

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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## SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM AUGUST ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



Top left: SJ.II.V.48; top right: SJ.II.K.212. Center: SJ.II.V.183.  
Bottom left: SJ.II.V.40; Bottom right: SJ.II.V.49

The Sheldon Jackson Museum's August Artifacts of the Month are four Inupiat ulus and an ulu handle. Three of the ulus and the ulu handle are from Point Barrow. The fourth ulu on the top right side of the photograph is from Point Hope. All the ulus feature distinct details and are the kinds of knives traditionally used by Alaskan women. Together, they represent a technology that has played a vital role in the survival of Arctic and circumpolar peoples, including Alaskan Inupiat and Yupiit, for over 3,000 years.

The ulu featured in the top left side of the photograph has an ivory handle that has been carved to represent a reclining fox and has been stained to a reddish brown color (SJ.II.V.48). Its blade is made of a deep symmetrical iron-based

metal with a bi-beveled cutting edge, slightly concave shoulders, and a straight base.

The semi-lunar ulu on the upper right hand side of the photograph with the brown antler handle has an iron blade with a straight shoulder on the left side and a serrated shoulder on the right, probably from a saw blade (SJ.II.K.212). The date and collector are unknown, but it is documented as originating from Point Hope.

The miniature ulu handle shown in the center of the assorted ulus is made of mineralized ivory and features three etched whales' tails on the darker side and a single whale tail on the lighter side (SJ.II.V.183). There is an etched border surrounding the design on both sides. The straight edge is hollowed for inseting the blade. It was one of many items collected by Rev. Samuel Spriggs in Barrow, Alaska between 1899 and 1908, and is part of the museum's Harrington Collection.

The ulu on the lower left side of the photograph is a contemporary piece with an ivory handle (SJ.II.V.40). The steel blade is curved at its bottom and sharpened to one direction. There is a short extension toward the handle, in the style of the Coronation Gulf indigenous peoples of the Nunavut territory. The ivory handle is riveted with brass rivets. It was made by Harry Brower and given to the museum by his wife, Mrs. Annie Brower, in 1967.

The biggest ulu of the group, shown in the lower right side of the photograph has a bone or antler handle with many scratches on its edges, possibly canine bite marks (SJ.II.V.49). The blade, made of an iron-based metal with two holes bored into it, is attached to the handle by two shanks made out of the center portion of nails. The collector and date are unknown.

All skin work including the removal of hide from carcasses and shaping, was done with knives. If an Inupiaq male cut the skins, it was generally done with a knife (*savik*) with an oblong blade of slate or iron, sometimes made of chert or jade, fastened onto the end of a wood or antler handle, or placed between two pieces of wood wrapped around with cords of baleen or rawhide. The men's knives resembled modern sheath knives.

When women cut skins, thread for sewing or fish or meat in food preparation, it was almost always with an ulu. They were especially important for the production of sea mammal hide clothing, thongs, and boat covers. Scraping a walrus or sealskin without an ulu was nearly impossible, according to Ernest Burch, author of *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Inupiaq and Eskimo Nations*. This is primarily because unlike with a regular knife that is drawn, the ulu is held by the handle and cuts as the user makes a pushing motion, directing the force of the push centrally over the middle of the blade.

Early on, ulus were made out of slate or shale and later, iron and steel and of iron and steel-based metals. Sawblades were especially preferred because of their tough steel and tendency to not dull quickly. The ulus were flat on one edge and crescent shaped or curved in a semi-lunar shape on the other and had blades that were curved and beveled. The flat edge of ulus had a caribou antler or bone, walrus ivory or wooden handle attached to it, sometimes elaborately carved, incised or stained; and other times, left relatively plain. The handles were often grooved for placement of the blade. Sometimes holes were made through both the handle and the blade and then sinew or hide strips were used to lash the handle to the blade.

In some traditions, ulus were made by men and given to women as a wedding present. The ulus were then passed down through generations. Mothers would teach their daughters from a very young age about food production and clothing manufacturing using the special knife.

Ulus continue to be used and remain a practical tool to this day because they are small, practical, and can easily be made of locally available materials. Their elemental shape and the way in which they are used has changed little over the years and today, they are used by Alaska Native and non-Native peoples alike.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum has approximately ninety ulus made with slate, iron, steel, bone, antler, and ivory in its permanent collection. The selection of ulus comprising the August Artifacts of the Month will be on exhibit at the museum until August 31st. Summer hours are 9am to 5pm daily. The museum is closed holidays year round. In the winter, 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. Summer general admission is \$5; \$4 for seniors; and free for those 18 and under or members of Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or Alaska State Museum.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

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Burch, Ernest S., JR. *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Inupiaq Eskimo Nations*. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2006. Print.

Murdoch, John. *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition by John Murdoch*. Ninth Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology to the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution 1887-'88 by J.W. Powell Director. Washington: GPO, 1892. GPO. U.S. Government Printing Office. Print .