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Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JULY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's July Artifact of the Month is a pair Inupiaq child's mukluks (SJ-II-D-45 A, B). The mukluks were likely collected by Sheldon Jackson from Cape Prince of Wales. The footwear has some minor damage and shows signs of wear, but they are currently in better condition and better able to be exhibited now than in previous years due to a recent re-humidification treatment. The design, decoration, and construction of these mukluks help underscore the great skill, technology, and art involved in the manufacture of essential footwear traditionally worn in the northern part of Alaska.

The July Artifacts of the Month have many characteristics typical of Bering Strait Inupiaq mukluks. The uppers or leg area of the footwear is sealskin, made of one piece with a single, low-peaked vamp in the front and a seam in the back. The seams of the vamp and the seam in the back are all straight. While all cultural groups use all kinds of uppers in their mukluks, the silhouette in this pair

is typical of the Bering Strait Inupiat and Yupit with the closer-fitting vamp and consequential stovepipe-like form. At the top of each upper is a band of bleached white sealskin with a thin piece of hide strip applied in wavy lines from the front to the back. A full strip of hide is attached between each upper and sole of the boots. Bleached seal skin upper edges and welts of bleached seal skin have been used by Bering Sea Inupiat and Yupit as well as St. Lawrence Islanders and East Greenlanders. The soles are likely made of bearded seal skin or oogruk and have vertically aligned pleats the entire way around. The toe areas are relatively flat. Each sole has a strap of bleached sealskin (?) sewn into the sole-upper seam. On one of the straps, "Cape Prince of Wales" is written in red ink.

The mukluks are in fair condition, but slightly damaged, misshapen, and missing elements. Both are largely depilated with a few remaining individual hairs on the boot legs. Both are scratched and have small holes – a sign of previous insect infestation. There is a noticeable small area of abrasion and surface loss on the outer edge of the left boot. Only one of the two boots has its sealskin thong drawstring at the top of the boot - the other is missing.

While men would hunt to obtain sea mammals for food and their skins, women were responsible for skin preparation and for making clothing and footwear. The sewing and preparation process involved a variety of tools including scrapers, ulus, boards, stretchers, needle cases, bodkins, needles, thimbles, and other implements. Women would begin learning about the process, so important to her family's wellbeing, and the proper use of these tools, at a very young age.

There were three main steps carried out to prepare skins for sewing. The first step in making a garment was to remove all of the meat, blubber, and fascia from the skin using an ulu or a scraper.¹ Next, skins were dried by either pegging the pelt to the ground or lashing it to a wooden frame. The frames were traditionally rectangular and nailed or lashed together with driftwood or scrap lumber. The hair was either then left intact or removed through the process of rotting or shaving off the hair. Finally, skins were either

tanned, softened, depilated, left intact (with fur remaining), or dyed or processed using one or more of these steps in preparation for sewing.

Tanning was achieved using masticated fish, urine, alder bark, fish eggs, brains, fat or smoke. Skins were also sometimes turned into a poke and used to store aged seal fat. These processes permanently altered the protein structure of the sealskin, making it more durable and less susceptible to decomposition. Skins could be softened, depending upon the garment, using flour, baking soda, baking powder, ashes or sand.

Sealskins were either left undyed or dyed varying shades of red or bleached white. To obtain colors on the spectrum of reddish-brown to darker red, a red dye made from alder bark boiled in water is used. The less time the stain is applied, the lighter the result. If white sealskin, like the sealskin bands at the top of these mukluks, was desired, the skins, once scraped, stretched and dried, were hung outside in early spring and whitened by the bright sunlight, cold temperature, and ice crystals.

Once the skins were prepared to her taste, the woman would make patterns using hand, eye, and string measurements on the skin. Basic hand measurements traditionally used included the half handspan or distance between the thumb tip and tip of the middle finger; the three quarters handspan or distance between a bent index finger at the middle knuckle and thumb outstretched in the opposite direction; and the full handspan. Final adjustments were made based upon the eye and the person for whom the garment or footwear was made. Today, it is more common to use paper or cardboard patterns.

Sealskin garments are still made to this day, though some of the tools and materials to carry out the preparation process and actual sewing have changed. To see these traditional mukluks or any of the Sheldon Jackson Museum's traditional walrus ivory and bird bone needles, bodkins, sewing bags, thimbles, ulus, and impressive array of Inupiaq garments and footwear, visit the gallery between 9am and 4:30pm any day except holidays, Tuesday through Saturday. The July Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until July 31st. General admission is \$7, \$6 for seniors, 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.

Nelson, E.W. *The Eskimo About Bering Strait*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983. Print

Oakes, Jill and Rick Riewe. *Alaska Eskimo Footwear*. Fairbanks, AK: University of Alaska Press, 2007. Print

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¹ Smooth wooden cutting boards were used as surfaces for cutting and scraping pieces. Often the boards were used by women during throughout their lives and then passed on to their daughters.