New Exhibit Features Qayat - Kayaks

From driftwood, animal skins, tendon and baleen, Alutiiq people created qayat that were expertly designed for Kodiak’s notoriously windy waters. Working with stone and bone tools, and using the proportions of the human body as a measuring guide, men built boats that permitted swift, secure travel through ocean waters. For the Alutiiq, qayat were a lifeline. They allowed people to harvest fish and sea mammals from the ocean, to travel and trade over great distances, and to carry supplies home. In coastal Alaska, the qayaq remains a symbol of maritime knowledge, craftsmanship, and manhood.

The Alutiiq Museum’s newest exhibit Qayat, explores this technology, assembling historic and modern objects to illustrate the gear essential to every hunter. Harpoons, paddles, a bailer, and a visor surround a complete kayak and a kayak frame. The heart of the exhibit is an historic qayaq, a boat collected in Alaska in 1869 that retains its oiled, hand-stitched, and decorated seal skin cover. Loaned to the Alutiiq Museum by the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology the boat is a rare, complete example of the graceful, light, and flexible Alutiiq qayaq.

Adjacent to the historic vessel is a qayaq frame. Carved by Alfred Naumoff in 2014, this piece illustrates the internal framework of traditional boats. Pieces of a qayaq were never nailed together, but carefully lashed to allow the boat to bend in the waves. Naumoff is one of just a handful of contemporary Alutiiq kayak builders, and his knowledge has been informed by studies of historic boats.

“We placed the two kayaks together to show both the inside and the outside of a boat. Naumoff’s boat is not covered, so you can really see the details of internal construction–frame design and lashing,” said Leist. “Then with the historic kayak, you get to see how the skin cover is made and attached. We placed the two together to help people to understand the links between old and new objects. This exhibit is about kayaks, but it also about living culture, how collections can inspire and inform cultural practices.”

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