

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JULY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s July Artifact of the Month is a twined Unangan grass basket done in Unalaska style. The basket has an open mouth, an open twined base, and appears to have never had a cover. Its rim is turned in and its final termination is braided about a half an inch and stitched down on the inside. This basket is particularly interesting because the inner walls show slight remnants of false embroidery designs in red and dark blue fiber running right up to the rim.

This basket was donated by Denis Francis Xavaier Bowen of the U.S. Revenue Cutter Service. Bowen collected the basket from Makushin on Unalaska Island sometime between 1902 and 1904. Bowen, born in January of 1856 in Ireland, served in the U.S.

Revenue Cutter Service, the precursor to the U.S. Coast Guard, on the East Coast, in the Great Lakes region, and in Alaska. He retired in January of 1920 and died in September of 1935.

Unangan baskets were traditionally used to collect seabird eggs and store dried meats and berries. Said to have the tightest weave of any style of basket made by North Americans, Unangan baskets sometimes feature over forty stitches per inch and are sometimes described as having the texture of linen.

Unangan baskets have traditionally been made with ryegrass, a plant native to the Aleutian Island chain. Grass for baskets is cut from hillsides twice a year. In preparation for basket making, women gathered the longest, toughest grass they could find, cut it and stored it inside away from sunlight to prevent discoloration and the weakening of fibers. After drying the grass, women sorted and split it into thin strands. These strands were bundled and hung up outside on cloudy days for additional drying in preparation for basket making.

To make a basket, women would twine thin, flexible horizontal strands, weaving horizontal strands together between vertical ones, working from the base down. In the twining process, two or more strands of horizontal pieces are twisted around each other in half turns as they pass over and under the vertical pieces. Decorative elements are added during the weaving process by wrapping the top weft with a band of colored fiber, usually cotton or silk, and then weaving the stitch so a decorative pattern shows only on the basket’s exterior. This process is known as false embroidery and is exhibited in baskets made by many Alaska Native peoples. A second method of achieving a design in a

basket was to alter the regular sequence of the warp (vertical strand) and weft (horizontal strand) to create a pattern in the fiber of the piece.

The three major styles of contemporary Unangan weaving named for the islands where they originated are Attu, Atka, and Unalaska. All three of the basket styles have slightly different characteristics and vary in shape (the degree to which their bottoms are angular or non-angular), shape of knob and the thickness of the stem upon which their knobs (if present) sit, the degree of fineness in the weave, and the slant in the vertical rows.

Unalaska baskets, like the July Artifact of the month, tend to have a coarser weave, and a bottom corner closer to a right-angle than the Atka, but less than the Attu styles. Unalaska basket weaving methods tend to result in larger baskets and more of the fish baskets or open weave kinds of baskets.

Grass preparation among Unangan peoples varied. Ray Hudson's memoir, *Moments Rights Placed*, noted the differences as follows:

“Attu people buried their grass beneath a layer of sand for a few hours so that the absorbed heat would quicken the bleaching of the grass. Atkan weavers spread their grass out on the hillsides to change color. Unalaskan women bundled their grass and placed it beneath deep ferns or under the house where it was covered with burlap to keep it dark and damp.”

The Sheldon Jackson Museum invites you to see this basket and other Unangan pieces woven out of ryegrass including bag-like wallets, personal accessories, cigar/card cases, and colored bottles in the permanent collection. The basket will be on exhibit until July 31st.

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

Fair, Susan. *Alaska native Art: Tradition, Innovation, Continuity*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press. 2006  
Hudson, Raymond. “Designs in Aleut Basketry.” 1987. *Faces, Voices & Dreams*. Ed. Peter Corey. Juneau: Alaska State Museum and Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, 1987. 63-92. Print.  
Hulbert, Bette. *Aleut Basketry Collection of the Alaska State Museum*. Juneau: Alaska State Museums, Concepts. Technical Paper Number 10. October 1999. Print.

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