

Linda S. Thibodeau
Director

Division of Libraries, Archives,
& Museums

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AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Robert C. Banghart
Deputy Director

395 Whittier St.
Juneau, Alaska 99801-1718
907.465.2901

Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

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February Artifacts of the Month: Haida Argillite Platter

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Artifact of the Month for February is a round Haida argillite platter (I.B.58) believed to have been copied from or influenced by cut and pressed glass Euro-American designs. Euro-American motifs prominent in the piece include three concentric circles on the platter's inner surface, four circles enclosing compass-created six pointed "stars" with foliate-like swags extending off to one side with cross hatching on the exterior surface, and a large six-pointed star in the central recessed area. Located in the trajectory of Haida argillite works, which changed considerably in form, style, and motifs during the 19th century, this dish is illustrative of Western style argillite platters carved between 1830 and 1880.



Haida argillite platter (I.B.58)

Haida have been carving argillite since at least the 1820s and have rendered the stone into a variety of forms including assorted styles of pipes, flutes, single figures, group figurines, circular dishes, platters, bowls, compotes, poles, boxes, personal ornaments (amulets, labrets, medallions), models of Haida houses, and models of Euro-American objects. Today, Haida continue to carve argillite on Haida Gwaii and in the areas of Victoria and Vancouver.

The earliest documented Haida argillite carvings date to the 1820s and take the form of tobacco pipes carved with traditional Haida subjects and formline design. The pipes have large bowls and are functional in form, though few show evidence of having been smoked, and were predominantly made to sell to Euro-American maritime traders, the same people who brought the tradition of smoking tobacco to the Northwest Coast. These pipes were generally

extensively carved with fine detail and formline including angular eye sockets, square formline U's, very thin slit reliefs at the base of solid U's, and inner ovoids with rounded rectangular shapes.

From the 1830s until the smallpox epidemics of 1862, Haida argillite carvings were heavily inspired by Euro-American people, forms, subjects, and motifs.ⁱ Haida carvers in this period continued to fashion Euro-American commercial style tobacco pipes and expanded their range of work to free-standing sculptural figures and tableware, including round and oblong platters which bore no resemblance to traditional Haida serving dishes made from wood or mountain sheep horn and were not used for eating, only as art, due to argillite's susceptibility to scratching and brittleness. Free-standing argillite sculptural forms depicted Euro-American traders, seamen, and their vessels; some forms included Native women portrayed in Euro-American dress. Platters, compotes, and dishes were embellished with geometric patterns and floral motifs seen on foreign furniture, ornamental ship carvings, coins and mass-produced tableware, including utensils, china and pressed glass plates.ⁱⁱ

In late 19th century, after the arrival of missionaries to Haida Gwaii, there was another shift from old to new forms and motifs as Haida began carving in a new narrative style and expanded upon forms to appeal to a growing number of Victorian consumers. Haida mythology, crest imagery, symbols, and natural and supernatural animals and beings including the Raven, Killer whale, Grizzly bear, Black bear, Hawk, Moon, Wasco, Dogfish, Thunderbird, Mountain goat, Wolf, Eagle, Beaver, Five-finned Killer whale, Frog, shaman forms and chiefs wearing regalia were employed to convey stories, oral histories, and legends in new forms of carving made for sale to outsiders.ⁱⁱⁱ At this time, old forms like Haida motif pipes and Euro-American ship pipes were dropped. Some traditional food trays and bowl shapes continued to be carved and model totem poles, model houses, model chests, covered bowls, ink wells, candlesticks, footed compotes, and sculptural forms, usually with a rectangular base suitable for curios cabinetry and mantel displays were added to the argillite carvers' repertoire to cater to Victorian tastes. Formline details in Haida argillite also changed and came into more extensive use.^{iv} Previously, carvers used stippled surface decorations and hollow dashes and dots to indicate fur, hair and clothing on argillite carvings. Prior to the late 19th century conventional formline had been included in argillite works in facial features and some clothing decorations, but had rarely been applied to earlier wings, fins, flippers, and joint areas.

An intermediary between shale and slate, Tilgadu argillite is a carbonaceous, metamorphic rock unique in its structure and formation compared to other kinds of argillite. The sole source of the black slate-like material the Haida call kwawhlhal is a site on Slatechuck Mountain in the upper basin of Tilgadu Creek (Slatechuck), near the Haida village Hlragilda 'Lnagaay (Skidegate) on Graham Island, one of the one hundred fifty islands comprising Haida Gwaii, an archipelago on the North coast of British Columbia, Canada.^v Argillite is found only in this site due to the geological events that formed Haida Gwaii between two hundred and one hundred sixty million years ago, a subsequent slow buildup of silt and shale particles in a fine clay called

kaolin, and volcanic activity that heated, folded, and cooled the layer nearly seventy million years ago. These physical and chemical changes resulted in argillite, its unique major mineralogical components of silica, alumina, ferrous oxide and carbon, and consequently, its ideal texture and hardness for carving.^{vi}

Like wood, argillite is first cut and roughed out with a heavy adze from an outcropping or raw slab. After the initial blocking out, relief is added and the carver conforms design elements to the grain using hand chisels, scribers, files, knives and other woodworking tools. A compass can be used to inscribe geometric motifs, circles, rosettes, and other convolutions. After carving, argillite is smoothed. Smoothing was done traditionally with dried sea sponges or dried sharkskin but has been done with very fine emery paper or steel wool in more recent times. After the 1890s, polishing with fine abrasives to deepen the blackness and glossy sheen of carvings came in vogue and artists applied their own concoctions or lamp black, loggers chalk, petroleum or shoe polish for added luster.

Material made of argillite is unique and fragile. Due to its properties, changes in humidity, temperature, heat, or applied light are absorbed by the carving internally, leaving the object at greater risk of damage. Many carvings collected long ago have chips, cracks and scratches due to poor handling, damage in transport or inadequate, inappropriate environmental conditions. Even this platter, though well cared for and carefully stored, has chips on many parts of its surface, has been previously broken and repaired, and shows a crescentic line running around one side due to glue residue.

Considering the rarity and fragility of argillite, the Sheldon Jackson Museum is fortunate to have thirty argillite carvings, nearly all thought to have been collected by Sheldon Jackson. A few argillite pieces pre-date the February Artifact of the Month, allowing for instructive comparisons. Some pieces including compote carved by Charles Edenshaw featuring the Haida myth of the bear mother, are more finely and elaborately carved. The compote, considered to be a masterpiece of the museum by some, was recently included in the Vancouver Art Gallery's groundbreaking exhibition and retrospective of Edenshaw's work.

This platter will be on exhibit at the Sheldon Jackson Museum until February 28th. The dish and many other Haida argillite carvings including pipes, dishes, sculptural forms, bowls and model totem poles may be viewed at the museum between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

Augaitis, Daina, Jim Hart and Robin K. Wright. *Charles Edenshaw*. London" Black Dog Publishing. 2013. Print.

Macnair, Peter L. and Alan L. Hoover. *The Magic Leaves: A History of Haida Argillite Carving*. Victoria, Canada: Royal British Columbia Museum, 2002. Print.

Wright, Robin. "Haida Argillite Carvings in the Sheldon Jackson Museum" *Faces, Voices & Dreams: A Celebration of the Centennial of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, 1888-1998*. Ed. Peter L. Corey. Sitka: Division of Alaska State Museums and the Friends of the Alaska State Museum, 1987. 177-198. Print.

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ⁱ Occasionally, Euro-American and traditional Haida motifs were combined.

ⁱⁱ Mass production of glassware using pressed molds originated at the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company in Massachusetts. From 1825 until the late 1880s, the company supplied thousands of inexpensive pieces to the East Coast market including the Boston and Salem fur trading ships that frequented Haida Gwaii in the early 19th century. Boston and Sandwich Glass Company pressed plates often had patterns made of floral geometric motifs, berries, rosettes or circles connected with scrolls, and leaves or spirals that sprout from the joins - an arrangement almost identical to the floral and geometric patterns found on some argillite platters such as one in the Lowie Museum of Anthropology and similar to some of the patterns in argillite platters at the Sheldon Jackson Museum.

ⁱⁱⁱ Shamans were never represented in argillite or in any other medium before the late 19th century, the period when shamanism was being actively discouraged by missionaries.

^{iv} In the late 19th century classic formline design system began to break down. Some carvers continued producing art in traditional formline style and took formline design to a new, innovative stage of development. Others not trained in the tradition made formline designs that show a lack of understanding of the basic design principles.

^v Aptly named, Slatechuck translates to English as slate and water or salty water.

In 1941, Skidegate band obtained 43.81 acres of land surrounding and containing Slatechuck quarry site for sole use of the Skidegate people. Permission may be obtained from the Skidegate band council by people seeking to visit it.

^{vi} Geologists rate the hardness of rock on a scale of 1 to 10 with diamonds ranking at 10 and talc at 1. Argillite rates at only 2.5