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## **SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM SEPTEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH**



SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s September Artifact of the Month is a contemporary mask made by Inupiaq artist “Art” Othniel Oomittuk (2014.4.1). This mask was purchased with Art Acquisition funds awarded to the Sheldon Jackson Museum by the Rasmuson Foundation in late 2013. It is the first contemporary Point Hope mask to be added to the museum’s collection.

The mask is aptly entitled, *Welcome to Tikigaq, the Transformation* after Oomittuk’s village, Point Hope, and depicts a man’s lively and realistic face with a whale fluke in the forehead and inlay of baleen eyes and a baleen labret. In the lower right cheek are three deeply carved X’s, aligned vertically, representing the artist’s daughter. The fluke in the forehead is a direct reference to the Inupiat people’s connection to animals and the land and their belief that all things have “inua,” a life essence of soul. Though not directly inspired by any particular mask in the Sheldon Jackson Museum’s collection,

which includes the world’s largest collection of masks from Point Hope, Oomittuk was aware of the museum’s holdings and had them in mind while he was creating the work. Soon after completing *Welcome to Tikigaq* Oomittuk became an artist-in-residence through the National Museum of the American Indian’s Artist Leadership Program hosted by the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

Oomittuk is a contemporary Inupiaq artist who has been carving masks, primarily in wood, for over fifteen years. He has worked with a plethora of materials including ivory, baleen, bone, various animal skins, stone, clay, bronze, and also delved into painting, photography, printmaking, and silkscreen. His work is inspired by his environment, the land his ancestors came from, specifically, Tikigaq (Point Hope). In his work, he strives to convey powerful experiences and reveal distinct impressions of how he perceives, feels, thinks, and communicates while simultaneously exploring “the intrinsic relationships between matter, energy, and meaning.”

Though Oomittuk has been inspired by some other contemporary Inupiaq artists such as Larry Ahvakana, and has formally studied ceramics, photography, printmaking, and graphic design, he is largely self-taught in terms of carving. His work has been shown at the Alaska Native Arts Foundation, Princeton University Art Museum, the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, HI, the Heard Museum, the Portland Art Museum, the Anchorage Museum of History and Art at the Rasmuson Center, and the Sheldon Jackson Museum. He has won three consecutive first place awards for his carvings at the Indian Art Northwest Festival.

This mask along with many other Inupiaq masks and material may be seen at the Sheldon Jackson Museum until September 30<sup>th</sup>. The museum’s summer hours are 9am to 5pm daily. Admission is \$5 for adults, \$4 for seniors, and free for those 18 and under and Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska State Museum. The museum’s hours change to winter hours September 14<sup>th</sup> to 10am to 4pm Tuesday through Saturday and at that time, general admission will change to \$3.