

Linda S. Thibodeau

Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,  
& Museums

lam.alaska.gov

STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Robert C. Banghart

Deputy Director

395 Whittier St.  
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1718  
907.465.2901

## Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**DATE: July 1, 2013**

### July Artifact of the Month: Yup'ik Dish

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum's artifact of the month for July is a Yup'ik dish from the Kuskokwim River region (I.I.S.80). The dish was collected by Sheldon Jackson, is oval in shape, and made from one piece of wood, possibly willow. It is natural in color except for red lines on the bottom exterior and the rim, which is red inside and out. A stylized



Yup'ik dish I.I.S.80

design of an unidentified animal slightly similar to the mythical dragon-like pal-ray-uk is painted in black pigment on the bottom interior of the dish. A border comprised of two black lines with four groupings of black parallel lines border the ochre-colored rim.

Among the Yup'ik it was the responsibility of men to work with wood which was used to make everything from hunting tools and children's toys to bentwood bowls. To make a bentwood bowl, men split wood from a tree stump using wedges and an ax, used an adze to cut the wood down to size, and used a crooked knife to do any finer work. Once the wood was sized down, it was dipped in hot water, hung in a confined space, heated, and continually bent during steaming. Men's bowls required only a single piece of wood, but women's bowls were made with a detachable bottom and an additional piece of steamed, bent wood for the rim. To attach a rim, the maker would add blood from his nose to act as an adhesive, clamp the two pieces together, re-heat, and let it dry until it was ready for painting. Uitera or red ochre and black pigment was used to paint the interior of bentwood dishes with distinctive inherited family designs akin to private emblems from one's ancestors.

Painting the inside of a bowl with family designs was ritualistic and done only during certain times of the year. Often the designs were linked to an event experienced by an ancestor, sometimes with a particular animal. A grandfather might apply the same designs that had been in his bowl when he was a child in his grandson's. Other times, mythological creatures, like the one in this dish, were added. Patterns of red lines applied to the undersides of bowls were common, but did not have proprietary value or indicate information about one's family. Bowls were made for use in ceremonies and the everyday making and serving of cooked food. Large deep bowls called alviit or ilutuliarat were made to serve akutaq, a mixture of seal oil or caribou fat mixed with boned fish, berries, greens or other ingredients. Long oval more shallow bowls called tunmat were used to feed people in qasgi or men's community houses during feasts. When not in use, bowls were stored in the house, upside down on corner shelves with men's bowls in one area and women's in another. Every individual had his or her own bowl and when an owner died, bowls would be "killed" or made useless by cutting a hole in the bottom before being placed atop the owner's grave.

Important lessons and teachings were linked to bowls, affording them great value. Theresa Moses recounted in *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live*, "They said that a bowl depends on animals that they are trying to catch. We used to think about all food that is placed inside our bowl when we used it, and we hoped that it would be filled with more. It was a way of requesting food that one wanted to eat, hoping that it would be filled with food... We left no food behind and were grateful because it would be filled with the animals we caught." Yup'ik elder Annie Blue in Anne Feinup-Riordan's book, *Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on Its Head*, echoed the importance Theresa's sentiment when she said, "Back in those days, women cared for men's bowls with utmost respect. A man's bowl was never left out in the open but always put away neatly on a shelf. And when a woman picked up a man's bowl, she was not allowed to take it with her palms down. If a woman picked up a man's bowl like that, it was said that the man's future catch was being covered. And it was always important to keep it clean."

Yup'ik bentwood food processing tools in the Sheldon Jackson Museum collection include ladles, dippers, berry buckets, bowls, and spoons. This dish can be seen at the museum through July 31<sup>st</sup>. The Sheldon Jackson Museum summer hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Museum admission is \$5 for adults and \$4 for seniors. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Jacqueline Fernandez  
Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 747-3004  
[www.museums.alaska.gov](http://www.museums.alaska.gov)

---

[return to top](#)

[press releases](#) | [Alaska State Museums](#) | [artifacts of the month](#)