

Paper: Collections make connections!

The Museum of Knud Rasmussen and the Inuit of the Arctic

- by Søren la Cour Jensen, The House of Knud Rasmussen

Since 1721, when the Danish king send a missionary to Greenland, Denmark has had a presence in Greenland. Up until around 1900 the country was closed to visitors, and you had to apply the Danish state to get access to the country

This meant - amongst other things - that the general knowledge about Greenland and its native inhabitants was very limited in Denmark and in the rest of the world. The only Europeans living in Greenland were officials, bureaucrats and clerics. It was in this very closed and isolated country that Knud Rasmussen was born.

Knud Rasmussen was born in Ilulissat, Greenland - by the famous Icefjord - and was the son of a Danish priest. Rasmussen spent his early years in Greenland amongst the Inuit, where he learned to speak the native language, hunt, drive dog sledge and survive in the harsh Arctic conditions.

As he said: "My playmates were native Greenlanders; from the earliest boyhood I played and worked with the hunters, so that even the hardships of the harshest sledge-trips became pleasant routine for me."

In 1891 Knud Rasmussen went to Denmark for further education. During this time he went on several journeys to the North. To Iceland and Lapland in the northernmost part of Norway. In Lapland he meet with the sami people, and got his first taste of ethnographical work.

He went on his first real expedition from 1902 until 1904, known as The Danish Literary Expedition - the aim of the expedition was to examine the culture of the polar Eskimos and to gather their intangible culture through tales, myths and document their everyday life.

This was the first ethnographical expedition to the polar Eskimos, and despite of many problems they managed to gather a lot of important material. After returning home Knud Rasmussen went on a lecture circuit and wrote *The People of the Polar North* (1908), a combination of a travel journal and a scholarly account of Inuit folklore. This was his first of many publications.

In 1910, Rasmussen and his friend Peter Freuchen established the Thule Trading Station at Cape York, in Northern Greenland. The mythical name *Thule* was chosen because it was the northernmost trading post in the world. Thule Trading Station became the home base, and economical foundation for a series of expeditions, known as the *Thule Expeditions*, between 1912 and 1933. At that time the northern part of Greenland was no-man's land and no country had laid a claim on it - not even Denmark was interested.

The declared objective of Knud Rasmussen was to ease the way for the polar Eskimos into modern civilization. A development he saw as inevitable, and a development in which he felt he had a part to play.

He defined the Thule Trading Station as "a moral and economic fulcrum for the Polar Eskimos under the difficult crisis, which the transition to civilization always must present to a primitive people." (Knud Rasmussen in 1910)

He defined a number of statutes, giving the native Eskimos a big part in the governance of the vast district in which Knud Rasmussen had placed the trading station.

The main focus of the expeditions was to map the unknown territories, archaeological research into the different waves of immigration to Greenland from North America and the ethnography of the Inuit. He made a unique and all important contribution in saving the intangible culture of the Inuit by collecting the tales and myths from all the Greenlandic settlements and from the North American Inuit as well. A work which today is regarded as the single most important contribution to understanding the pre-Christian cosmos of the Inuits in both Greenland and North America.

Rasmussen's "greatest achievement" was the massive Fifth Thule Expedition (1921–1924) which was designed to "attack the great primary problem of the origin of the Eskimo race"

" A ten volume account (*The Fifth Thule Expedition 1921-1924*) of ethnographic, archaeological and biological data was collected, not to mention more than 20.000 artifacts - many of which are still on display in museums in Denmark today.

Rasmussen left the team - which stayed in the eastern part of Canada, and traveled for 16 months with two Inuit hunters by dog-sled across North America to Nome, Alaska. His journey is recounted in *Across Arctic America* (1927), today considered a classic of polar expedition literature.

For the next seven years Rasmussen traveled between Greenland and Denmark giving lectures and writing. In 1931, he went on the Sixth Thule Expedition, designed to consolidate Denmark's claim to a part of eastern Greenland that was contested by Norway.

Unfortunately the Seventh Thule Expedition in 1933 was to be his last. Knud Rasmussen contracted pneumonia after an episode of food poisoning, and died a few weeks later in Copenhagen at the age of 54. He was given the special honor of a state funeral.

The House of Knud Rasmussen and the new museum

The house in Hundested was build in 1917. Knud Rasmussen wanted a house in which he could work in peace from the bustle of Copenhagen where he had his house and family. In this house he wrote his books, planned new expeditions and gathered his friends and colleagues for work and relaxation.

Since 1939 the House of Knud Rasmussen has been functioning as a museum, or memorial house. Showing interior and smaller exhibitions about Knud Rasmussen's life and work

The exhibition is largely placed in four rooms in the house, of which three present the original interior and furniture and one is reserved for special exhibitions, Greenlandic art, and other related subjects. In respect for the house, it's interior and historic integrity we are locked in terms of using the house for larger exhibitions.

This of course means that we can't extend the dissemination of the Greenlandic and Inuit cultures and societies - which is one of the purposes of the museum, and the wish from our visitors. Visitors enjoy the intimate atmosphere in the house and the beautiful surroundings. The house has been visited by a steadily increasing number since it opened more than 70 years ago.

Many of the visitors who come to see the House, have some sort of connection to Greenland, and thus they expect to feel the special atmosphere of the historic house, and a broad and deep presentation of the Inuit culture and of the history of Greenland. The House attracts approximately 10.000 visitors every year.

Because of the huge interest in Knud Rasmussen as a person and in his work, in Denmark, Greenland, the Arctic and the relationship between Denmark and Greenland. The House has almost reached its limits in terms of numbers of visitors and the possibilities of extending the exhibits. That means that we cannot meet the expectations of our visitors regarding the presentation of Knud Rasmussen and his work with the Inuit culture.

We have made several larger exhibitions, but all placed outside the museum. Here we see pictures from an exhibition on the 5th Thule Expedition, situated in a very beautiful local public House of Culture - but for limited periods of time and with bad conditions regarding the fragile museum artifacts.

For this exhibition - Celebrating the 75th anniversary of the 5. Thule-expedition called "The Polar Journey" we tried something new. Parallel to the historic presentation, was the modern story - how are the Inuit living today? What has happened since Knud Rasmussen was there?

This brought history, ethnography and the present together. By using Knud Rasmussen as a mediator, we found that the visitors seemed to get a kind of handle to understand the very foreign and alien culture of the Inuit and the arctic societies of today which they had previously lacked.

The exhibition was very successful and we realized that if we were to make a proper presentation of Knud Rasmussen and the Inuit culture, we had to have a new physical frame to work within.

The museum therefore decided to work towards establishing a proper museum building to host the complex history, the many aspects, questions and parallel stories that can all be seen as part of the personal and professional life of Knud Rasmussen - and not least the culture of the Inuit of the Arctic.

But of course, the content of the building is the most important. By using the experiences we got from the exhibition "The Polar Journey" we want to explore an even broader concept of how our museum can disseminate the knowledge of Knud Rasmussen and Inuit culture. Being true to the ideals of Knud Rasmussen which were to increase our knowledge of Inuit culture, and to be aware of the challenges and possibilities the people of the Arctic have to deal with.

In my mind his greatest achievement was in succeeding in expanding the knowledge of the people of the Arctic. I believe that it must be the role of the Museum of Knud Rasmussen to continue this work, but with an outset in our time, and with the means that we have available today. Knud Rasmussen managed to secure much of the intangible culture by collecting a vast number of tales and myths and by collecting both sacred and everyday artifacts.

With this material, and in close cooperation with colleagues in the National Museum of Greenland and with the people of Greenland we will establish a new kind of museum which deals not only with the past, but also with the present and with the future of the Arctic Inuit.

As in the beginning of the 20th century, Greenland is facing great challenges but also great opportunities. As before, the world surrounding Greenland is closing in on the island. A hundred years ago, it was the

mechanisms of the Industrialized world which changed large parts of Greenlandic society. Today Greenland is a modern self-governing country, with very close economic, cultural and personal ties to Denmark.

To stress the importance of the new position of Greenland, the actual awareness concerning the areas surrounding it, and the Danish/Greenlandic relations - the challenges and possibilities of Greenland are the sole focus at the Danish Pavilion at the 13th Biennale of Architecture in Venice this year. The name given to the Danish-Greenlandic contribution was *Possible Greenland*.

At the Biennale there was a strong focus on the present situation in Greenland but just as much on all the potentials of the country if we all dare to rethink many of the ways in which our societies coexist.

The two main assets of Greenland being discussed in the opening days were:

1. The nature: the growing tourism industry and the possibility to exploit the natural resources of the country.
2. The very fundamental self-understanding and identity of the Greenlandic people, based on the knowledge of their own culture and history.

The possibilities for Greenland to create greater income in harvesting the natural resources of the country - that mainly means more fishing, mining for metals and minerals and drilling for oil. Furthermore Greenland and Denmark now have territorial claims on the North Pole and the hopes of a soon to be shipping route through the North-Western passage - sailing north of America could save thousands of miles of transport - will place Greenland right on what could be one of the most busiest shipping routes in the world.

But the challenges of Greenland are just as many. Greenland is the largest island in the world but only has 55.000 inhabitants. How is the country going to run mines which require 5-6.000 workers, and make sure that the infrastructure can supply the new industries, and most importantly: how will all this affect the people of Greenland and their culture?

All these aspects are not only being discussed at the Biennale in Venice, but are part of an ongoing debate in both Denmark and Greenland.

The museum wish to be able to contribute to the debate of the challenges of this new development, as an ethnographical museum we can play an important role in the discussions of what is going to happen within Greenland, the culture of its people and their thoughts on what they want their society to be like in the future. That is why dealing solely with the past will not be enough.

The Museum of Knud Rasmussen must be an institution that deals with the past, but in a fashion that always points forward. This must be the red thread in all the work the museum engages in.

The museum cannot only be about one man: Knud Rasmussen. It has to be a museum which contributes to the debates and important discussions mentioned above. A museum that can lay some of the cultural and historic foundation that is so important in making the right decisions for the future.

This will not be a Living Museum but a museum which is alive - which has real ordinary living people communicating through the museum, a communication within and between cultures. Between Greenland and Denmark.

In cooperation with Greenland National Museum, the National museum of Denmark and other institutions of interest in Denmark, Greenland and the Arctic circumpolar region we are now gathering idea and substance for the new museum.

The future is more important than the past. But to be able to make qualified choices and decisions we have to understand both the past and the present. It is our wish that the new Museum of Knud Rasmussen will be able to participate in giving a deeper insight and raise important questions about the future of the Arctic.