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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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November Artifact of the Month: Cribbage Board

SITKA – The November artifact of the month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a cribbage board (II.X.19). The cribbage board is made of walrus ivory tusk and is finely carved and etched with the figures of a seal on an ice floe, a bear, and a walrus. The board has threaded storage space for six delicately finished pegs with threaded plug closures and is missing the balancing peg from the bottom side. The game piece is visually appealing because of the expertly rendered pictorial engravings on its surface and historically fascinating for its connection to *Ye Olde Curio Shop*, a store that has been in operation in Seattle for nearly one hundred and fifteen years.



Cribbage board (II.X.19)

The cribbage board was given to the Sheldon Jackson Museum in by A.W. Hilkert in 1977. In his 1977 letter to then-curator, Alice Postell, he describes his visit to Sitka several years before and his great interest in the museum's collection of cribbage boards. He writes to Postell that he "was told that the museum was very interested in obtaining handmade boards (cribbage boards)." Hilkert, a passionate cribbage player, went on, "As you know, all crib players think they are the champions, and with this board, I have challenged many a good player, and many a dollar has passed over this board... Since I am elderly and can no longer see to play, I would be very happy to donate this beautiful piece of art to your museum as a token of good will and friendship."

Mr. Hilkert acquired the piece from the *Ye Olde Curio Shop* in Seattle in 1915. The shop was founded in 1899 by Joseph E. "Daddy" Standley, a curio collector who was originally from Ohio and came to Seattle in the late 1890s after the Yukon gold rush. Standley sold exotic material from all over the world but quickly began to focus on Native American collectibles and art including whalebones, baskets, moccasins, Haida "jadeite" totem poles, masks, paddles, carved miniature totem poles made by Nuu-chah-nulth from British Columbia, full-size totem poles on commission, curios from Native Americans from the Plains, the Southwest, and California, and ivory carvings like this cribbage board. The shop became an active participant in Seattle's 1909 Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Exposition and

became an important source of Northwest Coast and Arctic collections for the Royal Ontario Museum, the National Museum of the Native American Indian, the Newark Museum, the American Museum of Natural History, and other collecting entities.

Inupiaq peoples were engraving representational images on ivory long before contact with Euro-Americans. Linear and circular designs have been found engraved on utilitarian tools at the earliest archaeological sites in the region and ivory featuring pictorial designs can be dated back to A.D.1200-1800 (the time of Thule culture).

Northern Alaskans sold their belongings and engravings to occasional travelers and laborers on board ships for many years after arrival of Euro-Americans, but it was not until the gold rushes of the Klondike and Nome that permanent markets for Northern Alaskan art identified as “market art,” art described by Dorothy Ray Jean as art generally made for nonnative consumers, was established.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, the new market for Northern Alaskan art emerged. As gold-rush customers realized the local Native population was extremely adept at copying illustrations and objects in two and three-dimensional forms, the market became flooded with ivory objects such as gavels, umbrella heads, napkin rings, tableware, penholders, cigar holders, smoking pipes, long strings of beads, belt buckles, vases, toothpick holders, and many other objects. The most popular item to appear among these goods was the cribbage board.

The ivory cribbage board originated in Cape Nome when a man named Angowazhuk, known as “Happy Jack, the ivory carver” carved a walrus tusk into the form. He often signed his work and became one of the first carvers in Nome to be identified as an individual artist as opposed to an anonymous one, which was often the case. Angowazhuk and several other men who signed their names and many who did not and remain anonymous began what Dorothy Ray Jean identifies as the western pictorial style of engraving subject matter. This style was often copied from twentieth century printed illustrations or photographs furnished by customers and was one of four engraving styles. The other styles include old engraving (usually reserved for drill bows and bag handles), modified engraving (used on large surfaces of a tusk or ivory pipe), and modified pictorial or contemporary, a modification of old western pictorial style generally depicting northern Alaskan subjects.

The cribbage board will be on display through November 30th. Winter hours at the museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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[return to top](#)

[press releases](#) | [Alaska State Museums](#) | [Sheldon Jackson Museum](#)