

Amber — Amaq

AMAT INEQSUNARTUT. – AMBER IS PRETTY.



Photo: Basket decorated with Amber beads, by Cleo Chernoff. Courtesy of Cleo Chernoff.

Amber is the fossilized resin of ancient trees, particularly pine trees. This hard, yellowish-brown substance forms when a tree's gummy oils oxidize. Contact with air solidifies the resin, creating hard lumps. Across the globe, people prize amber for its warm lustrous color as well as the prehistoric plants and insects often trapped inside. Alutiiq people are no exception.

Historical accounts of Alutiiq society repeatedly mention amber as a highly valued material. Pieces of amber were more precious than even sea otter furs or the slender white dentalium shells used to decorate the garments of the wealthy. These precious stones were often incorporated into jewelry, including earrings, pendants, armbands, and necklaces. They were also strewn on graves or given to young men preparing for warfare. Amber is said to wash up on beaches, particularly on Chirikof Island, and to be particularly common after an earthquake.

Amber is also one of the materials Alutiiq people traded for with communities on the Alaska Peninsula. Historic accounts indicate that Kodiak Islanders exported finished parkas, sinew thread, and sea otter skins, in exchange for antler, caribou hair, amber, and caribou hide clothing manufactured by their neighbors.