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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM FEBRUARY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s February Artifact of the Month is a 19th century meat tenderizer (2015-5-2). The meat tenderizer, along with a cribbage board, is a recent acquisition donated by Ellen Harrington, the great niece of Reverend Samuel Robert Spriggs. More than a jovial-looking memento, this engraved ivory artifact with a wooden handle has a fascinating provenance, is exemplary of one of several walrus engraving styles, and underscores the complexity of the curios trade, its development, producers and consumers, and the dispersal of Inupiaq material culture outside of Alaska in the 19th century.

Dorothy Ray Jean identified four principal kinds of walrus ivory engraving styles including old engraving, modified engraving, Western pictorial, and modified pictorial. This particular ivory curios piece has many qualities of an artifact done in the modified engraving style, which originated in the area of St. Michael and was popular between 1870 and 1900 and appeared on many ivory pipes and whole walrus tusks.

In the modified style, engravers applied essentially the same techniques and subject matter as the old engraving style to smaller surfaces, but discarded most of the old stick men and schematic figures. Great concern for shading and contrast was shown through incised crosshatched, vertical or horizontal lines. Modified style also included incisions that were often deep, heavy and filled with jet black color. The ears and all of the scenes on each side in the lower quarter of the tenderizer, including a caribou, two foxes, three walrus, and fish drying all feature crosshatching or crosshatching and vertical lines filled with black color.

From the beginning of the 19th century, non-Native enthusiasm for collecting Inupiaq material was strong, but it intensified starting in the late 1840s when the first Yankee whaling vessel sailed through the Bering Strait and hundreds of whalers subsequently followed in search of the bowhead whale. Journals and accounts from the whaling period reflect that many of the men returning did so with curios goods made by Alaska Natives in the North.

Institutional collecting was carried out by Smithsonian collectors E.W. Nelson around the Bering Strait and by John Murdoch in the Point Barrow area for the purpose of scientific study. The nature of collecting done by such collectors was strongly influenced by turn-of-the-century anthropologists’ interests and concerns about typology.

1 Human figures were made in larger size and rounded out. Anatomy, clothing, and sex was not made until western style engraving was adopted, but the nationality of non-Inupiaq peoples – Yankee, Chukchi, or Lapp, was indicated by physical characteristics or headgear.

2 Ivory carvings, drill bows, a hunting helmet, and possibly other items, were collected by the 1816 Kotzebue expedition and in 1826-27, Frederick Beechey, an English explorer, made a sizeable collection, now mostly at the Pitt Rivers Museum.
Individual collectors formed another important market for curios goods in the latter half of the 19th century. This demographic included a large number of officers and crew members of the U.S. revenue cutters that patrolled arctic waters every summer. Sailors on board were allowed to take a limited number of trade goods north to barter with Natives for cold weather clothing and curios for personal use. School teachers and missionar...
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