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Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE: June 1, 2017

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JUNE ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's June Artifact(s) of the Month are two throwing boards (SJ-II-K-185 and SJ-II-V-189). Both throwing boards were collected by Sheldon Jackson in the late 19th century and are illustrative of a tool and technology important to peoples of the Amazon, Australia, and the hyperborean regions of North America, including Alaska.

The throwing board or spear thrower is designed to improve the power of bird

spears and lighter kinds of harpoons. Traditionally, the device is a narrow wooden platform carved in the shape of a long triangle, usually between 15 and 18 inches long, with a handle at one end and groove along the upper surface in which the spear shaft lies with the butt solidified in place by some kind of catch at the opposite, narrower end, usually made of ivory. The grip of throwing spears is below the wide end and just adjacent to it is a hole cut for the forefinger and notch for the thumb.

In his 1883 publication, *Throwing-Sticks in the National Museum*, the curator of the Department of Ethnology at the Smithsonian National Museum, Otis T. Mason, identified thirteen different kinds of throwing boards or throwing spears including the following kinds named after their respective places of origin: Greenland, Anderson River, Point Barrow, Kotzebue Sound, Eastern Siberia, Port Clarence and Cape Nome, Norton Sound, Nunivak Island and Cape Vancouver, Bristol Bay, Kadiak or Unalashka. His account included several sketches and a detailed narrative describing the different kinds of throwing spears and how to identify where they are from. According to Mason, structural characteristics and markings that could indicate place of origin includes: shape or general outline, side view, and size; handle; thumb-groove or thumb-lock for a firm and comfortable placement of the fingers and ball of thumb; finger grooves; finger-pegs, little plugs of wood or ivory to give more grip to fingers; finger-tip cavities, "excavations" on the front into which tips of the last three fingers help in grasping; index finger cavity or hole; spear shaft

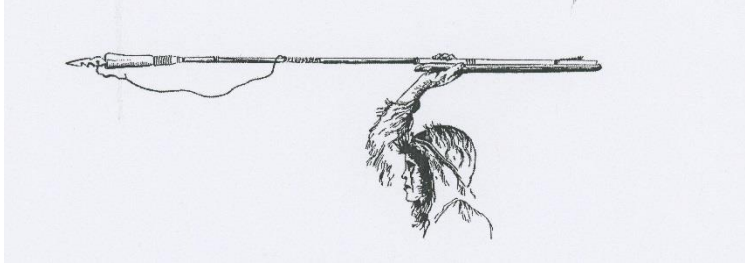


Illustration of a throwing stick being used with a harpoon. Illustration from Otis T. Mason's "Throwing-Sticks in the National Museum"

groove to hold the shaft of the weapon; hook or spur to seize the butt end of the weapon during launch; the side edges; and the face upon which the dart or spear rests and the obverse face.

When examined against Mason's written descriptions of the different kinds of throwing spear types, each of the two June Artifacts of the Month appear to be most stylistically similar to

those of the Kotzebue Sound. Kotzebue Sound throwing boards are shaped like obelisks or elongated, truncated pyramids and are fluted on all sides. They tend to have spiral shaped handles and an index finger cavity below the groove for the shaft. The groove is typically shallow and wide. Most often, a hook at the distal end is made of ivory and stands above the wood.

Of the two spears, the smaller one with a red ochre line down its center (SJ-II-K-185) is most like those categorized as being of Mason's Kotzebue Sound type. Although it was collected by Sheldon Jackson from Point Hope, according to his handwritten inscription on one side, it has all of the Kotezebue Sound characteristics except fluting. The larger spear thrower completely painted with red ochre (SJ-II-Y-59) is identified as being from Kotzebue Sound by Jackson's handwritten inscription, but has a flat handle and is also lacking in fluting.

The June Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until June 30th. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to seventeen throwing boards, thirty-one bird spears, twenty-three harpoon points, and a dozen harpoons. The June artifact and others may be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 9am and 4:30pm. 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.

Mason, Otis T. "Throwing-Sticks in the National Museum." Science Views Ebooks. 24 May 2017. Web. <<http://scienceviews.com/ebooks/ThrowingSticks-Mason/index.html>>

Nelson, E.W. *The Eskimo About Bering Strait*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983. Print

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