



Umiak

Construction and Care

Open skin boats in Alaska, generally known as umiaks or baidars (Russian word for an Aleut open skin boat), use the same construction materials as kayaks – sea mammal hide covering and driftwood frame. Lightness and strength characterize these essential water craft. Using few and small structural members helps create a light weight craft with great flexibility. Sinew or hide strips lash the covering to the frame and the frame is lashed with baleen. Although the coverings appear to be stretched tightly over the frame, they are left unattached in a number of places allowing skin movement distortion during the impact of beaching and encounters with ice floes.

Hides are initially soaked in animal oil to waterproof them. Rubbing seams with fat or blubber did the best job of sealing them. Pitch or tallow were used only occasionally as they decreased the flexibility. To remain waterproof, maintenance oiling took place every four days to a week.

These seagoing open skin boats normally range from 15 to 60 feet in length. The museum's only full-sized example, however, is a smaller craft



King Island boat under construction, c. 1930. University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

measuring only 11 feet in length, 3 feet wide and 2 1/2 feet deep. Depending on the size of the craft, from 6 to 15 bearded seal or split walrus skins were needed to cover an umiak.

Umiak Use

During the short seasons of open water, families transported themselves and their cargo when traveling to new hunting, fishing and gathering areas. These light-hulled, almost flat-bottomed boats with flaring sides allowed little increase in draft, even when heavily loaded pulling the boat onto the beach presented little problem. Women do much of the paddling when a family or small group travels. Propelled traditionally by paddles,

oars or sails, the modern umiak operator uses a gasoline engine or sometimes is towed by an engine driven boat.

The exhibit of Eskimo paddles on the upper wall show the more commonly used ones. Oars are thought by some to be a more recent addition to umiak gear with paddle being the earliest propellant. The same is thought of sails, although some of the earliest Arctic explorers mention skin boats



Hunting umiak with walrus skin sail.
Smithsonian NAA 43458-D

with “entrail sails” or sails made from grass mats. After contact, drill (heavy-duty cotton cloth) replaced grass mat sails.

The craft’s lightness, strength and maneuverability make it the choice of sea mammal hunters. In order to achieve maximum speed, hunting umiaks are designed slightly differently from their cargo-hauling counterparts. Only a select group of men take part in whale hunting, but if not enough men are available to power the craft, women go along to do the paddling.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s umiak is exhibited on top of the *Cultural Comparison* case. The Reverend Sheldon Jackson collected the small umiak from Little Diomed Island on his first trip to the Arctic with the Revenue Cutter Service 1890. To see the inside of a model umiak, look on the

deck area of the *Alaskan Watercraft* drawer case.

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