

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
ART MUSEUM

Artful Adventures

Alaska





Welcome to the Princeton University Art Museum. Our collection of Alaskan Native art is on the lower level of the Museum, in the gallery of art of the ancient Americas. At the bottom of the stairs, turn right. Walk through the Greek gallery and turn right again, into the gallery of art of the ancient Americas.

Today we are going to Alaska, the northernmost state. Here is a map of North America. **Find Alaska and draw a circle around it.**



A Big Party

As you enter the gallery, look to your right. You will see several spoons and bowls made by the Tlingit, a tribe that lives along the coast of Alaska. These utensils were used to host large celebrations called potlatches. Relatives and friends would come from neighboring villages to attend these parties, which would last for days.

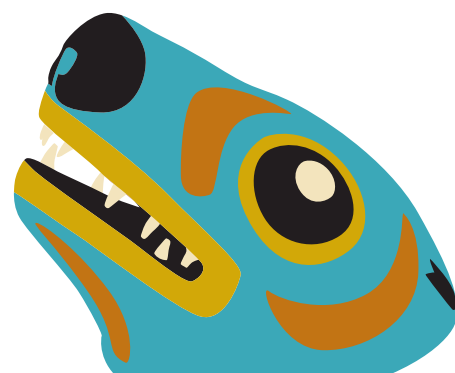
When does your family have big parties?

Potlatch means “to give away.” The hosts of a potlatch would save money for years so that they could afford lavish food and gifts for their guests. Activities would include dancing, singing, and storytelling.

What activities do you have at your parties?



Tlingit, Alaska, Two-piece spoon with finely carved handle, ca. 1875. Mountain goat horn, copper rivet, and wood plug. Lent by the Department of Geology and Geophysical Sciences, Princeton University (PU 5237)



Animals

Animals are very important to the Native peoples of Alaska, who believe that animals and people are closely related. In their stories, animals often have human characteristics, and people and animals frequently change from one species to another. The Haida and Tlingit are hunters and fishers. Although they depend on animals for food, they follow strict rituals when killing animals, including asking for forgiveness and thanking the animal for giving its life.

Look at the objects in the case in front of you. Which animals can you find?

I spy ...

a bear

a seal

a bird



Tlingit, Alaska, Comb. Wood. Lent by the Department of Geology and Geophysical Sciences, Princeton University (PU 5057)



Tlingit, Alaska, Crest helmet in the form of a sea lion, ca. 1820–40. Wood, teeth, metal, and pigment. Lent by the Department of Geology and Geophysical Sciences, Princeton University (PU 3910)





Masks

Storytelling, along with song and dance ceremonies, plays an important role in Tlingit and Haida culture. The storytellers, dancers, and singers wear elaborate costumes and masks.

Can you find the masks in these cases?



Imagine people wearing them, along with elaborate costumes made of woven fabric, feathers, fur, beads, and shells. The moon mask is somewhat difficult to recognize as a moon. But the face is round, like the moon, and it is painted blue with a red border. The eyebrows are heavy, and the eyes are half-closed, as if the moon is falling asleep.

What stories would you tell with these masks?



Tlingit, Sitka area, Alaska, Moon mask, 1830–50. Wood and red, black, and blue pigment. Lent by the Department of Geology and Geophysical Sciences, Princeton University (PU 3912)

ACTIVITY

If you could design animal masks based on your life,

- Which animals would be important?

- Do you rely on these animals for survival or companionship?

- Which colors, patterns, or shapes would you use?

- What materials would you use to make the mask?



Music

The Tlingit, Haida, and Yup'ik clans of Alaska also used musical instruments like rattles and drums in ceremonies. There are several rattles on display in this gallery. They are elaborately carved and painted with many colors to look like real animals.

What colors do you see?

What animals do you see?



Tlingit, Alaska, Raven rattle, ca. 1840-60. Wood and red, turquoise, and black pigment. Lent by the Department of Geology and Geophysical Sciences, Princeton University (PU 5239)



St. Lawrence Yupik or Iñupiaq, Alaska, Human figure dressed in seal gut raincoat, probably late 19th century. Western red cedar, seal gut, and thread. The Lloyd E. Cotsen, Class of 1950, Eskimo Bone and Ivory Carving Collection (1997-360)

Storytelling

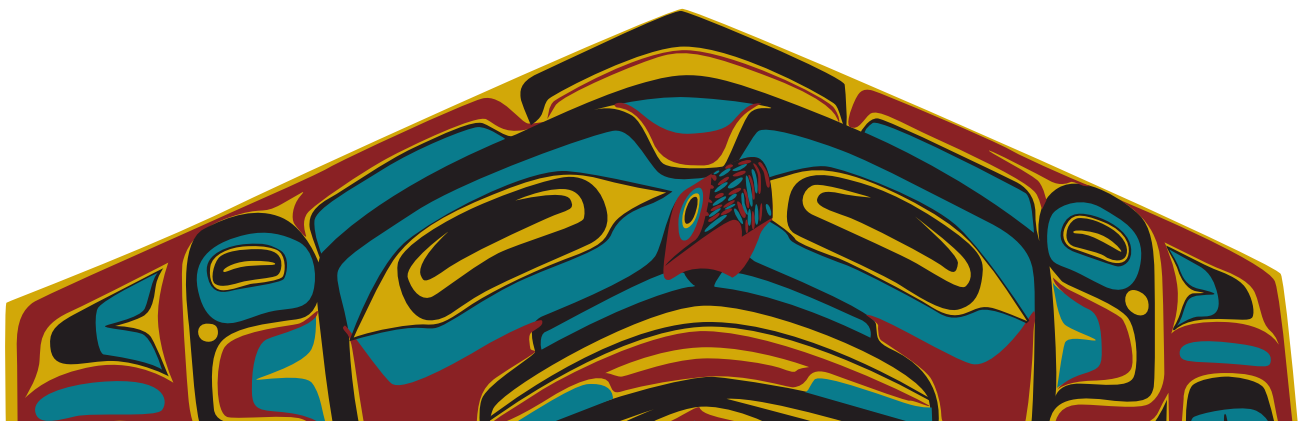
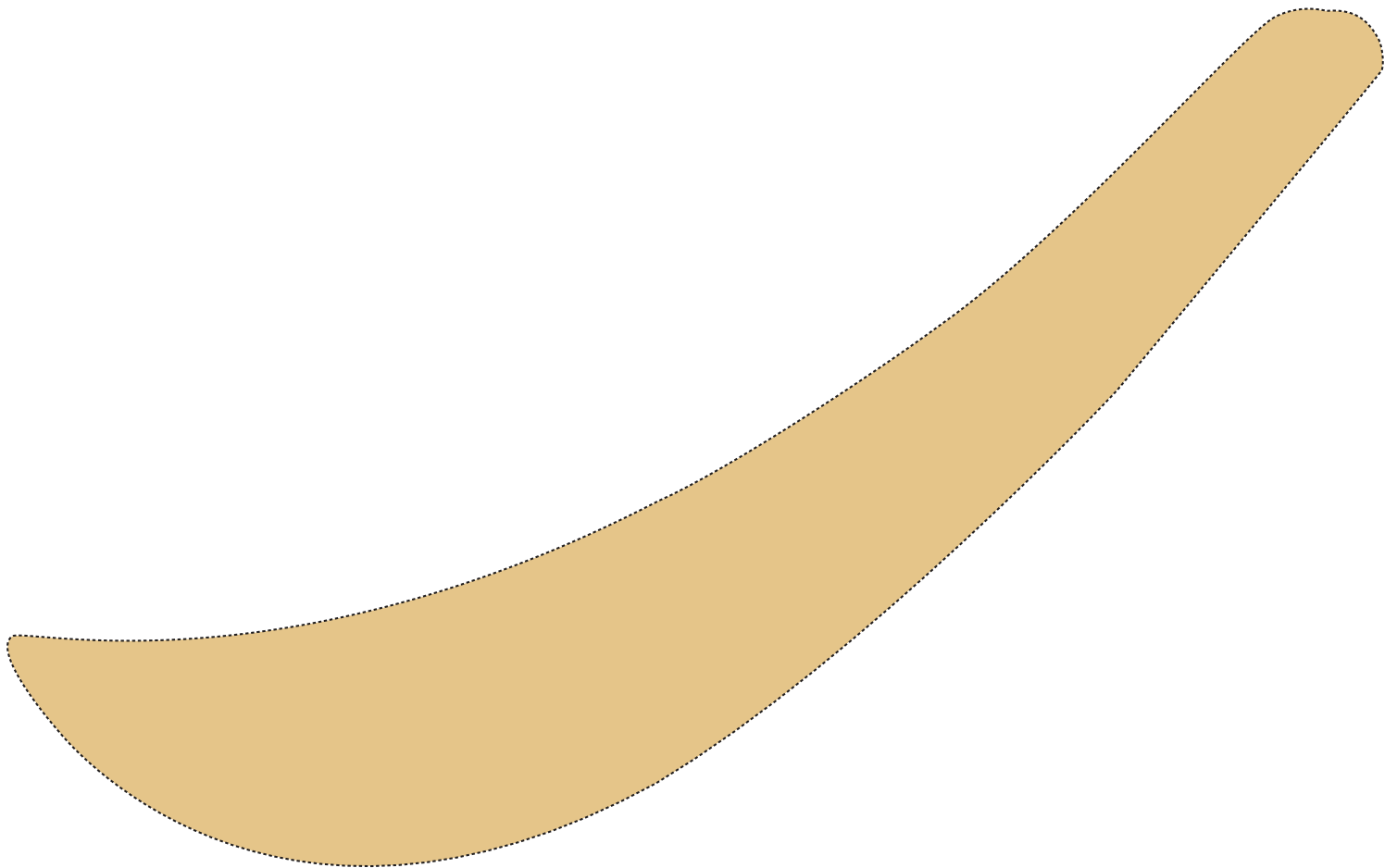
Small human figurines and smooth knives may have been used to tell stories. Children used story knives to sketch designs on the ground that helped them tell stories about their daily lives or their cultures. Find these objects:



Yup'ik, Yukon-Kuskokwim delta, Alaska, Storyknife (yaaruin), late 19th century. Walrus ivory. Bequest of John B. Elliott, Class of 1951 (1998-492)

ART PROJECT

Think about something that has happened in your life that would make a good story—maybe something that went wrong and the lesson you learned, something funny that happened, or even something sad. Choose a scene, object, or place from your story and draw it on the storyknife below. If you like, when you get home, you can cut out your storyknife, tape a pencil to the back of it, and use it to illustrate scenes as you tell your story to your family and friends.



SUGGESTED READING

Mama, Do You Love Me?

by Barbara M. Joose; illustrated by Barbara Lavallee

A child living in the Arctic learns that a mother's love is unconditional.

(Preschool–Gr 1)

Salmon Summer

by Bruce McMillan

A photo essay describes a young Alaskan boy fishing for salmon on Kodiak Island, as his ancestors have done for generations.

(Gr 2–5)

Children of the Midnight Sun: Young Native Voices of Alaska

by Tricia Brown; photographs by Roy Corral

Photographs and text present the experiences and ways of life of Tlingit, Athabascan, Yupik, and other Native American children in the villages, cities, and bush areas of Alaska.

(Gr 3–7)

Island of the Blue Dolphins

by Scott O'Dell; illustrated by Ted Lewin

Left alone on a beautiful, isolated island off the coast of California, a young Native American girl spends eighteen years not only surviving but also finding a measure of happiness in her solitary life.

(Gr 5–8)

Thunder Rolling in the Mountains

by Scott O'Dell and Elizabeth Hall

In the late nineteenth century, a young Nez Perce girl describes her people being driven off their land by the U.S. Army and forced to retreat north until their eventual surrender.

(Gr 5–8)

