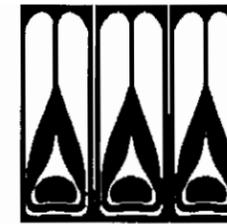


ATHABASCAN BIRCH BARK CANOE



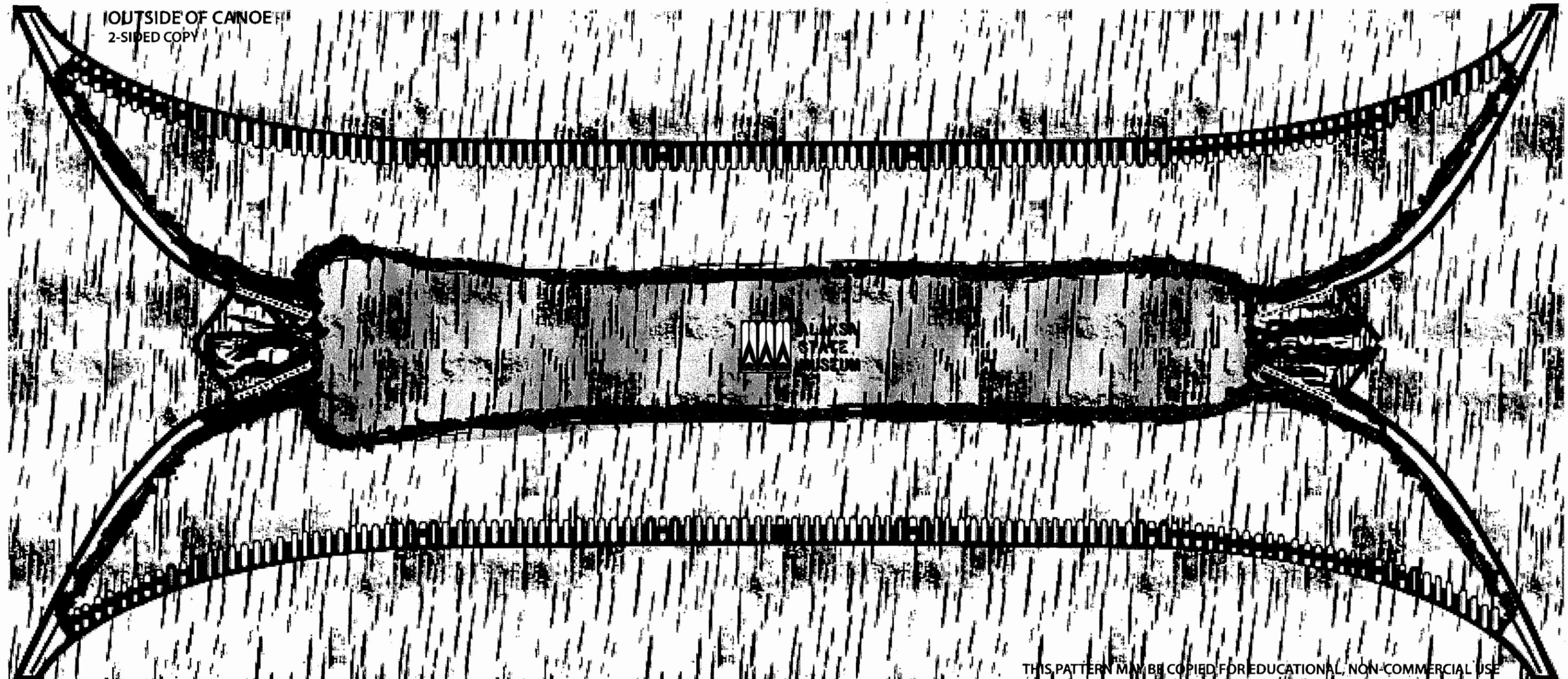
Alaska State Museum

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www.museums.state.ak.us

Color this side of the canoe if you like. The bark on the museum's old canoe is yellow-brown like old wood. The lashing on the gunwale can be colored as well. Sometimes the lashing was dyed black and red to add a decorative element to the rim.



Birch bark canoes were made and used for hundreds of years by Native people across North America in northern boreal forests regions where birch trees grow. This type of boat is tough, turns easily with a single blade paddle, and can be repaired in the woods with pitch collected from nearby trees. The size and shape of canoes varied to create boats for different uses. Larger cargo canoes that were 25 to 35 feet long were designed to haul supplies and families. This model canoe pattern is based on a real boat you can see at the Alaska State Museum. The actual boat is an Athabascan birch bark canoe built around 1850 from an old village near Iliamna, 200 miles southwest of Anchorage. It is 16 feet long but only weighs about 40 pounds making it easy for one hunter to paddle and carry overland between lakes and rivers. The Athabascan people from the interior region of Alaska are the primary builders of birch bark canoes in the state.

The design of the canoe is also known as a kayak-form canoe as it shares a kayak's long sleek form, has a rigid bottom frame, pointed bow and stern, a multi-chined rounded hull, and rides low in the water. Three pieces of birch bark are sewn together and tied to the frame using split spruce root lashing to make the outer covering. Pitch from spruce trees is warmed and used to seal the seams and make the boat watertight. Some canoes had decking of birch bark that covered the bow and stern. The split spruce roots were sometimes dyed and colors such as red and black and woven over the gunwale providing it with a decorative rim. Although modern canoes are made of different materials, the old bark canoe designs are still used by companies to manufacture canoes for sport, recreation, and subsistence hunting and fishing.