Legends and stories play an integral role in the oral traditions of the Inuit people. The Cape Dorset 2009 portfolio contains numerous depictions of indigenous Canadian legends. While it is difficult to determine which stories lie behind many of the prints, certain examples appear to represent specific traditional narratives. These examples include *Owl on Sealskin*, *Lumaaq (Legend of the Blind Boy)*, *Sedna’s Wonder*, and *Owl Paints the Raven*. Connecting these four prints to the legends which give them shape allows the viewer to better understand the role of oral traditions in Inuit society.

The belief systems of the Inuit are a common subject matter in their art. Inuit society and culture fosters a tight connection with the environment in which they live and the animals with which they share the land. As John MacDonald writes, Inuit legends often provide explanations for realities within nature, or how something in nature came to be.¹ *Owl Paints the Raven*, by Ningeokuluk Teevee, illustrates the tale of how the plumage of both Owl and Raven came to be colored. The story begins with two birds, Owl and Raven, who have stark white plumage. Raven becomes bored with his plain coloring and asks Owl if she is bored with being white as well. Owl responds that she is also unsatisfied by her coloring. Raven proposes that the birds paint

each other’s plumage so that they are no longer as white as the snow around them, and Owl agrees. Raven paints Owl first, drawing gray circles of various sizes all over his friend’s feathers. When he is finished, Raven is overcome by what a good job he has done and steps back so that Owl may look at herself. Turning his head to the sun and staying as still as possible, Raven then waits while Owl paints him. Once Owl has finished, she begins to admire her work. However, when she looks back at herself she realizes that Raven now looks more beautiful than she does. Owl accordingly goes over to the lamp from which Raven had taken the burnt-fat and pours the remnants over Raven. Owl then flies away; Raven shrieks after her, “Oh, you sharp-clawed Owl, oh, you keen-eyed Owl, what have you done? You have made me blacker than soot, blacker than night!” From that day on every raven has been black. The narrative behind the print *Owl Paints the Raven* speaks to the idea of cohabitation and conflict within the animal world. By portraying the animal world as a functional community in which animals of different species interact, this Inuit story reflects aspects of the natural world and of human nature.

The print *Owl on Sealskin* by Kananginak Pootoogook is a further example of the mingling of human and animal worlds. The owl in the center of Kananginak’s print displays an almost human facial expression, however one might read it. Inuit artists’ personification of animals may be an expression of the respect that their culture traditionally gives to animals.

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and animal spirits.\textsuperscript{3} The owl at the center of this print also has the traditional flat face and shortened beak of a short-eared owl, for which the Inuit legend is as follows. A young girl was magically transformed into a short bird with a long, majestic beak. The girl was so frightened to be a bird that as she flapped her wings frantically she forgot to look where she was going, flew straight into a wall, and flattened her face and beak.\textsuperscript{4} This story could explain the curious facial expression of the owl in Kananginak’s print, but it also serves a similar purpose to the story of how Owl and Raven received their coloring. It explains how something in nature came to be; it is a further interpretation of the surrounding natural environment.

When examining oral traditions of any culture, the idea of translation needs to be taken into account. Legends are translated in various ways. In Inuit culture the main options of translation are from Inuktitut to English, from the spoken word into text, and from text to illustration. The prints selected for the 2009 Cape Dorset portfolio represent this last form of translation. Additionally, with each translation comes the possibility of the story being altered. An oral tradition, rather than a written one, can lead to different versions of the same story existing within separate geographic locations. The story of Sedna, illustrated in the print \textit{Sedna’s Wonder} by Ningeokuluk, is one example of a

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\textsuperscript{3} Webpage, “Indian and Northern Affairs Canada,” “Discover Inuit Art,” http://www.ainc-inac.gc.ca/ach/hr/ks/er/pubs/disc-eng.asp .

pluralistic oral tradition. One version of the tale begins with a young Inuit woman who was happy living with her parents. She rejected many offers of marriage until a man who said he would provide all she needed in life proposed marriage. To him she said yes. Unfortunately, Sedna was tricked. After taking her to his home on an island, the man divulged that he was in fact a bird masquerading as a man. Sedna was wildly unhappy, and when her father came to visit her, he killed the bird-man and brought his daughter home. The bird-man’s flying friends discovered what Sedna and her father had done, and in punishment they beat their wings as hard as they could to create a storm above the humans’ kayak. Because he was afraid the kayak would capsize, Sedna’s father tossed his daughter into the ocean. She tried to hold onto the edge of the kayak so she wouldn’t sink, but her father pounded on her fingers, chopping them off, so that she would release her grip on the boat. Sedna drowned in the water, and became a very powerful water spirit in the hierarchy of the Inuit gods.\(^5\) An alternate version of the Sedna legend leaves out the account of the bird-man’s murder and the storm brought on by the bird-man’s flying friends.

When thinking about the translation of a legend from oral into any other form, the question of how the legend is affected is of concern. Legends and narratives which originate in oral traditions are not meant to be read: they are meant to be told and performed. Arnold Krupat writes, “Inuit culture has a rich tradition of tales and sung poems,”\(^6\) thus proving that the legends are in their element when they are told and not


read. However, a print is another medium for telling the legend: it leaves the narrative up to the interpretation of the viewer, rather than having the plot laid out in black and white. The print Lumaaq, also by Ningeokuluk, shows one episode of the story of Lumaaq, a young boy who was born blind. He lived with his sister and stepmother, who were very evil. The stepmother made him hunt for her, but she would often tell him he had missed his kills when in reality she was keeping all of the food for herself. One day a loon asked what was wrong with his eyes, and when Lumaaq told him, a number of loons took hold of the boy and pulled him under the surface of a lake, letting the water wash out his eyes. Lumaaq could finally see; however, he didn’t share this with his family, because he wished to get revenge on his stepmother. One day they went whaling, and he tricked her into tying the rope of the harpoon around her waist, right before he threw the harpoon into a large whale she had not seen. She was pulled into the ocean by the whale and became the first narwhal.\(^7\)

Oral traditions are fragile, frequently changing and easily lost over time. Because Inuit oral and performative traditions have such importance within Inuit culture, stories such as Owl Paints the Raven, Owl on Sealskin, Sedna’s Wonder, and Lumaaq are repeatedly told, in many variations. In a sense, the Inuit have preserved aspects of these stories by interpreting them through visual media. By adapting these age-old legends into the medium of printmaking, the artists of Cape Dorset have simultaneously created new interpretations of traditional culture and documented these stories for posterity.

Although each image differs in its “translation,” the heart of each story remains for the benefit of the next generation.

As the world outside of northern Canada continues to evolve and modernize at an ever increasing rate, the legends, narratives, and oral traditions of the Inuit do not remain in a vacuum. As John MacDonald notes, “They should be seen as the residues of complex patterns of belief and knowing which defined for generations the interrelationship between mankind and the universe.” The prints of the 2009 Cape Dorset portfolio tell a greater story than just the legends they appear to be based upon. They speak of Inuit society as a whole, and give an outsider a small glimpse into this culture.

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8 MacDonald, p. 17.