



# Kayaks History and Construction

The Sheldon Jackson Museum exhibits four kayaks collected by Dr. Sheldon Jackson during the 1890s. Each of the four kayaks reflects a style best suited to their place of origin.

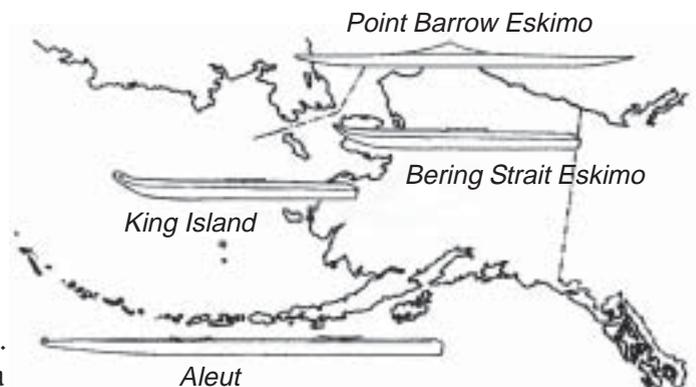
## History

For thousands of years many types of skin boats have been used throughout the world. The hunting kayak, used by the Native peoples of Siberia, North America and Greenland, is the most sophisticated and highly developed of all these craft. The kayak is probably a descendant of the umiak. Individual examples of kayaks have not survived well, but recent archaeological evidence shows them to be at least 4,000 years old. Further inferential evidence places their origins back as far as 10,000 years.

Developed as a silent means of getting within harpooning range of sea mammals, the use of the kayak spread to caribou hunting, fishing, fowling and transportation. Kayaks became one of the most important means of food gathering in the north. As a hunter's most prized possession and symbol of manhood, important cultural and ceremonial practices developed around the kayak. Diverse climate and conditions throughout Alaska

influenced the varied styles of kayaks. They were used year round by the Aleut, but Eskimos used their kayaks only during the season of open water (summer months) and some had to carry a small sled on their kayak to pull it over summer ice floes.

## Origins of Kayaks in Museum



Dick Bunyan watching Aloysius Hale fit the crucial first rib in the kayak. Photo by David Zimmerly.

## Kayak Construction

Building a traditional kayak required both meticulous craftsmanship and proper ritual which often included fasting, special dress and ceremonial activities intended to bring success to its owner. Repairs and building went on during the winter in order to have the kayaks ready for spring sealing. An elder skilled in boat building traditionally supervised the frame construction in the *qasqig* (ceremonial house). Custom-made kayaks resulted from the use of anthropometric measurements – a system of measurement based on the length of the hunters' arms, hands and fingers.

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Each community had its own standard set of measurements.

It took nearly a month of steady work to assemble the kayak frame. Adzes and curved knives shaped driftwood and willow into the various frame pieces. The kayak builder used his teeth as a clamp to bend the kayak ribs.

After the builder fitted and lashed the frame together, women cut seal skins to size for the coverings. Sometimes tougher walrus skins substituted for seal skin in areas susceptible to wear. One woman alone, if she was a fast sewer, could cover a frame in two days.

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