

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
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## **SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM NOVEMBER ARTIFACTS OF THE MONTH**



The Sheldon Jackson Museum November Artifacts of the Month are four Inupiat fishing lures (SJ.II.K.238, SJ.II.K.239, SJ.II.K. 240, and SJ.II.P.178). All four lures were collected in Northern Alaska by Sheldon Jackson, served a similar purpose, and reflect the traditional importance of fish and fishing among the Inupiat people. While all four lures are shape liked fish each has unique characteristics and differs slightly in design. Three are made of ivory and one of bone. Tools needed to attract fish, these lure are products of both the skill and imagination of the Inupiat fishermen and hunters who made them.

Fish are a traditionally important source of food for the Inupiat and their sled dogs. The list of species important to this Alaska Native group is varied. Fish harvested include: Alaska blackfish, arctic grayling, burbot (ling cod), char and trout, cod (arctic and saffron), flounder, longnose sucker, northern pike, Pacific herring, salmon (chum, king, pink, red/sockeye, silver/coho), sculpin, smelt (capelin, pond smelt, rainbow smelt), whitefish (arctic cisco, broad whitefish, humpback whitefish, least cisco, round whitefish, sheefish/inconnu). The distribution of these fish varies geographically and in most areas of northern Alaska, seasonally.

Inupiat harvest, process, and store the fish according to the same basic procedures. Traditional fishing techniques were employed based on local conditions and location and include fishing with a weir, seine net, gill net, dip net, and hook and line with or without a fishing lure or bait.

Fishing with lures has been dated back as early as 2,000 B.C and has a long history of use in Northern Alaska.<sup>1</sup> Edward Nelson, who did field work among the Inupiat between 1877 and 1881 recorded men fishing, especially for tomcod, with fish hooks, sinkers, lures, and rods. Anthropologist John Murdock in his 1888 paper published in the Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology and entitled, *The Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition*, recorded seeing men fish for Polar cod and small sculpins in cracks of frozen sea water along the edges of beach. He described the men's "tackle" consisting of a "short line of whalebone...a little "squid" or artificial bait of ivory...and a wooden rod" as well as small ivory lures shaped like shrimp.

Fishing with lures is an effective but simple method requiring only a line and the lure. The lure acts as an artificial bait to attract fish through vibration and movement as the line, hand held or suspended from a stick or rod, moves up and down in the water, mimicking a fish. As illustrated by this month's featured artifacts, Inupiaq lures are traditionally made of walrus ivory or bone. The lure is tied to a line, historically made of sinew, rawhide, twisted filaments of whalebone or quill feathers of gulls or other large waterfowl split, worked, and knotted together. Sometimes the lure is connected to the line via a leader made from baleen. Many lures have a hook or hooks attached. Inupiaq hooks are traditionally made of bone, ivory, bone or tooth or nail of a certain animal such as a beaver and post-contact, metal, usually iron.<sup>ii</sup> If no hooks are used, a pronged fishing spear or leister or pole with a barbed point attached to it may be used to capture the fish striking for the lure or close by. The artifacts of the month were likely used to attract fish being speared according to old inventory records.

These fishing lures will be on exhibit at the Sheldon Jackson Museum until November 30<sup>th</sup>. The museum is home to many Inupiaq fishing implements including hooks, sinkers, leaders, and fishing spears. The museum's winter hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 4pm. General admission is \$3 and admission is free for those 18 and under and members of either Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska State Museum.

Burch Jr., Ernest. *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 2006.

Corbyn, Zoe. "Archaeologists Land World's Oldest Fish Hook". *Nature*. On November 24, 2011 . <http://www.nature.com/news/archaeologists-land-world-s-oldest-fish-hook-1.9461>. Accessed 12 November 2014.

Murdock, John. *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition*. Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. 1887-1888 by John W. Powell. Washington, D.C: Government Printing Office. 1892. Print

Nelson, Edward William. *The Eskimo about Bering Strait*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press. 1983.

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<sup>i</sup> According to James R. Coull's World Fisheries Resources, the basic techniques for fishing, namely net, hook, line, rod, and spear, were in use in Egypt by about 2000 B.C. He also notes the importance of fishing early on in the Far East with the earliest fulltime fishermen in that era to being based in Egypt, Mesopotamia, and China.

<sup>ii</sup> According to Zoe Corbyn's article, "Archaeologists Land World's Oldest Fish Hook" published in *Nature* on November 24, 2011, the earliest fishing hooks found by archaeologists to date were made of shell and uncovered in East Timor.