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## SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JULY ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's July Artifact of the Month is a halibut hook (S.J.I.A.645). Despite serving the same purpose and having the same basic principal design as the other halibut hooks in the museum's collection, the Artifact of the Month is very different from the other hooks in its construction and simplicity.

All coastal tribes have historically caught halibut, though the Makah on the Olympic Peninsula in Washington and the Tlingit and Haida were the most extensive harvesters of the fish. The species is most abundant in the spring before the arrival of salmon, but can be caught year round, an excellent source of food, fresh or cured.

The featured halibut hook is made from the natural crotch of a tree. The large heavier arm has an iron barb bound into place in a vertical groove with two-ply commercial cord. There is a slight lip on top to prevent the cordage from slipping off the end. The other arm which veers off to one side has a groove girdling it below the midpoint closer to the crotch. There is a piece of heavier two-ply commercial cord bound in place. A piece of commercial cord has been tied on top of the barb binding and wound back and forth between the two arms. A small flattened knob is carved into the base of the body.

Halibut hooks generally are made of two sections lashed together, usually with spruce root. The two sections form a V-shape with every angle, curve, and measurement informed by generations of experience and the measurement of the individual user. The proportions of the hook including the spread of the two arms are traditionally based on the width of the fisherman's clenched fist; the barb's placement in a location where his thumb could pass just between its point and the opposite arm. The proportions of the hook, based on the fisherman's hand size, dictated the limit of the size of halibut that could be caught and ensured that only halibut that could be safely brought into the canoe by the fisherman would be caught. This was very pragmatic in light of the facts that halibut are very strong and powerful and can weigh several hundred pounds; the men who caught them usually fished alone and had to pull their catch into the boat without any assistance.

One side of the V-shape of a hook is usually carved with a meaningful design. The carvings are traditionally intended to represent a spirit helper for the fisherman and ranged from extremely simple to elaborate and finely finished. Historically, hooks were often made by the fishermen themselves as opposed to the professional artists who made masks, rattles, and totem poles so focal to Northwest Coast art.

The figures depicted on hooks varied, but generally were significant in that they were believed to bring good fortune fishing to the men who used them. Two common figures that appear on halibut hooks include octopus or devil fish or a woman. Another very commonly carved image on halibut hooks is a composite figure of a raven and a halibut. The majority of the hooks in the Sheldon Jackson Museum's collection feature either humanoid or bird figures.

The undecorated arm of the V hook had a barb lashed to it and would impale the mouth of the fish. Some of the barbed arms of hooks in museum are rough and shredded from being bitten by captive halibut. Many of these hooks are made with two different woods and of different ages, which indicates that when chewed up arms were too badly damaged, they would be discarded and a replacement piece would be fitted to the arm. It was believed, according to Emmons, that the use of two different kinds of wood pleased the halibut. The side of the hook that had the barb was usually made of spruce or yellow cedar; the other side was made of alder or yew.

Originally, barbs were made of bone, but as metal was introduced to Northwest Coast cultures, iron was utilized. When baited with iron barbs, the usual equilibrium that existed when the wooden hook was baited with floating devil fish was lost and the hook sank. As a result, a small float near the hook needed to be added to counteract the effect.

The July Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until July 31st. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is home to approximately twenty halibut hooks. Many of the hooks, along with the July Artifact of the Month, can be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 9am and 5pm. General admission is \$5 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.

Emmons, George Thornton. *The Tlingit Indians*. Ed. Frederica de Laguna. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991. Print.

Holm, Bill. *The Box of Daylight: Northwest Coast Indian Art*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum. 1983. Print

Stewart, Hillary. *Indian Fishing: Early Methods on the Northwest Coast*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977. Print

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