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Press Release
SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JANUARY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

The January Artifact of the Month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a fish skin mask made by contemporary artist, Joel Isaak (Keniatze Athabascan). Entitled *Tu'qa Mask*, this piece was made in 2011 and acquired by the museum in 2014 with Rasmuson Art Acquisition funds (SJ.2014.3.1).[i]

Joel Isaak is a member of the Keniatze Indian Tribe from the Dena'ina region of South Central Alaska. His artwork, including this mask, reflects his Native Alaskan and Northern European heritage and how that duality plays out as he combines Native materials and process with the more modern industrial process. In his bio, Isaak writes, "I use nontraditional materials to tell traditional stories that show how people have overcome adversity, or given life from themselves. I love the way traditional masks enable the human body to transform into another entity to tell a story…In these mask and figurative forms I wanted to portray myself but allow a large enough audience to relate personally to the work."

In this salmon skin work of art, Isaak literally portrays himself, as the form of the mask is based on his ancestral portrait and features his silhouette sculpted in the bone structure of several of his male family members. The face includes skin molded in the form of some of his own features, his uncle's nose, and his grandfather's chin. A slight split in the fish skin at the approximate location of where the right eye socket would be located is sewn together with artificial sinew and suggestive, for Isaak, of the "individual nature of skin and individuality, and the "scarring and healing that happens as we go through life." A splay of five hammered, copper feathers extends off the top of the mask.

Fish skins have been used as a textile material in many northern regions of the world including Scandinavia, Siberia, Canada, Northern Japan, France, and Alaska. Tlingit, Alutiiq, Athabascan, and Yup'ik peoples of Alaska were all documented by 19th and early 20th century collectors and ethnographers as using fish skin to make warm, waterproof, windproof, and durable garments.[ii] This is not surprising considering the abundance of fish and Alaska Native peoples' inseparable connection to the land and its resources. Despite the materials' relative wide spread use, fish skin sewing fell largely out of practice by the mid-20th century.[iii] Fortunately, some contemporary artists including Joel Isaak (Athabascan), Audrey Armstrong (Athabascan), Coral Chernoff (Alutiiq), and Marlene Nielsen (Yup'ik) are working with fish skin, studying fish skin artifacts in museum collections, experimenting with the art form, and sharing their knowledge with others.

Traditionally, women would be responsible with the construction of fish skin garments and the preparation required including fishing and soaking or tanning and sewing. Women set nets and weirs to catch fish and then prepared the skins by carefully removing meat after fish were smoked and dried. With a special tool – often an ulu or caribou or deer clavicle bone, shell, or other similar implement and through a lengthy process all of the meat and oil was removed to help prevent deterioration of the finished product. Skin was then soaked in urine for several days and hung to freeze-dry in the cold. (Urine contains

formic acid and urinase, and uric acid, among other things; these acids have a preservative effect on the skin.) Sometimes, instead of soaking the skins in urine, women tanned and simultaneously dyed them through a process of using alder bark chips or willow bark and boiling water. Contemporary artists working with fish skin may use urine but frequently use lye or a mild soap such as dawn detergent and water and they may use commercial dyes for added color instead of the traditional alder or willow. The final step in processing is to work or massage the skins to make them pliable after which they are either kept frozen or maintained in a cool place until rehydrated for sewing.

A variety of fish skin garments, needle cases, pouches, bags, boots, mittens, pants, and parkas are in the collection of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and they, along with this mask, may be seen in the museum gallery through January 31st. Winter hours at the Sheldon Jackson Museum are 10am to 4pm, Tuesday through Saturday. The museum is closed 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.

Isaak, Joel. "Re: Fish Skin Mask." Message to the author. 17 Dec. 2014. Email

Reed, Fran. "The Poor Man's Raincoat: Alaskan Fish Skin Garments." *Arctic Clothing of North America: Alaska, Canada, Greenland*. Ed. J.C.H King. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. 48-52. Print

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[i] Tu'qa is Dena'ina for salmon and the T should be a barred L.

[ii] Diapers, tent and window coverings, were also made, though the Sheldon Jackson Museum currently lacks any examples.

[iii] As Fran Reed pointed out in her article, The Poor Man's Raincoat: Alaskan Fish-Skin Garments, Edward Nelson incorrectly surmised that Inupiaq used fish skin for making garments. They used them for ceremonial gloves and occasionally, containers, but not for garments according to Steven Jacobson in his book, A Yup'ik Dictionary. Of the nearly fifty items made with fish skin at the museum, only three, including this contemporary mask, are not identified as being Yup'ik.