

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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June Artifact of the Month: Tlingit Feasting Dish



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's June Artifact of the Month is a large Tlingit feasting dish or bowl in the form of a seal (SJIA873). The feasting dish is embellished with various ovoid forms and abalone or pearl inlay in the eyes, flippers, and rim, glass beads, bone peg teeth, and a dark stain finish. The sides of the dish feature flippers with basal ovoids that sweep up and back to form an arch over the tail. One basal flipper ovoid has a rectangular abalone inlay; the other flipper's inlay is missing. The seal's head is large and embellished with cross-hatched cheeks and flaring nostrils. The bowl cavity is cut from the animal's back and embellished with eight domed oval bone or antler inlays spaced around the rim. The majority of the bowl is a brown blackish color but a darker stain runs across the eyebrows and the top of the flippers. This bowl was

collected by Bud Fear, who travelled by steamship to Southeast Alaska in the 1930s or 1940s, at which time he likely purchased the bowl. Fear gave the bowl to Doctor William and Carol Mundy in the 1950s and the couple later donated it to the museum. Although there is no written signature evidence, it is believed to have been made by the artist Rudolph Walton.

Feasting was different than everyday eating and often involved the use of dishes, ladles, and spoons to support notions of rank and identity. Simple horn and wooden spoons were used on a daily basis, but elaborately decorated utensils, bowls, and dishes were reserved for special occasions. Such celebratory meals would take place often when there was a seasonal surplus of salmon or a successful hunt. The food served would vary seasonally and include dried salmon or some other fish, seal meat, seaweed or herring spawn, berries, often along with oil from fish or seal, in which food was dipped, and the beaten soapberry.

Northwest coast dishes were usually made of alder but or other non-resinous woods such as maple and birch, constructed by men, and according to Lieutenant George Thornton Emmons, were one of four types. The first kind was small, most varied in shape, and used for oil, into which foods were dipped during meals. These smaller dishes would become so permeated with greased and smoothed from use they would appear to be made of ebony. The second kind of dish was a deep dish called a *kah-kon-na* made of a single length of board steamed and shaped and then sewed or pegged on one side with an additional piece of wood added for the bottom. The third and commonest kind of dish was called a *tsikh shee-ou*, often of medium size, cut from solid blocks of wood, carved at the ends with an animal's head in low relief, and used to prepare and eat all kinds of food. The fourth kind of dish called a *sho-hun-cut-to-r tsikh* was much rarer and oval in shape with high canoe-like ends, deeply curved sides, a slightly convex outer surface, and carved in low relief to show an animal's head. In more ornamental dishes, the rim was inlaid with opercula. Feast dishes tended to be huge - some as large as small canoes, and capable of serving up to five people at once. Some feature family or clan crests.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum invites you to see this feast dish, other utensils, dishes, and bowls, and works by Rudolph Walton. The dish will be on exhibit until June 30th.

Summer hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. General admission is \$5 for adults; \$4 for seniors and visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

Emmons, George Thornton & (Ed.) De Laguna, Frederica. *The Tlingit Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1991

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