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Press Release

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM

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September Artifact of the Month: Athabascan Birch Bark Baskets

SITKA – The Sheldon Jackson Museum artifacts of the month for September are two Athabascan birch bark baskets collected by Sheldon Jackson in the late 19th century (SJIF42, SJIS82). Both baskets have folded sides. Beautiful inside and out, the outer white and dark brown striated bark appears on the exterior of the baskets; the inner light brown bark, on the interior. The larger of the two is from the Kuskokwim River region and is



Athabascan birch bark baskets (SJIF42, SJIS82)

reinforced with willow root. The smaller is identified as having been collected in the interior, though not specifically from any region, and it is reinforced with two crescent and square-shaped pieces of bark attached below the rim. The dyed spruce root woven into the rim of the baskets is aesthetic and functional, providing strength and visual appeal.

Birch bark is waterproof, strong, and flexible, and a historically valuable resource for the Athabascan people. Athabascans traditionally used birch bark to make collecting and food serving baskets, storage containers, cooking vessels, plates, cups, dishes, utensils, canoes, baby carriers, roofs and walls of winter houses, fish drying sheds, and more. Men and women collected bark from the outermost layer of birch bark trees in the spring or early summer, the time of year when bark removal was easiest. (Removing only the outer layer prevented potentially killing the tree.) Women steamed, bent, and applied holes to the bark with a bone awl, and stitched or sewed the pieces together to their desired size and shape with threaded spruce root. Each piece of bark has its own design.

Birch bark baskets and containers were used for collecting water, berries, and roots; to hold food and water inside the house; and (with sewn-on covers) to store various foods underground for winter, such as berries, wild onions, fish, oil, bear grease, muskrat, and moose meat. To make a strong yet light, watertight, leak-proof cooking container, extra thick

bark was used and hot pitch was applied along the seams of the basket, which could then be filled with water and hot stones or be hung two feet above a fire to heat food. Small sticks would be placed at the bottom of birch bark containers for cooking to prevent rocks from burning a hole in the base.

Details and embellishments added to baskets varied and were often not just for aesthetic purposes. Handles could be fashioned out of cotton fabric and left plain or wrapped in spruce root and attached to the sides. High cranberry bush stems, wooden splints, split spruce roots or red willow roots as in the case of these two baskets, could be used to lash and reinforce rims or sides. Stitching roots dyed with blueberries produce a gray-blue, dyed with rhubarb for green, or alder to yield red. Sometimes beads and dyed or natural porcupine quills, spruce roots, or mouse berry plants were added for decorative purposes. Other decorative materials such as stems of the mouse berry plant or porcupine quills could be worked into the design. In her book, *Travels Among the Dena*, Frederica de Laguna describes seeing Athabascan women selling birch bark baskets during her 1935 archaeological survey in the middle and lower Yukon Valley, an expedition she carried out when she was only in her late twenties. The baskets were cylindrical in shape with a circular bottom, to which was sewn a single wide strip for the sides. They were made to be sold and were used to cover tin cans in which plants were grown in homes in Nenana. Like the baskets described by de Laguna and the baskets made by Athabascan artists today, birch bark baskets are now unlikely to be used for everyday storage and cooking but are produced for gifts or for sale and made using traditional techniques.

Many birch bark baskets, containers, and several birch bark canoes can be seen at the Sheldon Jackson Museum. The museum recently held a third *Saturday At Saxán* youth program for children to make Athabascan birch bark baskets and model canoes using yarn, paper, and other craft materials. In the first week of September, the museum will host Smithsonian Folklife-nominated artist and renowned Athabascan birch bark basket maker Daisy Demientieff (Deg Hit'an) as an artist in resident. Her time here will include a lecture on her mother's influence on her art on Thursday, September 5th at 3:00 p.m. In addition to making birch bark baskets, Daisy is one of three known living people able to make willow root baskets. We are pleased to welcome her back as part of the Native Artist Demonstrators Program.

Summer hours at the museum run through September 14th are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily. Summer admission is \$5 for adults and \$4 for seniors. Winter hours begin September 17th and are 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Discounted winter admission is \$4. Visitors 18 years of age and younger, Friends of the Sheldon Jackson Museum, and those with passes are admitted free of charge.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

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