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## [GREENLAND INUIT] ANONYMOUS ARTIST.

Watercolour of a Greenlander hunting seals in a kayak.

*Watercolour on laid paper, 193 x 185 mm, mounted. Unsigned, c. 1800-1820.*

### BEAUTIFUL DEPICTION OF TRADITIONAL INUIT SEAL HUNTING

A very finely painted depiction of a traditional Greenlandic Inuit hunter after harp seals in his distinctive hunting kayak. The unsigned watercolour is of considerable quality and style, and depicts an Inuit pursuit with a level of detail whose accuracy modern historical sources now confirm. A very simplified version of this image was published in Orme's collection of *Foreign Field Sports* (London, 1813) as "Greenland Seal Catching" [*see illustration overleaf and click illustration for a fuller description of Orme's work*], an aquatint engraved by M. Dubourg after John Heaviside Clark (1770-1863). The present drawing is of so much higher quality, and contains so much detail that could not have come from the Orme aquatint, that there seem to be just two possibilities: either the present drawing is an original from which the Orme print was derived, or both images derive from a common source. If the latter, there is no trace of such an image to be found today.

The design of the Inuit *qajaq* (kayak) is estimated to have evolved gradually over as much as four millennia. A personal boat, usually made by the hunter himself to suit his exact size, such a kayak would have been constructed of seal skin stretched over a wooden or whalebone frame; the curved ends were adopted to improve manoeuvrability while the hunter's jacket, usually also made from skins, was typically laced to the boat's skin to form a waterproof seal, enabling the hunter to deal with all sea conditions, including capsizing. The double-bladed paddle with square ends is of a specifically Greenlandic type. The objects secured to the boat's deck are a bladder and a roll of line. The *attarsoak* or harp seal was described by Crantz (see below) as the most stupid of the five types of seal available to the Greenlanders and therefore the usual target of the kayak hunter.





We are grateful to Dr Rick Knecht for his help in identifying details of the scene.

In 1820 David Crantz described the hunting of the *attarsoak* or harp seal in his *History of Greenland* [see images overleaf]:

“The small man’s boat, or Kajak, is six yards long, and shaped like a weaver’s shuttle. The middle is not a foot and a half broad, and scarcely a foot in depth. It is constructed of long laths with cross hoops, secured by whalebone, and is cased in seal-skin leather. Both the ends of the boat are capped with bone, on account of the friction to which they are exposed amongst the rocks. In the middle of the leathern covering of the kajak is a round hole with a ring of wood or bone. In this the Greenlander squats down upon a soft fur, the hoop or margin reaching up to his hips, and tucks his water-pelt or great coat so tightly round him, that no water can penetrate into the boat. This water-coat is also fastened close round his neck and arms, by bone buttons. The harpoon-dart is strapped to the kajak at his side. Before him lies the line rolled up, and behind him the bladder. He grasps with both hands the middle of his Pautiky or oar, which is made of solid deal plated with metal at the ends, and with bone along the sides. and strikes the water quickly and evenly, beating time. Thus equipped, he sets out to hunt seals or sea-fowl, with spirits as elate as the commander of the largest man-of-war.

“A Greenlander in his kajak is indeed an object of wonder and delight, and his sable sea dress, shining with rows of white bone buttons, gives him a splendid appearance. He rows with extreme celerity in this boat, and when charged with letters from one colony to another, will perform fifteen or sixteen leagues in a day. He dreads no storm: as long as a ship can carry its top-sail, he braves the mountainous billows, darting over them like a bird, and even when completely buried in the waves, he soon re-appears skimming along the surface. If a breaker threatens to upset him, he supports himself in an erect position by his oar, or if he is actually upset, he restores himself to his balance by one swing of his paddle. But if he loses the oar, it is certain death, unless speedy succour be at hand.

“The Greenlander seated in his kajak with all his accoutrements,



“Greenland Seal Catching” from Orme’s collection of *Foreign Field Sports* (London, 1813) [click illustration for a fuller description of Orme’s work], an aquatint engraved by M. Dubourg after John Heaviside Clark (1770-1863).



“The Greenlander in his Kajak” from *History of Greenland* by David Crantz (London, Longman, 1820)

no sooner perceives a seal than he approaches, if possible, to leeward of him, with the sun on his back, lest he should be seen or scented by the animal. Concealing himself behind a wave, he darts swiftly but softly forward, till he arrives within the distance of five or six fathoms, taking care meanwhile, that the harpoon, string, and bladder, lie in proper order. He then takes the paddle in his left hand, and seizing the harpoon in his right, lances it by the casting board at the seal. If the harpoon sinks deeper than the barbs, it immediately disengages itself from the bone joint, and that again from the shaft, while the string is wound from its roller in the kajak. The Greenlander, the moment he has struck the seal, which dives down with the velocity of an arrow, throws the bladder after him into the water. He then picks up the floating shaft, and restores it to its groove in the kajak. The bladder, which displaces a body of water of more than a hundred pounds weight, is frequently dragged down by the seal; but the animal is so wearied by this encumbrance, that he is obliged to re-appear on the surface in about a quarter of an hour to draw breath. The Greenlander, on perceiving the bladder, rows up to it, and as soon as the seal makes his appearance, wounds him with the great barbed lance; and this he repeats as often the animal emerges above water, till it is quite exhausted. He then despatches it with the small lance, and ties it to the left side of the kajak, after inflating the cavity under the skin, that the body may float more rightly after him.

“This exercise is extremely perilous, and exposes the Greenlander to the greatest danger of his life, from which it probably derives its name of Kamavok, the extinction. For if the string, in its rapid evolution, becomes entangled in the kajak, or if it winds itself round the oar, the hand, or even the neck, as it sometimes does in windy weather; or if the seal suddenly glance from one side of the kajak to the other; the inevitable consequence is, that the kajak is overturned by the string and dragged under water. The Greenlander has now occasion for all his address to extricate himself and recover his balance several times successively; for the string continues to whirl him round till it is quite disengaged. Even when he supposes all danger to be over, and approaches too near to the dying seal, it may still bite him in the face and hands; and a seal with young, instead of retreating, often flies furiously upon the hunter, and tears a hole in the kajak so as to sink it”.

**\$6400**



“Skeleton of a Kajak” from *History of Greenland* by David Crantz (London, Longman, 1820)



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