

Introduction



Wooden Raven rattle made by the Tlingit Indians, collected by Louis Shotridge in 1923 (NA 9466).

For many people, a museum is a place where interesting "things" can be accumulated, displayed, and stored. In the case of The University Museum, the range of items collected and cared for is particularly diverse. As a museum of archaeology and anthropology, it contains weaving tools from pre-Columbian Peru, bricks and drainpipes made by the ancient Sumerians, wooden drums from central Africa, and images of Buddha made in 20th century Japan. As this list implies, the artifacts are of interest for many reasons. A few are great works of art, assuming importance because of their aesthetic qualities. All are of value as tangible records of human history and achievement: they help to document the development of technology, of social and economic systems, and of belief systems. The full significance of each object can be understood, however, only if it has a context. This context is provided by anthropological and archaeological research that relates an artifact's manufacture, use, and meaning to the society that produced it.

In the case of ethnographic materials, such records are in the form of interviews, diaries and notes of observers, historical documents, drawings, photographs, and videotapes. When the ethnographic record is relatively complete, the cultural context of artifacts may be obvious. For example, the ethnographic sources for the objects in the Museum's newest exhibition, "Raven's Journey," are unusually rich. Within the exhibit, these artifacts from Alaska can be looked at in two different ways: as superb pieces of craftsmanship they can be appreciated in themselves; through photographs and labels, they can be understood as pieces of equipment being used by the Indians and Eskimos who created them.



The Raven rattle in context. In this photograph of three men taken in front of their clan house around 1900, the rattle is held by the man in the middle as one of the symbols of his chiefly rank. (Vincent Soboleff Collection, Alaska State Library [neg. PCA 1-19])

In the case of archaeological materials, two steps are needed to supply a meaningful cultural context. An initial record of associated materials is obtained during excavation in the form of field notes, photos, and scale drawings. An artifact is thereby placed in context within the "site": its relationship to other artifacts, debris, architectural remains, and any other features, such as hearths or pits, is defined. The second step, the reconstruction of cultural context, relies on principles derived primarily from anthropology but also from other social and natural sciences. These principles specify the relationship between characteristics of the artifact (e.g. form, use, archaeological context) and patterns of human behavior. Understanding the function and meaning of archaeologically recovered artifacts may be relatively simple. For example, the presence of an iron spear next to the body of a

child in a city destroyed in warfare communicates a message to every member of modern society. With less familiar kinds of artifacts, however, interpretation may be difficult. Archaeologists studying our remote ancestors disagree as to whether it is even possible to know the way in which specific kinds of stone tools were used.

In each of the articles in this and the next issue of *Expedition*, the author describes an artifact (or group of related artifacts) from the Museum's collections, traces its history, and discusses its role in the society that created it. They serve to remind us that a museum consists not only of inanimate objects and the building that houses them, but also of the scholars who bring the artifacts and their documentation together to interpret them, thereby making them meaningful to you, the visitor.

Robert H. Dyson, Jr.