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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**DATE: February 3, 2015**

## **SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM FEBRUARY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH**



The February Artifact of the Month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a Tlingit wall pocket of fabric embellished with designs in seed beads (S.J.I.A.302). The maker of this wall pocket is unknown as is the year of its manufacture and it is a relatively small example of beadwork but at close examination, it is a splendid amalgam of beading techniques and fabrics, and an interesting composition.

“Seed bead” is a term applied to a variety of very small European-made glass beads. Technically, seed beads are round beads considerably smaller in size than the 3.5 millimeter diameter pony bead. Seed beads became popular trade items early on in the European settlement of North America. Venice had a monopoly on glass bead manufacture from the twelfth to the late nineteenth century when Czech beads began being imported heavily for trade. The Hudson Bay Company, with trade posts at many sites in the interior of Alaska, traditionally home to the Athabascan with whom Tlingit traded, carried a variety of colored seed beads in the early 1900s.

The beading technique used in this wall pocket is single row beading except for the zipper edge beadwork made up of white seed beads along the exterior edge along the light blue ribbon border and at the top and bottom edge of the brown velvet fabric in the center. Beads are missing in several places and small frays of buff-colored or previously white thread used for application are visible, most notably at the top. Though this pocket was sewn with thread, sinew or a combination of sinew and thread was sometimes used in sewing. Sinew is strong and can be rolled very finely and with so sharp a point that beads too small

for most needles can still be strung. It was also more readily available earlier than thread. Even after thread was introduced colored varieties were very rare.

Other Native peoples including Athabascans, and Non-Alaska Native Americans including Algonquin, Ojibwa, Cree, Anishinaabe and other Woodlands Indian tribes made wall pockets and shelf valances designed to hold letters and mementos. These purely decorative household accessories were popular in Victorian homes and featured in women's magazines and pattern books. While they were often sold to outsiders, they were sometimes used by their Native workers.

Patterns on wall pockets were often similar throughout their regions of origin but subtle differences such as preference in color, motif location and scale indicate individual styles of different women in the same tribe. This top pocket on this textile is "upside down" and made with red wool trade cloth. It has a stylized face with an open mouth and a set of ears on the top of the head in yellow and turquoise blue beads resembling Tlingit formline animal ears and a set of ears on the side of the head in yellow and green resembling a human's. Above the head is a five-pointed star with a green center and a row of dark yellow, red, white, and light blue beads. The bottom pocket is also on red wool trade cloth and has a design of a double-headed eagle with white heads and a white tail and a shield-like design in the center of its body in black and white chevrons. The torso of the double-headed bird is outlined in blue turquoise beads, the inner wings in orange, and the eyes, beaks, and talons in yellow. A small foliate design with a green center and white and medium blue beads is above the bird. A six-petal flower with a white center and dark blue petals outlined in dark yellow is beaded in the bottom left and right corners. The inner pocket and back of the pockets is lined with cotton fabric and the back of the textile is dark blue wool with the word, "Chilcat" hand painted in tan paint in one corner. The backing of wool and velvet with a layer of cotton is common and adds stability and hides stitching.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum has many beaded textiles in its collection ranging from beaded wall pockets to gun cases, dance bibs, and robes. This wall pocket will be on exhibit at the Sheldon Jackson Museum through February 28<sup>th</sup>. Winter hours at the Sheldon Jackson Museum are 10am to 4pm, Tuesday through Saturday. The museum is closed holidays. General admission is \$3 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.

Dubin, Lois Sherr. *Native North American Jewelry and Adornment*. New York: Harry N. Abrams Press. 1989  
Duncan, C. Kate. *Northern Athapascan Art: A Beadwork Tradition*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1989.  
Print

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