



Strengthening Museums Across Alaska  
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March 19, 2019

The Honorable Michael Dunleavy  
Office of the Governor  
P.O. Box 110001  
Juneau, AK 99811-0001

Dear Gov. Dunleavy,

Museums Alaska, the statewide association of museum professionals, has identified supporting the Sheldon Jackson Museum as one of our top legislative priorities. We write this letter out of concern for the proposed sale or transfer of the building and its ethnographic collection, which are priceless parts of our shared cultural heritage. Shutting the museum facility as well as the Stratton Library, which is used as collections storage for the Sheldon Jackson Museum, may appear on paper to be a sound cost cutting measure but will devastate the cultural landscape of Alaska and will set a dangerous precedent for managing museum collections held in the public trust.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum and its collection were purchased by the State of Alaska to inspire human thought and artistic endeavor, to stimulate ethnographic research and to foster an awareness of, and an appreciation for, the enriching qualities of a multi-cultural existence. Selling the collection to an outside museum or other interest would reverse decades of efforts by tribal organizations and Alaska museums to recover objects dispersed by colonialism, threatens accreditation with the American Alliance of Museums, and would require a great deal of time, money, legal assistance, consultation with tribes, and possibly even court proceedings. These realities would make dissolving the collections much more difficult than decision makers likely anticipate.

It is a basic tenet that museums are stewards of collections as a public trust. This means that collections must be protected and maintained for use and enjoyment of the public in perpetuity. The Sheldon Jackson Museum's collection was acquired by its founder and namesake in the late 1800s at a time when Alaska Native identity was being reshaped by colonialism and sacred cultural items were taken into private collections and to populate museums around the world. The Museum's collection is unique in that it includes 5,900 objects representing all of the Native groups in Alaska: Tlingit, Haida, Tsimshian, Aleut, Alutiiq, Yup'ik, Inupiat, and Athabascan. By having the collection in one location within the state, it provides a means for Alaskans to study their ancestor's cultural arts and learn about traditional ways of life on their own land. For many, traveling out of state to study museum collections is not affordable or attainable.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum is one of only seven museums in the state of Alaska to achieve accreditation through the American Alliance of Museums for commitment to, and demonstration of, the professional standards for education, public service, and collections care. This accreditation was achieved through high profile, peer-based validation of the museum operations and impact, and increases the Sheldon Jackson Museum's credibility and value to funders, policy makers, community members, and peers. Accreditation is a powerful tool to leverage change and helps facilitate loans between institutions statewide and nationally. Losing accreditation will directly impact the Museum's current and future loans with local, state, federal, tribal, and international agencies.



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Beyond housing a world-class collection, the Sheldon Jackson Museum is an economic driver and beloved community asset. The museum is one of the top tourist attractions in Sitka. Last year the museum attracted 14,012 visitors generating \$42,175 in revenue. With increased cruise ship traffic in the coming years, visitation and revenue are expected to increase. The Museum contributes to Alaska's economy through grant funding that is spent locally and employees who live locally. The Museum also provides year-round educational opportunities. The hands-on loan program and other resource materials are available for both local and statewide school groups. Educational programs in the form of lectures, films, and classes in numerous Native arts are offered to adult learners. An Artifact-of-the-Month program features in-depth research on the collection and those articles are available on the museum's website for anyone to access. The Native Artist Residency Program provides a way for Alaska Native artists to study their own cultural artifacts and to share their knowledge with visitors and museum staff.

The Sheldon Jackson Museum facility is a gem in its own right. The building is situated on the historic Sheldon Jackson College campus, which closed in 2007 and is being revived as the home base for the Sitka Fine Arts Camp. The Sheldon Jackson Museum is the oldest concrete building in the state and is listed as a National Historic Landmark and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

When budgets are tight, museums are needed more than ever. They provide free and low-cost programming to members of the public of all ages. They are places to learn, explore, and grow. The value of these services to the public cannot be measured in dollars, but rather in the value they add to the lives of those who visit.

I hope this letter has helped convince you that the Sheldon Jackson Museum is a vital part of the social and cultural life of Sitka and Alaska. Please feel free to contact us if you are interested in discussing this further, at 907-474-5484 or [director@museumsalaska.org](mailto:director@museumsalaska.org).

Sincerely,  
Museums Alaska Board of Directors