

2009 Beringia Days Presentation James Kivetoruk Moses, Inupiaq Folk Artist

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On August 14th, 1953 a small plane returning to Shishmaref from a fishing trip in Bristol Bay crash-landed upside down on Ear Mountain, 46 miles north of Teller on the Seward Peninsula.¹ A passenger, James Kivetoruk Moses suffered a badly broken leg and was henceforth unable to maintain his subsistence-hunting career. During recuperation from his knee injury, Moses returned to a childhood interest in drawing and began a successful new life as a professional artist.

Moses (ca. 1903-1982) was born near Cape Espenberg on the northern tip of the Seward Peninsula. His mother died giving birth to him and his father died soon thereafter as well. He was raised by an uncle with a first name of Moses. His early years were in the Espenberg area but he lived as well in Deering and Shishmaref as an adult. He worked as a hunter, trapper, trader and reindeer herder. His life as an artist in Nome began at the relatively late age of 50.

Moses quickly became known for his works on paper that were a painting-like synthesis of mixed media techniques: colored pencil, ink and watercolor. He had doubtless observed his brother-in-law, George Ahgupuk as precedent. Ahgupuk of Shishmaref was nearly ten years younger and was already well established as Alaska's most notable Eskimo graphic artist.

It wasn't long after the accident that Moses' first drawings were being sold. His wife Bessie carried about a stack of the pictures in a black briefcase and would solicit door to door at the hotels in Nome.² These earliest works were unsigned or signed James Moses, the name everyone knew him by socially, but soon the artist started using his Inupiaq name, Kivetoruk as signature, to enhance sales to tourists and other visitors.

Moses' early works were formatted much like Ahgupuk's small horizontal rectangles, five or six inches high. He also composed these first images in a manner similar to that of his brother-in-law; broad flat landscape vistas with figures depicted small in size relative to the overall space. They were likewise done in black and white media such as pencil or ink though he early on begins to make mainly color pictures, a practice that sets him apart from his contemporaries.

Even in these earliest works, a temperament emerges in contrast to his fellow Alaskan Native artists. There is an attention to visual detail and an enthusiasm for narrative that soon become hallmarks of his style. The Blazo can in an early work *Woman Ice Fishing* (ca.1954) is a typical anecdotal point of interest. The ubiquitous Blazo can for white gas was an integral part of village life in the 1950's and 60's. The upside down presence here demonstrates a sense of humor and a feel for documentary detail. Naturally it is upside down because the top was cut open.

Some Moses images might be difficult to interpret accurately but for a handwritten account that accompanied the work at the time of sale. Moses' wife Bessie,

¹ Mary Jane Anuqsraaq Melovidov, "James Kivetoruk Moses," *Eskimo Drawings*, Suzi Jones ed., Anchorage Museum of History and Art, 2003, 123.

² Interview with Nancy Baker of Fairbanks, AK, pilot and traveling salesperson who traveled frequently to Nome in the early 1950's.

who was more fluent in English, would write these stories down for the client usually for an extra fee of five dollars. She jokes in an interview about skimming some profit off the top for these sales³. The written accounts vary from quite extensive to perfunctory but their frequency shows Moses was generally fond of inscribing his images and would do so for gifts as well as sold pieces. This inscription accompanied a polar bear picture that was a gift or commission.

Moses understood the marketplace and capitalized on it, selling his pictures for about one to five hundred dollars while his contemporaries were pricing theirs less than 20 dollars. In his later years after becoming well known he could not keep up with the demand. He protested gaining additional clients.⁴ At the present time Moses' work still commands 10 times the prices of the other Native artists. A large picture typically sells for \$5,000 to \$12,000.

The narrative specificity of his imagery plays out into a wide range of subjects. When depicting typical Eskimo lifestyle activities such as hunting, he includes autobiographical information. Here he depicts an hunting story concerning his capture of two huge problem wolves. His subjects include: portraits and groups of individuals, scenes of daily life especially hunting and travel, wildlife, with and without human presence, village celebrations with dancing, historical accounts, and folkloric stories of shamans and mythology. His artist compatriots depicted scenes from Eskimo life but specific places or individuals are rarely shown. Or if they intend such specificity their skills are not up to the task so their figures and places remain anonymous while Moses bears down on the unique and individual.

Moses embellishes his pictures with as much information as his considerable skills allow. He reaches for an illusionistic realism through naturalistic color and meticulously rendered texture. He takes pains to show particular furs and clothing designs. We can see that the shaman's pants are sealskin and a particular type of seal at that. The lighter part at the back of the legs tells us it was a smaller seal and the many sets of concentric rings dotting the leg fronts indicate a ring seal. The Chief's New Son-In-Law shows grey wolf ruffs for the men and a brown to black shaded wolverine ruff for the woman. Parkas shown in the portraits are subjects unto themselves; they are fancy dress outfits demonstrating position and status in the social order as well as which side of the Bering Straits the wearer dwells. Moses had nostalgia for the times when the Siberian Natives were allowed to visit the Alaskan side. He frequently indicates costumes from the Russian side with the black and white mottled fur of the domestic reindeer bred for their exotic coats. He also did some pictures depicting a trading dispute with Russian visitors.

There is a remarkable attention to the mechanical sense of things as well as subtle observations of nature. The interiors have not only convincing wood grain in the boards but each board has its own overall light or dark character. The drumming and dancing figures' palms are lighter than the tan and weathered backs of their hands. And the horizontal log with remnants of branches on the wall tapers naturalistically from one end to the other.

³ Yvonne Mozee, "Conversation with Kivatoruk Moses," *Alaska Journal* 8, no. 2, 109.

⁴ Yvonne Mozee, 109.

Moses gives a very telling response to a question in his only published interview with Yvonne Mozee⁵ The interviewer asks:

People like your drawings. Why do you think that is?

James: (Very long pause) Even customers, they like to see pictures. I'm not good artist but I have more experience—seal, oogruk, walrus reindeer, hunting, trapping. I been many hunting twenty years over, up in Espenberg. That's all. More experience. You know Beltz School (in Nome). Young people try to be artists. They come up good artists, very good drawing because they were school. But no experience. Don't know nothing living. That's all.

Moses' thoughtful and perceptive response here shows awareness of the strengths to be found in his work. In spite of any formal or technical artistic shortcomings, his life experience of culture, history and nature itself, enable him to make powerful statements that compensate for schooling. His myriad pen markings take on the qualities of naturalistic fur. He integrates the pen and ink with color media very successfully often using black as a color rather than simply decorative outline. The seawater in his pictures has the characteristic blue black seen often off the Seward Peninsula in windy weather. The landscape and sky in his pictures are keenly observed and laid down in a naturalistic manner. All his outdoor pictures establish a transition from light yellow at the horizon to an increasingly dark blue at the top of the picture as is routinely seen in the Arctic. He laces together blues and reds into the purple shadows of the clouds. One imagines Moses spending many the contemplative moment studying the land, sea and sky.

Like many other artists, both trained and untrained, Moses made multiple versions of popular images. Images that sold well were repeated as demand warranted. However upon comparing these like images, one sees considerable variation in terms of composition and narrative. While it is difficult to address an exact evolution from image to image because the pictures are not usually dated and provenance not well documented, one can occasionally see evidence of progression or at least an interest in experimental variation. Later versions of the same story demonstrate enhanced pictorial sophistication. A doubtless earlier version of the swimming shaman lacks the concentric ripples and sunset reflection of a later, more confident version. The Eskimo Mermaid pictures usually show the mermaid as sitting rather erect and square on the edge of the ice with her legs in the water. However there also exists at least one version with the mermaid striking quite a cheesecake pose reflecting Moses' sense of humor and awareness of popular culture imagery.

Edmund Carpenter has stated that the best among the contemporary Native American artists have gone over to a western tradition, made it their own and brought it back to their own culture.⁶ Moses falls into this category in several regards. He had an intuitive understanding of the need to excel at his craft. In spite of a lack of training he labored to accomplish pictorial feats of substantial achievement. He developed an uncanny deftness with simple drawing materials and pushed the medium to approach a

⁵ Yvonne Mozee, 109.

⁶ Carol Ann (Bunny) McBride, An Interview with Edmund Carpenter, <http://faculty.virginia.edu/phantom/mcbride.html>

fully painted look. He improved his skills steadily over the period of his activity. Though self-taught, he taught himself well. Furthermore, Moses selected subjects for his work that while specific and often personal in narrative, resonate widely throughout the culture. The pictures form a telling documentation of Inupiat life and values as seen from the rearview perspective of a man whose living conditions changed so much over his lifetime. There is not only nostalgia for an earlier time but also nostalgia for his youth.

Glenn Simpson, a professor emeritus at University of Alaska Fairbanks and a Tsimshian Native American, visited Moses a number of times in Nome. He paid a final visit at near the end of Moses' life. Moses, having suffered multiple strokes was much impaired and always a small man now was quite shrunken. He had still managed to do one last picture. It was in ballpoint pen, which Glenn speculates was probably for ease of manipulation. It was a portrait of himself as a strong robust young man. He was not interested in selling it but planned to leave it to his family.