

## Sheldon Jackson Museum

104 College Drive, Sitka, AK 99835

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

Home page: <http://www.museums.state.ak.us>

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FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Scott McAdams, 747-8981

### AUGUST ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

#### TLINGIT BONE KNIFE

An unusual bone knife from Yakutat is the Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month for August.

The knife, carved from one piece of bone, has a hollow handle decorated with circles and lines. The circles are a design used typically by Inupiat, Yup'ik, and Alutiiq Eskimo people. In these cultures the circles sometimes represented eyes, joint marks or were simply decorative elements. Yakutat's close proximity to the Alutiiq people of Prince William Sound might explain why a Tlingit knife would have these design elements. It is also possible that the Tlingits acquired the knife by trade and later sold it to Sheldon Jackson or one of his collectors.

The knife's shape appears to be modeled after a Western-style pocketknife, adding more questions about its use. Was it made as a souvenir item, for use by a shaman, or did the carver borrow the attractive designs to make the piece unique? Anthropologist Frederica de Laguna, in her work *Under Mt. St. Elias: The History and Culture of the Yakutat Tlingit*, states that there are shaman-related paraphernalia that exhibit the circle design. De Laguna suggests that these were manufactured by one of the Eskimo groups but does not speculate on how they came to be in Yakutat or if a shaman sought them out for his box of implements.

The knife's collector did not leave any information about the bone knife. It has been in the Sheldon Jackson collection since the early 1930s and has "Yakutat" written in white ink on it — a technique sometimes used by Jackson to label objects he collected.

The small bone knife can be seen at the museum August 1 – 31. Summer hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Summer admission is \$4. Youth under 18 and those with annual passes are admitted free.

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[return to top](#)

[SJ Artifacts-of-the-Month](#) | [press releases](#) | [SJ home](#) | [Alaska State Museums](#)

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[return to top](#)

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