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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM MARCH ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's March Artifact of the Month is a selection of arrowheads (SJ-II-W-43, SJ-II-Y-149, SJ-II-V-158, and SJ-II-V-209). Two of the arrowheads were collected by Sheldon Jackson; the other three by Reverend Samuel Spriggs. All five artifacts are believed to date back to the late 19th century or earlier and are examples of a kind of arrowhead used to hunt birds.

Bows, arrows, and related implements including quivers, waterproof bags to carry bows, wrist guards, and sets of tools for the manufacture and maintenance of the weapons were important items in an Inupiaq and Yup'ik man's kit for warfare and hunting purposes.

Bows were made from wood, primarily driftwood collected from the beach or riverbanks, and made to be the length of the hunter's outstretched arms to the fingertips. They were manufactured in one of two basic styles – either simple or complex. The simple bow was made from one piece of wood while the complex was made from one or multiple pieces but included a straight rigid extension on each end and bends at the junctures. Often bows originating from areas south of St. Michael had sinew backing while those made northward of the village generally did not. Bowstrings were made of caribou sinew.

Several forms of arrows were used in different parts of Alaska though all featured a straight wooden shaft that terminated in a fore shaft of bone or ivory with an arrowhead. The shaft of arrows were usually made of spruce, almost always acquired from driftwood, reduced to a cylindrical rod shape using woodworking tools, and straightened with a special tool carved out of ivory or antler, frequently carved in the shape of mythical or real animals. The end of the shaft had attached to its end split feathers bound with fine sinew or baleen and wedged into cut slits. The length of ordinary hunting or war arrows was the distance from the tip of the extended left thumb to the inner end of the right collar bone.

Arrowheads took a variety of forms depending on the purpose of the weapon. Arrows used for hunting caribou were tipped with ivory, bone or chert. Ivory used for bears had heavier shafts, were longer than ones used for caribou, and were tipped with iron or chert. Arrows for large birds were usually tipped with antler or ivory. Arrows for small birds were also made of antler or ivory but had blunt tips that would kill the bird without damaging it. Fish arrows had two or three antler or ivory prongs on the tip in the form of the head of leister.

The three arrowheads on the left side in the image above are made from antler, have blunt heads with crenulations and a cleft shank for attaching to a shaft. They were collected from Kowak River and Kotzebue Sound. The two on the right side were collected from Barrow, Alaska, are made of ivory, and are blunt at the top but distinct in form and design. The larger ivory arrow head (SJ-II-V-209) flares to the top and has four outward flaring side panels while the smallest of the arrowheads (SJ-II-V-158) has an unusual flaring toward the top and two parallel bands of engraving at the shaft. The engraving has barb shapes, a design that appears in other Inupiat artifacts at the museum, including some needle cases.



Though none of the five artifacts of the month are attached to their original arrow shafts, the photograph on the left of two arrowheads with slightly similar structures illustrates how the ivory and antler pieces would have traditionally been attached.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to nearly one hundred Yup'ik and Inupiaq arrowheads and arrows, nearly two dozen bows, nearly a half dozen quivers, several quiver rods in the form of animals, and many other examples of hunting implements. The March Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until March 31st and can be seen Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 4pm. The museum is closed Sundays, Mondays and 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.

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