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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM AUGUST ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s August Artifact of the Month is a Yup’ik wolf mask (SJ.II.G.2). The mask was collected from St. Michael by Henry Neumann, an agent for the Alaska Commercial Company based in St. Michael and early contributor to the Sheldon Jackson Museum’s collection. The mask has many features typical of Yup’ik masks including feathers, moveable parts, and pigment yet its inclusion of gut makes it distinct from the many other Yup’ik animal masks in the museum’s collection.

The wolf mask is made of wood and has a faded blue-grey forehead and stripe down the nose and white on each side of the face. There are brown drip-like stains on each side of the nose

and red ochre-colored pigment is painted around the rim of the head and inside the holes for the eyes and the nostrils. Five stripped bird quills extend from each side of the lower muzzle. Four white swan feathers extend in a halo around the top portion of the head. There are stubs of wooden appendages in both eyebrow areas. A piece of gut protrudes from the wolf’s moveable mouth, representing either its tongue or possibly, something it is eating. There is an upper and lower row of wooden pegged teeth in the mouth. The mask is very similar to another mask in the museum’s collection.

Masks were not casually worn without respect and honor – they had a purpose. According to Ann Feinup-Riordan, Yup’ik people traditionally used masks, “calling it *agayuliyaraq* [way of making prayer] as resolutions to petition God for the things they needed.” The masks were made by people called *angalukut* and each had a story and dance associated with them.

Masks were made for secular and spiritual purposes. Animal masks were used in the Bladder Festival, honoring souls of the seals killed the previous year, during the *Agayuyaraq* Festival, a festival to invite animal spirits into the human world where they were made visible through masked dancing, and by people wishing to depict their respective helper spirits. According to Paul John, “it seems to me that our ancestors chose designs that represented things that were desirable to acquire. The person who made that particular mask made it to represent something from the ocean that he was able to pursue in the hunt. Others made different animal designs depending on what represented desirable acquisitions for them. Mary Mike stated (p. 21) “it appears to me that they [*angalukut*] would reveal their helping spirits in the form of masks. The August Artifact of the Month may have been made to represent a game animal desired to be captured in the hunt or it could reveal a helping spirit.

Slightly over a dozen artifacts at the museum, including the Artifact of the Month and eight other Yup’ik masks were collected by Henry Neumann or his nephew Ralph. Both men were agents for the Alaska

Commercial Company. Besides distributing goods, fuel, peltry, and outfitting hunting expeditions, the Company played a prominent role in the curio trade, strengthening a market that had already begun under Russian Rule. Company agents, including the Neumanns, routinely collected curios which were then sold at company trading posts, sent to the company's museum in San Francisco, or supplied to other museums, including the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

The August Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until August 31st. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to approximately one hundred and twenty Yup'ik masks. Many of the masks, along with the August Artifact of the Month, can be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 9am and 5pm. General admission is \$5 and free for those 18 and under or members of either the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska State Museum. Admission for seniors is \$4.

Fienup-Riordan, Ann. *Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on Its Head*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2005.

Graburn, Nelson H.H, et al. *Catalogue Raisonne of the Alaska Commercial Company Collection: Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology*. University of California Press, 1996.

Meade, Marie, trans. And Ann Fienup-Riordan, ed. *The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks: Agayuliyararput (Our Way of Making Prayer)*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.

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