

OUR STORY IN MANY VOICES

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**Detail of
Sanightaa
Rain parka**

*Seal skin, seal fur, bird
feathers and beaks,
St. Lawrence Island,
Siberian Yupik*

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FOREWORD

As the curator of collections for over thirty years, I have many favorite objects in the Alaska State Museum that I especially enjoy presenting to visitors—extraordinary objects that represent important moments and ideas in our Alaska story. One example is a bronze crest representing the Russian double-headed eagle that was presented to Alaska Natives in 1804 as both a peace offering and as a visual sign to colonial competitors that Alaska was claimed by Russia. Since the fifteenth century, European powers had recognized a “Doctrine of Discovery” that dictated they could seize new lands if the people they found there were not Christian. This concept, although recently repudiated by the pope himself, is still reflected by the lines drawn on our modern maps. The crest helps us to think about who really owned Alaska, how the concept of ownership has changed through time, and what it means today.

Author Charles Wohlforth and designer Sarah Asper-Smith, who created this book, present their own unique perspective and favorite objects, adding a valuable perspective. They made the book independently of the museum or the State of Alaska, raising money for the project from grants, and it received academic peer review rather than museum review. Asper-Smith played an integral role in creation of the exhibit, which opened in 2016, as a contractor with her firm ExhibitAK. She engaged

Wohlforth to edit the exhibit labels, as his final essay here explains. Their exceptional work in Alaska over many years has prepared them to present their interpretation of Alaska’s people and history.

Many objects chosen for the exhibition tell multiple and sometimes contradictory stories. Each museum visitor is encouraged to think deeply about the many meanings represented. As we discovered from our many conversations with Alaskans about the exhibit design, the meaning and significance of many key episodes of the history are still unsettled. Fittingly, the exhibit often reflects the conflicts and contradictions, encouraging visitors to be flexible, consider the evidence, and draw their own conclusions. We embrace different perspectives as a way of understanding and pondering Alaska’s unique human history.

The Alaska State Museum welcomes all visitors. We believe all who come will learn something here, no matter the level of knowledge you bring, and regardless of how much time you are able to devote. All will appreciate the beauty and power of the objects. And we welcome this book, as well, as a fitting guide and interpretation, which will orient you to Alaska, carry you through the exhibits, and help you understand, in your own way, the complex history and changing meaning of this place.

STEVE HENRIKSON
CURATOR OF COLLECTIONS

LEFT
**Binoculars from
the S.S. Aleutian**

ASM-2008-11-8

INTRODUCTION

No building could encompass Alaska, but the Alaska State Museum attempts to do so like no other. This book seeks to assist in that impossible task by placing the museum's exhibits in their context—in time and place, and in the cultural landscape. For newcomers, we hope to help with mental mapping, so you can arrange the objects into a story that makes sense for your own exploration of our state. For vintage Alaskans, we would guide you into a deepening Alaska story in this current moment of change, as familiar characters and incidents reorient themselves in new dimensions.

None of this is easy. Indeed, the exhibits' designers believed it should be hard. That challenge was essential, because the curators refused to dictate how visitors should understand the past and each other's cultures. Instead, they created a rich, complex, nonlinear space without a defined pathway to follow. Each visitor chooses where to look and in what order. Sometimes perspectives conflict. As you see each object, you can choose to perceive it for its beauty, its use, or for what it can say about the people who made it and their relationship to this place.

As the museum was built, we worked alongside the gifted curators who created these permanent exhibits. Asper-Smith helped conceive and manage the exhibit project and led the graphic design. She recruited Wohlforth to edit the museum labels, melding the language of the many diverse co-curators who brought to the project their own cultures and areas of

historical expertise. When this work was done, in 2016, we stepped back with pride.

Several years later, however, Asper-Smith noted the absence of a museum catalog, and again recruited Wohlforth to help. This time, our roles would be fundamentally different. Instead of being collaborators with the museum, we became observers and even, at times, critics. Generous donors who are mentioned in the acknowledgments made this possible, without any cost to the museum or the State of Alaska. This independent funding allowed us to interpret the museum without the institution's oversight (although staff members were extremely helpful in the process). We determined the design and content of the book, with the quality control of anonymous academic peer review. Thus this book does not promote the museum but describes it, taking our own informed but particular point of view.

Of course, ours is only one perspective. The Father Andrew P. Kashevaroff Building, housing the Alaska State Library, Archives, and Museum, contains thousands of unique records and objects representing a state that is larger than all but sixteen nations, is home to more than twenty indigenous languages, and has speakers of one hundred more. Alaska's story is rapidly being made and remade. We are honored to offer this catalog and guide to interpret the exhibits, as a companion to those ready to enter this extraordinary tale, so you may draw your own conclusions.

CHARLES WOHLFORTH
SARAH ASPER-SMITH

LEFT

**The newly
opened Andrew
P. Kashevaroff
Building in 2016.**

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Photography