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Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: May 1, 2017

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM MAY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's May Artifact of the Month is a long piece of coiled intestine (gut) (SJ-III-X-9a). The museum has little information on the artifact, but it was collected by Sheldon Jackson in 1891 from the Point Hope area of Alaska. Jackson wrote on the inside end of the roll the following: "Intestine of polar bear for making rainproof coat - Point Hope Arctic Alaska Presented by Sheldon Jackson 1891." Although originally identified as polar bear, it has since been identified as seal. The width of this strip of intestine and its coiled shape suggests it may have been processed for the purpose of making a parka.

Gut or intestine of mammals and sea mammals has long been used by Alaska Natives to make pouches, containers, bags, skylight coverings over smoke holes of semi-subterranean homes, tent coverings, doll clothing, mukluks and garments, particularly, parkas, and for embellishing basketry, masks, and wall pockets. According to Dorothy Ray Jean, gut parkas were made by all Inuit, Inupiaq, Alutiiq, Aleut or Unagan, Siberian Yup'ik, and central Yup'ik peoples. Accounts of Lt. Zagoskin in the early 19th century, William H. Dall in the mid-19th century, and Edward W. Nelson in the late 19th century all include references to seeing gut parkas or long shirts of seal intestine being worn by Native peoples.

Intestine is a dense tissue similar to tendon and is extremely tough by nature of its biological function of contraction and pressures of digestion as it absorbs water and nutrients from food and drink. When an animal is alive, its intestine is laden with capillaries but upon death, they close up, making the material impermeable and resistant to decay. As a result, hooded parkas, were ideal outer garments for travelling on the ocean and for wet weather conditions.

Parkas made of gut served a very important functional purpose - when worn over other parkas and garments, they helped keep fur and feathers dry. Men wore them while hunting on land in rainy weather and used them while hunting on the water by boat. Kayakers tightened drawstrings of their parkas' hoods

and sleeves and tied the bottom of the parka to the raised rim of the kayak cockpit to prevent water from getting in.

Gut parkas were also important for spiritual and ceremonial purposes. In *Innerskins/Outerskins: Gut and Fishskin*, Pat Hickman describes gut parkas as being used during healing and shamanistic ceremonies. Hickman also references gut parkas being worn for protection from harmful spirits by women on Nunivak Island and in other parts of southwestern Alaska while preparing seal skins for kayak covers; boys on King Island bringing their first caught bird to the men's house; whaling crews on Little Diomed Island preparing for the first hunt of the season; and men handling sea nets (9). Rolls of dried seal gut were sometimes tossed like streamers to welcome villagers arriving for winter dances on Nelson Island (Hickman, 10).

While all gut parkas have similarities, there are some significant differences between parkas originating from different regions of Alaska. All gut parkas were made with ribbon-like strips joined side by side and had a similar color, weightlessness, thinness, and shape. In the northern and eastern areas of Alaska, the Inupiaq parka is typically made of short, vertical strips, seldom decorated in the seams. Parkas from southwestern Alaska tend to have strips placed horizontally, as if coiling around the body. The width and length of the strips depends upon the size of the animal it came from.

Women sewed gut parkas using long strips of dried and split intestines that they carefully processed and prepared. Intestines were removed from an animal, usually a seal, walrus or bear, intact, turned inside out, scraped with a mussel shell, and soaked in urine and seawater, and dried in the sun and wind. The gut was then cut into long strips, generally around three inches in width, and kept in rolls until ready for use.

The most commonly used materials to stitch waterproof garments were sinew (animal tendon) or grass though thread has been used in more recent years. These were used alone or often in combination and could swell with moisture to retain waterproof qualities. The most common waterproof seam is sewn with a running stitch and parallel elements, often grasses, secured in place with the running stitch. A decorative stitch is also sometimes incorporated that involved a looping technique through the running stitch. Men's parkas had seams sewn on the outside, whereas women's had seams on the inside. To embellish seams for fancier, more decorative parkas for special occasions, women sewed in feathers, seal fur, auklet beaks, dyed pieces of tanned skin, colored fabric and beads.

The May Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until May 31st. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to almost ninety artifacts made out of or comprised in part of gut or intestine, including artwork by contemporary Alaska Native artists Sonya Kelliher Combs (Inupiaq/Athabaskan) and Coral Chernoff (Alutiiq). The May artifact and others may be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 9am and 4:30pm. 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.

Hickman, Pat. *Innerskins/Outerskins: Gut and Fishskin*. San Francisco: San Francisco Craft and Folk Museum, 1987. Print

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

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