ART EXHIBITION REVIEW

Lost Visions, Forgotten Dreams: Life and Art of an Ancient Arctic People:

Picture an elderly man, seated in his cold stone dwelling. The dark season has descended and envelops him in its howling winter winds. He can only dream of hunting. To pass time, he picks up a small piece of antler and chisels it, singing in the language of the spirits. Images from his song are conjured up and soon take shape in his carvings.

Welcome to the remarkable exhibition called Lost Visions, Forgotten Dreams: Life and Art of an Ancient Arctic People. This display of over 600 tiny artifacts at the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Hull, Quebec, gives us insight into the world view of the Paleo-Eskimo or "Tuniit" people.

The items shown represent the culmination of over 20 years work in the Arctic by Robert McGhee and partner Patricia Sutherland, who are both archaeologists at the Museum. All items are described in English, French and Inuktitut. But because of the number of artifacts presented, limited space is available for explanations regarding displays. The Exhibit Guide therefore is essential.

Upon entering the circular exhibit, one is treated to the sounds of the Arctic, re-created by Ottawa musician, Ian Tamblyn. The outer rim of the circle details cultural and historical facts. These are presented in a variety of formats. One stunning presentation involves telephones connected to video screens which enable one to hear Inuit Elders give oral narratives of the last days of the Tuniit, while viewing images of Arctic flora and fauna. It is obvious from these accounts that the Tuniit had a significant impact on the lives of the Inuit of today.

The inner space of the exhibit is divided into four rooms, each dedicated to a different aspect of the art and beliefs of the Tuniit people. Throughout, the connection between human life and animal life is apparent. Miniature harpoon heads, as well as replicas of other weapons are presented in mass quantity, an overwhelming number of which depict flying bears and falcons.
Their markings suggest that these represent animal spirits believed to aid in hunting.

Although these are exquisitely carved and obviously important to the PaleoEskimo people, it is rather what is absent that makes this display so unusual. There is not one carving or depiction of a seal or walrus throughout the entire exhibit, although it is obvious that these coastal dwellers depended on them for survival. One explanation alluded to orally in the Inuit presentation, is that their own people removed these from the Tuniit sites, centuries before they were excavated by Whites, perhaps having retained a belief in the powers vested in these amulets.

Overall, the exhibit is a marvelously structured blend of ancient historical artifacts and modem technology. We may never know how or why the Tuniit disappeared but the remnants they have left, which are so beautifully displayed, provide a remarkable record of their 3000 year occupation in one of the harshest environments of the world.

This exhibit will go on tour beginning in 1998. It will open in Copenhagen in February, followed by a stop in Moscow during the summer. Dates for openings in other locations have not been finalized at this time.

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