



BY LAURA BUSCH

THE HISTORIAN

FOR DECADES, **ABRAHAM ANGHİK RUBEN** HAS RECORDED THE OLD STORIES ABOUT HOW THINGS USED TO BE IN THE ARCTIC. BUT HIS PUBLISHED WORKS AREN'T VOLUMES OF PRINT. THEY'RE MONUMENTS OF STONE, IVORY, BONE AND BRONZE.

Two intricately carved narwhal tusks rising from soapstone bases stand sentinel over the gallery entryway. One, I'll learn later, tells the whole history of the Inuit of the Mackenzie Delta, from the Raven creation myth to the suppression and resurgence of Inuvialuit culture. In this gallery, exhibiting selected works by sculptor Abraham Anghik Ruben, the Inuit stand side-by-side with the Norse; Sedna, the Inuit goddess of the sea, next to Ran, to whom the Vikings prayed for safe passage. ♦♦

MEMORIES: AN ANCIENT PAST; WHALE BONE, BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE AND CEDAR. PHOTO COURTESY KIPLING GALLERY/SILVIO CALGANO



FAR LEFT:
DREAMS OF VALHALLA
2013: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE
48.0 X 115.50 X 25.5 CM
COURTESY KIPLING GAL-
LERY/SILVIO CALGANO

ABOVE:
RAN
2009: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE
64.5 X 77.0 X 24.0 CM
COURTESY KIPLING GAL-
LERY/SILVIO CALGANO

LEFT:
KAGUN AND APAKARK
2014: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE
67.0 X 32.0 X 23.0 CM
COURTESY KIPLING GAL-
LERY/DANIAL DABROWSKI

BOTTOM LEFT:
(R) ABRAHAM ANGHIK
RUBEN WITH (L) BOB
CARPENTER CIRCA 1977
FRAN HURCOMB

TAKING IT ALL IN while I wait for the artist to arrive, I ponder the connections between the Inuit and the Norse, who lived together in the eastern Canadian Arctic for hundreds of years. Very little is known about that time, even less from an Inuit perspective, and I'm curious about where Ruben gets his inspiration. When he walks through the door, I make my first attempt to find out.



It's interesting how similar the myths and legends of these two peoples are, I remark, pointing to Sedna and Ran. Oh no, he tells me, it's not a coincidence—the stories of all the people of the North are intertwined. It's not a philosophical statement; Ruben's words are peppered with names

and dates and reference materials. And I realize I'm not here for a philosophical conversation about art and culture. I'm here for a history lesson.

Ruben was born in a camp out on the tundra east of the Mackenzie River Delta, south of Paulatuk, a small mainland hamlet on the coast of the Beaufort Sea. He spent the first eight years of his life in the traditional Inuvialuit way: moving around with the changing seasons, surviving off the land and the animals.

After 11 years in the residential school system, Ruben left the Mackenzie Delta in search of himself. He travelled through the Yukon, down to the west coast of British Columbia, and eventually found himself at the Native Arts Centre at the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1971. After a four-year intensive program, Ruben worked for a summer quarrying soapstone in B.C., and then followed that shipment north to the shores of Great Slave Lake.

"This was my post-hippie era, coming down to the west coast," he begins, gesturing to the left as we make our way to some of the works that came from his time in Yellowknife. The piece he points

to—a foot-and-a-half tall soapstone killer whale jumping out of the ocean being swallowed by a raven, in turn being consumed by a rockfish—bears some of the style of Haida art from the Pacific Northwest. This kind of stylistic fusion is on display all around us.

The exhibit, currently on display at the Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre through April 2016, is a bit of a homecoming for Ruben. "Yellowknife is where my first steps into becoming a full-time artist, sculptor, took place," he says. "This is where my ideas and everything started."

He has faced troubled times along the way, including what he refers to as "my illustrious drinking career," finally becoming sober in the late '80s. Today, the self-described foodie lives comfortably on Salt Spring Island in B.C. His work is prized internationally and he's the first Inuvialuit artist to have his sculptures exhibited at the Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian.

If you ask him how long it takes to make a carving, he'll say 40 years. Technically it's a few weeks, but it's taken much of the past four decades to hone his ability to create art he's happy with. When

he first started sculpting scenes from Inuit myths and legends in Yellowknife, "it was like cheating," he says. "It's like creating something that you'd heard second- or third-hand and trying to say, 'this is who I am.'" And with that, our tour begins.

AURORA BOREALIS

Brazilian Soapstone 2014

The exhibit's title piece (pictured on page 58) represents Norse and Inuit travelling together in a longship, with the Northern Lights overhead. Of several longships on display, this one is the simplest. This diversion from his regular technique is to emulate the carving style from Northern Scandinavia during that period, he explains.

In search of a means to support their settlements in Greenland and Iceland, Vikings (which is how Ruben refers to them, rather than the more scholarly "Norse") travelled north from Greenland where "they found that the land and the northern waters were rich." Their first shipments to Europe included one breeding pair

RIGHT:
TAKING FLIGHT
2014: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE,
77.0 X 57.0 X 52.0 CM



FAR RIGHT:
PASSAGE OF SPIRITS
2011: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE,
WHALEBONE, AND CEDAR
48.0 X 115.5 X 25.5 CM

BELOW:
AURORA BOREALIS
2014: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE
66.0 X 80.5 X 22.0 CM
COURTESY KIPLING GAL-
LERY/SILVIO CALGANO



RIGHT:
APPEASING SEDNA
2014: BRAZILIAN SOAPSTONE
91.5 X 80.0 X 53.0 CM
COURTESY KIPLING GAL-
LERY/SILVIO CALGANO



BELOW:
ABRAHAM ANGHİK RUBEN,
THE MASTER CARVER,
OPENS HIS AURORA
BORALIS EXHIBIT ON MAY 3
BOB WILSON



of falcons that were exchanged for two shiploads of goods and gold—the equivalent of millions of dollars today—and a narwhal tusk that was given to the Danish king and given the same value as an entire northern town.

“When [Vikings] make contact with the Inuit, there was warfare at first, then trade, then intermarriage then cooperative living but also cooperative hunting,” says Ruben. “From that, they survived in the Arctic for 500 years.” The claim that the two cultures cohabitated at all is controversial, mostly due to a lack of physical evidence, but Ruben is adamant the Norsemen’s survival wouldn’t have been possible without the Inuit’s knowledge of migratory patterns, as well as their *qajaqs*, *umiaks* and dogsleds for transportation.

“There’s very little on the historical record [of the two groups living side by side],” he concedes. (This makes it next to impossible to independently verify his accounts.) “But the material record shows that there was a large volume of goods coming into Europe, which means that there wasn’t warfare, or constant warfare.”



**SEDNA,
GODDESS OF THE SEA**

To hear Ruben tell it, Sedna of the Inuit and Ran of the Norse are one and the same. “The origins of Sedna have been set—when they study the language and study the root words, her origins go back about 15,000 years to Northern China in the Sea of Okhotsk,” he says as we stand before a smaller, untitled sculpture of the goddess riding on the back of a beluga whale.

From Siberia to Alaska to Scandinavia, pagan peoples worshipped the goddess of the sea. Depending on whom you talk to, the name changes but the stories remain remarkably similar. In places like northern Alaska where the massive shifting ice poses many dangers and the sea claims many lives, Sedna is ill-tempered. In calmer

climes, she is more dignified. “In all these different stories she’s a grandmother, a young maiden, an irritable old woman, or a matron, or a young woman who is of marrying age,” he says. “And each of the different areas where the story is set relates to the people and the conditions of the area.”

TAKING FLIGHT

Brazilian Soapstone, 2014

“This is three or four thousand years ago in Scandinavia,” Ruben explains as our tour takes us to a shaman transforming into a hawk. The piece, the height of your average one-year-old, is covered in pictographs, with more and more revealing themselves the longer you look at it—a bear figure, a man hunting with a bow, a fox, the shaman’s spirit helper, Nordic longships with the distinctive dragon head protruding from the bow. *Taking Flight* was in fact inspired by a two-inch tall pictograph (cave drawing) found in a cave in Northern Denmark that Ruben saw a photo of once.

“The interesting thing with the pictograph images of ancient Scandinavian art is they’re very similar to the pictographic images of the Inuit of North Alaska, the Plains Indians and the Indians of the Great Lakes,” he says. “In ancient times, through pictographic art, the cultures seemed to be the same.”

“That shaman going into a trance in Scandinavia is no different from the [shaman] from the Plains, Great Lakes, or Arctic Canada or Alaska going into a trance and transforming into his spirit totem.”

For Ruben, those recurring images reveal a harmony that “ties into their association of the spirit world, where Man sits and where he sits in relation to the rest of the world around him, and how he connects to the world.”

“With the advent of Christianity, that connection was severed,” he says. “And what’s interesting about the Vikings is when they came into the Arctic 1,000 years ago ... they weren’t Christian ... they brought their shamans with them, and the shamans were women. Men weren’t allowed to take up the activity.” ♦

APPEASING SEDNA

Brazilian Soapstone, 2014

"Here's the story of a shaman," Ruben says as we examine *Appeasing Sedna*, perhaps the darkest piece in the exhibit, depicting a pockmarked shaman latched on to the tousled hair of the sea goddess, mouth open in an attempt to placate her with song. Few people know how shamans came to be, and how they interact with the spirit world. "I

know because I've been there," he says. His great grandmother and great grandfather were themselves shamans who travelled east from Alaska. His mother was selected as a shaman's apprentice at the age of two and had her first spirit journey at four years old.

Shamans were revered in their communities. People relied on them to advise them on the right times for planting, harvesting, and hunting. Shamans had knowledge of weather patterns, and would relay

auspicious times for weddings, to start a journey, and other major life events. Most importantly, a shaman was "a mediator for the community with the spirit world and with Sedna and other deities," says Ruben. Both men and women could be shamans in Inuit culture, though most were men. When a child showed signs of these abilities, a shaman could select them as a potential apprentice. With the parents' permission (which was almost always given) the gruelling initiation process would begin. It varied somewhat from region to region, with practices in the Central and Eastern Arctic, as well as Greenland being more severe, reflecting their harsher climates.

Ruben offers an example: a young boy aged between eight and 10 years old is chosen by a shaman. A small hut, roughly four-by-four feet, is built and the boy is put inside. Every day, the shaman will bring the boy a little bit of food and water, and ask him if his spirit helper has revealed itself yet. Otherwise, the boy is alone.

"Over time, he starts—from the hunger and the cold and deprivation, the lack of human contact—he starts hallucinating," says Ruben. "Slowly, a change takes place. He starts looking inward and starts dropping off all the human baggage to the point where, looking inwards, putting the focus inside to his soul, the room starts to become larger and larger, until he's sitting down and the room becomes cavernous ... and over time, he starts looking at his world and where he is in the world from a very different point of view."

Historical records show this process going on for up to 30 days. "Eventually, an animal spirit will come to him in the form of a bear, wolf, raven, loon. They will come to him and give him a name, and this is his direct contact with his spirit helper. And when the shaman hears that name, him uttering that name, he knows the child is ready." And then the real work begins: 15 to 20 years of instruction in human psychology, animal psychology, the matters of migration, weather, wind, snow, the relationships between a man and a woman, parents and their children, mothers and their newborns. He will also learn to put himself in a trance, at first under the guidance of the elder shaman, and take spirit journeys.

Which brings us back to *Appeasing Sedna*. It captures a deciding moment in a time of turmoil: only the shaman can restore peace when Sedna is riled. "She is the mirror of the health and wellbeing of the community," says Ruben. In good times, she is well put together, hair braided. CONTINUED ON PAGE 96

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