

# Arctic Visible: Mapping the Visual Representations of Indigenous Peoples in the Nineteenth-Century Western Arctic

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**Abstract.** This paper describes progress of the ongoing postdoctoral project ARCVIS. The project is funded by a two-year individual fellowship from Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions (2019-2021). ARCVIS gathers, maps, and disseminates representations of Indigenous peoples in the western Arctic (Greenland, Canada, Alaska) between 1800 and 1880. The material is comprised of watercolours, pencil sketches, photographs, and prints, such as lithographs, woodcuts, and engravings. The visual material is scattered in archives around the world and this project's aim is to gather that material together and display it geographically, linked to its places of origin in the Arctic. A key element of this project is the collation and interpretation of the material through an open access online geospatial platform, which combines the visibility of exploration and travel with digital methods that seek to bring out the richly contextual information often bypassed in visual documentary records. The project will present the peopled western Arctic that was encountered by 'explorers.' Through the analysis of picture and text in archives and published nineteenth-century texts, it will strive to give 'voice' to the Indigenous people who were key to the success or failure of expeditions from the south. The project challenges the common outsider perception of the Arctic, which is often seen as an empty, icy region, devoid of human populations. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it has not been possible to include 'new' archival sources and the online platform will now only use images and texts available online and in the public domain.

**Keywords:** Mapping, Arctic, Indigenous, Visual, Nineteenth-Century.

## 1 Introduction

### 1.1 Background

In this paper, I describe my ongoing work on the project Arctic Visible (ARCVIS), a two-year postdoctoral research project funded by the Marie Skłodowska-Curie actions Individual Fellowship as part of the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 839477). The project gathers, maps, and disseminates approximately one thousand nineteenth-century representations of Indige-

nous people in the western Arctic (present-day Alaska, Canada, and Greenland) alongside associated textual extracts. These images include watercolours, pencil sketches, prints in travel narratives and periodicals, and photographs; they are located at archives around the world with large amounts of material preserved at the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge (SPRI), Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa (LAC), the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich (NMM), and the Museum of Cultural History, Oslo (KHM) among others. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to carry out any archival research due to the pandemic and the project now relies on material freely available in the public domain. The project creates an open-access geodatabase that connects the representations with their geographical origins. By connecting picture to place, the project seeks to virtually ‘return’ these cultural artefacts to people in the Arctic. Furthermore, the project aims to unsettle the dominating narratives of the empty, isolated, barren Arctic by showing the very peopled places and complex environments that travellers to the Arctic encountered in the nineteenth century. The project also includes the work of Indigenous artists and, in particular, instances where the Indigenous insider depicts the ‘explorer’ outsider, giving us a rare view through a reversed lens.



**Fig. 1.** Map of the Arctic Region showing the areas of Alaska, Canada, and Greenland.

## 1.2 Data Types and Problems

The data takes many different forms. It includes diminutive watercolours and sketches, handwritten notes, inscriptions, personal journals, hand-coloured photographs, as well as secondary prints such as lithographs, engravings and woodcuts. The prints are most often located in published travel narratives, periodicals and folios. The type of media is of great importance to the project; prints made in the metropole differ in style and content to documentary art made aboard an expedition ship and rough sketches usually contain richer information than photographs or artistic lithographs. For example, on-the-spot sketches are more likely to show damage indicating their creation in the field, marks indicating their handling afterwards, and inscriptions such as names of subjects, locations, and exact dates. These inscriptions and indicators provide us with rich sources of information that are often missing from published material.

Unfortunately, the current COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible to conduct the archival research that was planned for late spring and summer 2020, meaning that the project now relies solely on available digital sources. Metadata has so far been gathered from the online catalogues of LAC, SPRI museum, KHM [10, 15, 17]. Websites such as the Illustration Archive (based at Cardiff University) [8] and the HathiTrust Digital Library [7] are also invaluable for the research. However, the pandemic makes it difficult to obtain material that has not been previously photographed and to discover uncatalogued material. Other potential problems include copyright issues meaning that permissions to display images will have to be sourced individually from separate institutions, although, even when it is not possible to obtain/display an image the metadata of that image can still be mapped.

## 2 Approach and Methodology

### 2.1 Data Collection

The project gathers data held at archives and museums around the world, as well as published material, and includes image files, textual extracts, and metadata that is augmented by the project. An important aspect is ascertaining where pictures were created and who or what they depict. Material collected so far includes that created in Greenland, Nunavut and the Inuvialuit Settlement Region (Canada), and northern and western Alaska. New data that is added aims to include locations (where the images were made and/or the place they depict) using the GeoNames geographical database to give them identifiers [6] and supplemented by regional databases. These include the Inuit Heritage Trust Place Names Program [9] (Nunavut), NunaGIS [13] (Greenland) and Alaska Native Place Names [1]. Historical place names as well as those used today are included in the database and when it is not possible to ascertain a location, a distinct symbol will be used to indicate that this is the case. Different data sources are gathered together manually and information entered into an Excel spreadsheet using approximately 25 fields based on 'Dublin Core' metadata terms [5]. Fields include the name of the archival repository where the material image is held, its archive number and its contents, making each picture findable for future researchers. Each record has a unique identifier based

on the original date of its making, its artist, and a short title (YYYYMMDD\_Artist\_ShortTitle). A large proportion of records from this spreadsheet and their associated images will form the basis of the open-access online portal. Following the completion of the project, all the tabulated data will be preserved and made available as an open-access, reusable .csv file.

**Table 1.** Sample Data Entry Showing the Field Names and Data.

<b>Field</b>	<b>Example</b>
Filename (date, artist, short title)	18300109_Ross_FirstCommunication
Title (Inscription where present)	First Communication
File	<a href="https://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/museum/catalogue/article/y66.3.48/">https://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/museum/catalogue/article/y66.3.48/</a>
Creator (Artist/Photographer)	Ross, John
Engraver	N/A
Date: From	1830
Date: To	1830
Format (Medium)	Watercolour
Level	1
GeoNames ID	near 5952057
Historic Location	Felix Harbour
Location	Near Felix Harbour
Territory/Municipality/Region	Nunavut
Country/State	Canada
Size h x w cm	14.5 x 22.5
Type	Scene
Season	Winter
Expedition	Ross 1829-33
Source	Scott Polar Research Institute
Identifier (Archive Number)	Y: 66/3/48
Associated Text	See Ross, p. 242. "Going on shore this morning, one of the seamen informed me that strangers were seen from the observatory." (242)
Notes	This watercolour was reproduced as a print for Ross's Narrative of a second voyage in search of a north-west passage.
Subject	Netsilik, Inuit, British, Naval, Contact
Inuit Heritage Trust Place Names	In the Inuit Heritage Trust Place Names Program, the place of first contact between Ross's expedition and Netsilik Inuit is given as Qaplunasiuqvik. Latitude 69.9839147; Longitude -92.0442772

## 2.2 Working with Sensitive Material

Although the representations do not depict living people, the material and their titles can be overtly racist in their contents, design, and choice of words. The material, despite its age, still requires a reflexive approach and ethical sensitivity “based on careful considerations, continual reflections and conscious choices at every step of the project” [3]. Titles of pictures can also be problematic and the guidelines for writing culturally sensitive titles established by Library and Archives Canada [11] will be followed where necessary. This allows for creating a new title in square brackets, whilst retaining original formal titles used by the museums or artists/photographers.

## 2.3 Online Portal

The research project will likely use a combination of open source tools, such as WordPress, Omeka, Neatline, and StoryMapJS [18, 14, 12, 16], to build a user-friendly and attractive platform in 2021 that will encourage use by the broadest possible spectrum of people. It is particularly important for the project that not only researchers make use of the data, but that it is freely accessible and usable by local communities in the Arctic, whose members are located thousands of kilometres from the archives that hold the original pictures that depict their local areas and the people who lived there in the nineteenth century. Information about the project is being disseminated to Arctic organizations and it is hoped that the website and its material can be used in educational settings for example.

The data from the online portal will be placed in a suitable data repository approved by Re3data enabling reuse independently of the lifespan of the website and assuring adherence to the FAIR principles.

With the permission of the relevant repositories (some repositories own the copyright of their archives), image files will also be made available and permalinks to material already in the public domain will be provided. A text file will also be created to provide supporting documentation explaining the data.

## 3 Impact

The ARCVIS project portal will enable users to search for visual material in several ways but perhaps most significantly by location on the map. It is hoped that the project portal will prove to be a resource for local communities in the Arctic as well as academic researchers. This will enable users to search within their geographic area of interest. In a sense, it is hoped that this portal can allow Arctic communities to ‘reclaim’ a part of their heritage that is currently scattered in various archival catalogues, digital libraries, and databases worldwide. This project draws together a wealth of resources and uses documentary texts such as journals and travel narratives to pinpoint the original locations of images. Historical geographer Felix Driver observes that the “visual archive of travel” (and, I would add, the mapping of that archive) has the potential to be used in Indigenous land claim settlements [4].

The Arctic region suffers from sweeping generalizations and is often viewed by outsiders as one homogenous area, however, this project will show not only portraits of people but also scenes that include settlements and considerable environmental information. The maps of documentary art and photography that the project creates will open up new avenues for researchers as well as showing the Arctic as a region that is highly localised and specific. Importantly, the majority of the images were created by visitors to the Arctic, mostly expedition members, and show the huge significance of Indigenous people to the expeditions. Such exploration would have been increasingly difficult, if not impossible, without that support. As Ellen Boucher notes, expeditions were not above appropriating Inuit survival techniques, but their debt to Inuit was “easily obscured and forgotten” [2].

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