



# Museums & Mukluks

Words by **Maia Lepage** Photos by **Maia Lepage** and **David Stewart**

## Arctic Representatives Explore MacFarlane Collection in Washington's Smithsonian Institution

**R**oderick Ross MacFarlane was only 19 years old when he joined the Hudson's Bay Company in 1852. He left his home in Scotland to work as a clerk, managing postings in Fort Rae, Fort Resolution, until eventually settling in Fort Good Hope for a short time. In 1857, MacFarlane was among the first Europeans to explore the Anderson River area (which he named after James Anderson, his superior at the Hudson's Bay Company). MacFarlane was sent on

a journey to investigate the possibility of trade with the Inuvialuit, and in 1859, it was decided that Fort Anderson would be built approximately 50 km downstream of the forks on the Anderson River.

Fort Anderson was completed 2 years later in 1861 and MacFarlane remained there to manage the post. During that time, MacFarlane encountered a man named Robert Kennicott, who was an explorer and naturalist sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C. Kennicott spent his time in the

north collecting specimens and artifacts from the area for three years. Upon Kennicott's departure, MacFarlane took over Kennicott's pursuit and became the Arctic's most avid collector of natural history specimens –including birds, plants, mammals, geological samples as well as artifacts created by the people living in the region.

MacFarlane often would organize collecting expeditions in search of rare eggs or bird specimens, which he sent mainly to the Smithsonian, but also to museums in England and Scotland. Sometimes MacFarlane's expeditions would last entire seasons but he never neglected his principle responsibilities as a fur trader for the Hudson Bay Company. The remainder of his time was spent trading with local Inuvialuit and Dene for furs, clothing and tools. In 1866, Fort Anderson was closed due to outbreaks of measles and scarlet fever that devastated the northern populations and their fur trade industry.

In the five years MacFarlane was stationed at Fort Anderson, he collected and sent over 5,000 specimens

to the Smithsonian Institution, including several hundred Inuvialuit artifacts (clothing, pipes and tools). His collections are among the earliest specimens from Arctic North America and remain of tremendous interest and significance to contemporary researchers. 143 years have passed since this collection traveled from the north, and they still remain in Smithsonian's care.

On November 13th, 2009, 8 representatives from the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (ISR) boarded a Canadian North Boeing 737 and began their journey to Washington, DC to explore the MacFarlane collection. Along with Natasha Lyons, a post-doctoral fellow from Simon Fraser University, Kate Hennessy, a PhD candidate from the University of British Columbia, and Chuck Arnold, the former director of Yellowknife's Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre, the group was anxious about the discoveries that were awaiting them.

"The pieces have never been seriously looked at, and it is sad," said Stephen Loring, a museum



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ALBERT ELIAS



anthropologist, an arctic archeologist for the Smithsonian Institution, and the group’s host while they were in Washington. “A lot of the clothing that we have in the collection were like the blue jeans of a hundred years ago. These objects are not sacred objects, but the were mostly tools and everyday items. The fact that the museum has saved them for this long makes them remarkable.”

Remarkable is definitely the word to describe this vast collection.

“All these items were bought or traded for by MacFarlane, and there are astonishing pieces. They are incredibly innovative and the skill that went into making them is unbelievable,” said Loring.

The MacFarlane Collection was among the first collection that the Smithsonian accumulated, and it is the



first collection that was thoroughly collected. “MacFarlane wanted one of everything so he collected as much as he could to send back to Spencer Baird, [the Director of the Smithsonian at the time],” said Loring. “That is what makes this collection so unique: how extensive it is. Most museums may have one or two pieces that were given to explorers while they were on their journeys, but this was the first collection that had



breadth.”

Deep in the depths of the Smithsonian Research Center, the group sat around 2 folding tables as Loring pulled the artifacts out of securely locked, climate-controlled cabinets. As each item found its way to the table, you could see the group eagerly working to figure out what each item was and how it was made. Some items were obvious, like spears and bows, while other items remain a mystery, but each artifact was the beginning of a conversation about a time past.

Albert Elias from Ulukhaktok and James Pokiak from Tuktoyaktuk were amazed with the tools in the collection. They spent much of their time inspecting the craftsmanship and materials used in those artifacts. “To me, it is really amazing to see and hold objects, like tools and weapons for hunting that was used over a hundred and fifty years ago. It’s really amazing,” said Albert Elias. “I try to take in as much as I can; to absorb what I’ve learned and shared with the group. They’ve been very helpful; helped me to

share opinions and ideas, [especially about] some of the things that we were not sure what they were. From listening to their perspectives, I learned from the others like Helen Gruben, James Pokiak, and Mervin Joe from Parks Canada, and I hope that they learnt something from me. It was just an amazing exchange of ideas.”

“[The origin of the items] is something that we would like the elders to talk about,” said Natasha Lyons, who began working with Inuvialuit artifacts when she worked as an archeologist for Parks Canada. “We would like to know whether people know how some of these artifacts were manufactured or where the elements came from to make them.”

“If we look at some of the Inuvialuit tobacco pipes, they were modeled after pipes that came from China, or Siberia, and that leads to a whole history of tobacco in the Arctic,” added Loring. “English Colonists came to the southern United States in the 1600’s and they took tobacco back to Europe and started growing it in

Turkey. Turkey started making into pipe tobacco and they brought it to Moscow. Somehow, that tobacco made it all the way across to Siberia and then the Siberian Eskimos were trading it with the Inuvialuit, and the Inuvialuit liked it so much they started making their own pipes. This is an example of the amazing trading that was going on 200 or 300 years ago, and no one really recognizes that today until you show them these artifacts and ask them where did these come from? It is really interesting to think about.”

Other artifacts like soapstone lamps traded from the Coppermine region, labrets (ornamental lip-plugs) with huge turquoise-colored beads that originally

came from China (and would have been traded by Russians and Siberian Chukchi), and prized reindeer skins for fancy parkas also acquired from the Siberians reveal the extent of far-flung trade and interaction that characterized the Inuvialuit world 200 years ago.

Karis Gruben and Shayne Cockney were two youth representatives that accompanied the group to Washington, and both were amazed with the history that was before their eyes. Although they are too young to know much about these ancient tools, both could recall stories that were passed down from their parents and grandparents about what things were for and how they were used.



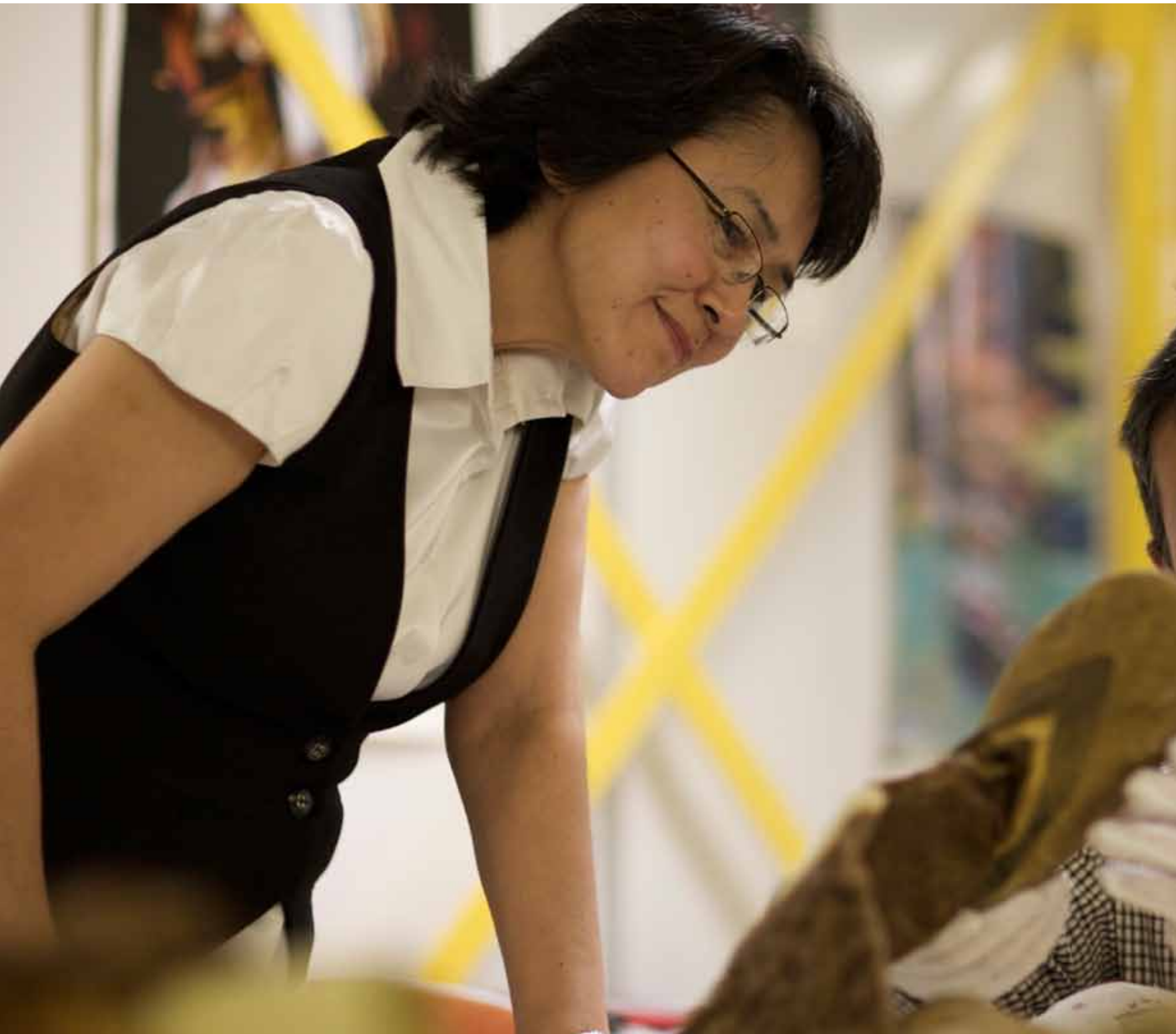
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CATHY COCKNEY



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FREDA RADDI



Freda Raddi, an avid seamstress from Tuktoyaktuk, spent most of her time examining the clothing that MacFarlane collected. “I’m really interested in the gloves because we never see this kind,” said Raddi. “Myself, growing up, I never had gloves. I’d never even see my parents wear gloves like this, and to see them here is interesting. I would like to make myself a pair.” Raddi, along with Cathy Cockney from the Inuvialuit Cultural and Resource Centre, spent many tedious hours making sewing patterns from artifacts in the collection. “I just can’t get over the detail they make in everything,” said Raddi. “This is just the first time I’ve seen gloves like this.”

“Everything was so incredible. I never thought that I would see this collection,” said Cathy Cockney. “I’ve done some research before with this collection, but every object that we’ve seen was still a surprise.”

“I think the week went really well,” said Lyons, “It is not what I expected but I think it went better than expected! It was really a highlight to see people engaging with the material, making plans for the future to share the information with the folks back in the Inuvialuit region. I hope [the project] will just expand. I’ve heard elders talking all week about others who might know more about the Anderson River area or about certain artifacts. They keep identifying other sources of knowledge, so it feels like a great start.”

As a continuation of what this group has begun, there are several plans to bring back information to the communities. Each member of the group has their own small project, which will eventually be presented





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to the communities in the ISR.

Shayne Cockney is working on a short documentary of her visit, while Karis Gruben is working on writing about her experiences, as well as producing artwork based on her trip to the Smithsonian. Freda has undoubtedly begun work on sewing her own pair of gloves, and James, Mervin and Albert are talking about making their own bow and arrows, or spears.

Kate Hennessy is also working on adding the MacFarlane collection to a museum portal website called the Reciprocal Research Network (RRN). The RRN is currently in co-development by the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia and four northwest coast partnering First Nations.

The network is designed to provide on-line access to globally dispersed museum collections for community, academic, and museum researchers. The Inuvialuit group hopes that being able to view and comment on the MacFarlane Collection through the RRN will allow them to continue adding their knowledge to the artifacts, to develop their relationship with the Smithsonian, and to consult other knowledge-bearers in their home communities about the collection as they develop educational projects. There were also talks about creating an educational unit based on the artifacts that can be incorporated into the school curriculum. “We would like to show the communities right away,” said Cathy Cockney, “We would like to

get the information out there while it is still fresh in our minds.”

“A lot of the objects that we saw, we haven’t seen before. I think it is a living document: a living project,” added Elias. “When we go back home and we do our presentations and we show these objects to schools and communities, their input it going to be very important too.”

On November 21st, everyone waved goodbye to the MacFarlane Collection and boarded a plane to return to Canada. Although the actual artifacts remain in the collection storage facility at the Smithsonian, the spirit of the collection has returned to its proper place in the ISR and its knowledge back with its proper owners.

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