

Patience Frederiksen

Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,
& Museums

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STATE OF ALASKA

DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Addison Field

Chief Curator

104 College Drive
Sitka, Alaska 99835
907-747-8981

Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM AUGUST ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's August Artifact of the Month is a Tlingit feasting bowl (SJ-I-A-12). The museum does not have a great deal of information about the bowl, but it is a fine example of carving, typical of many square feasting bowls, and is believed to have been collected by Sheldon Jackson.



Feasting was different than everyday eating and often involved the use of dishes, ladles, and spoons to support notions of rank and identity. Simple horn

and wooden spoons were used on a daily basis, but elaborately decorated utensils, bowls, and dishes were reserved for special occasions.ⁱ Such celebratory meals would take place often when there was a seasonal surplus of salmon or a successful hunt. The food served would vary seasonally and include dried salmon or some other fish, seal meat, seaweed or herring spawn, berries, beaten soapberries, and frequently, fish or seal oil, in which food was dipped.

Northwest Coast feasting bowls were made in a variety of forms and sizes. They were typically constructed out of mountain goat horn, alder or some other kind of non-resinous wood such as yew, maple or birch. They were made in sizes ranging from tiny individual containers for candlefish and seal oil to feast dishes up to twenty feet in length and any size in between. While some bowls were made in the form of bent-corner boxes, others were made of hollowed out sculpted animals or globular forms. Some were rectangular or square in shape and carved from solid blocks of wood, like the August Artifact of the month.

Feasting bowls varied in their degrees of embellishment, though they were often elaborately decorated with painting, carving or inlay of shell or opercula. Most were painted on the sides and at the ends at one time, but the oily wood forms a poor bond with native salmon-egg tempera and generally the bowls, many years later, are richly patinaed, but without paint. Without color, the positive, negative relationships of the carved forms are much harder to see.

The August Artifact of the Month has several characteristics always present in square Northwest Coast bowls. Most notably, on the ends, is a series of vertical, parallel grooves with a thin groove slanting down to the corners - a feature of all squarish bowls originating from the Northwest Coast. Like other Northwest Coast square bowls, the featured artifact has sides that flare toward the top and are slightly bowed in a convex form; corners that are curved and slanted outwards; and a flanged rim that is high at the ends and dips at the sides.ⁱⁱ Square bowls like this are universally carved from the center of a log as is evident from the growth rings that visibly run from one end of the bowl to the other.ⁱⁱⁱ

The featured square bowl has no inlay in its rim and no signs of having been previously painted, but each end has finely executed formline design carved into it depicting an unidentifiable animal. Apart from some small white paint spots and stains from unidentified sources, it is in very good condition. This is fortunate as square bowls often have splits that appear from the rim to the center.

According to Bill Holm, the squarish Northwest Coast bowl's design suggests a connection between the Athabascan peoples of the interior and coastal peoples. Athabascan peoples who historically lived high in the interior plateaus used canoes and containers made out of birch bark. Among the containers used were rectangular bowls with undulating rims. The bark sheets used to construct the bowls were folded by a method that left triangular pleats lapping the corners in the same position as the carved grooves in Northwest coast square alder bowls. The square bowl may therefore, be a skeuomorph, with decorative elements that once had a functional purpose in the birch bark bowl.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to twenty-six Tlingit feast dishes, but only three made from a single piece of wood. To see all of the feasting bowls and the August Artifact of the Month, visit the gallery between 9am and 4:30pm any day except holidays, Tuesday through Saturday. The August Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until August 31st. General admission is \$7, \$6 for seniors, 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.

Emmons, George Thornton & (Ed.) De Laguna, Frederica. *The Tlingit Indians*. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 1991

Holm, Bill. *The Box of Daylight*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum & University of Washington Press. 1983

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Jacqueline Hamberg

Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 747-3004

www.museums.alaska.gov

ⁱ Many feasting bowls were passed down as family heirlooms and given as a privilege in noble marriages or prestigious relics passed down by high ranking ancestors.

ⁱⁱ This detail is possibly the result of the natural change that occurs when the sides of a hollow vessel are spread apart – such as when a horn bowl or a canoe, is widened by steam-bending. Unlike bentwood boxes, bent corner bowls' sides are carved into more or less convex form.

ⁱⁱⁱ If a dish or bowl was made with more than a single piece of wood, Tlingit carvers bent the corners, avoiding fitting joints of boxes and bowls whenever possible. This was done by bending the corners using the complex technique of thinning a plank for the sides with grooves and then steaming the thinned wood until it became flexible enough to bend. If the square feasting bowl did have joints, wood-joining technology involved pegging, lacing, lashing, and fitting with various sorts of tenons was applied. These methods were most commonly used for square feast dishes with red cedar bottoms.