

Cheslaget

Greenland's Inuit community has fought long and hard to preserve its unique identity. The country established Home Rule in 1979 and withdrew from the EC in 1985. On the 16th of the month its leaders will open a \$15.6m cultural centre as a focal point for all Inuit groups of the Arctic Circle. Mark Isitt reports from Nuuk

Fifty-eight-year-old Jonathan Motzfeldt was already out among the ice floes at six o'clock this morning. When he got back to Nuuk he had eight seals in his boat and by twelve he's standing in the harbour market, skinning, carving and hanging up their pelts on bamboo frames. The frozen ground around him is drenched in blood and people tread cautiously around the cleaning table to avoid slipping. Before critically fingering his catch they greet him with respect. For the short, heavily-built Motzfeldt, clad in overalls and anorak, isn't just another Greenland hunter. Here in the capital they call him "the father". He is Greenland, they say, just like Winston Churchill was synonymous with Great Britain and Tage Erlander with Sweden. Even if this ex-priest and ex-prime minister (1979-1991) is now just one man among 31 in the Greenland Home Rule Government, his successors are careful to stick to the course he laid out. To attack a Greenland for modelling himself on Motzfeldt, the man who forced imperial Denmark to accept the idea of Greenland's autonomy, would be like criticizing a Christian for imitating Christ.

It's Sunday, five degrees below, and hunters sit on barrels of whale oil, smoking in the sun, surrounded by whale



MINI JACOBSEN

PUTTING ON A SHOW



Jonathan Motzfeldt, founder of the Home Rule Government. "We've preserved our native culture while leaping from a hunting community to a modern high-tech society in just one generation."

Many [Nordic] council ministers don't know what Greenland is and they've certainly never been here

hide, fins and tails, and a hundred gullems, strung in straight lines, stiff in death, with their heads twisted back to front.

"Sure, it's exotic," says Motzfeldt and pauses to light his pipe, "but Greenland's not a museum nation. This is not an Inuit reserve. The Inuits are not a zoological species. This is how we live. And we've managed to preserve our native culture while leaping from a traditional hunting community to a modern high-tech society in just one generation."

When he was 18, Motzfeldt wrote in his notebook that he wanted to become Greenland's greatest politician ever. That was safely in his pocket once Home Rule was secured, and when he went on in 1985 to withdraw Greenland's 55,000 inhabitants from the European Community in the teeth of Danish opposition, there was nothing left to do but to canonize him. No Greenlander need bow his head to Brussels, he insisted, and this spirit of independence still holds sway. Pride and rugged individualism: that's what Greenland and the new Cultural Centre are all about.

Ever since Greenland was admitted to the Nordic Council of Ministers in the mid-1980s, Motzfeldt has been pursuing the goal of a national cultural centre.

With sweeping gestures he has depicted for his council colleagues a place which would enable Greenlanders to be Greenlanders and give them the self-esteem they need to stand and defend the island's ancient traditions, but few listened. "The Nordic countries have had difficulty appreciating the importance of a *kulturip illorsua* [cultural centre]," he mutters. "For them Greenland is very, very far away. Many of the council's ministers don't even know what Greenland is and they've certainly never been here. This lack of knowledge is a major problem."

Maybe the ministers' scepticism isn't so hard to understand. Judging from Motzfeldt's extroverted personality the last thing Greenlanders appeared to need was an injection of confidence. And wasn't it a little overdone to fear the loss of traditional culture when invasions from the rest of the world were as rare as sealskin trousers in a European co-op?

The final question was how a single centre could reflect the culture of the world's largest island: 2,175,600 square kilometres, an area large enough to stretch from Stockholm to the Sahara?

It wasn't until Motzfeldt invited the ministers to a wilderness safari and

showed them musk oxen, whales, seals, and crystal-clear ice floes big as houses that Dkr20m (\$3.4m) landed on his desk.

After a further round with begging bowl in hand, both the Home Rule Government and the Nuuk local authorities each found themselves Dkr30m (\$5m) poorer. When the centre opens on the 16th, after two years of construction, the bill will touch Dkr91m (\$15.6m). "A bargain, no doubt about it!" claims the centre's Norwegian director, Jan Kløvstad, who compares it with the Dkr180m (\$31m) price tag for Denmark's new museum of modern art, Arken. "My aim is the same as when I was the boss of the cultural centre on the Faeroes," he says. "I want to stimulate and develop cultural activities throughout Greenland. The centre is a meeting place where links are forged between ethnic cultures. It will put Greenland artists in touch with their peers in the Nordic countries and especially with the Inuit populations of Canada

and Alaska. There'll be film shows and theatrical productions and concerts and exhibitions and lectures and..." He gasps for breath. "Never before has the Greenland government spent so much on culture."

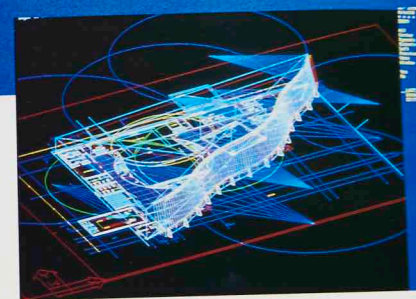
This is exactly what some people find irritating. A number of the Inuit, those who still struggle to make a living out of fishing and seal hunting, consider that the money could have provided jobs during the off-season if it had been invested in production of kayaks, trawlers and - most of all - housing. Mariane Petersen, director of the Nuuk National Museum, states frankly that the Home Rule Government suffers from megalomania. "Just because this happens to be the largest island in the world they believe they have the right to behave as if it were an independent state with a population of a million," she exclaims. "I'm not opposed to a *kulturip illorsua* as such. I just don't like the fact that it's taking money from projects that deserve priority. Why build a luxurious cultural house when people have to wait ten years for a flat?"

"Because we are an alarmingly small people with a unique culture," is Motzfeldt's reply to criticism. "There are 100,000 Inuit worldwide. We've existed for 5,000 years. When I meet friends

PETER RABOED



Left: Jan Kløvstad (with hat), the Cultural Centre's director, and Konrad Steenholt, Minister of Culture. Above: the undulating facade is inspired by the aurora borealis, claim the architects.



SCHMIDT, LAMMICH & JENSEN

The word for artist in Inuit means "the one who makes strange things"

from Canada or Alaska, or even from Siberia, we all speak the same language. However, many experts fear that the Inuit language and culture run the risk of disappearing. That's why we need to strengthen our position both at home and abroad."

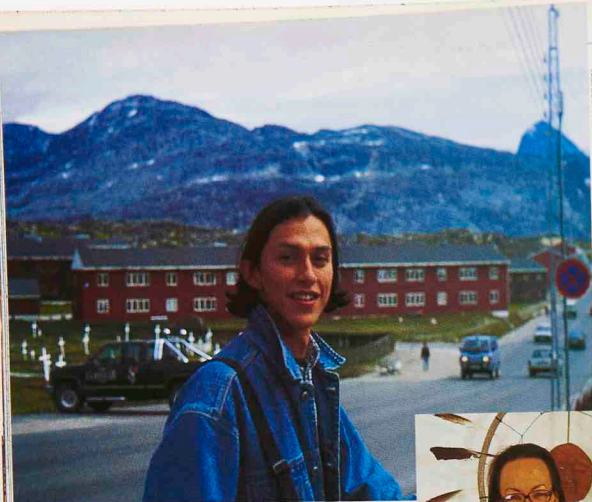
When Motzfeldt tries to explain what he means by culture, he doesn't refer to the fine arts. His view of culture is the way of life of the common man. And when Minister of Culture Konrad Steenholt is asked the same question you don't catch him dropping names from art history books either. "I think I got this job because as a child I sailed in *umiaks*, traditional skin boats," Steenholt says. "My father was a seal hunter and fisherman. I decided to become a teacher. I know the origins of

the Greenland way of life and I've seen the progress. I want to preserve our traditional culture."

Needless to say, this policy is seen as retrograde by the island's community of artists. "I don't consider the preservation of dead things as being culture," snorts Jessie Kleeman, artist and actress. "I think the best way of defining your culture is by meeting foreigners and exchanging experiences." Following this principle, she and colleagues Anne-Birthe Hove and Miki Jacobsen have founded The Greenland Art Association. The 13 members have established contacts with artists abroad, and from now on they hope to exhibit their works in the new centre. Kløvstad, Kleeman and company want modern art to play a central role in the building. "When the place is opened it will put pressure on Steen-

holdt and other politicians to show more interest in culture," claims Hove, a graphic artist and teacher at the art school which is soon to move into the building.

"Greenland art, to the politicians, seems to be synonymous with ethnic art," says Kleeman in irritation, and mockingly curses her decision to go in for performance art, video art and installations when it's still soapstone sculptures and *tupilaks* (amulets often made from whale-bone) which sell best. "However much you try and resist it, it's always easy to fall back upon local art traditions because the international influence here is so limited," Jacobsen, a sculptor and painter, adds. "Hopefully this centre will change all that. If we're lucky it might even alter the way artists are perceived here. Our fellow countrymen think we're weird. In



MIKI JACOBSEN

Klovstad's job. He was the one and only applicant for the post, which may say something about the level of cultural interest. Klovstad sent off a summary of his experience in Norway, Sweden and the Faeroes. His appointment came through a year ago and since then, he claims, he's listened and learned and done what he can to blend into his new milieu. Not that a sealskin cap and cape help much when your beard is red and you're two metres tall.

"There are two ways of financing my plans for the centre," he explains. "One is through NAPA - The Nordic Institute in Greenland. They will have their headquarters in the centre and sponsor cultural exchange between Greenland and the Nordic countries. I also expect conferences on Arctic-related topics to be held in the centre's Friendship Hall. We're in the middle of the United Nations' 'Decade for Indigenous Peoples': aborigines all over the world are interested in how Greenland managed to establish its Home Rule system in 1979. In fact, Greenland is seen as a model among indigenous states."

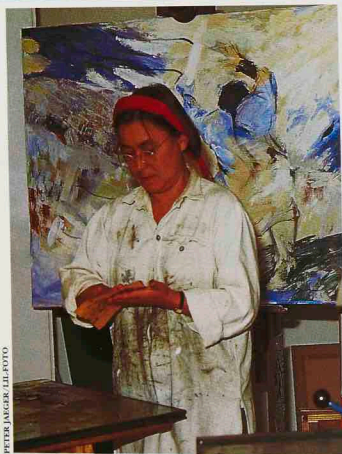
It remains to be seen if the



PETER JACOBSEN

Nuuk's inhabitants are said to record the world's highest incidence of video rentals

Greenland artists (clockwise from top) Miki Jacobsen, Jessie Kleeman and Anne-Birthe Hove. "When the centre is opened it will put pressure on the politicians to show more interest in culture," says Hove.



PETER JACOBSEN

fact, the word for artist in Inuit is *eqqumi-ituvullortoq*, which means 'the one who makes strange things'."

The triangular-shaped centre is strategically placed in the heart of town, on the icy pedestrian street which cuts across Nuuk's grid pattern of roads "just as Broadway cuts diagonally through New York" as they put it in the centre's publicity folder (maybe the talk about megalomania is not entirely groundless). It lies between one of Nuuk's innumerable video shops (the 13,000 inhabitants are said to record the world's highest per capita incidence of video rentals) and the large red blocks of the county council building. The façade which hides the

3,380 square metres of floor space is grey and imposing, and in comparison with the gaily painted wooden houses which cling to the surrounding slopes it resembles a crash-landed spaceship. Schmidt, Hammer & Lassen Architects, from Copenhagen, claim, however, that their spaceship is inspired by an ice floe and nothing else. They also claim the undulating southern façade in oiled larch wood is meant as an interpretation of the aurora borealis. "Irresistible!" chorused the Greenland jury when they heard this and, after skipping through the remaining 225 entries of the architect competition, they quickly declared it the winner. Compare this with the competition for

island can stimulate the same interest among nations of traditional fine arts. Motzfeldt believes the country is already halfway there. "Let me tell you about my meeting with Mr Pope," he chuckles. "It was in 1984, in Rome. A private audience, just me and the holy father. Mr Pope says to me, 'Dear Mr Prime Minister, I hear that Greenland is the biggest island in the world but that more than 90% is covered in ice?' I say, 'That is correct, but did you know that the part not covered in ice is as big as Norway?' That made him curious. Instead of a planned three minutes I was allowed to stay 9 minutes and 53 seconds."



MARK ISITT is Scanorama's associate editor. Before going to Greenland his Inuit vocabulary consisted of three words: *anorak*, *igloo* and *kayak*.

TRANSLATED BY DAVID ISITT

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