



Donald B. MacMillan, *Rosaliea Freida (l) and Miriam Dressed for a Dog Team Trip*, Anaktalak Bay, Labrador, spring 1928. Gift of Donald and Miriam MacMillan.



**The Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum and Arctic Studies Center**

9500 College Station, Brunswick, Maine 04011

Museum Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 10:00 a.m.-5:00 p.m. • Sunday 2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m.  
Closed on Mondays and national holidays • 207-725-3416 • bowdoin.edu/arctic-museum

**Bowdoin**

Cover: Green Family, *Doll's Fancy Boots*, Nain, Labrador, ca. 1950. Sealskin, wool, cotton floss. Gift of Elizabeth Green Solis; Inuit, *Women's Kamiks* [detail], West Greenland, 20th century. Dyed sealskin, cotton. Gift of May Fogg.

# THREADS OF CHANGE: *Clothing and Identity in the North*



## THREADS OF CHANGE: *Clothing and Identity in the North*

**W**earing appropriate clothing is essential in the Arctic, where staying warm and dry is a matter of life and death. For thousands of years, northern women stitched all the garments their families needed. Seamstresses developed distinctive local and regional styles, linking their clothing to both personal and community identity. Women today no longer sew everything their family wears, but they continue to find new ways to incorporate traditional designs into everyday attire.

### Traditional Life

In the centuries before 1900 women made clothing that reflected generations of accumulated knowledge and experience, combining furs and skins of different properties and appearances to make garments that were both beautiful and functional.

A woman in the Aleutian Islands made this seal intestine parka. Preparing and sewing gutskin was a lot of work, but the result was important: a beautiful, lightweight, and waterproof garment.

An Inuit woman from Baffin Island stitched this beautiful parka for her daughter. Every part of the parka was carefully thought out, from the size – to fit a growing child – to the number and color of the bands at the hem, cuff, and hood.



Donald B. MacMillan, *Eskimo Girl*, Baffin Island, 1929. Gift of Donald and Miriam MacMillan.



Aleut, *Gutskin Parka*, Bering Sea region, ca. 1865.  
Seal gut, sinew, feathers, and silk cord.  
Gift of Mr. Rawson L. Wood.



Inuit, *Child's Sealskin Parka*, Baffin Island, ca. 1929. Sealskin.  
Gift of Donald and Miriam MacMillan.





Pitloosie Saila and Pitseolak Niviaqsi, *Changing Traditions*, Cape Dorset, 1991. Lithograph, 34/50. Museum purchase.

## Changing Traditions

By 1900, virtually all northern groups had direct access to a trading post. Families traded valuable furs for imported goods ranging from tea to ammunition. They increasingly sought cloth, as women began incorporating it into traditional clothing, as well as adopting some Western styles of dress.

Inuit artist Pitloosie Saila reflects on changing traditions with this drawing of her great-grandmother, grandmother, and mother. Placing the women side-by-side, Pitloosie documents the ways in which women's clothing changed, and the ways certain styles endured, from the late nineteenth through the mid-twentieth centuries.



Labrador Inuit, *Bead-trimmed Parka*, Labrador, ca. 1941. Wool, fur, glass, and bone. Donated by Eugene Springman.

This parka, made in Labrador in 1941, is a fancy dress version of the wool duffle parkas worn by both men and women in Labrador in the twentieth century. The hand-made bone dangles around the hem and colorful glass beads on the hood indicate it was made for a woman. The black and red bands at the hem and cuffs echo the contrasting bands of sealskin sewn into fur parkas across the Arctic.

## The Contemporary Arctic

Today climate change, pollution from distant industries, and global social and economic trends all impact people in even the most remote northern communities. By the 1980s animal rights organizations protesting the seal hunt in eastern Canada had effectively destroyed the global market for sealskins, eliminating a vital source of cash income for northern families. Seamstresses and designers continue to create clothing using traditional and modern materials and styles, seeing it as an important way to express their identity in the modern world.

Yup'ik hunter and designer Peter Kawagaelg Williams chooses to make modern fashions using furs from animals he has hunted. He processes and sews the furs himself, as a strategy to revive the market for ethically and sustainably hunted furs. Even so, his fashions cannot readily be sold outside the United States due to complex national and international restrictions on the sale of products made from marine mammals.

Inuit designer Becky Qilavvaq works to ensure that young people in her community stay connected to their roots, while also embracing the future. The printed design on this modern and stylish dress that she designed evokes the U-shaped hem of a traditional woman's parka. The dress gives the Inuit wearer an opportunity to express her modernity while acknowledging her traditions.



Peter Kawagaelg Williams, *Pencil Skirt*, Sitka, Alaska, 2015. Sealskin and cotton. Museum purchase, Estate of May P. Fogg Fund.

Becky Qilavvaq, *Amaut Flare Dress*, Iqaluit and Montreal, 2016. Polyester. Museum purchase.