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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM SEPTEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's September Artifacts of the Month are a Yup'ik clay lamp and pottery paddle dating back to the late 19th century (SJ.II.B.142 and SJ.II.B.57). Both pieces have been identified as being from Western Alaska and are technological implements indicative of the reliance on oil lamps for heat, cooking, and light in daily and ceremonial Yup'ik life before the advent of electricity.

The paddle is made of bone, likely whale bone, and has etched concentric circles on its concave face and carved finger grips on its shaft. On the back is the following inscription: "used for cleaning skin boats/ Presented by Capt. M.A. Healy U.S.R.M." (referencing Captain Michael Healy of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service.) Despite the notation this piece is thought to not have

been used for cleaning boats but for working pottery. Similar pottery paddles made of ivory have been identified as coming from the Old Bering Sea culture and were used to consolidate and smooth wet clay and impart surface decoration.

The second Artifact of the Month is a clay lamp or *Qikut* collected by Sheldon Jackson from Andraefsky in the late 19th century. Saucer-like in shape and shallow, it has five bands of clay on the inside of its rim and two concentric circles in its center with four spoke-like double lines.

Throughout western Alaska, including the islands of the Bering Strait and on the coast of Siberia, open lamps were used to burn oil for light, heat, and cooking. They were fashioned of clay, soapstone or other easily worked stone. Women were primarily responsible for making clay lamps and traditionally made them outside during the summer using clay found in seams along the coast or on riverbanks at low tide. They shaped the clay with their hands and often added small pieces of grass to strengthening the material. According to Anne Feinup-Riordan's 1996 interview with Yup'ik elder Dick Anthony, partially published in *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live, Masterworks of Yup'ik Science and Survival*, after being formed, the lamps were stored inside grass containers to dry. As they dried, women pressed on them with sticks to add designs, placed them in twined grass, and hung them to set. Once fully dried, women rubbed seal oil on the lamp's surface and placed them in a fire. Once the initial layer of oil burned off, they repeated the process, leaving the lamp in the fire for a long time.

Lamps varied somewhat in form and design. E.W. Nelson recorded seeing lamps varying in size, some as wide as two feet long; symmetry, and convexity. Some of the lamps he encountered had ridge subdivisions; others did not. He noted that saucer-shape lamps were common from the Kuskokwim to the Yukon mouth and also found along the shore of Norton Sound to St. Michael. Of the lamps Nelson photographed during his fieldwork among the Bering Sea, Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta, and Lower Yukon and Kuskokwim River regions, one from Big Lake with incised parallel grooves and spoke-like rays and incised lines is the most similar to the Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month.

Some oil lamps were always kept lit, even during the day, and were used to light other lamps. A lamp might be brought as a source of fire from a neighboring house to light another one or a piece of charcoal from the fire. The *qasgi* or men's communal house was lit by two oil lamps made of stone or clay and set atop *nanilrak* (two wooden lamp supports with concave tops) posted into the ground on both sides of the

fire pit inside. Taking care of the lamps inside the *qasgi* was a joint responsibility held by many men though women would assist with wicks and oil upon being notified by their husbands. Seal oil was the most frequently used, but fish oil, beluga oil, and many other types of oil were used.

Much of the pottery from Western Alaska was fired at low temperatures and therefore display a higher level of porosity and are more susceptible to damage. Porosity refers to the ability of a material to absorb water. Earthenware pieces, having been fired to a lower temperature, do not fully vitrify, and as such, allow water to slowly pass through the wall of the pot. The higher the firing temperature, the less water can pass through.

According to William Fitzhugh and Aaron Crowell, unlike other pottery traditions in the Americas, which developed without external stimuli, pottery spread in Alaska from Neolithic cultures of Siberia approximately 4,000 years ago. The practice remained in use in western Alaska, primarily to produce cooking pots and oil lamps among coastal peoples, until the 20th century.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to approximately two dozen examples of clay pots, lamps, and dishes. Much of the pottery in the Sheldon Jackson Museum was collected at Andreafsky; some pieces are from the Kuskokwim region. The September Artifacts of the Month will be on exhibit until September 30th. 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. During summer hours, the museum is open 9am to 5pm daily. The last day the museum is open summer hours at the museum is Sunday, September 20th. During winter hours, beginning Monday, September 21st, the museum is closed Sundays and Mondays, and open Tuesday through Saturday from 10am to 4pm. Beginning September 21st, 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. The museum is closed holidays year round.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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Feinup-Riordan, Ann. *Yuungnaqpiallerput: The Way We Genuinely Live, Masterworks of Yup'ik Science and Survival Social Life in Northwest Alaska*: Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 2007. Print.

Fitzhugh, William and Aaron Crowell. *Crossroads of Continents: Cultures of Siberia and Alaska*. Washington, D.C. and London. Smithsonian Institution Press, 1988. Print

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