

A L A S K A S T A T E M U S E U M S

ALASKA STATE MUSEUM, JUNEAU ❖ SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM, SITKA

Sheldon Jackson Museum

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Release date: **October 26, 2005**

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NOVEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

OJIBWE BIRCH BARK BASKET

An Ojibwe birch bark basket is the Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month for November. Although the museum now collects artifacts only from Alaska Native cultures, a few Native American objects from other areas were acquired through the 1970s. Each November the museum exhibits one of these pieces to honor the diverse Native cultures of North America in recognition of National American Indian Heritage and Alaska Native Heritage Month.

This small cylindrical basket with quillwork design and pine needle rim was donated to the museum by Mrs. Merville W. McGinnis of Seattle in 1972. She acquired the basket from the Ojibwe Indians of Mackinac Island, Michigan, in the mid-20th century.

The waterproof and pliable properties of birch bark made it the perfect material to use not only in canoe or house construction but also to make containers for collecting, storing, cooking and consuming food and drink.

Porcupine quill decoration on bark is not as prevalent as quill embroidery on leather. Quillwork predates the European arrival in North America, but following the introduction of beads, the difficult and time-consuming art of quill on bark was almost lost. In the late 19th century, a group of Ursuline nuns worked with a group of Ojibwe to revive the techniques. Objects were made primarily for the art market that developed in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

A triangular-shaped awl is used to perforate the bark, and the wet or damp quills are inserted and bent on either end much like a staple. As the quills dry they stiffen, and with the layered nature of bark the quills are held in place. A liner is sewn inside the outer bark to hide and protect the ends of the quills.

The basketry rims are not only decorative, but they reinforce an otherwise brittle area. Pine needles are used on this basket, but other baskets' rim materials include split spruce, willow root or sweet grass bundles.

The Ojibwe birch bark basket can be seen at the museum November 1 through November 30 and can be viewed on our web site at www.museums.state.ak.us.

Winter hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. General admission is \$3. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

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