

# Land, Animals, and the Spirit World

## *Frightened by the Land Spirits*, Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq

Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq (pronounced Ah-vah-LAH-kee-akh Tick-tah-LAKH) is an artist of Inuit descent who was born near Baker Lake, in Nunavut, Canada. Irene was raised by her grandmother, who provided for her through hunting and other sustenance from the land.

The area Irene grew up in was very remote, and she and her grandmother could not often interact with many other people. To pass the time, Irene's grandmother would tell her stories, including those of animals who talked like humans, animals who could transform into humans, and humans who could transform into animals. Storytelling was, and continues to be, an important part of Inuit life. The stories her grandmother told her about Inuit relationships with the natural world would later become central to Irene's work as a textile artist. Irene says that "Each wall hanging I do tells a story of a legend. Art is a way to preserve our culture."

To create the hand-sewn wall hanging *Frightened by the Land Spirits*, the artist used appliqued forms, stitching, and felt on a wool background. Irene created a central figure with six green heads and two red figures, each with two faces and hands, that ward off evil. The stitching around the green figure adds decoration as well as meaning. Says the artist:

The shape at the center represents the land and the animals and people who live there; the strips [of yellow and magenta felt] on this shape are willows. The border is grass growing. The two [red] figures are people out on the land. The grass is trying to grab the people. They turn into loons and fly away. The hands are saying, "Don't grab me. Stay away from me."

The name Avaalaaqiaq translates as "willow." By including strips attached with a branching chain stitch, which the artist identifies as willows, in the wall hanging, Irene created a type of signature connecting her as an Inuit to the story of the land spirits and symbolizing her powerful attachment to the land.

## Classroom Activity

*Frightened by the Land Spirits* is symmetrical and balanced. Have students fold pieces of colored paper in half, draw simple or complicated shapes, and then cut them out. Opening the paper will reveal symmetrical forms. Students can glue these shapes to a piece of paper and embellish them with colored lines and details to create their own composite creatures. Just as Irene created a signature pattern on her wall hanging, invite students to use markers or crayons to create their own unique marks as signatures on their artworks.

Instruct students to use their final compositions as inspiration to write stories about how creatures interact with other creatures, humans, and the land itself.



Irene Avaalaaqiaq Tiktaalaaq (Canadian Inuit).  
*Frightened by the Land Spirits*. c. 1994. Baker Lake,  
Nunavut, Canada. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of  
Eunice K. Lipkowitz, Washington, D.C., BMA 1998.485.  
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