James Houston

Translating ice into glass.

by Brooke Chilvers

MY HEART SANK on April 17, 2005. Flipping from the front page of the *New York Times* to the obituaries (a beastly Baby Boomer habit), I saw the handsome, grizzled face of 85-year-old Toronto-born artist, author and Arctic adventurer James Houston looking back at me. I had "discovered" his work only a year earlier, during a timid first entry into Steuben Glass's flagship store on Madison Avenue, and been bedazzled by his trio of crystal glass sculptures of Inuit fishermen. Bedazzled! Me? Who abhors glass "art"?

I kicked myself in the butt—twice—for not immediately making contact with this exceptional man, whose art expresses the icy environment of the Inuit by capturing it in glass. "Realizing a connection between glass and ice was of huge importance to me," wrote Houston, referring to how well the purity of Arctic waters translates into flawless 30-percent lead crystal glass, and how both are formed from the hardening of a liquid.

Many of Houston's works are windows onto the ageless interactions between Man and his piscatorial prey both above and below the ice. In *Arctic Fisherman,* the kneeling Inuit, cast in sterling silver, waits to thrust his three-prong kakivak or fishing spear into the engraved Arctic char approaching his ice hole. In *Mother & Child,* because Inuit culture distinguishes between men's and women's tools, she uses a "woman's fish jig" to lure her dinner. In *Fisherman's Magic,* the figure stands, his arm raised above his catch—a simple gesture that suggests thanks or prayer to the fish that have given themselves to his spear. He has laid them in a circle, heads facing the fishing hole, so their souls can flow from their mouths to the sea in order to return to his trident.

How did the man, who worked from 1948 to 1962 as Baffin Island's first civil administrator and self-described "game and fisheries officer, explosives officer, mineral claims officer, fur officer, dog officer and roving crafts officer," become a master designer at Steuben Glass for 43 years, creating some 120 sculptures? Houston also wrote and illustrated 17 children's books—and as many for adults—based upon or about Indian, Eskimo and Inuit art and culture. His novel, *The White Dawn,* was a Book-of-the-Month Club main selection and was turned into a movie with Warren Oates. Houston also produced and directed numerous documentary films on Arctic cultures and received every possible award, medal and honorary degree including Officer of the Order of Canada, his country's highest honor. For his prescient recognition, appreciation and promotion of Inuit art and handicrafts, he was named one of the 125 most influential Canadians in his country's history. In addition to bringing worldwide attention to these distinct native carvings, in 1957 he introduced the printmaking techniques he'd learned in Japan to the Inuit, inspiring them to recount their unwritten stories and myths in the stone block and stencil printing for which they are now also renowned.

In the book, *The Arctic Fisherman,* Houston recounts the arrival in 1959 of Cape Dorset's first tourists: a lively group of men and women provisioned with jerry cans of gin, vodka and scotch. The group included Arthur A. Houghton Jr., great-grandson of the founder of Corning Glass Works, president of Steuben Glass Works (a division of Corning) and later of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. By the time they left, ditching their Abercrombie & Fitch rifles, ammunition, fishing gear, parkas and sleeping bags to avoid overloading the aircraft, Houghton had purchased for the MET the entire offerings of the first-ever West Baffin Eskimo Cooperative, substantiating what Houston already knew: that the steatite carvings expressing the Inuit cosmos were not only beautiful, compelling and historically important, but were also created by individual artists with obscure names, worthy of acknowledgement.

That Houghton invited Houston to New York City to work for Steuben (he arrived three years and

one divorce later) is not entirely surprising. Houston had studied art in Canada, Paris and Japan, and learned from a goldsmith to sculpt with hard wax. Still, he worked throughout his life almost exclusively in pencil, ink, dry point, woodcut engravings—and glass.

It's said that his spirited sketches of Inuit life originated, at least initially, in his inability to speak Inuktitut. Instead, he communicated with the 360-some Inuit living in a dozen nomadic camps spread over 65,000 square miles with a sketch book, a flexible pen, or goose or raven quill, and a single flat bottle of black ink carried against his chest to keep it liquid. As temperatures even inside igloos were never warmer than -32 degrees Fahrenheit, Houston learned to work fast. Fifty years later, he felt "the on-the-spot quality of quick sketches has a certain vitality that I find nowhere else in my work."

Although Houston was influenced by the Inuits' characteristic style, he only echoed, never imitated it. If his curving, flowing sketches are reminiscent of their soapstone sculpture, his glass sculptures have the sharp edges of an iceberg, as in *Ice Hunter* and *Ice Bear*. These sheer cuts, even in his softer, more "squarish" works, create a multitude of angles, refractions and reflections through which to view the piece, making them exponentially complex aquariums of Inuit life, ice and the sea. Houston was a natural storyteller, and his innovative combining of precious-metal figures in a landscape of clear, frosted or unpolished glass narrates these tales perfectly.

Although the exact origin of glass, one of the earliest man-made materials, remains a mystery, glass lumps dating from 3000 B.C. have been uncovered in Mesopotamia (today's Iraq). By 1500 B.C., glass-making was a full-fledged industry in Egypt, and in Europe during the Industrial Revolution had become mostly automated.

Glass is made by uniformly stirring in temperatures to 2500-degree precisely measured quantities of dry "batch," such as sand, soda and/or potash and lime. Lead, which started to be added in 17th-century England, makes glass more suitable for hand-working by increasing its density; this in turn increases its refractive index, rendering it clearer and more brilliant when cut and polished.

Steuben—pronounced Stoo-ben´, the accent solidly on the second syllable, like the New York State county named after General George Washington's drillmaster, Baron von Steuben—was founded in 1903 by an English glassmaker and acquired by Corning Glass Works in 1918. Originally known for its colored glass similar to iridescent art glass, under Houghton's vision for the company Steuben developed a new formula for optical glass with an especially high refractive index, clarity and brilliance. He added top designers to the formula and maintained the tradition of hand-finishing.

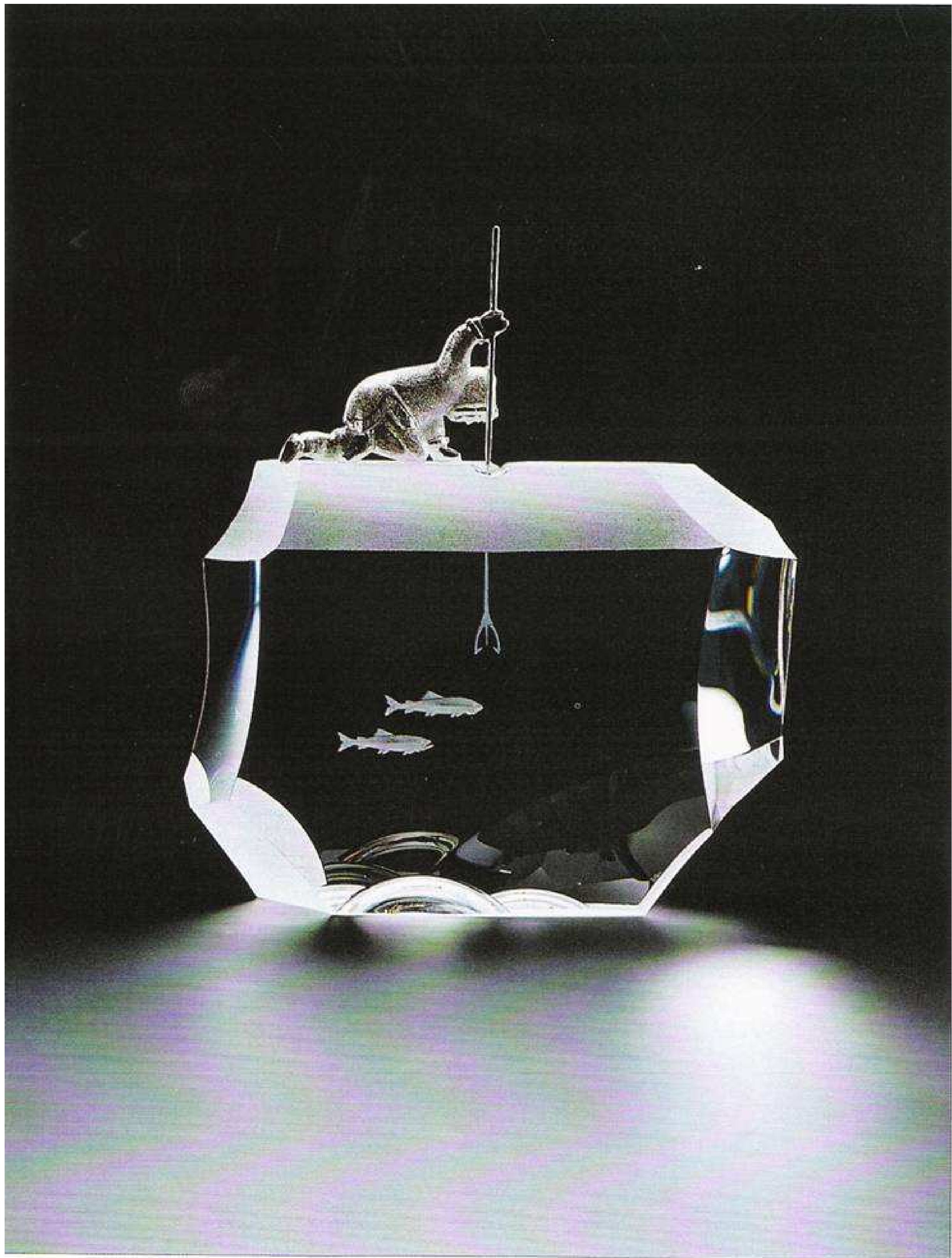
For Houston the process began with the Steuben studio turning his drawing into a three-dimensional model of clay, wood or plaster. Molten rubber was then poured over the model to create a negative image, or master mold, from which a second plaster mold was made. Then a roughly shaped piece of "cold" glass was slowly heated at low temperatures in that mold until it "sagged." After slow cooling (from eight hours to two and a half days), which eliminates the stresses that might otherwise cause the glass to crack, the mold was chipped away, leaving the glass form ready to finish by diamond-saw "cold cutting," or sandstone-wheel rough cutting (similar to sandblasting), to create the matte frosty finish of snow, or by polishing to brilliance with pumice and a cerium-oxide putty.

Houston's bush life and bushcraft undoubtedly carried over into his art. He would have found parallels between the incised bone carvings of the Inuit and the concave, shallow intaglio engraving (i.e., low relief in reverse) into glass. Engraving starts with an India ink drawing on shellacked glass. The lines are then pressed against rotating copper-plated wheels of various sizes (from one-quarter to four inches in diameter) fed with linseed oil and emery powder. In addition, the teamwork required for nomadic Arctic hunter-fishermen to survive would have reminded him of the teamwork of craftsmen—designer, gaffer, servitor, bit gatherer and stick-up boy—to produce glass works.

Houston certainly appreciated that white-hot, molten glass is almost alive. And, like human life, its quantities are measured in time. For a fin in *Trout & Fly*, the master gaffer might call out: "Hey Joe! Give me a 60-second gather." Finally, cold glass can be cut or melted, like ice.

Houston learned many things along a lifeline that ran from the -45 degrees of the Arctic to the +2500 degrees of the Steuben factory's roaring "glory hole." He never stopped celebrating and crediting the Inuit and Eskimo for the great richness they brought to his life and art. "They even taught me how to walk on thin ice." ■

Despite her offerings (in the form of ice cones flavored with Crown Royal) to the half-fish sea goddess, Taliillajuuk, Brooke's pitiful attempts at ice fishing in Nunavut, competing against a group of Japanese tourists, resulted only in Chef Boyardee ravioli for her dinner instead of sushi.



"Arctic Fisherman," 6 ½ inches, by James Houston (1921–2005).
Courtesy of Steuben Glass.