Wandering around a community with your camera can feel awkward, especially if it’s not your hometown. But in March, Patrick Saltonstall and Dehrich Chya found warm, friendly people in Old Harbor willing to have their pictures taken. Saltonstall and Chya are part of a team of museum staff members working on the Alutiiq Community Photograph Archive project, a year-long effort to collect images of Alutiiq people and places. Over three days, they visited with Old Harbor residents and took pictures of their daily lives—working on boats, drying a seal skin, meeting the mail plane, taking a walk, visiting with family and friends. The result is a snapshot of Old Harbor in 2020. The images will be preserved at the Alutiiq Museum thanks to support from the US Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Sun’aq Tribe.

“People love old photos, and we’re collecting those,” explained Collections Manager Amanda Lancaster, “but this project is also helping us to gather photos of today. People don’t normally think of their daily lives as worth documenting, but it’s daily life that make history interesting. Fifty-years from now, young people will want to know what Old Harbor looked like in 2020 and how people lived. They will want to see pictures of grandparents and great grandparents.”

Although the Covid-19 pandemic has temporarily halted travel, the museum plans to collect photos in Kodiak and four additional villages when it is possible. In the meantime, all Alutiiq families are invited to share photos of their lives.

“We created a way for people to upload photos through our website, wherever they live,” said Executive Director April Laktonen Counceller. “We know there are a lot of Alutiiq people living far from Kodiak and we want to include them in our project. Now they can be represented in our collections by sharing photos. We’ve already received submissions from families in Washington and Pennsylvania.”

Some people have shared older family photos, others have sent pictures of how they are passing Covid-19 quarantine time at home—making artwork, teaching the kids to vacuum, or enjoying s’mores by a campfire.

“This is a unique moment in our history,” Counceller said. “Like the earthquakes and ash falls of the past, we will talk about the pandemic for years. We would love a 2020 family photograph, a selfie, or some pictures of life in lockdown. We really have a unique chance to capture family and community history, while sharing a common experience.”
Cama’i Friends,

When I last wrote to you, we were imagining the museum’s 25th Anniversary celebration—a year filled with special events and activities. But the past two months have dramatically altered our course. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, we have closed to the public and are doing our part to help flatten the curve by keeping staff safely at home.

Nevertheless, all of us have been busy at our home offices and kitchen tables working to transform the museum’s services. We know that there are people who need the comfort of culture right now, and we are working to bring Alutiiq heritage into every home. How can you access our services during the shutdown, or after?

For those of you using social media, watch for new resources in the coming weeks. We are particularly excited about our short how-to videos that explore crafts and cultural activities. Each has downloadable instructions and you can watch on your phone. If you are not on social media but use the web, check our website (www.alutiiqmuseum.org) for new videos, like the Pinguat project documentary and online displays, like the virtual edition of our new language exhibit. We can also help you find a birthday, graduation, or anniversary present. Our online store at alutiiqmuseumstore.org is still open. We are shipping regularly and updating our store with new items from Alutiiq and local artists. If you do not use the Internet and would like to ask a question or speak to a staff member, call 844-425-8844, or write to us at info@alutiiqmuseum.org. Don’t be bored! There is a lot to learn and we’ll help you connect.

We look forward to reopening our doors but also accept that there will be social changes as a result of the pandemic. To ensure a bright future, we are looking for at least ten new monthly donors by June 1st. Monthly donors help to provide year-round support for our mission. If you believe in preserving and sharing Alutiiq culture, please join us! To register for a monthly gift visit alutiiqmuseum.org/give/donations.

Quyanaasinaq (big thanks),
April Isiik Counsellor, PhD
Executive Director

Membership Matters
Give a little each month for a big impact.
https://alutiiqmuseum.org/give/donations

Mission and Vision:
By preserving and sharing cultural traditions of the Alutiiq people, we celebrate Alutiiq heritage through living culture.

The Alutiiq Museum is governed by Afognak Native Corporation, Akhiok-Kaguyak Inc., KANA, Koniag, Inc., Leisnoi, Inc., Natives of Kodiak, Inc., Old Harbor Native Corporation, and Ouzinkie Native Corporation. Each organization elects a representative to the Alutiiq Heritage Foundation, the museum’s board. Funding is provided by charitable contributions, memberships, grants, contracts, and sales from the museum store.

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Alutiiq Beaders Star in Documentary Film

The camera zooms in on June Pardue’s hands as she lovingly ties the final knot in a beaded headdress. The piece is a replica of an ancestral garment—part of an Alutiiq woman’s ceremonial clothing made more than a century ago. Pardue reminds listeners how special the headdress is. For many years no one on Kodiak made Alutiiq art.

“This really means a lot to me—for everyone to get together and to work like they did a long time ago,” she said. “It is really a blessing to be able to recreate this headdress.”

This is the opening scene of Pinguat, a 17-minute documentary film produced by Josh Branstetter for the Alutiiq Museum. The film follows the journey of 13 beaders to recreate a rare set of Alutiiq regalia—a beaded headdress, cuffs, and sash—collected on Kodiak in 1872. Last November Alutiiq artists from Kodiak, Anchorage, the Matanuska-Susitna Valley, Seattle, and Texas gathered in Kodiak for a week-long workshop. Pardue mentored the group. While they counted, knotted, and sewed Branstetter recorded their work.

“We are so pleased with this film,” said April Counsellor, the Alutiiq Museum’s executive director. “Josh really understands the spirit of our project. You can feel the deep respect the artists have for the regalia, their excitement about studying the pieces, and their cultural pride. He captured Alutiiq artists living their culture. It’s a beautiful film.”

The ancestral garments are currently visiting Kodiak as part of a long-term partnership between Koniag, Inc., the Alutiiq Museum, and the Musée Boulogne-Sur-Mer, France to study and share the remarkable collection of French anthropologist Alphonse Pinart. Pinart kayaked around Kodiak from November 1871 to May 1872, visiting Alutiiq communities, collecting objects, and recording stories. His collection contains many rare ceremonial objects, including three coordinated sets of women’s beaded garments. One set traveled back to Kodiak in 2018 to provide inspiration for a new generation of beaders.

To tell the story of the project, Branstetter weaves together interviews with each artist, footage from the workshop, historical details, pictures of other beaded items in the Alutiiq Museum’s collections, Alutiiq language terms, and both Alutiiq and French music.

“Josh shows how our ancestors’ creations hold cultural knowledge. When you combine people familiar with an art and pieces made by an ancestor, the result is very special. Artists are able to learn directly from the designs, material choices, constructing techniques of a traditional culture bearer. Walls tumble, confidence builds, and inspiration soars.”

Released in April, the Pinguat film can be viewed on the museum’s website at https://alutiiqmuseum.org/research/beading. The US Bureau of Indian Affairs, Sun’aq Tribe of Kodiak, Musée Boulogne-Sur-Mer, Koniag, Inc., and Alutiiq Heritage Foundation are generously supporting the development of these resources.

Beaded Bracelet Directions

Inspired by the Pinguat film? Interested in learning to bead? Download instructions and a supply list for a beaded bracelet, developed for the museum by June Pardue.

Find the full directions at https://alutiiqmuseum.org/research/beading
Art Added to Collection

With a $3000 grant from Rasmuson Foundation’s Art Acquisition Fund, the museum purchased two pieces of Alutiiq artwork for our collection. From Candace Branson of Kodiak, we bought Alutiiq Hat, a hand-sewn and embroidered fur garment inspired by traditional festival hats in the collections of the Kunstkamera, St. Petersburg, Russia. It features a dramatic puff of mountain goat hair surrounded by fish skin panels, pieces of red leather, and land otter trim.

From Cheryl Lacy of Wasilla, we purchased Not Even a Nibble, a watercolor showing an unwary fishermen trying to catch his dinner while marine creatures play around him. Lacy’s painting is an excellent example of the humor that fills Alutiiq life and the light-hearted side of fishing.

Old Sites in Chiniak Bay

Sea stacks are common around the Kodiak Archipelago. Gulls and puffins love these steep-sided, crag-filled prominences jutting out of the water. They are great places for resting and nesting. But birds aren’t the only ones with a history of inhabiting Kodiak’s rocky islets. A recent archaeological survey along the coast of Chiniak Bay illustrates that Alutiiq ancestors lived and worked atop some of these precipitous rocks.

“We were working along the coast of Cape Chiniak, looking for sites on the islands near shore,” said museum archaeologist Patrick Saltonstall. “Some of them we were able to climb up, but others were just too steep. One, about 30 meters high, had a flat grassy area on top and what looked like some eroding midden [ancient garbage]. I thought it was a site, but I couldn’t get up there.”

A week later, on a flight south, Saltonstall got a good look at the sea stack and confirmed the presence of a site. What were people doing on top of these islets? They are likely refuge sites, defensible places where people retreated for protection in time of war. Elders named one of the sites Nayurwik—a place to watch out. Saltonstall doesn’t know how people got to the top, and carried their children, food, water, and belongings up there.

“They must have used a lot of rope! Historic sources report that people made rope out of sea lions skins or kelp. It’s just another example of Alutiiq ingenuity.”

Two sea stack sites are among 74 cultural deposits studied by the museum last summer. A grant to Leisnoi, Inc. from the National Park Service Tribal Heritage program allowed researchers to visit all of the known sites on Leisnoi’s lands and to search for unrecorded deposits.

“Although archaeologists have studied a number of places around Chiniak Bay,” Saltonstall said. “There had never been a comprehensive survey of Leisnoi’s coastal lands. We visited eight areas and located sites spanning Kodiak’s history—including villages, camps, refuge sites, Russian-era brick kilns, barns, and bunkers. About half had not been recorded.”

The finds will help Leisnoi protect cultural sites on its property and balance land use and development with historic preservation.

“By knowing where sites are and their current condition, the deposits can be protected, monitored, and studied” said Saltonstall. “In one area we found a well-worn trail through a site. The trail was enhancing the erosion of a 500-year-old sod house. By rerouting the trail slightly, people can continue to hike in the area and vegetation will regrow and stabilize the site. A simple solution is great for both the site and for land users.”
Connections

Spotlight—Karla Nolan

When Karla Nolan of Poulsbo, Washington saw a picture of an Alutiiq woman in a beaded headdress, she knew she had to make one for herself. Karla is Alutiiq. Her grandmother is from the Karluk area, and Karla is a shareholder of both Koniag, Inc. and Leisnoi, Inc. But like many Alutiiq people born and raised in the lower forty-eight states, she has never been to Kodiak and yearns to learn more about her Alutiiq heritage.

Making a headdress was a way for Karla to immerse herself in an ancestral tradition and connect with her culture. Years ago, Karla called the Alutiiq Museum for help making a headdress. Staff members sent the only resources available—instructions for a simple, child’s headdress (https://alutiiqmuseum.org/images/activities/HeaddressKit2.pdf). At the time Karla was very busy—raising children, helping to raise grandchildren, operating a hair salon, and taking care of all her other daily responsibilities. The instructions were lost before she found time for beading. A decade passed. Then, last May Karla reached out again. Could the museum provide directions for making a headdress?

Education and Public Outreach Coordinator Djuna Davidson stepped up to help. As Karla doesn’t have Internet access, Djuna assembled and mailed a packet of information and Karla began imagining her first headdress. Using the museum’s information as a basic guide, she decided to incorporate a hummingbird design in the train of her headdress and worked out a pattern. The hummingbird is important to Karla because in her words the birds, “make me laugh out loud and I want to add that to my headdress. I want to share the emotion of feeling good.”

Karla had never worked with beads before taking on the hummingbird headdress. But as a retired hairdresser she knew she could rely on her experiences working creatively with her hands to guide the process. She spent last winter studying and beading to bringing her vision to light.

In her own words, “It was a challenge... and the experience was very spiritual. I knew I just had to make one. I’d love to dance it. I haven’t danced in years and I think my calling is to dance with my own handmade regalia.”

Karla named her finished headdress Energy and Splendor of the Great Mother and is already imagining her next piece. She hopes to continue to learn more about her culture and to keep connecting with the museum.

Quyanaaasinaq
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Craft Saturday Videos

Nunanjuaqsaakina! – You should have fun!

April 25 | Cottonwood bud salve with Gayla Peterson
May 16 | Slate grinding with Patrick Saltonstall
June 20 | Beaded bracelets with Candace Branson
July 18 | Youth beaded headresses with Hanna Sholl
August 22 | Mask carving with Dehrich Chya

Learn

Quyanna—Thank you