

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

**DATE: June 1, 2016**

## **SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM JUNE ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH**



The Sheldon Jackson Museum’s June Artifact of the Month is a basket believed to be Yup’ik and to have originated from Nushagak (SJ.2010.4.3). The piece was one of four artifacts donated to the museum by Donald and Jane Weaver in 2010. Mrs. Weaver inherited it from her grandfather, Captain Harry Willet Rhodes, formerly captain of the USS Patterson, a ship that conducted surveys along the coast of Alaska for the U.S. Geodetic Survey in the late 1890s.

The coiled grass basket has designs sewn onto it including two bands of red zigzag lines and gold leaf, followed by an x pattern. On the inside of the basket near the x’s green dots in yarn are visible. A partially detached grass-covered wire handle is sewn to one side on the top.

In *Nushagak Baskets: A Case Study in Artistic Fusion*, Molly Lee describes Nushagak basketry as “a little-known basketry type” with both Yup’ik Eskimo and Aleut characteristics” from southwestern

Alaska” in an area near the mouth of the Nushagak River where there was “a frequent dislocation of Alaska Native populations due to disease and economic factors and...an influx of Euro-Americans...”

According to Lee both Unalaska Aleut (Unangan) and Nushagak basketry are similar in a number of stylistic ways. Aleut (Unangan) and Nushagak baskets are made from beach or rye grass. The former is twined whereas the latter is coiled. The decorations of both kinds are done with wool, predominantly red and navy blue and include patterns of blocks, checkers or bars positioned to resemble those on traditional Aleut (Unangan) fishing baskets. The red color and design, material, and decoration style indicated to Lee that this basket was most likely from Nushagak. Former Sheldon Jackson Museum curator, and basketry expert, Peter Corey, agreed with her assessment and was even more resolute about the basket’s likely origins.

In her correspondence with former museum curator Rosemary Carlton, Lee noted some characteristics in the museum’s basket that are atypical of Nushagak basketry. Most baskets from the area are globular in shape, however, this basket has straight sides. Most have six revolutions of coiling to each vertical inch. This basket’s coils are thus proportioned, yet the coils are quite large compared with most Nushagak baskets. Nushagak baskets examined by her tended to be unlidged and ten or more inches tall. The museum’s basket is unlidged but measures only four and half inches tall.

The traditionally Yup’ik cultural area of Alaska includes a little over fifty small villages along the Bering Sea and banks of the lower Yukon and Kuskokwim River and near the edge of the northern reaches of Bristol Bay. Nushagak the Yup’ik village was located near Bristol Bay approximately six miles from the present-day location of Dillingham.

Twining and coiling methods are different and require a different application of surface decoration – twined baskets have three-strand embroidery achieved by using a third strand of differently colored material along the surface of a basket during the twining process. Coiled baskets are decorated by substituting a contrastive material such as yarn, dyed grass or seal intestine for the normal sewing material of the basket

Because of their geographical location, Yup'ik peoples remained largely isolated from world trade until the last part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the Alaska Commercial Company and Moravian missionaries arrived. Prior to that time, inhabitants of Nushagak were trading primarily with Yupiit to the north and with neighboring Aleut (Unangan) and Alutiiq peoples living in the nearby areas of the Bristol Bay coast, the Alaska peninsula, Kodiak, and Aleutian islands.

Coiled basketry is atypical of basketry made by women in the Yup'ik area of Alaska before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to that time, Yup'ik women made loosely twined grass carrying baskets called *issran*. According to Molly Lee, coiled basketry or *mingqaaq* most likely was introduced to the Yup'ik by the Inupiaq peoples of Bering Strait who had borrowed the technique from Siberia.

The trade between the Yupiit and neighboring Aleut (Unangan) could have been influential in the stylistic fusion present in Nushagak basketry embellishment though Lee theorizes the most likely explanation for the appearance of this kind of basketry may be "Yup'ik Eskimos from one of the Moravian basket making communities in the lower Kuskokwim River drainage moved to the Nushagak area either in connection with the Moravian mission at Carmel or to work at one of the Nushagak Bay canneries." The coiled style was likely adopted for selling purposes – coiled basketry was easier and stronger to withstand packing and shipping than traditional twined basketry and the coiling of the basket offered more options for decorative embellishment than twining.

Opportunities to sell basketry was fueled in the 1890s by Moravian missionaries. The missionaries, aware of the interest in Native-made basketry and seeking funding for their work in Alaska, began purchasing coiled basketry from Yupiit, exporting them to Pennsylvania and reselling them to benefit the mission. The basketry ended up in the hands of individual collectors and a number of them were added to early museum collections, including the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

The June Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until June 30<sup>th</sup>. The basket along with approximately one hundred other coiled baskets, only forty of which are Yup'ik, can be seen daily 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.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Jacqueline Fernandez

Phone (907) 747-8981 Fax (907) 747-3004

[www.museums.alaska.gov](http://www.museums.alaska.gov)

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