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## Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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**SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM  
ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH FOR MARCH:  
INUPIAT DOLLS BY ETHEL WASHINGTON**

March is National Women's History Month, and in celebration of women, the Sheldon Jackson Museum chose artifacts made by a woman for the Artifact of the Month.

These three dolls, a man, a woman and a baby, were made by Ethel Washington who has been referred to as, "the mother of modern Alaskan doll makers." Washington was an Inupiat woman from Kotzebue. Her Inupiat name was Napatuktoo. She had been making dolls as early as the 1930s but following the death of her husband in the early 1950s, she began creating these finely crafted doll families in order to support herself and her family. Each set she made was dressed in fur parkas and carried a variety of tools, utensils or hunting equipment. The wood faces were often carved to resemble someone in the community.

Many doll makers have picked up and continued her tradition of detailed work. The work of doll maker Dolly Spencer reflects the similarities of Washington's work.

Dolls have been made by the indigenous groups of Alaska since earliest times. Archeologists have discovered a variety of doll figures carved from bone, wood and ivory some of which date to well over 2000 years. In the late nineteenth century, Naturalist Edward Nelson lived in the Bering Sea region studying the cultures of Yup'ik Eskimo and occasionally their nearby Inupiat neighbors. His observation of toys indicates that girls possessed detailed dolls made from "...ivory or other material, and also have small models of dishes and other women's household utensils...they have complete outfits of toy bedding...small grass mats, toy boots, mittens, and clothing all patterned after those used by the people of the locality."

The three figures featured this month were purchased directly from Ethel Washington by Isabel Miller around 1954. Miller, former director of the Sitka Historical Society, had been a social worker in many areas throughout Alaska before settling in Sitka. She donated the three dolls to the Sheldon Jackson Museum in 1978.

The dolls may be seen at the museum through March 31. Winter hours at the museum are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$3. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge. This artifact-of-the-month can also be seen on our website at [www.museums.state.ak.us](http://www.museums.state.ak.us).

**FOR MORE INFORMATION:**

Phone (907) 747-8984 Fax (907) 465-3004  
[www.museums.state.ak.us](http://www.museums.state.ak.us)

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