



12 Joe Talirunili

1893 – 1976

Migration

stone, hide, wood and thread sculpture,
signed JOE and stamped faintly on the
bottom of the boat

10 ¼ x 10 ¼ x 4 ¾ in, 26 x 26 x 12.1 cm

PROVENANCE

Collection of Hudson's Bay Company,
Winnipeg

Acquired from the above by a Hudson's Bay
Company executive, Toronto and then
Vancouver Island, circa 1985

LITERATURE

John D. Furneaux, "Treize familles à la merci du
Grand Nord = The Desperate Journey behind an
Eskimo Sculpture," *M*, vol. 6, no. 2, Autumn 1974,
Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, pages 19 – 23

Marybelle Mitchell, *Joe Talirunili: A Grace Beyond
the Reach of Art*, Fédération des coopératives du
Nouveau Québec, 1977

Jean Blodgett, *Grasp Tight the Old Ways: Selections
from the Klamer Family Collection of Inuit Art*,
Art Gallery of Ontario, 1983, pages 208 – 211

Darlene Wight, *The Jerry Twomey Collection*,
Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2004, page 36

Darlene Wight, *Early Masters: Inuit Sculpture 1949 – 1955*,
Winnipeg Art Gallery, 2006, pages 108 – 112

Gerald McMaster, editor, *Inuit Modern: Masterworks from
the Samuel and Esther Sarick Collection*, Art Gallery of
Ontario, 2010, essay by Susan Gustavison, page 242

JOE TALIRUNILI WAS one of the leading artists of the village of Puvirnituk (formerly Povungnituk), in northern Quebec, along with his cousin Davidialuk Alasua Amittu, in the early decades of contemporary Inuit art. Regardless of subject matter, his sculptures, drawings and prints are much loved and sought after by collectors and galleries. The artist chose only a few themes—owls, male and female standing figures, and "migration" boats—but he revisited them tirelessly, never lagging in inventive variations. Each piece was unique—ruggedly expressive, informative and appealing in its own right. In addition to his many sculptures, Talirunili was among the most active printmakers in Puvirnituk. He created more than 70 stonecut prints during his career.

Talirunili was born in 1893 at Neahungnik, a camp near the junction of the Qugaaluk River and east coast of Hudson Bay. Later he lived farther north in a camp near Puvirnituk, along with his brother Levi Qumaluk (also an artist and hunter). Eventually he moved into Puvirnituk—the 1951 site of a relocated Hudson's Bay Company post—which grew into a thriving settlement. While still an infant, Talirunili and his extended family (reportedly as many as 40 people) had a scare that remained with him for life. They were heading to some islands in Hudson Bay when the ice floe they were on broke free from the mainland. Faced with certain death, they made an *umiak* (a large skin boat) to save themselves. They dismantled their sleds, using the wood for the boat frame and paddles. They hunted for seal, and the

women sewed the skins together to make a viable boat cover. Loaded with men, women and children, the boat made the perilous journey back to the mainland, but not without some loss of life. Throughout his career, this incident figured over and over again in the artist's work and has become known as the *Migration* theme.

Around 1950, Talirunili suffered an accidental gunshot wound that nearly severed his arm. From then on, his disability made a traditional hunting life challenging. But he persevered despite his limitations, to make a living and achieve a successful artistic career. He started carving around the same time as the accident, encouraged by the artist and administrator James Houston on an early visit to Puvirnituk. About a decade later, he was an eager and prolific graphic artist as well. He made many drawings and was a driving force in the early years of printmaking in the community. Throughout his life Talirunili drew and carved extensively, telling and retelling events, or more generally documenting aspects of his life and culture.

Talirunili explored the *Migration* theme over 25 times in sculpture as well as in some stonecut prints. The first *Migration* sculpture was carved in 1964, and the last in the final year of his life. While the overall theme remained constant—a crowd of paddlers in an *umiak* assisted by an oblong sail made from hide—the details and the expressive qualities vary in each sculpture. The number of figures also fluctuates, although 40 Inuit were said to be involved in this harrowing adventure. After Talirunili died, the artist was honoured with a Canadian postage stamp depicting one of his *Migration* boat sculptures, which are highly valued in the art market.

In this *Migration* sculpture there are four paddlers per side, each leaning forward into the stroke with a marked sense of effort, urgency and, no doubt, fear. Their paddles are lashed to the boat for safety. The tension in the boat is accentuated by the prominence of their eyes—very round and wide open. In the bow one figure is prepared to launch a harpoon. Is it to hunt or to establish a line to shore? Reaching safety was challenging enough, but in the story the land kept moving away from the paddlers the more they paddled. A shaman instructed the people to fire a rifle, or in this case a harpoon, at the shore to make land fast. The heads of smaller figures hover at the gunwales, perhaps women or children, making about 20 people in all.

The sculpture is expressively rough, a quality that clearly echoes the urgency of the situation. The sail is rudimentary, matching the expedience of the Inuit families who crafted a somewhat makeshift boat to save themselves. All the many artworks by Talirunili have an endearing quality that relates to the humanity of the artist himself. He actively supported his community through his work as a layperson in the church and his role in establishing the local sculptors society, which later became the Povungnituk Co-operative.

We thank Susan Gustavison, independent curator and author of numerous exhibition catalogues, including *Northern Rock: Contemporary Inuit Stone Sculpture* and, most recently, *Pitaloose Saila: A Personal Journey*, for contributing the above essay.

ESTIMATE: \$70,000 – 90,000