

Patience Frederiksen

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AND EARLY DEVELOPMENT**

Addison Field

Chief Curator

104 College Drive
Sitka, Alaska 99835
907-747-8981

Press Release

ALASKA STATE MUSEUMS

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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM NOVEMBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH

The Sheldon Jackson Museum's November Artifact of the Month is an Inupiaq bag made of plaited baleen (SJ-II-V-53). The bag is very unusual and is unlike any other in the collection of the Sheldon Jackson Museum or the Alaska State Museum. The museum has little information on the bag, but it was likely made for sale in the 20th century, was collected from Point Barrow, Alaska, and was added to the permanent collection in 1996. This Artifact of the Month is extraordinarily charming, not just because it is constructed in an unusual fashion but because it prompts our consideration of the importance of baleen and the bowhead whale among the Inupiat.



The November Artifact of the Month is small in size, measuring approximately six inches wide and five and a half inches high. It is unlined, square in shape, and has a handle, and a round toggle-type of fastener. The body of the bag in the front and back is decorated with bird quills beaded into the middle in eight plait strips, producing the effect of four off-white diamond shapes, repeating in eight columns and four rows. The handle also includes the quill design and is fastened to each side with frayed quills forming pom-pom-like shapes.

The bag is unlike typical examples of baleen basketry in two major ways. First, typical baleen basketry involves single-rod coiling whereas this bag is comprised of vertical strips made with plaited baleen sewn together. The maker constructed the bag by folding a rectangular plaited piece of baleen in half and lacing up its sides with strips of baleen. A second highly unusual element in this example of baleen basketry is that it is fastened by a button of coiled greyish white baleen around a brown baleen center – generally baleen baskets do not start like “buttons” due to the natural resistance of the material.

Baleen is the fibrous material, extending from the upper gum in overlapping plates inside plankton-eating whales' mouths.¹ It is made of keratin, the proteinaceous substance that forms hair, horn, and fingernails. When feeding whales swim through the water with open mouths, the plankton are caught on the inner surface of the baleen plates' long, bristle-like intertwined hairs. Of all the mysticetous whales, bowhead have the most baleen plates in their mouths and were therefore, the most desired by commercial whalers of the 19th century.²

Bowhead whale hunting is and has always been an inextricable part of Inupiat life including their food supply, material culture, and social structure. Traditionally, Inupiat hunted the bowhead using large, open

¹ All whales are placed in one of two orders depending on whether or not they have teeth or baleen. The bowhead is a baleen whale, growing up to sixty-five feet long and weighing up to fifty tons. The geographic range, population, and distribution of the bowhead is disputed, but it is the only great whale that spends its entire life in polar waters.

² Baleen was valuable in the 19th century because it was a strong, flexible material, similar to modern-day plastics. It was most commonly used for women's corset stays and was additionally used to make buggy whips, umbrella ribs, scrubbing brushes, trunk frames, fishing rods, and stuffing for mattresses.

skin boats, inflated sealskin drags and toggle-headed harpoons. The hunting process was a communal one and involved a great deal of ceremony and celebration and ritual. Songs and whaling amulets made of baleen, ivory, or stone with bowhead whale imagery were often attached to hunting equipment or boats or worn by the whaler around his neck or attached to his garments. Once captured and processed, all of the bowhead whale was used. Meat, blubber and intestine were sources of food and kept frozen in cellars for later use. Blubber was a source of fuel for fires. Whale bone provided lumber for semi-subterranean sod houses. Baleen, collected from the mouths of whales, soaked, and cut or split into fine pieces and heated could be permanently reshaped into a variety of new forms.

Tough, fibrous, and resistant to collecting frost, baleen could be used in many ways and was ideal for fishing and hunting implements. Baleen was bent into buckets, ice scoops, bows, and sled runners, shredded for fish line and lashings, shaved for boot insulation, and knotted into nets. It was also made into amulets and coiled for springy toys. Although baleen basketry only dates back to the early 20th century and never had a utilitarian use among Inupiat themselves it became an important trade item.

The first baleen basket was made at Barrow around 1915, just after the decline of the commercial whaling industry. Around that time, an American whaler, trader, and resident of Barrow named Charles Brower asked a local Native named Kinguktuk to make him a copy of a willow-root basket using baleen. It is unclear why Brower made the request, but likely that he wanted to have souvenirs to give to visiting friends. Other local Native men took up baleen basketry making, including some taught by Kinguktuk and the practice continued with different artists experimenting with shape, construction, decoration, and final forms. Baleen basketry eventually spread to other villages and became important for the livelihood of its practitioners in Point Hope, Wainwright, and Point Lay, Alaska.

Baleen basketry making declined in WWII as employment opportunities increased in the Arctic and continues to decline as evidenced by the fact that today, there are only around ten baleen basket makers, only one or two under the age of fifty. Although the future of the practice is uncertain, bowhead whaling remains a major important annual event and still the major cooperative activity that brings together more people than any other in arctic communities.

The November Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until November 30th. The museum is home to five baleen baskets and a variety of hunting and fishing implements and masks that incorporate elements of baleen including but not limited to rods holding wooden appendages in place on masks, knife handle wrappings, model sleds, and parts of fishing lures, fishing hooks, fishing rods, and bird bolas. The November Artifact of the Month, can be seen Tuesday through Saturday between 10am and 4pm. The museum is closed for lunch from noon to 1pm. 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.

Lee, Molly. *Baleen Basketry of the North Alaskan Eskimo*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983. Print

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Jacqueline Hamberg

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

www.museums.alaska.gov