

Sewing Bag — Kakiwik

MINGQUN KAKIWIGMI ET'UQ. – THE NEEDLE IS IN THE SEWING BAG.



Photo: Decorated sewing bag, Etholen Collection,
National Museum of Finland.

Alutiiq women are known for their sewing skills. In ancient times, they used delicate ivory and bird bone needles, bird bone awls, and wooden spools of animal sinew to stitch fine clothing. Their tools were stored in sewing bags with scraps of fur and gut. Each bag was uniquely decorated with animal-hair embroidery and appliqué of dyed gut. When not in use, sewing bags were rolled up and tied closed.

In classical Alutiiq society, both men and women carried sewing tools, particularly when traveling. Men kept sewing kits in their kayaks to repair tears in the boat's skin covering. Sewing tools were also used to fasten wooden slats into protective vests or armor, stitch waterproof containers from birch bark, and create tattoos. A soot-blackened length of sinew attached to a needle was passed under the skin to make permanent designs on the face, chest, or arms.

Sewing was often a social activity. Women enjoyed each other's company as they produced clothing and covers for skin boats. Girls began participating at the age of six, making thread and braiding lines. In some communities, Alutiiq people recognized a young woman's coming of age with a public festival where her parents gave away their hunting and sewing tools. This act symbolized a family's preparation for their daughter's new adult life.