

Bulletin

Alaska State Museum, Juneau • Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka

It has been said that a skilled craftsman could enter the woods with only a knife and an ax and return floating in a canoe. A birch bark canoe was an exceptional piece of pre-industrial technology. Light, strong, and field maintainable, it was the perfect vehicle for travel in the Bush. As more factory-made watercraft became available, however, the skills needed for making a birch bark canoe were no longer a necessary part of Bush life. As these canoes disappeared from the landscape, some ended up in museum collections. In the later part of the nineteenth century, the Reverend Sheldon Jackson collected several such canoes for the Sheldon Jackson Museum in Sitka. Over the years, one of them had become damaged due to insect attack, changes in the environment, and improper handling. During the summer of 2002, the Museum carried out an extensive conservation treatment of this canoe.

For this project, a conservation student and an Athabascan canoe builder were selected to be a part of the conservation team. The goal of the project was not only to restore the canoe to its previous appearance but also to provide an opportunity for collaboration between modern conservation methods and Native Alaskan knowledge. This collaboration would benefit everyone by showing how to repair and care for the canoe from two different perspectives. Because the work took place in the exhibit gallery, the public was also able to learn first-hand about this conservation effort.



Canoe Conservation Project



Conservation intern Lara Kaplan from the Winterthur/Delaware Conservation Program carried out the work under the supervision of conservator Scott Carrlee from the Alaska State Museums. Athabascan elder and canoe builder Howard Luke advised and helped with the reconstruction of the missing prow piece. The project was supported by a generous grant from the L.J. Skaggs and Mary C. Skaggs Foundation.

by Scott Carrlee
Conservator
Alaska State Museums

The Canoe

This canoe is more than a century old. Although the curatorial records are incomplete for this object, it was most likely accessioned into the Museum's collection towards the end of the nineteenth century. Stylistically, the canoe has many features characteristic of a type known as the kayak-form. Athabascan groups made these canoes almost exclusively, though some are found in Eskimo territory, including the Kobuk River. Therefore, this

TOP RIGHT: Canoe on new display mount after treatment.

BOTTOM LEFT: Howard Luke and Lara Kaplan at work on new prow peice.

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canoe may be from the Kobuk River, as the curatorial file suggests, even though this area is Inupiaq rather than Athabascan.

Treatment

The canoe took eight weeks to conserve. The process was open for public view during regular gallery hours. We used the opportunity to educate the public about how the Museum preserves its collection. Throughout the treatment Kaplan answered numerous questions from curious visitors.

The first step in the treatment process was to take the canoe down from its perch atop one of the exhibit cases in the gallery. This required six people to carefully

maneuver it down without putting any pressure on it.

The inside of the canoe was dusty with a compact dirt layer on the surface. The loose dust and dirt was removed with a brush and a vacuum. The more tenacious dirt was cleaned with cotton swabs and dry sponges.

Many of the spruce root lashings that hold the various canoe parts together were broken or missing. In order to repair them, Kaplan used Japanese tissue paper (a strong fibrous paper) and applied acrylic paints to match the old spruce root. The tissue paper was rolled to form a small tube and attached over the end of the broken lashings with an adhesive. The replacement lashings were then threaded through the original holes in the birch bark.

Some of the spruce gunwales were badly damaged by insects. Wood boring beetles had tunneled into the wood severely weakening the gunwale rails. These broke into many pieces when the prow collapsed.

Repairing them required adding small wooden splints to give support and hold the wood together. The areas of missing wood were filled with a mixture of adhesive and Japanese tissue paper. The mended area was covered with Japanese tissue paper toned to match the wood. The end result was both strong and gave the appearance of solid wood.



Prow before restoration.

The prow was the most damaged part of the canoe. It had collapsed during an earlier move because the insect damage had weakened the wooden support members. Fortunately all of the pieces were saved at that time, and the prow could be reconstructed using the original birch bark and carved spruce gunwale pieces.

The end piece of the prow was not found among the broken pieces. Curatorial records show that this piece was missing even before the prow was damaged in the move. Mr. Luke spent considerable time carving a suitable replacement piece for the prow. He shared his expertise in canoe building with Kaplan, who had many questions for him. This collaboration with a Native craftsman was very beneficial to the project.

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Japanese tissue repairs to spruce root lashings.



Repair to gunwale rail with wood splint.



Howard Luke carving prow.

The Alaska State Museum has recently added two new art exhibits to its list of exhibitions available for viewing on the Internet. The two exhibits highlight the work of contemporary Alaska artists Carol Lee Hilgemann of North Pole, and Don Mohr of Anchorage. They may be viewed online at: www.museums.state.ak.us/online.

The exhibits are virtual versions of recent solo exhibits by the artists at the Museum. The online visitor can see images of the art installed in the galleries and click on individual artworks to see enlarged views and details. Interviews with the artists are cross-linked to artworks to illustrate points in the discussion. Biographical material on the artists is also provided.

Carol Lee Hilgemann's exhibit, *Rescued and Reincarnated*, features numerous examples of the artist's work in assemblage, sculptural objects made by combining bits and pieces of found materials and objects purchased in second-hand and antique stores. Many of the objects contain autobiographical elements as well as comment on the roles of women in our culture. Hilgemann states: "Assemblage is an art form reflective of our consumer culture (involving) recycling and renewing. I enjoy juxtaposing objects, utilizing an object other than for its intended purpose, and

adding that unexpected twist or bit of humor."

Assemblage is also a key element of Anchorage sculptor Don Mohr's work. His exhibition, *...is this not an urgent matter?*, the title of which is taken from a poem by a Buddhist monk, consists of a half dozen works that incorporate scavenged industrial materials and high-tech fabric to fill a gallery space, with some pieces projecting off the walls and onto the floor. In the course of his interview, Mohr says: "I am drawn to science and scientific instruments...I use these types of found objects in a good deal of my work. They are not about nostalgia for the past. They are about measurement and decay. They are about precision and failure."

The new exhibits join a growing list of online exhibits available on the Museum's Web site, including the Alaska Positive photographic exhibit and earlier solo artist exhibitions. In addition, the Museum has extensive materials available on two other exhibitions that featured Alaskan quilts and the history of Alaska's flag. These exhibits are supplemented with interactive and curriculum materials to enable use by classroom teachers and home schoolers. For further information go to the Web site at: www.museums.state.ak.us. You may also contact the Museum at 465-2901. ■

New Art Exhibits on Museum Web Site

SEVERAL WEB SITES have come to our attention that may be of interest to museums.

AuctionMuse, "A museum professional's guide to online auctions," consists of the results of a survey conducted as a master's project in museum studies. It contains a good deal of information and will certainly be helpful if you've had questions or are considering using online auctions to augment your museum collection. You can find it at: www.auctionmuse.com.

Museum Marketing Tips provides a number of articles and links to Web sites on a wide variety of marketing topics of interest to museums. It's at: museummarketingtips.com.

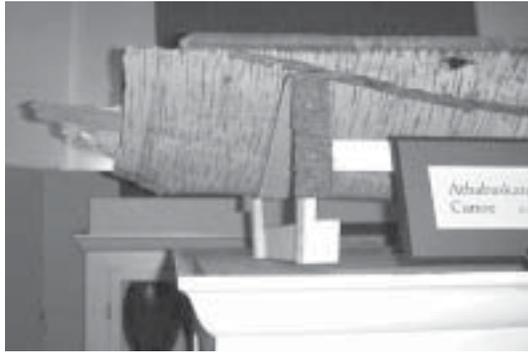
Techsoup- Technical Information and Advice for Non-profits, offers a collection of web pages and services aimed at helping non-profits negotiate hardware, software, Internet and other technology choices. Check them out at: www.techsoup.org. ■

Websites of interest

MAKE PLANS TO ATTEND the 2003 Museums Alaska and Alaska Historical Society Joint Conference, to be held in picturesque Haines, Alaska September 24-27. It's the 20th or 25th anniversary of Museums Alaska, depending on how you count it, and the theme is "Celebrating Our Past / Planning Our Future." The Historical

Society will be emphasizing the image of Alaska in popular culture. A preliminary list of session topics and speakers will be available soon. Haines also promises to offer some outstanding field trips. This is a great opportunity to learn new skills and have fun! ■

Museums Alaska Annual Conference



Prow before and after treatment.



It allowed Kaplan to get first-hand knowledge of a craft that is rarely practiced today.

The results of the treatment exceeded expectations. The prow was reconstructed using most of the original pieces. Some patches with new birch bark were necessary to cover holes. The newly carved end piece was toned with acrylic paint to match the old wood of the original prow. It was adhered to the broken end for a seamless match.

The final step in the treatment process was to construct a secure exhibit mount that would both properly support the canoe and show it to its best advantage. The new mount raises the canoe up so that more of it can be seen.

Now the Sheldon Jackson Museum has one of its major exhibits back intact. The project was a success. It was a learning experience for all involved and the public was able to see up close how the Museum cares for its collections. ■

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS BULLETIN

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Alaska State Department of Education and
Early Development

This publication was released by the Division of
Libraries, Archives and Museums, produced at a
cost of \$.30 per copy to communicate museums'
activities, and printed in Juneau, Alaska.

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