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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

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DECEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH
TLINGIT BASKET

A large shallow Tlingit work or berry basket is the Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month for December.

This unique basket almost met the fate of 13 other baskets and remnants of baskets that came to the museum in 2001 – that is to become "practice pieces" for the conservator and her assistants, or cut up and mounted for educational purposes. Fortunately once the basket was examined closely, unique ethnographic patches of circular "basket bottoms" were discovered sewn onto the exterior with spruce root stitches. The baskets and fragments are believed to be at least 100 years old.

In 2001, Russell Braun, acting on behalf of the now deceased and long time collector, Joe Ashby, brought a burlap bag full of what appeared to be basketry fragments to the museum. The bag was accepted with the understanding that the donation would not become part of the permanent collection but would be used for scientific and educational purposes. When the bag arrived and was examined by former curator Peter Corey, he found approximately 13 spruce root and cedar bark basketry fragments encrusted with dirt, covered with mold and potentially housing damaging insects. The contents were carefully bagged, labeled and moved to an off-site storage and eventually transferred to the Alaska State Museum in 2004 where they awaited their fate. The State Museums' conservator put the project of examining the pieces on a "to-do list" for summer conservation interns to address at a later date.

That time arrived in the summer of 2007 with two conservation interns, Samantha Springer and Molly Gleeson. While at the Alaska State Museum, the conservators unpacked the bag of baskets, vacuuming and removing the bulk of the mold and other debris. As the work progressed, they determined most of what remained should be used for scientific and educational purposes because of their extreme state of deterioration. The thirteen basket fragments were finally identified as individual baskets but only one had any hope of being saved. The before-unnoticed circular basketry bottoms attached as repairs to #417-1 caught the eye of the conservators, who consulted weavers and curators since it was a repair method not seen by them before.

The basket underwent extensive conservation treatment that included slowly unfolding and reshaping it using humidity and cleaning it with a conservation vacuum, some brushing and special cleaning sponges. Although there are tears in the weave and some missing pieces, the uniqueness of the patches has destined the basket to become a part of the museum's permanent collection for the study and learning of future generations.

The spruce root basket will be on exhibit at the Sheldon Jackson Museum December 1 through December 31 and can also be viewed on our web site at www.museums.state.ak.us. Winter hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. General admission is $3. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

TLINGIT BASKET