

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: December 2, 2015

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM DECEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s December Artifacts of the Month are eight 19th century Northwest Coast silver spoons (SJ.2009.1.11, SJ.I.A.881, SJ.2009.1.3, SJ.2008.1.1, SJ.I.C.28, SJ.2009.4.1, SJ.2009.3.1, and SJ.I.A.868.) Half of the spoons were generously donated by the late former curator and Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum board member, Peter Corey. These fine examples of Alaska souvenir spoons speak to the insatiable passion and enthusiasm for collecting prevalent among many American Victorian era households and Native silversmiths’ significant contributions to the flatware curio trade and decorative arts.

All of the spoons are elaborately engraved with either bear or salmon figures; some have dates; and six out of the eight have the word “Sitka” engraved on them.¹ The variety in style is great ranging from realistic looking designs with only minimal Northwest Coast stylistic elements to significant formline motifs with many ovoids, split u forms, u forms, and geometric triangles, crescents, diamonds, chevrons, and cross hatching. While the salmon have delineated scales, gills, fins, and lateral lines, the bear figures are far more stylized, practically grinning.

Though none of the December Artifacts of the Month were engraved with an artist’s name, five were attributed to Tlingit artist Rudolph Walton by Peter Corey.² Corey, a Northwest Coast silver enthusiast, based his attributions on the style of script – Walton frequently separated the letter “a” from the other letters when he engraved the word “Sitka”; the years engraved on the spoons (ranging from 1892 to 1897, all years Walton was active in Sitka); and formline details, including the kinds of hatch marks and slightly rectangular ovoids typically employed by Walton. Also significant are the repousse ears, eyes, brows, nose, and mouths - common in Walton’s work and present in the bears’ faces.

Silver was not a common traditional material for Alaska Native artists. Copper extracted from along the Copper and Chitina Rivers was the first metal worked by Alaska Natives and trade in the precious metal was controlled by the Tlingit. Silver in the form of Spanish, Chinese, and Portuguese coins came to the Northwest Coast in the 1740s and may have been given by foreigners as gifts or special compensation but was generally a very scarce commodity. Once silver became readily available in the 1860s in the form of American silver coins, it was substituted for copper, iron, and brass used earlier, and transformed into silver blanket pins, lip pins, nose rings, and status-conveying bracelets.

¹ Though place names on spoons can yield clues to a maker, it must be read with some skepticism since carvers would inscribe any town name at the request of a curio dealer. Names were also sometimes added after the date of manufacture by commercial jewelers.

² Spoons engraved with the name of the Native carver who fashioned them are extremely rare and it is often quite challenging to identify and distinguish the work of one artist against another. The way a spoon has been made, and the style of formline can reveal essential information about personal style that assist in identification.

The silver spoon was not yet part of the Northwest Coast artist's repertoire, but came about within decades as steamship tourists, inspired by Victorian romantic misconceptions of "vanishing Indians" and in search of "authentic", portable souvenirs for the home arrived to the Northwest Coast eager to purchase Native-made curios.

By the early 1880s, almost every village along the Northwest Coast had Native carvers working silver and crafting jewelry. Setting up shop was relatively easy. To work silver, artisans required only a few simple tools including an anvil, hammer, wooden mold, two or three engraving tools made from pieces of files or knife blades, a whetstone, a piece of dogfish skin for smoothing, and fine clay or deer skin for polishing.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum has over nearly one hundred and fifty examples of Northwest Coast 19th century silver including spoons, forks, sugar tongs, butter knives, bracelets, and even a silver napkin ring made by renowned Haida artist Charles Edenshaw. The December Artifacts of the Month will be exhibited until December 31st and can be seen Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 4pm. The museum is closed Sundays, Mondays and holidays. General admission is \$3 and free for those 18 and under or members of either the Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Friends of the Alaska State Museum.

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