Smithsonian Exhibition Previews Major Alaskan Expansion

On April 30, the Smithsonian opened an exhibition at the Anchorage Museum in Alaska that highlights new connections between Alaska Native peoples and the vast Smithsonian collections that represent their diverse heritage. “Sharing Knowledge: Alaska Native Peoples and the Smithsonian Collections” presents 14 extraordinary objects from the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian, set in the context of tradition, cultural identity and contemporary life. Objects in the exhibition include arctic clothing, implements, and ceremonial regalia and are accompanied by films and interactive web media. The exhibition continues through March 26, 2007.

The “Sharing Knowledge” exhibition serves as a prototype for a much larger permanent exhibition at the Anchorage Museum when 800 – 1,000 Smithsonian objects will be on display in 2010. The Alaska program, organized through the National Museum of Natural History's Arctic Studies Center, represents the leading edge of Smithsonian efforts to extend its programs to audiences and interest communities across the country.

Exhibition Highlights

- 1893 Tlingit battle helmet that is a masterwork of expressive sculpture
- Inupiaq feast bowl with walrus ivory carvings representing real and mythical sea mammals
- Richly beaded Gwich'in Athabascan moccasins
- Ceremonial seal intestine parka from St. Lawrence Island, decorated with sea bird beaks and feathers

To develop the Alaska exhibitions, more than forty elders and other representatives of Alaska's twenty indigenous cultures were invited to Washington, D.C. from 2001 - 2005. Working with
museum curators, they recorded in-depth discussion about the use, meaning, and artistry of hundreds of items stored at the Natural History Museum and American Indian Museum, which together hold more than 30,000 ethnological objects from Alaska. Historical scholarship, collector’s records, and archival images have enriched the results of this collaborative effort, which will continue into the future as more pieces are brought forth and conversations with Alaska Native elders and scholars continue. A “Sharing Knowledge” web site, offering transcripts from the project, photographs, films, and information about Alaskan cultures, will go on-line in Summer 2006.

The return of heritage objects to Alaska is important in a state with more than 100,000 Native residents and where a strong resurgence in indigenous arts, languages, and cultures is underway. During one of the project visits to Washington, D.C. in 2004, Trimble Gilbert, a Gwich'in Athabascan elder from Arctic Village said, "We can shoot this arrow up in the air. How far will it go? That's the future. That's what we came here for - future generations need to know our cultures."

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