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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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December Artifact of the Month: Iñupiaq Model Kayak

SITKA – The December artifact of the month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is an Iñupiaq model kayak (II.D.52) from Cape Prince of Wales, a village on the westernmost area of the Seward Peninsula. The model skin kayak includes a figure with a wooden face and parka made of hide and stitched with red ochre-colored thread. Prepared to hunt bearded and ringed seals and sea birds, he is equipped with a single-blade paddle, an extra paddle, a barbed harpoon, a three-prong bird spear, and an unknown round-headed weapon. A mythical animal, possibly a pal rai yuk, is painted on the sides of the boat. Museum records do not indicate when this model was collected, but do state that Sheldon Jackson was probably the collector. The model reveals important information about Iñupiaq traditional methods of hunting sea mammals and the general classic design of kayaks. A similar model dated circa 1900 complete with a model figure and hunting tools is in the collection of the National Museum of the American Indian.



Iñupiaq model kayak (II.D.52)

Of all the many types of skin boats used throughout the world, the paddle-powered kayak made and used by coastal Alaska Natives are and have been among the most seaworthy in the world. Traditionally, the kayak was used for silently hunting sea mammals, caribou hunting, raiding, fishing, exploring, hauling supplies, and transporting family. Present-day kayaks are used for recreation by thousands of people around the world.

Alaskan coastal peoples' kayaks varied slightly, usually in terms of width or length to beam ratios, depending upon geographical location, uses and needs, and available natural resources. A kayak needed for hunting caribou on flat water in lakes and river crossings would be wider and shorter and not need as much rocker (keels that sweep up to ends) or maneuverability for fast turning to hunt seals or sea birds in choppy, rougher waters. Comparatively, kayaks meant for ocean travel were longer with flat keels.

Despite slight structural variations, all circumpolar kayaks were made mainly in regions with treeless terrain with locally available materials and shared the vital features of portability, flexibility, maneuverability, and durability. Kayak frames were usually constructed of driftwood or materials that were readily obtainable via trade and lashed together with rawhide cords. Frames were covered with stretched, cured bearded seal or walrus hide coated with seal or whale oil. Structurally, the watercraft featured efficient, easily driven

hulls fully decked with a crown or fore and aft peak on deck with some arch or camber to enable the shedding of water. Bows were fine and narrow; sections aft, fuller. Round or oval cockpits with raised combings (lip or edge around cockpit opening) combined with an animal skin or gut raincoat prevented spray or rainwater from coming into the vessel. A kayak needed to be lightweight enough to be carried ashore by one to three people and then transported on a sled and strong enough to carry the sled once back in the water. Frames also had to be tough but flexible enough to twist and accommodate waves and shock loads from hitting rocks and ice. Light, waterproof hull coverings had to withstand point loads and abrasion from ice and rocks. Vessels needed to be able to be easily and quickly repaired by their crews if damage occurred. All kayaks had pockets and lashings on deck for securing spare a user's paddles, harpoons, spears, lines, etc. In addition to the hunting implements in this model, many users carried a wooden tube for bailing out the kayak.

The Iñupiat, Yup'ik, Alutiiq, and Unangan people have all used kayaks. While it is difficult to attempt to date kayaks because, being skin-covered, sinew-lashed, and wood-framed, they do not endure over time, archaeologists have found items associated with kayaks such as bird darts, throwing boards, double-bladed paddles, ivory kayak fittings, etc. dating as far back to 1700 B.C. Few watercraft have a history as old as the kayak - its original design has formed the framework for modern boats and few improvements have been needed.

This Iñupiaq kayak will be on exhibit at the Sheldon Jackson Museum until Dec. 31st. Visit the museum to see this model, various other model watercraft from across Alaska, a full-size Cape Espenberg kayak, a King Island kayak, a Kotzebue Sound/ Point Barrow kayak, an Unangan baidarka, an Athabascan birch bark canoe, and many boat and sea mammal hunting accessories. Winter hours at the museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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[return to top](#)

[press releases](#) | [Alaska State Museums](#) | [Sheldon Jackson Museum](#)