Joe Talirunili
1893 – 1986
Migration
stone, hide, wood and thread sculpture, signed Joe and stamped faintly on the bottom of the boat
10 1/4 x 10 1/4 x 4 3/4 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

Migration
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 Puvirnituq. 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 lure a rife, 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 experience of the Inuit families who crafted a somewhat makeshift boat to save themselves. All the many art works by Talirunili have an enduring 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 Puvirnituq 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