

# Diamond Jenness artifact collection

## The role of traditional tools in a modern community

By Brendan Griebel

The year 2014 marked the 100th anniversary of the central Canadian Arctic's first significant encounter with the western world. For nearly a millennium, the nomadic hunter-gatherers occupying the Central Arctic — a group who traditionally self-identified according to various regional names, but are now widely known as Copper Inuit or Inuinnait — built their lifeways in exclusion of the western world and its material influences. While there had been several isolated encounters between Inuinnait and early explorers, the habits and daily lives of the respective groups remained mutually exclusive until the early 20th century.

A student peers into the display of Jenness collection tools at the May Hakongak Cultural Centre. © Brendan Griebel/KHS



Jesse Apsaktaun and Ovide Alakannuaq  
measure a sealskin cover onto a kayak frame.  
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Remembrance “is not a process internal to the human mind, but rather a process that occurs in the bodily encounter between people and things.”

— Archaeologist Andrew Jones

In 1914, the Canadian Arctic Expedition bridged that divide. Designed to explore and document the last unmapped region of Canada’s Arctic, expedition members lived and worked alongside Inuit to record their landscapes, languages and lifeways. Through a mixture of coincidence and causality, the expedition would be both the first and last documentation of the group while unshaped by outside technology and culture. Within two years of the expedition’s arrival, many longstanding Inuit traditions were already in the process of rapid change.

Between 1914 and 1916, Canadian Arctic Expedition members acquired an extensive selection of tools, clothing and hunting implements through trade and barter with Inuit encountered during the expedition. This ethnographic collection gains particular importance because it provides an incredibly rare glimpse into traditions and lifeways unaltered by exposure to groups outside the Inuit culture. The artifacts acquired by the expedition — generally referred to as the Diamond Jenness collection — were subsequently used to introduce the western world to the ‘undiscovered’ Copper Inuit, fuelling a complex narrative that simultaneously celebrated traditional lifeways at the margins of the world, and mourned the inevitability of this lifeway’s collapse beneath the weight of western civilization.

In recent years, a shift in political tides has resulted in the flow of these artifacts back to the Arctic. Rather than retaining these objects as symbols of a distant past, or of a culture incompatible with the present, Inuinnait have begun to use the Diamond Jenness collection as the basis for a resurgence of traditional identity and the incorporation of historical tools back into their everyday lives.

## The Canadian Arctic Expedition

In 1913, the Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Stefansson approached the Canadian Government for funding to help support his American expedition into the last uncharted corner of the Central Arctic. In a bid to establish sovereignty over this territory, the Canadian Government agreed to cover the full expense of the expedition if it proceeded as an exclusively Canadian venture with national claim to all newly discovered lands. From 1913-1918, the Canadian Arctic Expedition carried 14 international researchers from multiple disciplines into the northwestern islands of the Arctic to fill the remaining blanks on the map and document their biological, geological and anthropological phenomena.

While the expedition was a journey of many firsts — including the discovery of five new islands — its pioneering studies in the realm of anthropology are of particular interest. The expedition was accompanied by a professionally-trained anthropologist named Diamond Jenness, who would use the opportunity to perform Canada's first systematic and government-funded archaeological excavations, as well as spend two years living with, and learning from Inuinnait encountered during the expedition.

Understanding the pedagogic value of participant observation, Jenness inserted himself into local life as the adopted son of the Inuinnait couple Ikpakhuak and Higilak, learning the Inuinnait language and diligently recording the families' various travels, hunts, and festivities. In addition to social ethnography, Jenness' work also focused on the material lives of Inuinnait.



Mary Avalak holds up a completed sealskin boot modelled on a similar example from the Jenness collection.

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“Old tools are special to look at, but to use them is so different. It makes us feel lighter in our bodies. It wakes us up.”

— Cambridge Bay elder Mary Avalak

Upon completion of his research, Jenness had amassed an astonishing collection of over 2,500 ethnographic specimens, cataloguing a full spectrum of domestic, hunting and spiritual activities. Unlike many previous ethnographic collections to come out of the Arctic, Jenness' supply contained no ivory carvings, models or souvenirs; materials that Inuit typically created for barter in areas where they regularly encountered whalers, traders and missionaries. The collection was one of purely utilitarian objects, and detailed a group completely reliant on the scant resources of their surrounding environment for survival. The materials from the Jenness collection were housed at the Canadian Museum of Civilization (now the Canadian Museum of History), becoming an integral part of the institution's indigenous collection.

Anna Nahagaloak and Mabel Etegiq model a traditional dance suit they created from historical example.

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Mary Kilaodluk prepares a caribou skin for use on a Copper Inuit parka.  
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### The legacy of the Jenness Collection

Rather than celebrating the ingenuity of Inuinnait for their ability to carve a comfortable livelihood from the minimal resources of the Arctic, the Jenness collection began to represent a material memorial to a vanished way of life. Even prior to Jenness leaving the Arctic, a Hudson's Bay Company store and Anglican mission had already set up shop in the midst of the groups with whom he worked.

By 1921, Jenness had written an article titled, "The Cultural Transformation of the Copper Eskimo," describing a wholesale material revolution among the Inuinnait. It detailed the group's total abandonment of their namesake locally sourced copper in favour of imported iron, as well as the replacement of traditional hunting tools with rifles, and soapstone lamps with primus stoves. This sudden thirst for western goods was due at least in part to the access Inuinnait gained to new materials through commodity trading with the expedition. By the time of Jenness' 1921 article, he estimated that roughly half the Inuinnait population had

abandoned traditional migration and hunting patterns to engage in the trapping of furs that could be exchanged for western goods at trading posts.

This move from traditional lifestyle deepened over the next 50 years with the further dislocation of Inuit from traditional lifeways through population settlement, wage labour employment and residential schooling. The trend has slowed with the formation of the Nunavut territory and associated attempts to recover and restore traditional knowledge and ways of life. The current challenge remains one of accessing traditional Inuit knowledge to integrate back into everyday life. In 2008, the Kitikmeot Heritage Society sought the Diamond Jenness collection as a pathway towards this goal.

### Re-building material knowledge

With the construction of the Kitikmeot Heritage Society's Cambridge Bay headquarters — the May Hakongak Cultural Centre — in 2002, a select portion of the Diamond Jenness collection was returned to the Centre for exhibit purposes. As is often the case with loaned museum artifacts, the objects were placed behind glass. While the collections provided community members with visual access to historical items, few people seemed to identify with the artifacts beyond recognizing them as tools their ancestors had made.

Around 2008, the Kitikmeot Heritage Society began working closely with local elders to find ways of better integrating the collection. The Diamond Jenness collection was used as a reference source to gauge what knowledge was missing in the community. As an almost complete material inventory of traditional Inuinnait lifestyle, the collection quite literally provided us with the tools to begin filling these gaps.

Over the last seven years, we have been gradually working towards the re-building of a parallel Diamond Jenness collection made from contemporarily manufactured items capable of everyday use. To date, we have made several dozen artifacts from



Jesse Apsaktaun using a homemade bow-drill.  
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the Diamond Jenness collection, including a kayak, sealskin boots, hunting tools and various types of clothing.

Participants in these projects insist that the re-building of artifacts is not about creating replicas. Using sources including photographs, illustrations and detailed accounts from Jenness' original field notes, the new artifacts gradually take shape through a combination of ethnographic detail, contemporary cultural knowledge, and reasoning as to what ancestors would have most likely done. In rebuilding the artifacts, it is important for participants that traditional construction materials such as hides, pigment and antler be used. There is, however, no sense of conflict in using modern tools (sewing machines, and power tools) to expedite the construction process. These modern additions are irrelevant to the fact that traditional materials are being constructed in a traditional manner.

In 2010, the Kitikmeot Heritage Society began to supplant its museum's holdings of original Diamond Jenness material with the community's recreated items. The new artifacts carry a more dynamic presence than the original items; they are able to move in and out of the cases as needed, and are accompanied by photos and texts that document both their origins and the story of their modern revival. One might argue that the items created during our projects have surpassed the original Diamond Jenness collection's ability to represent who Inuinait are and want to be.

The archaeologist Andrew Jones once noted that remembrance "is not a process internal to the human mind, but rather a process that occurs in the bodily encounter between people and things." As explained in similar words by Cambridge Bay elder Mary Avalak, "old tools are special to look at, but to use them is so different. It makes us feel lighter in our bodies. It wakes us up." This notion of 'waking a population up' to the role of traditional tools in a modern community is what ultimately drives the Kitikmeot Heritage Society's technology revitalization program. The historical dimensions of the recreated Diamond Jenness artifacts have less to do with age, their physical accuracy, or even their origins than their potential for communicating knowledge about the past and why this knowledge can never again be forgotten. [ASB](#)

The Kitikmeot Heritage Society is a non-profit organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Inuinait culture, heritage and language. They operate from the May Hakongak Cultural Centre located in Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.