

10/3/2006

Sheldon Jackson: Plunderer or Preserver?



Sheldon Jackson, missionary, educator, philanthropist, and collector, was he as many have labeled him a plunderer of Native material culture or was he a preserver that has made it possible “for the coming generations of Natives to see how their fathers lived?”

This paper is not meant to extol or condemn Jackson but merely to shed some light on his role as a collector. How did this one man in a duplicitous sort of way preserve the material culture of the people whose lives he came to Alaska to change? We’ll take a look at why he collected and then we will look at some examples of things he collected that otherwise may have been lost during the upheavals of the late 19th, and early 20th century and what the results of preserving those pieces have been.

How did Sheldon Jackson end up in Alaska? He was a successful Presbyterian missionary and church leader 20 years before arriving in Alaska. For nearly 10 years (1859-1869) he traveled throughout the Midwest with duties similar to a church circuit rider, but finally settled in as pastor of a church in Rochester, Minnesota. Following this assignment he became the Mission Superintendent for the Synod of Iowa, an area encompassing "western Iowa, Nebraska, the Dakotas, Idaho, Montana, Wyoming and Utah." Jackson, never one to interpret literally his appointments, had within a year added Colorado and, before the end of the decade, New Mexico, Arizona, Washington, and Alaska. While in these areas Jackson began collecting objects from Native American tribes to use to illustrate talks to legislators, church and

educational groups on the East Coast. He even sent Native American material culture to wealthy donors as premiums for their support.¹

In 1877, Jackson planned to visit Montana to set up new churches and check on others he had founded in that part of the west, but was denied access to the area because of the Nez Perce War. This became the opportunity he was looking for to get to Alaska, a place he had wanted to come since the transfer of Alaska to the United States in 1867. So instead, he headed to Portland, Oregon where he met with Amanda McFarland, a long-time friend from the Southwest whose husband had recently died. Jackson convinced her to go to Fort Wrangell as an unofficial representative of the Presbyterian Church and begin a school. He accompanied McFarland as her escort to the wild frontiers of Alaska. This first trip lasted only a few weeks, and focused on getting Mrs. McFarland settled into her school. He came to sow the seed of a Presbyterian Mission network in Alaska, but it was also at this time that he began his most serious period of collecting.²

In the Southwest and Rocky Mountain Region, Jackson had been both a “pot hunter” in the ruins and abandoned villages and a customer of the emerging tourist arts. His finds continued to enhance his East Coast lectures and appease his supporters, but after his first trip to Alaska he concentrated on developing a “cabinet of curiosities” for his alma mater, the Princeton Theological Seminary. While attending seminary, in 1858, he had been impressed by a “cabinet of curios” put together by a Mr. Bush, a former missionary in Siam. Jackson felt he had learned through the objects and Mr. Bush’s *explanations “more than ever before of their customs, dress, etc.”* Although collecting seemed to have been inherent in the man, the idea of using objects to educate others became the spark igniting the flame of all-out collecting.

Following this first visit in 1877, Jackson began in earnest to make arrangements for the Princeton Theological Seminary to develop "The Sheldon Jackson Home Mission Collection." Two years later his cabinet became a reality. Although still officially working in the Southwest, in the spring of 1878 he arranged for the Board of Home Missions to send John G. Brady to Sitka and later, S. Hall Young to Wrangell as the first official Presbyterian missionary-preachers. They also became Jackson's field collectors for not only his Home Mission Collection and later his museum but for donor premiums and exhibitions at world's fairs.²

Although popular belief has Jackson and his teachers and missionaries collecting to deprive their potential converts of so-called "heathen" objects that might have delayed their conversion, I have not found any documentation supporting this as Jackson's reason for collecting. In fact, Jackson's missionaries and teachers, referred to these objects as having been traded, purchased, or given as gifts. Jackson was not so naive as to think he could buy off or change Native customs by depleting their material culture. His personal interest in Native cultures and his confidence in education for effecting change would have negated the need to collect or, as some often mistakenly assumed, destroy material culture to advance the conversion process. The seeming readiness of some Native people to turn over material culture as a symbol of adapting to a new way of life is interpreted by some as simply another way Native peoples were indirectly coerced into parting with important ceremonial and sacred pieces. Others feel that those giving away or selling objects was a clear choice on their part in order to become part of the new world surrounding them.³

Now let's take a look at some of the objects Jackson collected during his years in Alaska and what happened to them.

Jackson made a second trip to Alaska in 1879 bringing along his wife Mary, a group of church officials and a new, missionary teacher bound for Fort Wrangell. Famed

naturalist John Muir also happened to be on the same ship. After making a stop at Fort Wrangell, the mail steamer *California* and her passengers went on to Sitka for a tour of the town and inspection of the Presbyterian mission run by John Brady.⁴ Heading south again after an aborted attempt to reach Haines in Chilkat country the group cruised in bays and inlets formed by glaciers, giving Muir the chance to make natural history observations and providing a scenic cruise for Jackson and the rest of the party. Jackson reportedly kept up a barrage of questions to Muir concerning the natural wonders surrounding them.⁵

Muir, in his account of the trip, Travels in Alaska, noted his disappointment about the canceled trip to the Chilkat country but received assurances from the "archaeological doctor" that they would most certainly find "stone axes, and other curiosities" amongst the old buildings and totem poles of the Old Stickeen village a dozen miles south of Ft. Wrangell. Reaching the village, the group indeed found the fifty-year-old ruins of a



Photo courtesy Princeton Art Museum

Tlingit town site. After disembarking, Muir stayed with the group only a short time before striking out on his own to sketch and take notes of the area. After a time he heard what sounded like the chopping and felling of a tree. Returning to the site Muir found that the *"most eager of the relic hunters"* (obviously Sheldon Jackson) had requested that the steamer's deck hands cut down *"...one of the most interesting of the totems...with the view to take it on East to enrich some museum or other."*

The group's Tlingit guide, Kadashan, whose clan claimed ownership of the pole, approached Jackson and posed a thought-provoking question to him: *"How would you like to have an Indian go to a graveyard and break down and carry away a monument belonging to your family?"* A rather uncomfortable moment for Jackson, but Kadashan, a recent convert to

Presbyterianism, accepted Jackson's apologies and gifts and allowed him to ship the pole away.⁶

What would have happened to this pole if Jackson had left it where it stood? From our 2006 perspective his actions of taking the pole may seem reprehensible—why not let the pole stay as Kadashan said “as a monument” belonging to his clan? And how would we have feel if someone went to cemetery where our ancestor’s remains were interred and took away the urn or case containing their remains? Jackson’s actions certainly seem to land him in the “plunderer” category from a 21st century perspective; however, we shouldn’t forget this is also the man who wanted to preserve the “...*best specimens...*” “*so the coming generations of Natives could see how their fathers live*”⁷. But did the means justify the end--the preservation of an object that the owners would have let fall back to the earth? How valuable is it for the ancestors of the people who raised the pole to have it today as a link to their past? It may not be in its original location, but it has survived.

This became the greatest irony of Jackson’s years in Alaska. He came to Alaska to change the Natives’ way of life, and encourage them to put aside their cultural values, yet he aggressively preserved some of the most important material culture for the benefit of future generations. Today the top portion of the pole remains preserved at the Princeton Art Museum as an important artifact for research and inspiration and as a symbol of the strong and sophisticated culture that first erected it nearly 200 years ago.

By the early 1880’s Jackson was collecting in high gear sending most of the materials he was collecting to his alma mater, Princeton Theological Seminary. His feeling, which reflected many 19th century collectors, was “*the present moment is the last to preserve these evidences of*

*the culture of the races of the old masters of our continent, which are rapidly disappearing before the rushing tide of civilization”*⁸

But it wasn't until 1887 when a group of high-powered educators, business men, and church leaders on tour with Jackson suggested the need for “*an organization in Alaska for scientific investigation*” an organization that would also be a venue for the growing number of objects Jackson was collecting.

Realizing he apparently was the means by which important material culture was leaving Alaska, Jackson, with the aid of the newly formed Alaskan Society of Natural History and Ethnology, began enthusiastically collecting for the Sitka Museum.⁹

He convinced his supporters to construct a building to house the artifacts he was collecting and a place “*for study of the students the best Specimens of the old works of their Ancestors.*”¹⁰ First this frame structure was built but was soon too small and in 1895 it was replaced by a concrete structure which continues to house the collection today.

He encouraged the continuation of arts such as weaving and carving, not for traditional purposes, but for creating objects for sale in the growing art market thus engaging the Native population in the new cash economy brought by Europeans and Americans. Carving and weaving classes became part of the curriculum of the Sheldon Jackson Training School.¹¹

The Sheldon Jackson Museum houses a huge number of objects Jackson obtained through purchase, trade or gift and we can't discuss them all, but I'd like to give one more example of Jackson's collecting here in Southeast Alaska that benefited future generations.

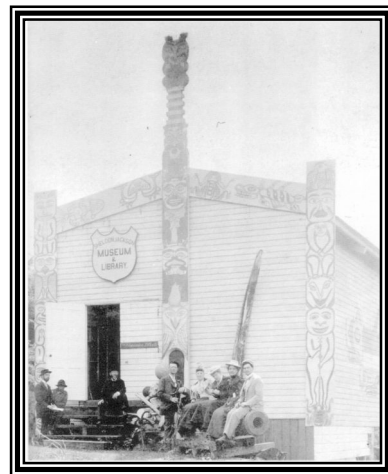
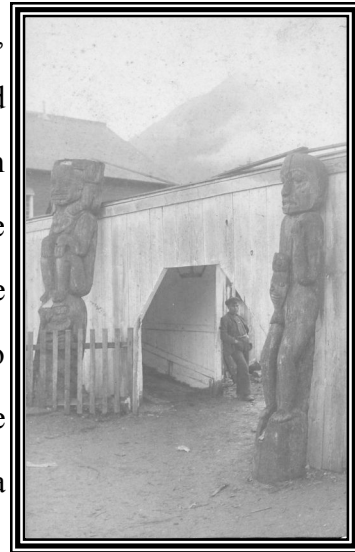


Photo courtesy of the department of History and Records management Services, Presbyterian Church.

In May of 1888, Jackson traveled to Metlakatla to visit William Duncan and the group of Christianized Tsimshians Duncan had brought to settle in Metlakatla. It so happened the site the chose was a long abandoned Tlingit village.

While there Jackson made arrangements for thirty-four young Tsimshian men to attend the Sitka Industrial and Training School. Meanwhile, Jackson learned that two Tlingit totem poles left in the old village would soon be destroyed by the new Tsimshian settlers. On hearing this, Jackson suggested the poles be shipped to Sitka with the young men. According to one account, on arriving in Sitka, the poles were transported to the school in a parade-like atmosphere. A number of the young Tsimshians played brass instruments leading a procession of Training School students and newly arrived Tsimshians. Wheels had been placed under the poles, making a one mile "*triumphal entrance*" through town to the school.¹² Most likely the poles were placed as is shown in this picture, outside until the first museum building was constructed in 1890.



*Photos courtesy of
www.dangel.net
A Photo shop image*

The poles had no significance for the Tsimshian people and the original Tlingit inhabitants had been gone for 50 years. Again we must ask ourselves if taking the poles constituted plundering after such an absence of the owners, or whether they should have been left for destruction by the new residents? Would the Tsimshian of Metlakatla been considered plunders if they had destroyed the poles? Couldn't their removal be considered truly and act of preservation on Jackson's part since otherwise their disappearance would have been sealed by the Tsimshian. These two poles have been connected to the Sheldon Jackson Museum since their arrival in 1888. They have been viewed by countless visitors, and have been examined by many researchers. One researcher, Steve Brown has used one of these poles in his search to identify the works of

a certain anonymous early Tlingit carver. Brown's theory is that this pole is the earliest work of an artist who also carved the house posts associated with Chief Shakes house in Wrangell. Through comparing this surviving pole with photographs and other poles in Wrangell, Kasaan, and Klukwan, Brown although not able to name this masterful carver has put together a major body of knowledge on the "*artistic legacy*" of a particular early Tlingit artist. Brown notes that "*the Sheldon Jackson Museum can be proud to be custodian of a few pieces of this inspiring legacy.*" Jackson's fore-thought in bringing the poles to the museum has helped in the study and analysis of Northwest Coast art and recognized the talent and creativity of this unknown artist.¹³

Again, the central irony of Jackson's life was that as he actively worked to impose change, he nonetheless preserved aspects of Alaska's traumatized cultures for posterity. In so doing he preserved objects so that the people whose ancestors had made and used them might study and learn from them. Consequently that preservation has in some instances assisted in the revitalization of some of those cultures.

Jackson's collecting has unquestionably extended far beyond preserving material culture for Alaska only. Since his first lectures to eastern audiences using lantern slides and "curios", Jackson's work has served to educate and enlighten people from around the world. Some of his collections were exhibited at the Seattle World's Fair in 1962 and at "The Far North: 2000 Years of American Eskimo and Indian Art" which opened at the Smithsonian's National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. in 1973. From that large exhibition came a smaller one which traveled to Alaska and five other sites around the country.

The artifacts collected by Jackson have also been loaned to the San Francisco Folk Art Museum, the Anchorage Museum of History and Art, and the Shed Aquarium in Chicago. The Yupik Mask exhibit, *Our Way of Making Prayer*, used many of the masks collected by Jackson

in Southwestern Alaska. Some of the Jackson collected pieces housed at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C., traveled in 1991 with the international exhibition of Alaskan and Siberian cultures, "Crossroads of the Continents." Other pieces from the Sheldon Jackson Museum were loaned to the Tacoma Historical Society and Anchorage Museum of History and Art in 1993 as part of the traveling exhibit "Russian America: The Forgotten Frontier." Since Jackson's death literally hundreds of thousands of people have had the opportunity to further their understanding and appreciation of the indigenous people of the North Pacific rim.

Researchers, scholars, and publishers from around the world continue to request photographs and information on the material collected by Dr. Jackson over one hundred years ago. Each year hundreds of local and out-of-town school groups utilize the Sheldon Jackson Museum as a primary educational resource. The pride many Native children take in the materials they find in the museum is a testament to Jackson's foresight in creating it. In addition, dozens of artists and craftsmen visit the Museum in order to see examples of how their ancestors wove baskets, and textiles, crafted kayaks or carved in wood, bone, ivory, and silver. Moreover, Native artists are hired or volunteer in the summer to demonstrate in the museum gallery presenting their arts and crafts, or sharing stories and legends from their cultures with thousands of visitors from every state and dozens of countries from around the world.

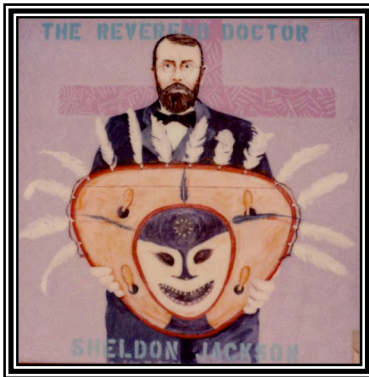
There are many opinions on the Sheldon Jackson collection, or maybe I should say on Sheldon Jackson himself, I would like to mention a few comments I've heard over the years: Dave Galanin, a Tlingit artist, feels Jackson's collecting has given him opportunities to find inspiration for his work which otherwise might not have been available to him. The Sheldon Jackson Museum provides Galanin and others like him with the opportunity to do as its namesake intended: see up close "how their fathers lived."¹⁴

Many feel the regalia and other objects should not be behind glass but should continue to be used for special occasions by the groups from which they originated. Still others, such as

Yup'ik scholar, Chuna McIntyre recently told me *"The museums house the wondrous works for all to see, appreciate and be inspired. They are the caretakers of our civilizations and artistic dreams."*

In 1988 the Coastal Yukon Mayors Association hosted a small exhibit entitled "Opening the Book." The exhibit consisted of artifacts Jackson collected from villages in the Bering Sea and Lower Yukon River area and then deposited in the museum in Sitka. Dr. Sheldon Jackson's work of collecting received a standing ovation for having preserved the artifacts from that area. Although the exhibit brochure, puts ownership of the artifacts in the hands of the people of Alaska with the Sheldon Jackson Museum as their place of storage: The brochure further states *"...these objects belong to you (the people of the Lower Yukon) because it was your ancestors who gave them to Reverend Jackson."*

Sheldon Jackson was a product of his era. He did his collecting by acceptable standards of the 19th century. By no means would his collecting or attitudes toward other cultures be acceptable today. Yet Jackson's work is appreciated as expressed by the Yukon-Kuskokwim people who gave a special thank-you to *"Sheldon Jackson, for collecting and saving the artifacts in the exhibit and keeping them in Alaska."*



*Sheldon Jackson Museum
V.D.3*

Was Jackson a plunderer or a preserver? These are questions about which many have strong feelings and to which I offer my responses. Yes, he acquired things from people in transition and in some instances did it in a way that is unacceptable today and we could label him a plunderer. And yes, he was a preserver *"so the coming generations of Natives, can see how their fathers lived"* and so today, and a hundred years

from now all can see, learn, and marvel at the works of the *"old masters of our continent."*

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11. "Expenses for Education of Children in Alaska," 10 May, 1886, *Papers*, Princeton University Theological Seminary, Shelf Vol. 4. This listed expenses for 21 January, 1886: "carving tools for U.S. School, Sitka - \$1.85; Douglas Cole, *Captured Heritage: The Scramble for Northwest Coast Artifacts* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985), 76; Hinckley, "Alaska's Tlingit," Chapter 4, 8
12. June, 1888, *The North Star*, 28; 12 May 1888, *The Alaskan*, 2; Abby Johnson Woodman, *Picturesque Alaska: A Journal of a Tour Among the Mountains, Seas, and Islands of the Northwest from San Francisco to Sitka* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin &

Co.), 114. William Watson Wollen, *The Inside Passage to Alaska: 1792-1920* (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark, 1924), 255-256.

13. Steve Brown "From Taquan to Klukwan, Tracing the Work of an Early Tlingit Master Artist" in *Faces, Voices and Dreams* (Juneau, AK: Division of Alaska State Museums and the Friends of the Alaska State Museum, 1987).

14. 14 February, 1992, Ellen Hays, personal conversation with the author; 1986-1992, Albert Davis, numerous personal conversations with the author about his Uncle's assistance to Sheldon Jackson; 27 February, 1992, Frank Spilman, personal conversation with the author, Frank, a half Tlingit, had not been to Alaska until he enrolled at Sheldon Jackson College in the fall of 1992. He feels that Sheldon Jackson Museum is giving him the opportunity to learn about his Tlingit heritage. 19 February, 1992, Jennifer Brady-Morales, conversation with the author, Jennifer is a Tlingit artist who feels the Sheldon Jackson Museum is an excellent place for school children to learn about Native cultures.

15. 2 August, 2006, Chuna McIntyre, personal conversation.

16. Program from "Opening the Book" exhibit. The title of the exhibit comes from a quote from another Arctic collector, Edward M. Nelson: "When the Eskimo between the Yukon and Kuskokwim Rivers become so sophisticated by contact with white men that mask festival fall into disuse, it will be but a short time until all the wealth of mythological fancy connected with them will become a sealed book." The exhibit helped to reopen that book.