

BULLETIN

Issue 10

AN INFORMATION SOURCE FOR ALASKA'S MUSEUM COMMUNITY

Autumn 1999

On Saturday Sept. 25, at Centennial Hall and at the Alaska State Museum in Juneau, Yup'ik elders and "youngers," anthropologists, curators, and others gathered for *The Meaning of the Masks' Return*, a symposium and ceremony held in conjunction with the closing of the exhibition *Agayuliyararput (Our Way of Making Prayer): The Living Tradition of Yup'ik Masks*. It was a rare opportunity for the individuals involved to reflect on the process of creating a major exhibition and its transforming impacts on their lives and communities. The group had not gathered since the exhibit's opening in May 1996. Although the closing event marked an end to *Agayuliyararput*, participants stressed that it was also a beginning—marking a new era in Yup'ik cultural revitalization and Native communities' collaboration with museums. The Yup'ik sense of being "means to share and express who we are," said Theresa John, and this exhibit helped to "bring that identity back again."

The Yup'ik Eskimos (Yup'it is the preferred noun) of western Alaska traditionally made masks not only to represent the universe but also to maintain and even transform it. Elder Paul John likened the ceremonial petition of the masks to the "passing of a resolution" to bring about certain ends in nature. Prior to its decline, in the wake of missionary suppression and acculturation, mask dancing was a central element in the Yup'ik ceremonial cycle. The elaborate imagery (representative of a range of powerful non-human persons in Yup'ik cosmology), craftsmanship, and uniqueness of the masks also caught the eye of collectors who acquired them for display in distant exhibits of "primitive" art. Here anthropologists, Surrealist painters, and others found their own meanings in the masks, typically a far cry from the Yup'ik world view that inspired them. Thus, although the masks were preserved, they were mute—divorced from Yup'ik culture. Dr. Anne Fienup-Riordan, anthropologist and curator of the exhibition, along with a committed group of Yup'it and museum personnel from Alaska and beyond succeeded in bringing many of the masks back to Alaska so that they could speak again to contemporary Yup'it, who, as elder Paul John put it, still recognize their "power and significance."

Process had a great deal to do with the success of *Agayuliyararput*. In the wake of the divisive legislative session on subsistence, participants reflected on how the mask project demonstrated that urban and rural Alaskans **can** work together to achieve important cultural ends. Rural Yup'it and urban museum staff collaborated with Fienup-Riordan to design the exhibit from the ground up. Basic issues—such as how to organize, interpret, and display these artifacts—were addressed by consensus through a steering committee. True to its grass roots, the exhibit was conceived in the village of St. Mary's a decade ago, and although it was organized by the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, it opened in the heart of Yup'ik country in Toksook Bay in 1996, where 500 residents and 500 guests celebrated the return of the masks.

THE MEANING OF THE MASKS' RETURN

Thomas F. Thornton



Dance Ceremony closes the exhibit at the museum.

Continued on back page.

New Legislation On Unclaimed Loans Commentary on House Bill No. 218

By
*Donna Baron,
Registrar, Alaska
State Museum*

Rep. Andrew Halcro (R. Anchorage) is sponsoring a bill in the legislature this session which will directly affect every museum in Alaska. House Bill No. 218, "An Act Relating to Property Loaned to or Held by Museums," will ease the burden on museums which have unclaimed or undocumented material in their collection. It also imposes new responsibilities on all museums that accept loans.

Most of us who work for museums are probably familiar with those "old loans" gathering dust in collections storage, or perhaps prominently displayed on exhibit. Perhaps someone dropped an object off on the doorstep, or asked an item be held temporarily for safekeeping, or lent an object for a special exhibit or for study, or a hundred other scenarios. Years pass quickly by, and the owner of the object loses contact with the museum, or moves away, or dies without heirs, and the loan goes unclaimed. In any case, the museum gets the burden of caring for these objects while not being able to dispose of them or have needed conservation repairs made.

HB218 spells out the procedure a museum can use to gain title to these objects so they may be disposed of or cared for as necessary. In addition, the bill includes a provision for gaining clear title to any objects in the museum collection which are completely undocumented, whether or not they were originally placed with the museum as a loan.

At least 28 states have passed unclaimed loan statutes to date. HB218 does not significantly differ from these statutes in other states.

Before claiming title to an object on loan, the museum must have lost contact with the owner for at least seven years, and must have made a reasonable attempt to find the original owner or heirs. Contact with the owner must be attempted through certified mail to the last known address, and if not successful then via newspaper announcements; the exact details of the procedure are contained in HB218. After the specified waiting period of 65 days after notice, the museum may claim title. However the owner still has two years after that date to reclaim their property in court.

Even if a museum does not currently have any old loans, all museums will be obligated under the new law to notify any new lenders of the requirements of the law. At the Alaska State Museum, we will be adding an addendum to our incoming loan agreement to comply with this notification requirement. We will also be more diligent in having loan forms (with termination dates no longer than a year) signed by anyone who drops off an object at the museum for whatever purpose – the best way to guard against creating these problem loans in the future.

Alaska State Museums Receive Federal Grant

The Alaska State Museums have received a \$112,500 grant from the federal Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) that will be used to augment statewide services. The grant will be disbursed over a two-year period.

In making the award, the IMLS considered the operations of the Alaska State Museum in Juneau and its sister facility in Sitka, the Sheldon Jackson Museum. The award is a measure of outstanding institutional performance in all areas of museum operations, according to the IMLS.

"The grants provide national recognition for museums that have the highest approval of their peers," said Beverly Sheppard, IMLS Acting Director. "It is a stamp of achievement that sparks vital public-private partnerships. Museums use these awards to do what they do best: educate, fascinate, inspire, illuminate, inform, enhance and enrich the lives of millions of visitors each year."

The IMLS received 973 applications from institutions across the nation; the Alaska State Museums were among 186 chosen for a grant award by a panel of museum professionals. About \$15.6 million in grant funds will be distributed. Grant amounts are equal to 15 percent of a museum's operating budget, up to a maximum of \$112,500.

Bruce Kato, Chief Curator of the Alaska State Museums, said the IMLS grant will be used for statewide projects such as redesigning the school loan program, improving outreach services to Alaska's smaller museums, expanding educational offerings, and using Internet technology to provide greater access to the state's collection.

The IMLS is an independent federal grant-making agency created by the Museum and Library Services Act of 1996. Its purpose is to foster leadership, innovation and a lifetime of learning by supporting museums and libraries.

2000

GOVERNOR'S CONFERENCE

ON THE ARTS

ANCHORAGE, ALASKA

JANUARY 20-22

Make plans now to attend the Governor's Conference on the Arts coming up in January. Whether you are an artist, performer, educator, arts patron or arts administrator, you'll find opportunities to share experiences, advance your career, expand your knowledge and re-energize.

Five different conference themes will be offered with workshops, panels and special sessions designed to provide helpful tools and information to advance the arts in the new millennium. Guest speakers and workshop leaders have been chosen for their passion for the arts, innovative thinking and ability to inspire.

Registration for the three day conference includes continental breakfast and lunch on Friday and Saturday, plus receptions on Thursday and Friday evenings. Register before December 31 to receive the early bird registration rate of \$125. After that date, registration is \$150. One day registration is available for \$65 per day. Some financial assistance is available.

For a registration packet or more information, please contact the Alaska State Council on the Arts at (907)269-6610 or toll free at 1(888)278-7424. Write the Arts Council at 411 W 4th Ave, #1E, Anchorage, AK 99501 or e-mail info@aksca.org. Visit the Council web site at www.aksca.org.

The Alaska State Museum will soon be sending out a survey form to Alaska museums with questions regarding budgets, staffing, governance, facilities, collections and programs. The intention is to establish a baseline picture of Alaska's museums at the beginning of the new century, and to implement a database that can be updated annually to provide an ongoing information resource about and for museums. Updates will be done primarily through the Grant-in-Aid application process backed up by supplementary inquiries. The State Museum is frequently asked for statistical information about museums, usually by museums themselves as they prepare proposals for their local governments etc. The information will also be useful to Museums Alaska as it conducts an economic impact survey for Alaska museums.

SURVEY OF ALASKA MUSEUMS

Here are some key museum-related web sites that offer a variety of resources. These do not include the major organizational sites, like AAM, IMLS, AASLH etc. as they are well known and are available as links from the State Museum web site. The pages below offer direct access to information, often as printable technical bulletins.

SOME WEB SITES OF INTEREST TO MUSEUMS

CONSERVATION ON LINE

<http://palimpsest.stanford.edu/>
CoOL, a project of the Preservation Department of Stanford University Libraries, is a full text library of conservation information, covering a wide spectrum of topics of interest to those involved with the conservation of library, archives and museum materials.

managing museum collections, including natural, cultural, archival and manuscript materials. They also publish the Conserv-o-grams, bulletins on a variety of topics, available under "publications."

AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR CONSERVATION

http://www.cci-icc.gc.ca/frameset_e.shtml
Look under C for a list of technical bulletins under the heading "Caring for your treasures."

MUSEUM EMPLOYMENT RESOURCE CENTER

<http://w3.trib.com/~jamesal/>
The Museum Employment Resource Center posts museum and cultural resource jobs. MERC also lists resumes and other information relating to these fields. There is an excellent list of museum-related links here.

MUSEUM DOCUMENTATION ASSOC. (UK)

<http://www.mda.org.uk/>
An excellent component of this web site is the Fact Sheets Online. MDA provides a variety of services for collections managers.

ARCHIVES OF MUSEUM-L

<http://home.dc.lsoft.com/archives/museum-l.html>
From this page you can join the Museum-L listserv or search the archive of previous postings on a huge variety of subjects. Museum-L is an international forum for discussion of museum related issues.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE MUSEUM MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/csd/>
The Museum Management Program (MMP) supports development and coordination of service-wide policies, standards, and procedures for

THE FOUNDATION CENTER

<http://fdncenter.org/>
The Foundation Center is the foremost clearinghouse in the U.S. for information on grant sources and fundraising.

Later the exhibit traveled to Anchorage for its museum opening, then on to Fairbanks, New York, Washington, D.C. and Seattle before finishing its tour in Juneau.*

All the speakers—from curator Anne Fienup-Riordan to Yup'ik participants Paul and Theresa John, Cecelia Martz, Andy Paukan, and Marie Meade, to Tim Troll and Jesuit Father René Astruc, to museum curators Peter Corey and Patricia Wolf, director of the AMHA—were humble and grateful for the many gifts of the masks. Said Father Astruc, "We have to thank the masks for what they have done for our lives." The symposium closed with ceremonial dancing and a blessing at the exhibit.



Thomas F. Thornton, professor of anthropology at University of Alaska, Southeast

* Editor Note: *Actually, a late decision is allowing part of the exhibition to travel to Dillingham, for display at the Sam Fox Museum.*

BACK ROW, L. TO R.: Peter Corey, Paul John, Andy Paukan, Cecelia Martz, Marie Meade, F. René Astruc, FRONT ROW, L. TO R.: Theresa John, Pat Wolf, Tim Troll, Anne Fienup-Riordan.

Bulletin on the Web

Selected articles from current and back issues of the *Bulletin* are available on our web site.

Point your browser to: www.eed.state.ak.us/lam/museum/bulletin.html

Alaska State Museums
Alaska State Museum
395 Whittier Street, Juneau AK 99801
Phone (907) 465-2901
Fax (907) 465-2976

Sheldon Jackson Museum
104 College Drive, Sitka AK 99835
Phone (907) 747-8981
Fax (907) 747-3004

To contact Museum Services toll-free:
1-888-913-MUSE (6873)

Email ken_deroux@eed.state.ak.us
All staff have email—first name, underscore, last name@eed.state.ak.us

On the World Wide Web:
www.eed.state.ak.us/lam/museum/home.html

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Division of Libraries, Archives and Museums
Alaska State Department of Education and
Early Development

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