The Inuvialuit sculptor Abraham Anghik Ruben was born on November 26, 1951, in the hamlet of Paulatuk, located in the great expanse of the Canadian Western Arctic; an area where, by then, diamond and mineral exploration had replaced the heydays of the fur trade and commercial whaling.

My ancestors were Bering-Sea Alaskan and Inuvialuit natives who followed the American whalers. They were employed as labourers, hunters and seamstresses. In their pursuit of the Bowhead and Beluga whale, the whalers valued my ancestors for their knowledge of the land and the surrounding waters of the Beaufort Sea and Amundsen Gulf regions.

With the demise of the commercial whaling era, my great-grandparents, the Alaskan shamans Apakark and Kagun, and the families of Ruben Anghik and Billy Thrasher, settled in the Paulatuk area.

Fig.2

Abraham's early years were spent in the many small camps that were scattered along the coast, where game and trapping was plentiful. These encampments consisted sometimes of one large family or a group of ten families that would include extended family members. As in the past, the nomadic communities subsisted on hunting for caribou, moose, muskox, game birds, waterfowl, and sea mammals. At that time Abraham's world consisted of Paulatuk, Letty Harbour, Cape Parry, Tuktoyaktuk and Akalvik in the delta. Letty Harbour was fifty miles away and Cape Parry, seventy miles.

The Inuit of this area would gather at key times of the year to celebrate Easter, Christmas, etc. These events would also coincide with tradition gathering times, family visits, and renewal of old friendships. Travelers were always welcomed. Abraham's early childhood education and rearing was done by his parents, older siblings, aunts, uncles and grandparents. As children, Abraham and his siblings were never scolded, and were allowed to experience their childhood in a warm and loving environment. As a result these events helped Abraham understand that by giving children this unconditional love and good upbringing they would grow into healthy, robust and caring individuals. It is also the Inuit belief that children were the reincarnated elders who had passed on, be it the father, the mother or loved ones. So children were treated with love and reverence.

Fig.3

Abraham's father, Billy Esoktak Ruben – Esoktak being an Inuktituk name-, of Yupik and Irish-American ancestry, was a great Inuvialuktun hunter and trapper. Through these efforts he was able to support his family by selling and trading goods at the trading post in Paulatuk. The Roman Catholic Missions and the Hudson's Bay Company operated the trading posts at Letty Harbour and Cape Parry. These trading posts were important because they supplied fuel and implements that had become necessary for Inuit survival. These supplies permitted the Inuit to prolong their hunting and fishing expeditions.

Our daily survival was ever in the mind of my parents. Great care was taken in preparing and stockpiling food caches and firewood. Our seasonal travel routes were some hundreds of miles in distance, and we travelled by dog team in the winter and by boat and on foot in summer.

Abraham has many fond memories of his parents and past events that helped shape his way of thinking that is reflected through the creation of his sculptures. One such memory is of his mother Bertha asking his father for fresh snow geese; a request that startled his father who quickly replied that it was not the season. With much insistence from Bertha, Billy decided to take the family on a picnic and hunting trip. Abraham and three other siblings were asked to accompany them on this trip. His father instructed Abraham's brother Joe to pack his shotgun and only one shell, to everyone's surprise.

Fig.4

The family embarked on its expedition by boat and once they reached their destination, the parents were let off at the beach. The children stayed in the boat at approximately half a mile offshore, while the parents walked up the nearby hill. His brother Joe expressed some concern about their father's state of mind, hinting that maybe he was becoming senile: goose hunting at that time of the year! But the children carried out his instructions, and could hear his voice over the sound of the water calling for snow geese. After a while the sound of a lone snow goose was heard coming from the south. The goose made a wide, sweeping arc from south to east and then west. They heard a single shot and the bird fell within a few feet from his parents. The children were mesmerized, and at the settlement the story quickly went around. When Billy was asked how he got the goose, his response was: "I asked and nature provided."

My childhood memories are filled with images of life on the land as our family lived and breathed with the change of the seasons and the migratory patterns of land and sea creatures. As nomadic people we were dependant on the animals we hunted for our sustenance, clothing and our heat.

Being an Inuk and a great hunter and trapper, he also believed that a good survival technique was to have a sense of humour and companionship. Abraham recounts a story of how his father trained his three cousins to become hunters and trappers in order to survive the harsh life out in the bush. After several months of tough lessons he felt that they had earned the right to call themselves hunters. And so one night, the graduated students were asked to follow the teacher on an expedition to ascertain the origin of a noise heard at a distance. Billy had his nephews crawl on their belly and follow him to where the noise was coming from. But on their arrival at the spot, tense and apprehensive that something was lurking in the dark, his father turned around and pointed at the sky: "Isn't it beautiful!" he says to the graduated students, as the moon was rising. His cousins broke out in laughter.

Abraham's mother, Bertha Thrasher, was a seamstress and a skilled storyteller. She was of Yupik and Portuguese-African ancestry, and gave birth to sixteen children, of which fifteen survived -nine boys and six girls-. An impressive survival rate for a remote hunting community! Bertha raised the children with Christian ideas, but also passed on Inuit beliefs and traditions. Both of Abraham's parents were instrumental in keeping these beliefs an integral part of their children's upbringing. Most families in the Paulatuk area were baptized into the Christian faith. They were still living in the old traditions, but at the same time were making extensive use of western ma-

terials, culture and implements. Abraham's parents felt it was very important to keep the Inuit's beliefs alive based on the interaction between humans and nature. They were vital for survival and preservation of their nomadic way of life. Inuit beliefs and traditions were present in their children's daily existence.

Fig.5

Abraham's parents were responsible for his education, and he was taught about the land and its rhythms, the birds, and the animals, as well as their oral tradition of myths and legends. At the age of twelve, boys were taught the skills needed for hunting and trapping. The young girls took on their training from their mothers and aunts on how to prepare food, tan hides and sew clothing. Much of Abraham's learning came from watching and imitating the activities of the elders or older siblings. Childhood games were designed to develop skills, strength, and survival for life in the North. This is how a nomadic community, in less than one generation, could produce an astounding number of accomplished sculptors.

In the early years our people were exposed to commercial Arctic Whaling in the 1890's, the R.C.M.P., the Christian Missionaries, and the Hudson's Bay Company. In the 1950's it was with the people working in the construction of the DEW line, (Distant Early Warning, U.S. and Canada). However, as nomadic people we still held on to our old beliefs. We were using many western tools and implements and many would speak and read English and participate in western festivals and assimilate them into Inuit daily life. The two cultural streams seemed to go hand in hand.

Abraham has also indicated that at an early age he noticed that some Inuit had become fully adapted to Western style of dress, speech and mannerisms. Some of these Inuit seemed to think that they were better than other members of their community for having left their old ways.

When asked if other artists influenced him while he was growing up, Abraham tells us that the Western Arctic was not an area of intense artistic activity. In the 1950's people in the area were still living in the traditional way of hunting and trapping, and marginal participation in the new construction that was coming into the Western Arctic. These activities were enough to sustain their lifestyle. It is for these reasons that carving and printmaking were not pursued as means to supplement their income. However some individuals did leave their settlements and went to Holman Island to learn printmaking. Holman Island became world renowned for its print shop and store. It was at Holman Island that the first printmaking studio was started in 1960 by Father Tardy of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate OMI, (RC). Other attempts were made at Aklavik and Tuktoyaktuk but the only thing that emerged from these places were traditional local crafts and clothing for local use, and later on for tourists.

There are only two individuals that stand out in Tuktoyaktuk: Jacobson, and an Inuit whale bone carver, who made sculptures from whalebone and caribou antler, telling stories of myths and legends. He was a prolific sculptor.

Abraham's father Esoktak (William Ruben) made small carvings of bears in antler, in the 1960's, but did not find any satisfaction in this occupation. His

His attempts were short-lived. He started carving again in the 1980's. He became known for his work in musk-ox horn and miniature work in bone and ivory.

Fig.6

Abraham's experiences of these early years have left an indelible mark in his psyche and are eloquently expressed in this insightful recollection.

My earliest memory as a child was the day I became fully conscious of being alive. It happened on the beginning of my second spring. I had walked away from our tent and had gone to a nearby pond fed by a small spring. I had crouched down on my knees and looked into the pond. As I stared into the pond, the whole area within my sight of vision seemed to become crystal clear and bright with light and colour. The sound of spring birds also came into focus. It seemed that a heavy shroud of fog had been lifted from me. I became at that point aware of being alive. This memory was to be forever etched on my conscious being. Throughout my childhood I had similar experiences and always the most vivid of dreams, dreams of being in other worldly places and meeting people and being in the dream world.

These childhood memories include following his father walking into his grandfather's tent and sitting in and listening to his grandfather, (Ruben Angnik) give his last talk to his many sons. Along with this, Abraham has many fond memories of his personal interaction with his siblings and cousins and the practice of sharing and watching out for one another.

The powerful and suggestive forces of nature, as expressed by that unique and incomparable Arctic landscape, will remain forever engraved in Abraham's young mind. The emotions evoked by nature combined with the oral tradition of Inuit culture, a culture dependant on the animals and on the shaman as a guardian of the nomadic community, must have been powerful. It was like a shamanic vision, when Ruben discovered, during his stay at the University of Alaska, his Alaskan ancestral roots. Indeed his great-grandparents Apakark and Kagun (renowned Alaskan shaman) were keepers of the ancient shamanic tradition.

I come from a long line of individuals who have chosen the pursuit of life as shamans. Shamans are keepers of our stories and ancient beliefs. This spiritual understanding and endeavour was the basis of my early childhood. My parents sought to pass on the knowledge that they had received from their ancestors to their children.

Fig.7

My mother was given initiations at an early age, and they became an integral part of her entire life. She was able to integrate the best of her shamanic upbringing with the best that Christianity had to offer to her life and circumstances. My father became to me the essence of what is known in the West as 'the salt of the earth'. He had an innate understanding of all life within and without. People sought his advice and company. My parents' influences still have a potent impact on my life, both on a personal and artistic level. They have been the pathway to my past and the light to my future.

At the age of eight, the Canadian government removed Abraham and his younger brother and sister from his parents. From 1959 to 1970 they lived in a Residential School. They were unhappy years and they left indelible emotional and cultural scars.

Fig.8

I have great difficulty in trying to bring back memories where I can link from one month or one year to the other. I think it's common to a lot of people who have gone through or who have had similar experiences within the Residential School system. A lot of the bad memories have been kind of tuned out.

In 1950, the year before Abraham was born; the World Health Organization stated that the inhabitants of the Canadian Arctic were among the most illiterate people in the world. As a result of these findings the Canadian Government developed The Canadian Indian Residential School System.

...There would be a couple of nuns with clippers, electric clippers and a bottle of coal oil. You get into the line-ups. They would cut the bulk of your hair off and slap on the coal oil and give you a razor thin haircut, right down to the roots. After they put you through de-lousing, or whatever they called it. You were sent into the showers, scrubbed down and then into the line-up for your clothes. Most of the kids couldn't speak English and this was their first day run. I would say the bulk of us were just scared to death. No parents. No relatives. We weren't allowed to talk amongst ourselves.

The intent of this system was to assimilate aboriginal children into mainstream Canadian society. Assimilation meant separation from their families and boarding in these schools that were operated by the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican United Church of Canada and the United Church of Canada. The federal government provided the facilities and the churches provided teachers and education.

This is where a mix of traditional beliefs and the situation I was in came to play. When I was growing up my childhood memories were that our basic beliefs were that you develop relationships based on what your parents taught you. You have an understanding of how people should treat each other. But they also believed that they were in the animal world, and the world of humans had different grades of people; some who were inherently evil. We also believe in the existence of evil spirits. Humans, as well as being in the spirit world, have the ability to become malevolent in intent. Here I am, a seven-year-old boy and I realized that this thing had come into my life. From my understanding of native background, I came to the conclusion that I'd stumbled upon an evil spirit in the form of this woman, this nun. And that she would be part of my life for years to come.

It was foreseeable that such form of cultural assimilation would inevitably obliterate their language and their self-identity. But most damaging to their identity was the removal of these children from their families and settlements. Despite all good intentions by the Canadian government, such removal caused a void that could not be filled by the residential schools. And instead of improving their lot, the unbearable stress experienced in these institutions led many Inuit to alcoholism, violence, and drugs and domestic abuse.

But my first initiations were dealing with spirits. From my parents I had an understanding how life should be lived when you're growing up; but when I started attending the residential school in Inuvik, it was initiations of a sordid type. All of the things that my parents had been trying to teach us as kids, to become good men and women, had been turned upside down. A whole new set of values had been set in place that guaranteed I would have a screwed up childhood, and become a screwed up adult with an unbalanced experience and unbalanced

experience and unbalanced view of life.

The abrupt intervention of the Canadian Government, with the creation of The Ministry of Northern Affairs and National Resources in 1953, in its benevolent intent of providing an education to all Canadian citizens, or in civilizing these aboriginal native Canadians, had removed Abraham and his younger siblings to a residential school. They may have been institutions of learning; but the backing of an educational system based on the principle of spare the rod and spoil the child was not too congenial to these Inuit youngsters. They had been raised within a culture that believed children were reincarnated elders, be it as the father, the mother, or loved ones and, therefore, treated with love and reverence; something that civilized westerners could not understand.

But in the clash of the two cultures the outcomes would only be in favour of the dominant culture, and the inevitable demise and eventual suppression of the natives' culture.

.... In the Residential Schools, both the Anglican Residence and the Catholic Residence, you weren't allowed to speak in your Native tongue whether it was Dene or Inuvialuktun on pain of beating. There are kids who are susceptible to alcohol and drug abuse, spousal abuse, physical abuse to others and I think there are a lot of illnesses that developed out of it. They become more susceptible to mental illness and psychological trauma. In Grolier Hall during the years of operation, and a few years afterwards, they found that there were upwards up to sixty individuals who had died as a result of their attendance, either through murder, suicide or alcohol poisoning. That's a pretty high percentage. ....Being at the Residential School everything about being Native was discouraged: your language and your culture.

Fig.9

Upon leaving residential school, he took an opportunity to travel to Fairbanks, to the University of Alaska.

I had the good fortune to be at the right place at the right time.... In November 1970 I went for a tour of the University of Alaska. I wandered off to the Fine Arts building and to the art studios. I looked through a small studio window where I could see the students working at their various work stations. I knew at that moment that this was where I wanted to be.

Abraham asked who was responsible for the department, and he was told that Ronald Senungetuk was the artist in charge.

He found Mr. Senungetuk in his office, introduced himself and expressed his interest in what he saw happening in the studio. Mr. Senungetuk explained that all the students were from Alaska and had received previous training in their respective fields. The training was a must before becoming one of his students. Mr. Senungetuk decided to make an exception and gave Abraham permission to attend the studio sessions.

Fig.10

Abraham's formal training began in the summer of 1971, and later continued from August 1974 to July 1975. His primary interest and training was in design and the use of tools, as well as the integration of old and new materials and techniques and styles. Mr. Senungetuk had a tremendous and lasting influence on Abraham's artistic life. Under his tutelage Abraham's life acquired new meaning. "He took a gamble on a lost nineteen-year-old youngster looking for himself," remarks Abraham. The pupil did not repay his teacher poorly for his efforts; they became friends, and today they continue to share their respect for one another.

I understood that this was something I had wanted to do and he gave me the opportunity to do it.

In the spring of 1977, at the age of twenty five, six years after he had stepped into Mr. Senungetuk's office, Abraham was given a solo show at the Pollock Gallery in Toronto. With his presence and versatility he captivated Jack Pollock and Eva Quan. In the hands of this artist traditional Inuit subject matter had become contemporary sculptures. In fact, Pollock described Abraham as a contemporary sculptor of Inuit ancestry. There was something unusual and refreshing in Abraham's work: its unmistakeable cultural elements, the presence of a historical past and its scale. For the next five years, Pollock and Quan introduced his work to private, corporate and public collections.

With his adamant and persevering Inuit curiosity (like the hunter in pursuit of his prey), and with his unique artistic style, Abraham's sculptures began to incorporate the historical memory gleaned from his research and readings.

I have always been keen to understand the people who inhabit the far-flung northern reaches of the world, their ancient cultures, artistic traditions, hunting techniques and migration. Prior to creating a new work, I find it necessary in some instances to do due diligence on the theme or character that I'm trying to portray or tell a story about. This is true of the old Norse and earlier Germanic myths and legends. I find the required background material from books, lectures and from internet sources that lead me to other books and written studies on my subject interest. This information gives me historical timelines, artistic and cultural information relevant to my research. Then I can commence on the best course of action and direction that the new work can take me. I have no particular preference on the type of material to work with. Each material has its uses and its innate qualities and drawbacks. I am always keeping at the back of my mind the potential for making bronze castings of the images that I am working on.

Abraham has been commissioned to execute large scale stone murals, bronze castings and limestone and plaster works for public installations. The stone murals installed in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, were made with African wonder stone, Portuguese marble and Mexican onyx. An impressive 16 by 14 foot limestone sculpture commissioned by Glaxo/Smith/Kline Pharmaceuticals, in Mississauga, Ontario, was created from twelve tons of Indiana limestone. He has also cast outdoor bronze sculptures that integrate with the environment in which they are installed.

When I finally got settled down I had been a fully thirty years on the road. I felt that I'd matured as an individual and as an artist, and capable of taking my work to the next stage, which I'm now working on. And it's taking the work from a regional Inuvialuit sculpture to the circumpolar story with the migrations of its people.

Fig.11

Seeing Abraham in action chipping away at an inert, rigid block of stone, regardless of its size and configuration, or carving the legends of his people on a massive six foot whale bone, and then thinking of this man when he was a little boy at the fringes of our globe caught in that immense expanse of ice and an infinite sky, leaves me in awe and leads me to ponder at the mystery of art.

I feel that I have found a place for myself within the arts community, because I have come to a time and place in my own life where I am comfortable with who I am and how I do what I do. I honour the memory of my parents Billy and Bertha Ruben for the cultural and spiritual values that they left me. I see the full impact and potential in the things that I do, and leave no borders in what I feel I can do as an artist. I feel that my artistic life has just begun.

Gossipy biographers have said that Michelangelo wanted to leave to posterity his name written on the skies' vault (sulla volta dei cieli). In knowing and working with Abraham, I truly believe that his name will be illuminated by the bright light of the Northern Star (Stella Polaris), for his artistic vision is like a navigational beacon that projects the past into the present, and keeping ancient memories alive for future generations.

Rocco Pannese
Director / Curator
Kipling Gallery

Fig.12

Fig.13

Fig.14

Fig.15

Fig.16

Fig.17

Fig.1 Abraham Ruben at the 2015 Great Northern Arts Festival in Inuvik. Photo courtesy of Nathalie Heiberg-Harrison.

Fig.2

Fig.3 "Billy Ruben Paulatuk", Pelly Bay and Pelly Bay Fish Camp; circa 1980-1981; Ulli Steltzer Papers (C1454), Box 13, Folder 9; Manuscripts Division, Deptartment of Rare Books and Special Collections, Priceton University Library.

Fig.4 Bertha Ruben, Abraham Ruben and Billy Ruben. 1991, Inuvik, NWT Photo courtesy of the artist.

Fig.5 Bertha Ruben
CREDIT: Northwest Territory Archives/Northwest Territories. Department of Public Works and Serives fonds/ G 1995-001:6919

Fig.6 Billy Ruben carving.
CREDIT: Northwest Territory Archives/Piqtoukun, David Ruben and Esther Atkin Ruben/ G-1995-001: 6970

Fig.7 "Bertha Ruben", Pelly Bay and Pelly Bay Fish Camp; circa 1980-1981 Ulli Steltzer Papers (C1454), Box 13, Folder 9; Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library

Fig.8 Sir Alexander Mackenzie School (S.A.M.S. or SAMS), Northwest Territory Archives, N-2011-005: 0280

Fig.9 View of Grollier Hall, the Roman Catholic residence in Inuvik. A baseball backstop fence with grafitti is in the foreground at right. Northwest Teritory Archives, N-1987-017: 2241

Fig.10 Carver Abraham Angik Ruben at work, Yellowknife NWT Archives/James Jerome fonds/N-1987-017: 3244

Fig.11 Abraham Working at Kipling Gallery. Photo courtesy of Kipling Gallery.

Fig.12 1950's Paulatuk. Front of R.C. Mission House. Ruben Angnik, Mona Wolki, Saddie Sukaluk. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Fig.13 Baillie Island in 1930 and shows (l to r) Mona Thrasher (Billy's first wife), his baby sister Misanik (deceased), Billy Thrasher, Mary Thrasher Kotokak of Tuktoyaktuk (deceased), Bertha Thrasher Ruben of Paulatuk (married Billy Ruben) and George Thrasher. CREDIT: Northwest Territory Archive. N-1988-013: 0002.

Fig.14 Tuktoyaktuk in 1945 and shows (l to r) Simon Kubluk, Charlie Thasher, Brother Michael Dobrowski, (behind) Peter Thrasher, Billy Thrasher, Alice Thrasher (Billy's second wife), George Thrasher, and Henry Anderson. CREDIT: Northwest Teritory Archives/Piqtoukun, David Ruben and Esther Atkin Ruben/N-1988-013: 0001

Fig.15 Billy Thrasher, an interpreter at murder trials. Aklavik, 1926 [man wearing fur (muskrat?) parka, trial of Ikagena/Ulukshuk]. CREDIT: Northwest Territory Archives/Canada. Dept. of the Interior fonds./G-1979001: 0274

Fig.16 Bertha Ruben and her Children. CREDIT: Northwest Territory Archives/Piqtokun, David Ruben and Esther Atkin Ruben/ N-1988-013:0004

Fig.17 Abraham Angik Ruben cooks food over a campfire in the Yellowknife area. CREDIT: Northwest Territory Archives/James Jerome fonds/N-1987-017: 3243

Fig.18 Abraham works on the stone sculpture honoring David Nasogaluak's life. Photo courtesy of Nathalie Heiberg-Harrison.