

## Spruce Root Hat — Awirnaq

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**AWIRNANEK SLAAPANEK PILITAALLRIIT. – THEY USED TO MAKE SPRUCE ROOT HATS.**

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Photo: Historic spruce root hat, purchased jointly by the Alutiiq Museum and the Anchorage Museum of History and Art.

Woven hats are one of the stunning pieces of headgear once worn by Alutiiq men. Twined from split lengths of spruce root, these waterproof, conical hats had a flat crown and ornate decorations. Anthropologists believe that Alutiiq people adopted these hats from the ?ingit people. Examples of Alutiiq *awirnat* in museum collections feature painted designs similar to the form-line art of Northwest Coast societies. On many, red and black designs depict the face of an animal.

In addition to painted images, spruce root hats, particularly those from Kodiak, featured attachments. Craftsmen sewed beads and dentalium shells to the surface of hats in symmetrical patterns and attached bundles of sea lion whiskers to their sides.

Spruce root hats were symbols of power and prestige. They were considered heirlooms and passed down through families. Historic sources indicate that these hats had the power to attract sea otters and that they were worn for hunting. In fact, the animal images painted on many hats may reflect helping spirits.

Elders recall that women wove spruce root hats on Kodiak until the 1920s. The roots they used were typically collected in spring. With the help of a digging stick, women pulled young roots from shallow soil. After heating the roots briefly to soften their sap, they peeled off the outer brown bark. The pale interior of the root was then split with a fingernail to form narrow strands, and the root's dark core was discarded. Women then soaked their root strands in water to make them pliable and bundled them for later use.