

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM MARCH ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The March Artifact of the Month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a Tlingit carving of a land otter made of bone (S.J.I.A.105). The carving is a very fine piece in classical Northwest Coast style. It features incised eyes, rib cage in x-ray style, rings on the tail, and a face located where the tail joins the body. The carving follows the natural curve of the bone. This piece was donated to the museum in 1893 by Mr. R. A. Clarke.

The Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Kwakwaka'wakw all tell stories of land otters, an animal highly respected and feared. Most often, the stories are about people, usually children, who while lost or in the forest were captured or drowned by the land otters. These individuals were kept in "land otter villages" or in their dens until they themselves became land otters. Occasionally, Shamans were able to save them, but not in instances where they traveler accepted an otter's food or followed their

call.ⁱ According to Tlingit myths, only the Shaman was able to control the land otter due to its supernatural powers.

Land otters were thought to have the power to bring about insanity, natural disasters such as storms and avalanches, illness, skin disease, and a variety of accidents other than drowning. Having once been humans, the land otter was horrifically intelligent and capable of luring individuals to them by imitating human voices or appearing in the guise of a parent or other family members.

The land otter is associated with transformation; its behavior simultaneously human and animal-like. Like people, they communicate with each other, can be playful and make chuckle-like sounds to each other. Highly adept at swimming and diving for fish and shellfish, they spend part of their lives under water, yet can walk on all fours and live in dens on land, essentially inhabitants of two different realms.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum March Artifact of the Month will be on through March 31st. 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.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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ⁱ In *Tlingit Myths and Texts* recorded by John R. Swanton and published by the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology in Bulletin 39 in *Myths Recorded in English at Wrangell*, the story of Kaka, a Kiks.adi man, is told. Kaka was the first man captured or "saved" by land otters who kept approaching him in canoes looking like

his mother or sister or other relation. Kaka gave himself up to the land otters and he was renamed Qowulka, a word that in the land otter language now applied to a type of fishhook used to catch halibut.

Swanton, John. *Tlingit Myths and Texts*. Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, no. 29. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1909. Print

Wardwell, Allen. *Tangible Visions: Northwest Coast Indian Shamanism and its Art*. New York: The Monacelli Press with the Corvus Press. 1996. Print