

Mingqecipet – SEWING TRADITIONS



Cuumillat'stun minq'rtukut. – WE ARE SEWING LIKE THE ANCESTORS.

ALUTIIQ GARMENTS

If you were an 18th-century Alutiiq/Sugpiaq person, your wardrobe would contain a set of garments stitched from bird, fish, and animal skins including sea otter, seal, caribou, and ground squirrel. For daily activities, you would wear a long, loose-fitting, hoodless robe and a soft undergarment stitched from the skin of a baby seal. Your outdoor clothing would include a waterproof rain jacket made of bear or sea mammal intestine, some socks woven from beach grass, a pair of knee-length boots, and perhaps some bear skin mittens. And, if you were fortunate, you would own an elaborately decorated parka for special occasions.

All of these garments were expertly crafted. Women spent countless hours working by the light of fires and oil lamps to turn natural materials into warm, durable, beautifully decorated clothing. Alutiiq garments were more than attire. They were pieces of artwork that expressed their owner's identity and talismans that demonstrated the close spiritual connections between people and animals.

PREPARING TO SEW

Accumulating materials was the first step in manufacturing clothing. Alutiiq garments often contained a variety of hides harvested over many hunts. After Russian contact, people were restricted to wearing garments made of materials with little value to the fur trade, particularly bird skins. The typical puffin parka—an everyday garment—had about 60 skins, and a cormorant parka for special events had as many as 150 throat skins. Other garments combined the pelts of several animals. Alaska Peninsula Alutiiq people wore parkas fashioned from squirrel,

caribou, mink, otter, and ermine pelts.

Alutiiq people tanned mammal skins with urine collected in large wooden tubs stationed outside their houses. Alutiiq women soaked hides in these tubs, relying on the ammonia in the urine to break down any remaining fat. Urine also removed hair from hides. Women soaked hides in urine and then rolled and left them in a warm place to sit for several days until the hair could be easily scraped away.



Bird skins, a popular material for parkas, were tanned with fish eggs. After scraping the skins to remove fat and tissue, Alutiiq people covered them with fish roe and left them to sit. After several days, they scraped the hides clean and kneaded them until they were soft and dry.

Wooden spool with ptarmigan carving, AD 1400–1750, Koniag, Inc. Collection, Karluk One Site.

In addition to processing hides, seamstresses also made thread. First, they twisted sinew—bits of animal tendon—into strips with small wooden implements. Then, with their fingernails, they separated the strips into thin fibers, moistened them, rolled them between their palms, and wrapped the resulting thread around a wooden bobbin.