FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
DATE: October 11, 2017

SHELDON JACKSON MUSEUM OCTOBER

ARTIFACT(S) OF THE MONTH

The Sheldon Jackson Museum's October Artifact(s) of the Month are three broken pieces of ivory (SJ-II-X-419). The pieces are all well-incised and were likely collected by Sheldon Jackson. Although the museum has no record of the exact location of collection, they were most likely made by Inupiat peoples in northern Alaska north of Norton Sound. Based upon their shape, the pieces of ivory may have been parts of bow drills.

A plethora of objects have been traditionally made by Inupiat peoples using ivory including, but not limited to dolls, charms, amulets, and utilitarian objects such as bucket handles, seal plugs, net gauges and shuttles, blunt arrowheads, harpoon heads, spear points, arrow shaft straighteners, ivory rests for use in umiaks while hunting; toggles and other appurtenances attached to lines, floats and nets; and bow drills.

Traditionally, walrus ivory was softened prior to shaping by soaking it in urine or hot water several times before modification. According to Ernest S. Burch in *Social Life in Northwest Alaska,* after soaking, the ivory was cut laterally with a stone saw, scored with an engraving tool or chisel, and split longitudinally with wedges. The ivory was then shaped more precisely with a stone or metal knife, etched, rubbed against a grindstone or drilled.

Bow drills were used to carve ivory or start fires and involved a wooden shaft that was twirled, a metal or stone bit mouth piece, and a bow piece or alternatively, hide straps with ivory handles. A mouth piece gripped between the teeth held the shaft in place and served to apply pressure to ivory being worked. The bow drill or hide strap with ivory handles rotated the shaft. Drills made north of Norton Sound were

usually rotated with a wooden, bone or ivory bow while more Southern regions tended to use hide strap with ivory handles. The bow allowed the user to more freely manipulate the piece being carved.

According to Dorothy Ray Jean, there are four major styles that characterize Inpuiaq work in Ivory – old engraving; modified engraving; western pictorial; and modified pictorial or contemporary. Of all the four kinds of styles, the October Artifacts of the Month seem to be most illustrative of the old engraving style, a style in which the drill bow was most frequently engraved. This style used minimal detail to depict action and typically showed human figures in stick-like form with scenes generally concerned with hunting or fishing activities, the animal world, village or camp life. Often, the engravings recorded hunters' activities and tallies of success. When included, humans shown are always engaged in intense activity. Incisions in old engraving styles were often filled with a mixture of black ash mixed with oil or graphite, though sometimes, red made with ochre or steeped alder bark was applied. The background was left uncolored.

The three pieces of ivory exhibited as the Artifact(s) of the Month are expertly incised with images of a dog sled team, men, caches, the hunting of caribou with a bow and gun, and various hunting scenes depicting walrus, wolves, and seals. The designs appear on all sides of each piece. These ivory pieces and other ivory artifacts that illustrate the different engraving styles and the importance of walrus ivory as a natural resource for the Inupiat may be seen at the museum Tuesday through Saturday between 10am and noon and 1pm and 4pm. The October Artifact(s) of the Month will be exhibited until October 31st. General admission is $6, $5 for seniors, 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.

Burch. Ernest S. Social Life in Northwest Alaska. Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press, 2006.

Ray, Dorothy Jean. *Eskimo Art: Tradition and Innovation in North Alaska*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1977

Smith. J.G.E. *Arctic Art: Eskimo Ivory*. New York: Museum of the American Indian, 1980.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Jacqueline Fernandez-Hamberg
lam.alaska.gov
907. 747-8981