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## Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **NOVEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH** **OJIBWA BIRCH BARK AND PORCUPINE QUILL BOX**

A small circular box made from birch bark and covered entirely with porcupine quill embroidery is the Sheldon Jackson Museum's Artifact of the Month for November. Although the museum now collects artifacts only from Alaska Native cultures, a few Native American objects from other areas were added to the collection prior to the adoption of the current scope of collections in 1984. Each November the museum exhibits one of these pieces to honor the diverse Native cultures of North America in recognition of National American Indian Heritage and Alaska Native Heritage Month.

How this finely made box came to be in the collections of the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a mystery. Some of these non-Alaska pieces were added in the early 1970s but this box was used in an exhibit "The Far North" in 1972 and at the time was thought to have been in the museum for many years. The inventory done in the 1930s does not list a basket of this type.

Quill on bark is an ancient art used by a number of Native American groups in regions with birch trees and porcupines. Utilitarian birch bark pieces would have little or no quill work because of their fragility. However, special boxes, headbands, fans and other personal objects would have been decorated with porcupine embroidery.

The labor intensive craft is still practiced today by a few. However, many switched to beads when they were introduced; some continued to cover all shapes and types of birch bark with quills in order to meet the Euro-American market demand for Native American crafts.

The quillwork is described as embroidery since it closely resembles the "satin stitch" used by embroiderers. Actually the process of adding the quills to the bark does not involve sewing. An awl is used to punch small perforations close together through the layered bark. Quills are soaked to soften them; the pointed, barbed end of the quill acts as a needle passing through first one hole then bent over to pass through the next hole where the ends are bent flat and sometimes clipped off. This creates a holding effect similar to a staple through a piece of paper. To finish off the basket strips of bark are fastened in place over the quill ends.

The Ojibwa birch bark and quill basket can be seen at the museum November 1 through November 30 and can be viewed on our web site at <http://www.museums.state.ak.us>

Winter hours are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. General admission is \$3. Visitors 18 and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

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