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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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August Artifact of the Month: Tlingit Octopus Bag

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum artifact of the month for August is a Tlingit octopus bag (I.A.844). This bag was purchased by the museum in 2000, but was originally bought by Ms. Ada Schwatka in 1882 or 1883 from Princess Thom of Sitka. Princess Thom, Raven, Kwa'Sk-Sa', was written about in travel accounts by Ruhamah Scidmore and Septima Collis, in *The Tlingit Indians* by ethnographer George Thornton Emmons, and in Alaskan newspapers including *The North Star* and *The Alaskan*. A lady of high status and conspicuous wealth, the princess whose adopted name was Emaline Baker, was described in narratives as a smart, successful, fashionable, business woman who independently amassed her fortune through trade, owned several properties in Yakutat and Sitka, and was the wife of two men. Fluent in several dialects, she made frequent trading trips alone by canoe and later, in her private schooner, bringing back furs, baskets, blankets, silver, curios, and various goods from villages along the coast of Alaska.



Tlingit octopus bag (I.A. 844)

First appearing in the mid-1800s and named for their unusual shape, octopus bags were traditionally fashioned out of trade materials including wool, cotton cloth, beads and yarn. Made by wives for their husbands, the bags were used to carry tobacco, smoking pipes, flint, tinder, and other small items. The bags' four tentacles or tabs usually featured tassel fringe strung with glass beads. Despite its missing tassels, this is a beautiful bag made of dark blue wool cloth with an interior lined with a red plaid and blue floral calico fabric. The back and front panels were made separately and are bordered with a white seed bead two-beaded edging. The front is adorned with typical Tlingit foliate or sea weed designs in light and medium blue, two shades of pink, tan, yellow, green, white and red seed beads.

The octopus bag and styles of floral beaded designs embellishing them were shared by groups connected through trading posts and indigenous trade routes. Although most often associated with the Northwest Coast Tlingit, octopus bags originated among the Cree and Cree-Métis people in the Lake Winnipeg and James Bay Cree area of Canada. Other Native groups that used this style of bag included the Algonquian-speaking Cree north and west of Lake Superior, the Cree of the northern plains in the United States, the Montagnais of the

Eastern subarctic, and some Shuswap and Thompson River Salish-speaking tribes. While the earliest examples of Cree floral beadwork date back to the early 1800s, Athabaskan regional floral styles developed regionally in the 1850s among the Great Slave Lake-Mackenzie River, the Liard-Fraser, the Yukon Tanana, the Tahltan, and the Interior Coastal. By the 1860s, the bags had reached the Northwest Coast where unique floral styles developed, probably influenced by Athabaskan work. It was not until the turn of the century that subarctic styles, which have no floral influence, emerged.

According to Megan A. Smetzer's article, "Tlingit Dance Collars and Octopus Bags: Embodying Power and Resistance" published in *American Indian Art Magazine* in the winter of 2008, Tlingit combined longstanding cultural practices, introduced materials, ideas, and techniques to produce octopus bags and other beadwork to articulate indigenous identity (group and individual) and power both within indigenous communities and for outsiders – the beadwork was, in her view, "a subtle means of resistance...in an era of increasingly repressive" policies that encouraged the discontinuing of cultural practices such as potlatches. Beadwork was often ignored or dismissed because the physical characteristics of beadwork did not 'fit the perceived Tlingit aesthetic.'" Some Tlingit octopus bags were done with beadwork of crest imagery, but most bags had more abstract sea weed or foliate or floral designs and would not have been recognized by non-Natives as ceremonial.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum collection includes nearly a hundred beaded artifacts including octopus bags, dance bib, moccasins, rifle cases, baby straps, and more. This octopus bag can be seen at the museum through August 31st. Additionally, Athabaskan artist Sarah Williams, a talented beader who has made octopus bags in the past, will be working in the galleries the first and second week of August.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum summer hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Museum admission is \$5 for adults and \$4 for seniors. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

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