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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: **March 25, 2011**

April Artifact of the Month: Drawings by Robert Mayokok



For the month of April, the Sheldon Jackson Museum will exhibit nine drawings by Inupiaq artist Robert Mayokok (1903-1983). These original drawings were given to the museum by the artist during the 1960s. Mayokok was a person of many talents, best described in an article by Yvonne Mozee:

“He was a reindeer herder and a lecturer, a deck hand and a walrus hunter, a news broadcaster and a mess boy, a fox trapper and a church translator, a drifter and a multi-published author.”

According to Dorothy Jean Ray, an expert on Inupiaq art, Mayokok should be included along with James Kivetoruk Moses and George Aden Ahgupuk as the first professional Inupiaq artists, “for all of them were eventually able to make a living from their artwork.”

Mayokok did not learn English until he was eight when, with great determination, he taught himself by memorizing words from the Sears Roebuck catalog and a dictionary he borrowed from his school. He later recounted his life story, “My Life as an Eskimo,” in the *Alaska Sportsman* and wrote “Marked Man: My Battle with Tuberculosis” for the *Alaska Journal*. Of his life, Mayokok said, “The story of my life is nothing extraordinary. Just a hard and lonely life, not much different from any other Eskimo.”

He was twice hospitalized for tuberculosis, spending almost five years in hospitals in Alaska and Washington. He passed part of this time learning to become a self-taught artist. Mayokok, remarking on his lack of formal education said, “I never went to art school. I noticed that people who study are usually influenced by their teachers. Their work tends to look something like their teachers’ work, and I don’t like that.”

In 1968, he started working in the Alaska Treasure Shop producing his artwork in various forms and in a promotional pamphlet encouraged visitors to “come make friends with an Eskimo and see my work.” He worked in this shop and another shop for 18 years, interacting with visitors producing thousands of drawings a year.



In the book, Eskimo Drawings, the author of the chapter on Mayokok, Susan W. Fair, finishes with an acknowledgement:

“Although I worked intensively with Native artists in Anchorage during Mayokok’s later life, I fooled myself into thinking that his work was too commercial to take into account. Instead, I could have learned much from this talented and courageous artist.”

The drawings will be on exhibit at Sheldon Jackson Museum from April 1 through April 30. Winter hours are from 10:00am to 4:00pm Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3 for adults; no admission is charged for those 18 and under. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is located at 104 College Drive.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 465-3004

www.museums.state.ak.us



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