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SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM OCTOBER ARTIFACT OF THE MONTH



The Sheldon Jackson Museum's October Artifact of the Month is a pair of wooden Yup'ik dance fans or finger masks collected from Andreafsky by Sheldon Jackson in the late 19th century. Even though the finger masks are in imperfect condition and simplistic in design they are fine examples of important accessories for a complex practice dating back to time immemorial – Yup'ik dancing.

The dance fans are round in shape with remnants of wooden finger holds on the bottom. Each has a simple face design made with cut-out crescent shapes for the eyes and mouth. The positive space of the face is white washed and surrounded by a black border line and a red ochre-colored edge. Each mask once had five quills tipped with down feathers radiating from its side. Now only four of the quills and two of the downy feathers remain on one of the masks and only two quills and two downy feathers remain on the other.

Dance fans, also called finger masks, *tegumiat*, literally, "things held in the hand," were used in traditional winter ceremonies and masked dances known as *Itruka'aryaraq* or *Agauyyaraq*. During dances, men kneel facing the audience while women stand behind them, bending at the knees, moving their arms in a motion to tell the story that goes with the song. Women would cast their eyes respectfully downward during the performance and allow the finger mask's "eye" to "see for them" while they danced.

Yup'ik men and women both used dance fans though they differed in shape and design. Men's dance fans were usually very simple and made of coiled grass or willow root hoops with snowy white owl or swan tail feathers inserted into them. Women's dance fans were usually carved by their male relatives and like regular masks, often had feathers, wisps of caribou hair, and were painted with white, red, black, and blue pigments. Some finger masks had geometric designs; others had carved faces depicting animals, most typically a bird, seal, walrus, salmon, bear, fox, mink, or wolf. Others featured creatures with crooked or toothy mouths like those on larger masks. Finger mask designs were often familial and determined by a woman's husband or other males in the family.

According to Anne Feinup-Riordan, Yup'ik ways of dancing embrace six fundamental key entities identified as *ciuliat* (ancestors), *angalkuut* (shamans), *cauyaq* (drum), *yuaruciyaraq* (song structures), *yurarcuutet* (regalia) and *yurarvik* (dance location). All dances involved distinct gestures, storytelling, drumming, song, and masks or some combination of the aforementioned. Some of the dances were inherited and associated with specific songs while others were "regular" dances concerned with hunting, animal behaviors, or teasing an individual. Because of its typically highly spiritual nature and association with idolatry, Moravian and Jesuit missionaries and Russian Orthodox priests banned Yup'ik dancing in Alaska in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Despite dancing being aggressively suppressed by missionaries, the practice continues to be a vital part of contemporary Yup'ik life. Singing, dancing, and dancing accoutrements are, to this day, interconnected and imbued with meaning; dancing is still believed to provide a window to the spirit world. Every three or four years since 1982, the Yup'ik dance festival *Yup'it Yuraryarait* has taken place at St. Mary's. This festival was the first of its kind designed to pass dance traditions on to younger generations. Since 1983, elders, youth, and Yup'ik dancers in Alaska's Yukon Kuskokwim region have gathered at the annual Cama-I Festival held in Bethel to sing and dance, and to learn about, preserve, and celebrate their living Yup'ik culture. There are many active dance groups in Yup'ik villages across Alaska and in schools.

The October Artifact of the Month will be exhibited until October 31st. The museum is home to twenty pairs of dance fans. Many of the fans are wooden and carved with faces or animals, painted, and embellished with caribou throat fur and feathers. The October 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. Admission for seniors is \$4. Beginning October 4th, the museum will be open Tuesday through Saturday 10am-5pm and admission for all visitors over 18 will be \$3 except for members of Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum and Alaska State Museum who will be admitted free of charge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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