

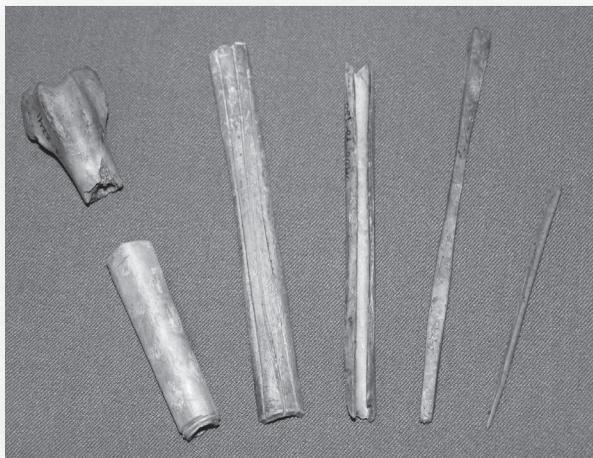


Mingqutet kakiwimni. – THE NEEDLES ARE IN MY SEWING BAG.

A SEAMSTRESS'S TOOLS

With a thimble made from a thick piece of hide, a sharply pointed bone awl, and a slender needle, sewing began. First, a seamstress used her awl to pierce a hole in her hide. Then she used a slender bird bone or ivory needle to pull the thread through the hole. Some needles had tiny eyes. Others had a small knob for attaching the thread. Still others were unmodified. A sewer simply wrapped strands of sinew around these needles.

Seamstresses stored their tools in beautifully decorated bags or *kakivit*. Men carried similar bags, with tools for repairing boats and clothing.



Artifacts from the Uyak site, Kodiak Island, illustrate how needles were made by cutting and polishing slivers of bird bone. Native Village of Larsen Bay Collection.

EMBELLISHMENTS

The final step in making any garment was decoration. Fur tassels, delicate embroidery and appliqués of dyed gutskin provided a spectacular finish, and often took as long to complete as the basic garment.

Decoration had both social and spiritual significance. Although the wealthy wore more richly decorated clothing to indicate their special status, clean, well-made clothing was essential to all as it showed respect for the animals that provided their skins. Clothes were also a form of amulet. Hunters wore the skins of the animals whose helping spirit guided them. Children were dressed in the skins of certain animals to bring them helpful qualities—quickness or good sight.

A HERITAGE OF SKIN SEWING

In classical Alutiiq/Sugpiaq society, sewing was both a social and an educational activity. As they stitched, women enjoyed each other's company and taught young people to sew. Girls began to assist with simple sewing tasks at age six, making thread and braiding line.

Russian traders quickly recognized the skill of Alutiiq seamstresses and commissioned Native sewers to produce a variety of garments, including European-style fashions made from traditional materials.

As the Alutiiq entered the Western economy, earning wages and purchasing goods, skin sewing waned. By the mid-19th century, imported fabric clothing began to replace skin garments. Fabric clothes were often worn indoors and traditional robes donned as coats.

Today, a growing number of artists practice the art of skin sewing. Hats, mittens, and slippers are among the garments that they continue to craft from Kodiak's velvety sea otter, fox, and ermine pelts.