

## Digitizing 89,000 unseen Inuit artworks, one turntable spin at a time

*The Globe and Mail*

By: Kate Taylor

July 7, 2023

Original URL: [Digitizing 89,000 unseen Inuit artworks, one turntable spin at a time - The Globe and Mail](#)



*JAMASIE TEEVEE (1910-1985), UNTITLED, 1979-80.*

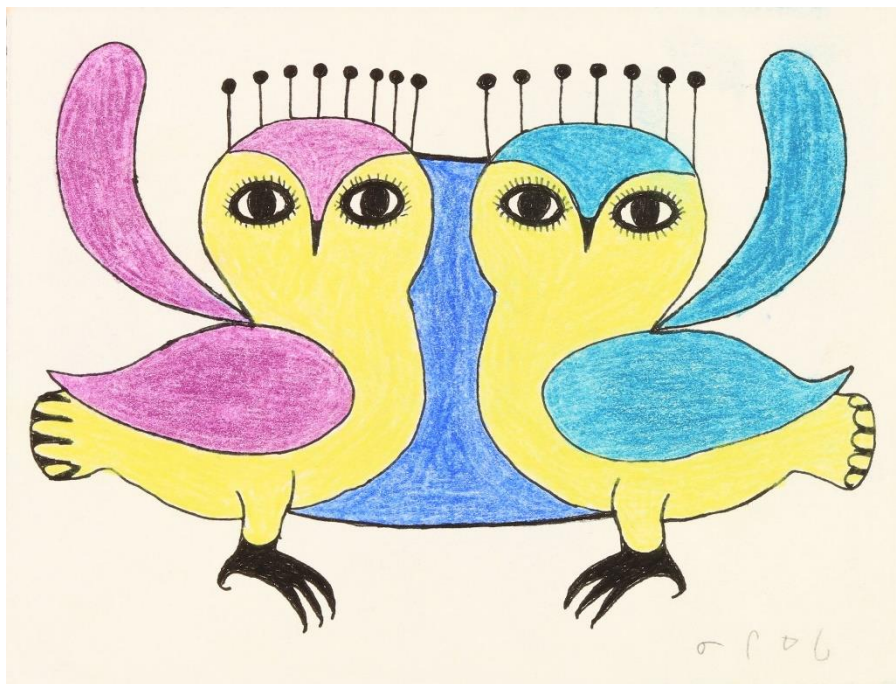
In a Toronto studio, familiar images of fanciful owls, Arctic terns and polar bears rotate gently, each one moving toward its moment under two big strobe lights and a digital camera. As a giant turntable circles continuously, one art handler carefully removes a drawing that has been photographed while another takes a new drawing from a box and puts it on the surface for its turn.

Art history is being made as the turntable, cleverly designed to cut the time it takes to photograph an archive, nears the completion of its maiden voyage: the complete digitization of a collection of 89,000

artworks belonging to the West Baffin Eskimo Co-operative in Kinngait, Nunavut, and housed at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection in Kleinburg, Ont.



*Kenojuak Ashevak (1927-2013), Untitled, 1966-1976.*



*Ningeeuga Oshuitoq (1918-1980), Untitled, 1978.*



On a recent visit, original drawings by Kenojuak Ashevak, the inspiration for some of the most recognizable Inuit prints ever made, were taken from the boxes where they have languished since the 1990s and placed on the rotating table. With the digitization, the McMichael is finally making good on a decades-old commitment to photograph all the drawings and create a publicly accessible record of the collection.

“In 1990, there was the promise of a database without the technology to support it,” said McMichael chief curator Sarah Milroy. “We realized what a Herculean and impossible task it was for an institution of our scale. The process was painfully slow because works were being shot one at a time. It would have taken a decade to shoot the whole collection.”

The archive in Kinngait (then known as Cape Dorset) was shipped south for safekeeping after a fire in another Nunavut community, Baker Lake, destroyed that co-op’s archive in 1977. The McMichael received the collection, featuring thousands of the original drawings from which printmakers had created the famous Cape Dorset print releases, on the understanding the museum would document it.



*Mary Pudlat (1923–2001). Untitled, 1984–1985.*

About half the collection was photographed for basic reference purposes in the 1990s but the scale of the job seemed to defeat any hope of completion. The McMichael took another stab in 2017, by which time digital cameras had greatly advanced: This time a collaboration with York University produced high-

resolution internet-ready images of 3,500 drawings. Still, that represented only four per cent of the total.

Then Milroy got chatting with photographer Edward Burtynsky about his latest project. Burtynsky is known for his large-scale environmental and industrial photography but also sits on the board of the Image Centre at Toronto Metropolitan University and was trying to figure out how to digitize the centre's large collections of photo journalism. Inspired by a turntable that the European art conservation company Factum Arte was developing to capture a documentary collection at the Cini Foundation in Venice, his studio began developing its own software for the job.

Eager to move ahead, the McMichael agreed to be the guinea pig for the new technology. The idea is fairly simple, turning the time-consuming photography of large collections into an assembly line. Digitization of archival collections is the key to make them publicly accessible but it's slow and hugely expensive as one person positions and photographs one item at a time.



*Digitization project specialist Daria Murphy loads prints by Kenojuak Ashevak into the digitizer at the Burtynsky Studio in Toronto. ALYSON HARDWICK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

The rotating platform Burtynsky developed – it comes in two sizes, about as big as round dining tables, and is known as the ARKIV360 machine – speeds up the process by four or five times but does require three operators. One places the art on, one removes it and a third sits at a computer checking that the software has correctly straightened and cropped each image as it is downloaded from the camera. (The

machine also has a camera on the underside so, if needed, it can shoot the back and the front simultaneously.)

Since March, the ARKIV360 machine has been digitizing the Cape Dorset archive at the rate of 800 to 1,000 pieces a day and should finish next week.



*Jamasie Teevee, Untitled, 1977.*



*Kingmeata Etidlooie (1915–1989), Untitled, 1976–77.*





Lucy Qinnuayuak (1915–1982), *Untitled*, 1977–1978.



Eliyakota Samualie (1939–1987), *Untitled*, 1981.

“Time allows you to bring the cost down. If you did it the old-fashioned way you would have to charge five times more. And there is no loss of quality,” said Burtynsky, who plans to sell or rent versions of the device to other museums and archives. His next project is digitizing the Rudolph P. Bratty Family Collection at TMU, which includes 25,000 press images from The New York Times archive.

The Dorset project started before the pandemic when the turntable was moved to the McMichael and smaller drawings were photographed. When the pandemic hit, it was returned to Burtynsky's studio where his staff retooled it and installed a larger platform to accommodate bigger drawings.

Meanwhile, the pandemic had underlined the importance of [digitizing collections](#) as shuttered museums could only reach visitors virtually and the federal government stepped into the breach. The 2021 budget included a two-year, \$20-million addition to the museums assistance program specifically designated for digital access to heritage. The McMichael was one of the first applicants, receiving a \$430,970 grant to photograph the Dorset archive and expand the website that will house it. TMU has also received \$300,000 toward the Bratty collection digitization.



*Janine Butler, head of collections and registrar at the McMichael Gallery, carries a box of Inuit art prints in the gallery's archives.*





Ian DeJardin, executive director of McMichael Gallery, and Sarah Milroy, the gallery's chief curator, are joined by Janine Butler, Nicole Laccino, digitization assistant, and Grace Johnstone, communications director, to examine a print by Inuk artist Kingmeata Etidlooie. ALYSON HARDWICK/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

In the Dorset instance, virtual access is particularly important because many of those with a direct interest live so far away: The co-op in Kinngait runs the trilingual website [iningatilagiit.ca](http://iningatilagiit.ca), which currently houses 4,000 images and where the new ones will start appearing this month. Users can search by artist and subject matter and curate their own online galleries. A low-bandwidth version is also available for use in the north.

For the McMichael, the digital archive will also be an opportunity to finally look at what is in all those art boxes that came south in 1990. Some drawings are the work of such well-known names as Ashevak, Pudlo Pudlat and Parr, but many of the artists have been forgotten.

“We are looking forward to having some revelations about careers not previously known,” said Jennifer Withrow, head of exhibitions at the McMichael, while Milroy also expects to discover more about how the artists developed their iconography.





*Kenojuak Ashevak (1927–2013), Untitled, 1966-76. Ashevak's earlier drawings included multiple figures of people and animals spread out across the picture plane compared to the bold single animals that made her famous.*

Today, large and complex drawings by Inuit artists such as Shuvina Ashoona are highly prized, but in the 1950s and 1960s the goal was to create simple images that translated easily into prints that would sell well in the south. Milroy notes that Ashevak's earlier drawings included multiple figures of people and animals spread out across the picture plane compared to the bold single animals that made her famous.

As the drawings circle by in Burtynsky's studio, their colours also stand out as brighter and more varied than what made it into the familiar prints. There are acid yellows and bright oranges produced with markers and even an Ashevak owl marked with a bold blue checkerboard pattern.

The McMichael is planning to hire an Inuit curator to oversee the work with an exhibition scheduled for 2025. All 89,000 images should be available online by the fall for interested viewers from Kitchener and Kamloops, to Kinngait itself, where descendants of the original artists still live. After a 30-year absence, the Dorset archive can finally go home – virtually at least.



*Egevadluq Ragee (1920-1983), Untitled, 1981-1982.*