

Capturing the Unknown: Pictures of England's First Encounters with the Inuit

The watercolours presented in this exhibition all record first encounters of the English with the Nugumiut Inuit. Following Martin Frobisher's expeditions to Baffin Island (located in today's Canada Arctic) in the 1570s and 1580s, John White produced a series of limnings, the early modern word for pictures painted in watercolour, bodycolour and gold. Limning at the time was a medium whose 'quickness' (both in application and drying) and portability made it a medium fit for the depiction of all things 'new' and curious. As limnings usually required the 'party's own presence for the most part of the time' (Nicholas Hilliard), these images were oftentimes associated with a sense of presence and immediacy. The use of bright colours, inherited from illumination techniques, added to the life-likeness of these images as well as to their captivating power.

It is not known whether John White, who either painted or inspired all artworks in this exhibition actually travelled with Frobisher to the Bay now named after him. Yet White had already made a reputation for himself as the gifted limner of the wonders of the new world, thanks to his watercolours of the Algonquian people, natural resources and landscapes. It may therefore come as no surprise that he should have been chosen to illustrate the violent confrontation between the English and the Inuit at Bloody Point, as well as to portray the captives brought back to England against their will. These pictures, like the men and women they depict so realistically, were part of a greater colonial and commercial project. They are not to be read solely as a form of proto-ethnography but also as part of a visual propaganda destined to the English crown and the Cathay company, whose economic interests rested partly in the discovery of the North-west Passage.