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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JUNE ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The June Artifact of the Month at the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a dance bib made by contemporary artist Chloe French (Tlingit) (SJ.2014.9.1). This dance bib entitled *Visiting Our Past* was purchased in 2014 with generous support of the Friends of Sheldon Jackson Museum. The collar is made of black melton cloth and embellished with fine beadwork and sequins. The whimsical designs were inspired by pictographs in southeast Alaska.

The following is taken directly from correspondence with the artist about the piece: “We can only guess at their [the pictographs] meaning. They represent people and birds and perhaps the sun and stars. Some are geometric and simply beautiful. Is the person with

the antlers calling to the deer? The person with the helmet dancing? Do the birds represent something specific or is it our insatiable need to decorate and make our mark.

It is the immediacy of pictographs that always draws me closer. I want to show these magnificent pictographs in a new setting using the bib form of regalia. We see both the distant past in the pictographs, the recent past in the bib form and the present in the materials and choice of subject matter.”

A well-known spinner, weaver, and beader whose button robes and beaded necklaces are highly sought after, French’s work has been shown and sold by the Stonington Gallery and by the Sealaska Heritage Institute at fundraisers. Originally from Kake, Alaska, and a former school teacher, Chloe now resides in Washington State and teaches beginning Chilkat weavers and button robe makers, taking “great delight in watching them discover their own artistic voice.”

Dance bibs or dance collars and other regalia were traditionally worn by Tlingit men and women during important ceremonial events, such as potlatches, and other special occasions involving dancing. The collars frequently feature crests - designs that communicate important information about the wearer’s identity and heritage. Some scholars, such as Megan Smetzer, point out that dance collars are similar to an early type of bib-shaped armor collected by Russian explorer Lisianski. The armor was made with walrus hide suspended from a wooden collar and protected the neck and chest. Contemporarily, many dancers in Tlingit dance groups wear dance collars when performing for special ceremonies or publicly.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to six Tlingit dance collars, and a variety of other pieces of 19th century Tlingit regalia including elaborate button blankets, Chilkat robes, and headdresses. This piece is the first piece of dancing regalia made by a contemporary artist to be acquired by the Sheldon Jackson Museum since it expanded its scope of collections to include contemporary art in 2013. The Sheldon Jackson Museum Artifact of the Month will be on exhibit at the museum until June 30th. Summer hours are 9am to 5pm daily. The museum is closed holidays year round. In the winter, 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. Summer general admission is \$5; \$4 for seniors; and free for those 18 and under or members of Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Alaska State Museum.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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