PITSEOLAK ASHOONA
1904-1983

Pitseolak was the mother of several Cape Dorset artists, the Ashoonas: Ottochie, Komwartok, Kaka and Kiawak; and Napatchie Pootoogook.

“One of Canada’s best known artists, the Inuit graphic artist known simply as Pitseolak was born on Nottingham Island in Hudson’s Bay. She lived the last twenty-five years of her life in a settlement of Cape Dorset where she became one of the most famous and certainly the most prolific Inuit graphic artist. Pitseolak produced more than 7,000 original drawings in her twenty-four year artistic career.

The subject matter of Pitseolak’s prints and drawings is generally the traditional way of life of the Inuit before the coming of the Whites. Scenes of camp life, fording a river with dogs, or sewing a skin tent remind both the artist and viewer of what life was like for previous generations before the appearance of airplanes, snowmobiles, and satellite dishes. Pitseolak’s narrative drawings serve as a means of recapturing these old ways and making them vivid for younger generations of Inuit.

Janet Catherine Berlo

Pitseolak was born in 1904 on Nottingham Island in the Hudson Straights, while her family was en route from Sugluk (now Salluit) on the north coast of Arctic Quebec to the south coast of Baffin Island. She spent her childhood in several camps on the south Baffin coast. As a young woman she married Ashoona and she bore 17 children, many of whom died in their infancy. Ashoona died during an epidemic in the Nettling Lake area he was still in his prime, leaving Pitseolak to raise their young family on her own. She settled permanently in Cape Dorset in the early 1960’s.

Pitseolak was among the first in Cape Dorset to begin drawing, and the most prolific. She made close to 9,000 drawings during her 20 years in Cape Dorset. Her prints have appeared in every annual print collection since her work was first published in 1960. Her best and most authentic drawings were of “the old Eskimo ways”, a way of life deeply embedded in her memory.

Pitseolak was been awarded several honours over the years, and her work has been the subject of several projects. In 1971 the National Film Board produced a film based on her book, “Pitseolak: Pictures out of my life”. In 1974 she was elected a member of the Royal Canadian Academy and she received the Order of Canada in 1977.

Pitseolak died in 1983 and is buried behind the Anglican Church in Cape Dorset. She fulfilled her promise to work on her drawings and prints until she was no longer able. Her vast legacy of original work now resides on long term loan at the McMichael Canadian Art Collection where it is being photographed, documented and exhibited.*