

Bulletin

ALASKA
STATE
MUSEUMS

Alaska State Museum, Juneau • Sheldon Jackson Museum, Sitka

Collecting Alaska

by Steve Henrikson
Curator of Collections, ASM

A century ago, the Alaska State Museum began collecting “all things Alaskan,” and curators cast a wide net to build a balanced collection that accurately and comprehensively represents human activity in Alaska from prehistory to present. The collection grew to form the basis for research, exhibitions, and educational activities. Today, we collect to fill gaps in our coverage of history, while keeping pace with current events by collecting contemporary artifacts.

The exhibition *Collecting Alaska* provides insight into the process of collecting by displaying over a hundred of the 1700 artifacts acquired by the Alaska State Museum since 1995. While some items were purchased by the museum with ever-declining state funds, this show pays tribute to the many generous donors who have given cherished heirlooms for the benefit of the public. Each object has a story to tell about our history and cultures.

With a sense of historical perspective, and following strict criteria, the museum considers items old and new for the collection. But what makes the cut? With Alaska's diversity and complexity, systematically deciding what to collect can be difficult. Which artifacts best represent pivotal people and events? Which artworks will stand the test of time? Some items are collected because of their rarity, and others for their typicality. To represent life in Alaska, even commonplace items—some never designed to last beyond a single use—are also sought and collected.

Each object proposed for the collection receives close scrutiny. The history of the object—the information

that comes with the piece as well as new research—is reviewed, and its connections to Alaska history are drawn to demonstrate that it falls within the scope of collections.

Does it meet collecting goals by filling a gap, meeting a particular exhibition need, or supporting future research or education? Also, the object must be legally acquired: Native artifacts, excavated objects, and items made of protected animal parts receive special attention. If the item is for sale, the price must be fair and within budget. Research and close examination test authenticity, the object's condition is assessed, and treatment and preservation costs estimated.

It falls to the curator, working in concert with experts in specific fields, to analyze the existing collection, identify its strengths and weaknesses, and develop a collecting plan—a “wish list” of categories of items and subjects needed for a well-rounded and comprehensive collection. Since one can not predict what new discoveries await just around the corner, the plan is flexible enough to accommodate unforeseen opportunities. For example, a large collection of paintings by Nina and Josephine Crum-

rine was offered for donation, but the work of these artists was already a strength of the existing collection. The paintings, from the Alaska Steamship Company (through the Skinner Foundation), included some of the famous Alaskan sled dog portraits used for steamship menu covers. The history of these paintings, as well as their size and subject matter, was the basis for our decision to accept the gift.

We build the collection both to reinforce strengths and strengthen weaknesses. Our art collection survey identified the need to acquire the work of certain 20th century Alaskan artists, including Sydney Laurence—especially a painting of Mt. McKinley, his most famous subject. In recent years, the museum received five Laurence paintings—two of the mountain—donated by Carl Valentine, who obtained them from Territorial Governor George Parks.

A second donation of two Laurences from

Celia Handley—a seascape and Native scene—further broadens our coverage of this essential artist.

Recent acquisitions of WWII artifacts used in Alaska are the result of proactively searching for material to better represent the Aleutian Campaign and wartime Alaska. While former curator Ed Keithahn succeeded in collecting some important Japanese relics immediately after hostilities ended, few



Mask “Salmon Dancer” by Nathan Jackson and Emma Marks, 1971

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uniforms and gear representing Allied forces were acquired. To “make the cut,” WWII objects must have been actually used in Alaska: we will not collect generic type examples of WWII gear without some direct and specific association with Alaska. Working with veterans and their families, as well as artifact dealers, we have significantly improved this aspect of the collection, which will be used for a new section in the history gallery.

Some artifacts are rare because they are one-of-a-kind. Others were once commonplace but never designed to survive, and never thought of as important. Locating such ephemeral material from an increasingly disposable society is challenging. Steamship baggage stickers and brochures, WWII propaganda leaflets, Alaskan beverage containers, and movie posters are “throwaways” that can actually be very useful to illustrate past life in Alaska.

Other recent focal points in our collecting are the Alaskan salmon industry and Alaska Native history. These themes merge in a single object—the salmon can. Made by the millions, these tin containers with labels intact are ex-



Japanese military artifacts from Attu and Kiska.

ceedingly rare. After a decade of searching, we have acquired eleven Alaskan cans found all over the country. Some were recovered in the walls and crawlspaces of houses, where carpenters apparently sealed their lunch leftovers. Several hand-soldered cans date back to the 19th century, and one — “Klawack

Brand”—is from Alaska’s first cannery. As an artifact of labor history, salmon cans represent the work of Alaska Natives, upon whom the early canneries relied for cheap labor. Discrimination kept most Natives in the most menial and dangerous jobs. In the museum, even a lowly discarded tin can may speak volumes about past social conditions.

One of the more popular items acquired recently is a pair of “bunny boots” used by Lanny Hotrum of Hobart Bay. Visitors are surprised to see such strange looking inflatable boots, developed for military use at cold-weather duty stations. Alaskans, however, are surprised that such a commonplace item would be considered worthy of a museum display. But the museum is as much about

everyday life as it is about famous people and significant events. Seeing the boots on display provokes visitors to share bunny boot lore with their friends and relatives.

Not even the Smithsonian collects everything: donations must sometimes be politely refused. It is hard to tell someone that their great uncle’s baby shoes just don’t make the cut. For museums, accepting a donation means making a commitment to securing, preserving, and housing it in climate-controlled space for centuries into the future. The cost of such a long-term commitment can be enormous, and everything we collect must have a specific function.

For the Alaska State Museum, the future of collecting is uncertain. On-going cuts to the museum budget have severely curtailed our ability to purchase needed objects once they are located or available. Space for exhibiting and storing new acquisitions is so severely depleted that we are forced to decline larger objects even when offered as a donation. On the plus side, the Rasmuson Foundation’s Art Acquisition Initiative has greatly expanded our ability to acquire significant works by contemporary Alaskan artists.

With the valuable assistance of the Friends of the Alaska State Museum, as well as the many generous citizens offering important donations, we begin our second century “collecting Alaska.”



“Klawack Brand” salmon can, ca-1890.

Grant in Aid awards announced

Fifteen institutions received grants totaling over \$100,600 for Fiscal Year 2004. Those receiving grants this year were as follows:

- Alaska Aviation Heritage Museum, Anchorage, \$4,600 to purchase and install a fire and intrusion monitoring system;
- Alutiiq Museum, Kodiak, \$6,503 to develop a disaster preparation plan;
- Dorothy Page Museum, Wasilla, \$9,077 for purchase of shelving and flat files for collection storage;
- Eagle Historical Society & Museum, \$2,565 for conservation of historic relief map;
- Juneau-Douglas City Museum, \$5,775 for totem stabilization and security upgrade;
- Kenai Visitors Center, \$9,190 to renovate natural history displays;
- Kodiak Historical Society, \$6,720 for fax machine, camera, and archival materials;

- Museums Alaska, the statewide association, \$9,850 for professional conference planning, expenses and scholarships;
- Pratt Museum, Homer, \$10,000 for Dena’ina Fish Camp, a community-based video production;
- Sheldon Museum, Haines, \$10,000 for cataloging their archive and photograph collection;
- Skagway Museum & Archive, \$2,650 for storage shelving; and
- Talkeetna Historical Society, \$2,500 for a Museum Assessment Program survey.

In addition, three museums received grants of approximately \$7,000 apiece to participate in an exhibition development workshop at the State Museum. These museums were the Clausen Memorial Museum in Petersburg, the Dorothy Page Museum in Wasilla and the State Trooper Museum in Anchorage.

Rasmuson Art Acquisition Initiative funds collection purchases



Harvey Pootoogooluk doll by Mary Ellen Frank [2003-8]

The Alaska State Museum has announced the purchase of significant contemporary Alaska artworks through funding provided by the Rasmuson Foundation Art

Acquisition Initiative. The purchases, which totaled more than \$37,000, added eight new artworks by five Alaska artists to the museum's fine art collection.

The artworks include two paintings by Kesler Woodward of Fairbanks, one of them a large oil titled "Light in Glacier Bay;" a Tlingit frontlet by Richard Beasley of Juneau; two fish skin basket sculptures by Anchorage artist Fran Reed; two Native Alaskan portrait dolls by Douglas artist Mary Ellen Frank; and a mixed-media sculpture by Jeff Patrick of Anchorage.

The Rasmuson Foundation's Art Acquisition Initiative is intended to improve the holdings of contemporary art in Alaska's museum collections. The initiative was launched because Alaska museums have added very little contempo-

rary art to their collections over the past fifteen years due to lack of funds. During 2003 eleven Alaska museums were assisted in purchasing artworks through the initiative grants.

Bruce Kato, Chief Curator at the State Museum, said "For nearly the past twenty years the Alaska State Museum has been unable to acquire prime examples of contemporary art, including Alaska Native art, due to budget constraints. Many of the state's best artists are under-represented or not represented at all in the museum's collection. We're hopeful this program will boost appreciation for Alaska's contemporary fine arts and Native arts."

The program is administered by Museums Alaska, the statewide museum support association, on behalf of the Rasmuson Foundation. It is now entering a second year. The State Museum intends to exhibit the works it will have acquired through the Rasmuson grants sometime in the next year.

Addison Field joins staff at Alaska State Museum

Alaska's museum community can welcome a new resource in Addison Field, the new Museum Security clerk at the Alaska State Museum. Field moved from Ketchikan to Juneau to take the position. He replaces Kai Augustine, who retired in November after many years greeting visitors to the museum.

Field, who grew up in Vermont, completed his Master of Arts degree in Museum Studies last May at the George Washington University in Washington, D.C., where he concentrated in Museum Administration. His areas of interest are historic houses, collection management and history in general. While studying last winter for his degree, Field worked as an intern and contractor at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery, where he helped revise the museum's collections management policy.

Prior to that, during the summer of 2002, he served as a program intern at the Totem Heritage Center in Ketchikan.



New online exhibitions

Three recent exhibitions at the Alaska State Museum can now be viewed on the museum's Web site. The exhibitions are Alaska Positive 2004, a statewide photography exhibition, and two recent solo shows by Alaska artists Kat Tomka and Sarah Beaty. The exhibits can be seen on the Internet by going to: www.museums.state.ak.us/online.htm

The Alaska Positive exhibit highlights the winning photographs from the show, which will tour the state for the next two years, while the solo artist exhibits provide "virtual" gallery tours of the artists' works, along with interviews and artists' statements. Beaty and Tomka both had exhibits at the State Museum last November and December. Beaty is a ceramist and Tomka specializes in "installation" art—in this case creating an environment largely using transparent tape.

Visitors to the museum's Online Exhibits page can also view other museum art exhibitions on the State Museum Web site.

Juneau archaeologist wins Volunteer of the Year award

Museums Alaska, a statewide organization, has honored Juneau archaeologist Jon Loring with its esteemed Volunteer of the Year award.

Since becoming a volunteer at the Alaska State Museum in 1991, Loring has given over 7,300 hours of his time, an average of 530 hours per year as a volunteer. Most recently he was involved with the installation of the Case and Draper photography exhibit at the museum. In addition, Loring has put in many hours in the Capitol as an advocate for museums, libraries and archives.

Loring has helped organize the annual Museum Day festivities at the museum each May for many years. He has also helped countless times in packing and crating exhibits, as well as with food preparation for numerous receptions at the museum.

Loring, who owns his own business in Juneau, grew up in northern California, was educated in Oregon and worked in both Oregon and Washington prior to moving to Juneau in 1990. Loring volunteered at other museums prior to his move north. "Saving cultural history is an important thing," he said.

Museums Alaska presented the award to Loring in late September at the organization's annual conference in Haines.

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