

OLE G. JENSEN

THE CULTURE OF
GREENLAND IN
GLIMPSES

milik
art & design



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FOREWORD

This book, which is about parts of the spiritual and material cultural inheritance of Greenland, gives us a long-awaited, easily-accessible, short and animated description of many of the phenomena upon which Greenland's culture is built. Hopefully, many people will enjoy the book, in particular visitors to Greenland who are looking for a short introduction to those parts of Greenland's culture that are only heard of sporadically.

Greenland's cultural inheritance, with its origins in Inuit cultures, is well-represented in the literature, but often in a form that is not easily accessible. This book provides a fine insight into the mindset that existed amongst the ancestors of present-day Greenlanders and on which some present day art and culture is based. I hope only that the book may provide constant inspiration for others who are interested in the cultural inheritance of the Inuit. There is still much to be drawn from the culture and traditions of the Inuit, even in today's globalized world.

Daniel Thorleifsen

Leader

The National Museum of Greenland



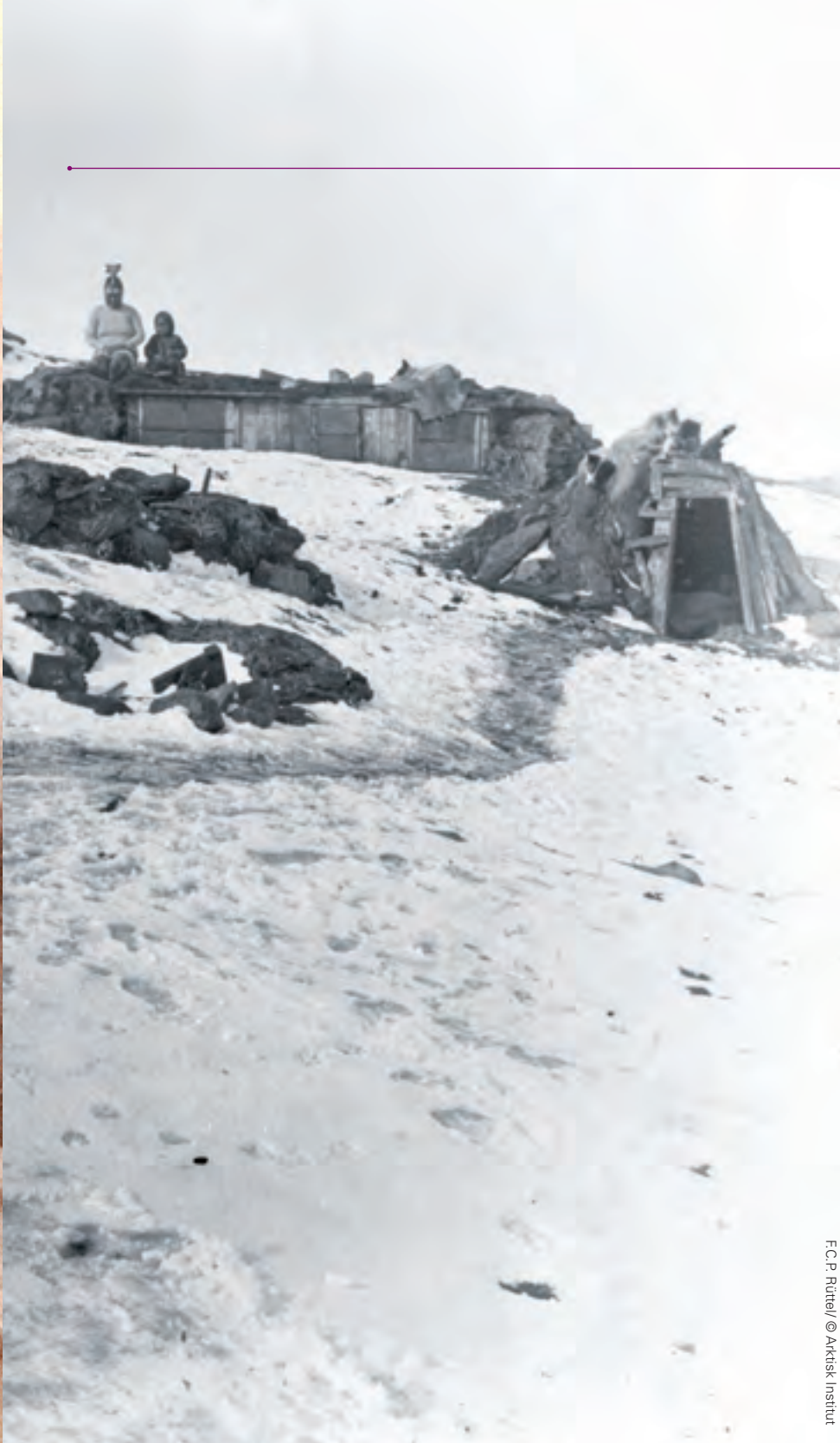
Hans Knudsen / © Arktisk Institut

TUPILOK

The tupilak, the world-famous figure, was originally feared and hated. In its present shape, it is valued by collectors of Inuit art, and by tourists to Greenland as an ordinary souvenir.

The word *tupilak* describes a wide variety of small figures which represent either tupilaks or other mythical and spiritual creatures, and it can be difficult to see the difference. Originally the tupilak was a creature composed of different materials from the natural world – animal, bird, or human remains – even parts taken from a child's corpse. The shaman, knowledgeable about witchcraft, would gather bits and pieces at a secret, isolated place, tie them together, chant magic spells over the tied up bundle, and then allow the tied up bits and pieces to draw sexual energy from the shaman's own genitalia.

The tupilak was then ready to



be put into the sea and sent off to kill an enemy. This way of getting rid of your enemies was, however, not entirely without risk because if the would-be victim had greater powers of wizardry than the initiator, his power could return the tupilak's strength and potency like a boomerang. In other words, it was a dangerous game – a Greenlandic version of Russian roulette.

No original tupilaks remain. They have vanished from the scene because they were made of perishable materials. They were, for good reason, “disposable” tupilaks and were not meant to be seen by others.

When curious ignorant Europeans came to Greenland, figures were carved to show the visitors what the creature looked like. The tupilak figure is known throughout all of the Eskimo regions. Throughout time, tupilak figures have been carved in different materials all over Greenland. The oldest known tupilaks are made of wood with a skin belt and they resemble the authentic ancient figures. Today these carvings are associated with East Greenland, the old traditions being more alive there as that culture has always maintained a rich carving tradition.

The more grotesque and terrifying the figure, the easier it was to sell. It became quite an industry for especially East Greenlandic artists who made tupilaks in the form most of us are familiar with today.

From the 1950s up until the 1970s, large numbers of these figures were produced in a more or less stereotypical form, although now and again the





artists created figures of great artistic craftsmanship. Today the figures are still produced, but due to whale conservation, they are usually made from reindeer horn or narwhal tusk.

Contemporary tupilaks are not dangerous. The only risk you take is that you might become fascinated by Greenlandic mythology. But most of us can live with that...



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