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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.¹ 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.² 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 missionaries who came North like Spriggs, also collected privately.

Reverend Spriggs and his wife lived in Point Barrow during a time of great change in Northern Alaska and arrived relatively close to the onset of the burgeoning curious trade. Gold had been discovered in 1898, the year prior to their arrival, at Anvil Creek near present-day Nome. Though Nome is nearly five hundred miles from Point Barrow, the discovery of gold and subsequent impact and reach went far beyond the Bering Strait area, and meant great change for all of arctic Alaska, and somewhat standardized the curios trade.

During the gold rush, there were three main groups of curios buyers. The majority were miners and prospectors going south on the last boat before freeze up during late summer. A second more discriminating group of collectors were the permanent or semi-permanent residents of Alaska – civil servants, doctors, lawyers, teachers, housewives, and merchants who usually looked for old artifacts or replicas of old artifacts. The third group included a small but growing number of tourists.

Collectors obtained curios in a variety of settings – sometimes directly from Natives; other times from retail stores. Street vendors were the most common purveyors. Nome merchants that began stocking curios very early included Polet's Snake River Grocery, the Nome Bazaar, and the Golden Gate. In Nome, where currency was used, curios had a dollar value. In more remote areas, like Point Barrow where the Spriggs were based, goods were bartered and values were often reckoned in cloth, usually made of cloth or denim and called "calico." Sacks of flour, hard tack, and gun cartridges were also used.

Curios were transmitted outside Alaska via many channels. The most active was the revenue cutter personnel. Despite it being against regulations to trade for resale, officers of the Revenue Service bought ivory in Siberia and later shipped them routinely to the Alaska Commercial Company stores at Unalaska and Kodiak and to curio shops in southeastern Alaska, and probably to some in San Francisco. Crew members travelling to Nome in summer on steamships also traded for curios and resold them in Seattle, Port Townsend, and Tacoma. Later, dealers in Nome accepted orders for Native artifacts from individual collectors, museums and specialty shops.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to nearly a hundred artifacts collected by Reverend Springs, also donated to by Ms. Harrington, including ivory cigar holders, toy spears, crochet hooks, bow drill mouthpieces, letter openers, wrist guards, bone combs, spoons, containers, and many other items. The majority of these artifacts were probably made shortly before or during Spriggs' time in Point Barrow for sale. The museum is also home to nearly a dozen cribbage boards made in the latter part of the 19th century.³

The February Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until February 29th 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.

Lee, Molly. "A Piece of the Past: Alaskan Eskimo Art and the Nome Gold Rush, 1895-1915." *Studies in American Indian Art: A Memorial Tribute to Norman Feder*. Ed. Christian F. Feest. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001. 96-105. Print

Ray, Dorothy Jean, "Graphic Arts of the Alaskan Eskimo." *Native American Arts. United States Department of the Interior, Indian Arts and Crafts Board*, 1969: 4-35. Print

Shuyler, Cammann. "Carvings in Walrus Ivory." *University Museum Bulletin Published by the University, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia*. Volume 18, No. 3. September, 1954: 1-32. Print

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

³ Inupiaq did not make cribbage boards until the 1890s – E.W. Nelson didn't collect any from 1879-1881. After the Gold Rush, cribbage boards were made by groups from Siberia to the Kuskokwim.

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