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Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

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## SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JANUARY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's January Artifact of the Month is an Inupiaq mask (SJ-II-DD-3). The museum has little information on the mask, but it was collected by former Sheldon Jackson Museum curator Esther Billman and purchased from Willie Hugo of Anaktuvuk Pass for twenty-two dollars. The details on the January Artifact of the Month and the time period in which it could have been purchased suggest that the mask is probably a later piece made in the 1960s or 1970s.

To make a mask in this style, one scrapes membranes from caribou skin to soften it, leaving a short stubble on the other side. Next, wet caribou skin, usually soaked overnight in a dyeing agent of caribou blood, reddish dye made with alder bark, iron oxide from a river bank, coffee, cocoa or tea. The skin is stretched around a wooden form and nailed on. After one day, the skin is dried, holds its form, and is ready for cutting out of the eye and mouth holes. The fur details are

added. Earlier masks had fur ruffs, eyebrows, eyelashes, and if male, often beards, moustaches, or both that were sewn on with sinew while later ones were sewn with thread or glued on. The ruff, usually made of lynx, fox, grizzly bear or wolf is put on last.

The Artifact of the Month is a contemporary woman's face mask. Her mouth is open but is difficult to make out if her facial expression is that of sadness or joy. Her snow white hair, likely caribou beard fur, is positioned in a middle part and peeks out from below the soft, grey wolf fur ruff framing her face. She has thick, bushy eyebrows, probably caribou fur. Dark brown eyelashes outline the holes that serve as her eyes. The fur embellishments are all sewn to the mask with mercerized thread.

In 1951, the first Anaktuvuk Pass caribou masks were created by Bob Ahgook and Zaccharias (Zak) Hugo.<sup>i</sup> The two men were out on a trap line, talking about upcoming holiday festivities in the village and discussing ways they could participate. They developed a scheme to disguise themselves in masks and surprise everyone with their costume and funny antics. Lacking many materials, the men began to work with pieces of caribou hide and bits of caribou fur, sewing them together with sinew. Lacking proper facilities and any experience making masks, it took them almost two days and involved a great deal of trial and error, but they succeeded, returned to the village, and hid their masks.<sup>ii</sup> The night of dance, once festivities were under way, Hugo and Ahgook appeared wearing their creations, delighting everyone. After the celebration, they hung their masks in the corner of their sod houses and didn't use them again. It wasn't till a few years later that anyone took any interest in the masks and another four and a half years before any more were made.

In May 1952, Laurence Irving of University of Alaska's Institute of Arctic Biology and Terris Moore, then president of the University, stopped at Anaktuvuk on return to Fairbanks from a research expedition further north. The men talked to Simon Paniaq, who was chief *umialik* or elder or leader of Anaktuvuk

Pass and during their conversation, the subject of masks came up. Paniaq sent two boys to the homes of Ahgook and Hugo to get the masks that had been made the year before and the visitors to the village purchased them.<sup>iii</sup> One of these two original hide and fur masks is now in the collection of the Museum of the North at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

In the summer of 1956, a school teacher from Anchorage, Mrs. Ethel Oliver, visited Antaktuvuk Pass. During her visit, she suggested to Paniaq that the villagers make and sell something other than the toys that were being made in order to bring in more income. Nearly six months later, she received a package of twelve masks including two made of wood that had details, including fur ruffs, beards, and moustaches, similar to the caribou skin masks originally made by Aghook and Hugo. Oliver showed the masks to her friends, who desired ones of their own, and then spoke with a local tourist gift shop which agreed to take thirty masks on consignment. One of the first masks to arrive to Anchorage was a caribou-skin mask made by the elder Paniaq's wife, was made of skin, and similar to the Hugo and Ahgook masks.

Soon after the first masks were sent to be sold, Justice Mekiana, a talented craftsman of the village, revolutionized the method of making them by incorporating a handmade wooden form into the process. Before long, he made multiple wooden forms and began drying several masks at a time, speeding up his production process. He sent more to Anchorage to sell on consignment and later made more wooden forms and sold them to other villagers who could not carve their own. Mekiana's method became the new way of making the signature Anuktuvuk Pass mask.

The January Artifact of the Month mask will be exhibited until January 31st. The museum is home to five Anaktuvuk Pass masks including men's faces, a child's face, and faces with wolf ears. The January Artifact of the Month, can be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 10am and 4pm. The museum is closed for lunch from noon to 1pm. 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.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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<sup>i</sup> There are several variations in the spelling of the men's names.

<sup>i</sup> None of the men had any mask making experience, though Hugo remembered seeing funny Halloween masks in a store in Fairbanks during a rare, recent trip.

<sup>iii</sup> The makers of the masks, Aguk and Hugo were on the trail when the masks were sold. They returned and learned of the sale, and were grateful since the elder village leader, Paniaq, had acted in line with communal mores and in best interests of the young hunters.