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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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June Artifacts of the Month: Tlingit Moccasins

SITKA – The artifacts of the month for June are two pairs of adult and child’s Tlingit moccasins likely made for the 19th century tourist trade. (I.A.826,a,b, I.A.883,a,b). Both pairs of moccasins are done in the Tlingit “old style,” lacking the top extensions that would fold around the ankle, and are made of soft tanned hide, likely deer, cloth, and colorful glass seed beads. Precisely executed, the positive-negative spaces in the designs are symmetrical and carefully balanced, allowing for unbeaded ground to show through. Like all Native beadwork, whether embellishments on regalia, souvenirs, or non-commercial pieces made for daily use, they are illustrative of the innovation, creativity, identity, and talent of the women who made them.



I.A.883A,B, I-A-826A,B Tlingit moccasins

The child’s moccasins have a vamp made of a layer of red and green felt, overlaid with red, white, and metal beads forming an eagle. The vamps were once outlined in blue beads, but only a portion of the original beadwork remains. Floral patterns in yellow and corroded beads outline the vamps and additional floral patterns in blue and metal beads adorn either side of the seams. The stitching is done in an off-white heavy thread.

The slightly more elaborate adult moccasins have a vamp covered in red cloth with a colorful beaded foliate design with color changes occurring at the contours or curves. The graceful foliate is bordered by two rows of chain-stitch embroidery in blue and gold. The heel is attached to the shoe upper by a leather rim bordered by a strip of red and black cloth. The stitching is done with sinew and thread.

The three dominant Tlingit beadwork motifs are floral and foliate, crest, and geometric. The motifs or combinations of them appear on moccasins, octopus bags, dance collars, and other objects and were inspired by individual and group identity, the natural world, trade relations with other indigenous groups, and in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, relations with Euro-Americans. The foliate scroll design, often called “seaweed” among Tlingit communities, first appeared on Tlingit beadwork in the 1880s and is similar to cartouche floral forms that became popular on

slightly earlier Northwest Coast engraved silver bracelets. The foliate scroll motif with curving, never angular lines is characteristic of the Tlingit-Interior Coastal style, common among the inland peoples of Atlin and Teslin lakes. Instead of rosettes, pointed leaves, elaborate blossoms or simple floral forms, these shapes are lyrical, curving, and plume like. A floral and foliate scroll motif popular on objects from the late nineteenth century to the present and often associated with the Raven/Owls, Kwaashk'i Kwáan/Tsisk'w Hít, from Yakutat is a daisy-like flower with six to eight petals.

Crest motifs are the second most prevalent design and remain popular. Crest motifs vary greatly in terms of style, ranging from Euro-American pictorial representations of animals to markers of identity incorporating shapes and designs from the painted formline tradition. Similarities in the formline designs in beadwork can be found in carved and painted objects and Chilkat blankets. Less popular and rarely appearing on beadwork dated after the turn of the nineteenth century, geometric motif beadwork may have been inspired by patterns applied to spruce root baskets or as noted by Steve Brown in *Native Visions*, adapted from other regions.

As evidenced by beads made of copper, shell, and bone found in archaeological sites dating from A.D. 1000 and on, the history of beads on the Northwest Coast began long before the arrival of Europeans and Euro-Americans. Though it was not until the nineteenth century that glass seed beads, small, uniformly sized beads like the ones on these moccasins were imported primarily from Venice for trade.

As Megan A. Smetzer noted in her *American Indian Art Magazine* article, "Tlingit Dance Collars and Octopus Bags: Embodying Power and Resistance," historically, "discourses about authenticity and cultural degeneration caused a kind of blindness to Tlingit beadwork" and much "ethnographic and tourist literature either ignored or dismissed this artistic production as inauthentic..." Yet Tlingit beadwork has been and remains a longstanding means of expressing individual and group identity and of continuing important cultural traditions. To this day, beads forming colorful, meaningful characteristic patterns are sewn on cloth or tanned hide.

These moccasins can be seen at the museum through June 30th and at the Saxán (Love of All Things) Saturdays family-friendly public program that will touch upon beadwork and invite youth to make Northwest Coast style octopus bags will take place at the museum on July 20th at 1:00pm.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum summer hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Museum admission is \$5 for adults and \$4 for seniors. 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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