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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

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October Artifact of the Month: Iñupiaq masks

SITKA – The October artifacts of the month are three Iñupiaq masks (IIC3, IIC7, and IIC9). The masks are all believed to have been used for ceremonial dancing and may have been collected from the Port Clarence area. Although the masks all depict human faces, are made of driftwood, and are painted with black, red, and white to indicate hair, cheeks, and facial features, they differ substantially in design. As highlighted by these three examples, each mask was traditionally unique and the product of an individual vision and experience.



Iñupiaq masks (IIC3, IIC7, and IIC9)

Masks have historically been used for spiritual and non-spiritual purposes by the Iñupiaq and Yup'ik peoples, their southwestern neighbors. Masks were worn during dance festivals generally held to honor spirits of game animals important to daily life and according to Ann Feinup-Riordan's *Eskimo Essays* were often discarded after a performance as new visions and new masks would replace them in succeeding years. Masks were also sometimes hung in houses to ward off harmful spirits, placed with the deceased, or used in non-spiritual contexts for entertainment purposes or for selling to Western customers. Masks intended to be used for ceremonial purposes were worn by shamans during consultation with their individual spirit helpers or guardian spirits. The carved designs on such masks were inspired by shamans' visions or might take the form of their spirit helpers or traditional forms. Shamans often carved masks themselves but could commission someone else to carve designs.

According to the August 1893 meeting minutes of the Alaska Natural History and Ethnological Society, the precursor to the Sheldon Jackson Museum, Miner Bruce gave six masks from Port Clarence to Sheldon Jackson. They were likely collected by him during his

time as the first superintendent of the Teller Reindeer Station. Bruce served as superintendent of the

government-operated reindeer station for one year and while in the region, collected a substantial number of masks in and around Port Clarence. After being fired from his post, likely due to his inability to get along with Captain Michael A. Healy of the U.S. Revenue Marine Service who was also involved in the station's operations, he became a trader in western Alaska, travelling to widely scattered locations and collecting Iñupiaq material for resale.

Bruce sold the majority of the material he collected, approximately seven hundred and thirty five items, to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago in 1896 and 1897. Among the pieces sold to the Field Museum by Bruce was hunting and fishing equipment including ice-hunting harpoons, whaling harpoon heads, float plugs, lance heads, seal scratchers, seal drags, arrows and spears for hunting birds; tools; household items such as baskets and buckets, dippers and dishes; examples of clothing, including mittens, women's belts, and waterproof raincoats; kayaks, sledges, and other pieces related to transportation; and twenty-five wooden ceremonial dance masks.

According to *The Bruce Collection of Eskimo Material Culture from Port Clarence, Alaska* published by the Field Museum of Natural History and written by former curator James W. VanStone, the provenience of the Bruce collection is "open to question" and supporting ethnographic materials is "minimal," and lacking the scientific accuracy and attention to supporting data written by his contemporary collectors of the day working in the same region, including Edward Nelson and John Murdoch. This is likely because Bruce had no scientific affiliation and was a trader with no intention of writing up his collection for publication. Collecting such information would have also been very challenging and time-consuming, even for someone with more expertise than Bruce because the presence of whaling ships and the reindeer attracted Iñupiaq and Yup'ik who brought materials for trading and selling with them from all over Alaska.

The masks will be on display through October 31. Winter hours at the museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$4. 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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