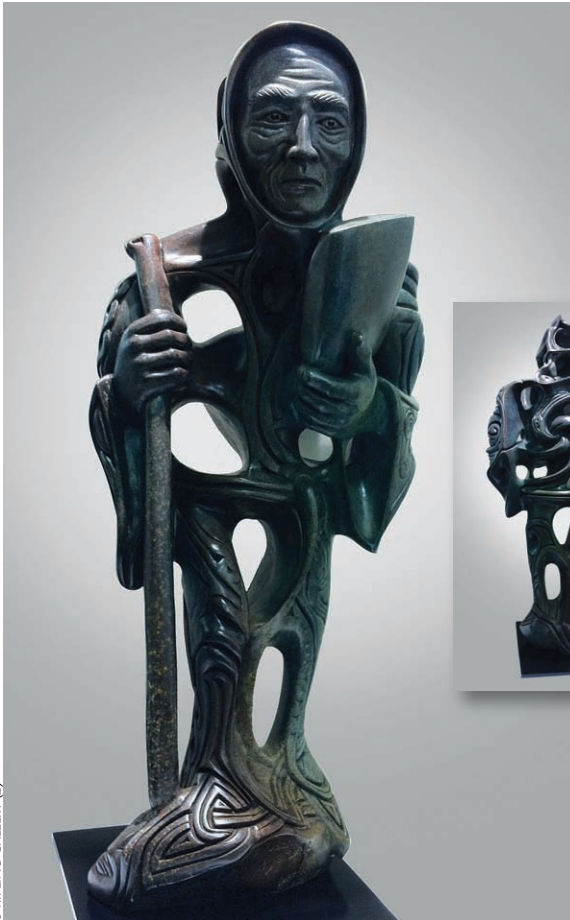
Odin's Story

2009

Brazilian Soapstone

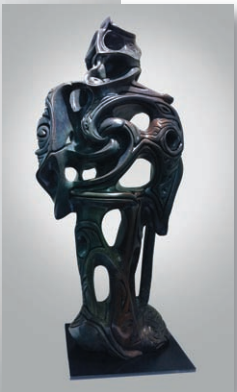
76.5 x 53 x 45 cm

Collection of Mark Beggs



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Celtic Monk: Keeper of Light
2007, Bronze 1/9, 88 x 39 x 30 cm, Collection of Larry Kubal



I have always been keen to understand the people who inhabit the far flung northern reaches of the world, their ancient cultures, artistic traditions, hunting technology and migration. Prior to creating a new work, I find it necessary in some instances to do due diligence on the theme or character that I'm trying to portray or tell a story about. This is true of the Old Norse and earlier Germanic myths and legends. I find the required background material from books, lecture materials and often from Internet sources that lead me to books and written studies on my subject of interest. This information gives me historical timelines, artistic and cultural material information relevant to my research.

Then I can commence on the best course of action and direction that the new work can take me. I have no particular preference on the type of material to work with. Each material has its uses and its innate qualities and drawbacks. I am always keeping at the back of my mind the potential for making bronze castings of the images that I am working on.

Ruben has been commissioned to execute large-scale stone murals, bronze castings and limestone and plaster works for public installations. The stone murals installed in Vancouver, British Columbia, were made with South African wonderstone, Portuguese marble and Mexican onyx. An impressive [16 by 14 foot] limestone sculpture commissioned by Glaxo/Smith/Kline Pharmaceuticals, in Mississauga, Ontario, was created from 12 tons of Indiana limestone. He has also cast outdoor bronze sculptures that integrate with the environment in which they are installed.

Seeing Ruben in action chipping away at an inert, rigid block of stone, regardless of its size and configuration, or carving the legends of his people on a massive whale bone spanning over five or six feet, and then thinking of this little boy at the fringes of our globe caught in the immense expanse of ice and an infinite sky, leaves me in awe and makes me contemplate the mystery of art.

I feel that I have found a place for myself within the arts community because I have come to a time and place in my own life where I am comfortable with who I am and how I do what I do. I see the full impact and potential in the things that I do leave no borders in what I feel I can do as an artist. 🌍

Kipling Gallery is the exclusive world representative of Ruben's work and negotiated with the collectors who so generously agreed to lend the sculptures that were included in the Smithsonian's exhibition. Rocco Pannese is the Director/Curator of Kipling Gallery.

the next five years, these two curators introduced his work to private, corporate and public collections.

Fully bilingual and intrigued by that adamant and persevering Inuit curiosity, like the hunter in pursuit of his prey, Ruben's sculptures began to incorporate his unique artistic style that interpreted the historical past he absorbed from his research and related readings.

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