



WOOD

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS, ALASKANS HAVE BEEN CARVING OUT THEIR STORY.

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SUPPLIED BY NATURE. FORGED INTO CULTURE.

Though wood resources across Alaska's ecosystems varied—and much was treeless during the Ice Age and for millennia after, even to today—cultures found a way to get this versatile raw material, even if it was collecting what drifted in on the ocean. Then they used it to shape the objects that touched every aspect of their lives, from everyday activities like eating to special rituals and sacred moments like masked dancing and drumming and honoring ancestors. In the southeast, where cedars towered, totem poles and large wood plank lodges were possible. In the far north, where only shrubby willow and dwarf birch could survive, and along the treeless Aleutian archipelago, even smaller objects like spear shafts sometimes had to be stitched together from fragments of wood.

Ancient Alaskans were attuned to the attributes of wood, and each part of the

tree was mined for its particular properties. The curve between trunk and root was essential for the bow of a boat and made sturdy adze handles. The straight wood of the lower trunk was good for bows and arrows and split cleanly into planks. Bark became light and watertight containers. Root fibers wove ritual hats. Gnarls and knots formed features on masks and burls became bowls and ladles. An abundance of woodworking tools like adzes, mauls, chisels, splitting wedges, and even fire itself were used for cutting, sanding, shaving, whittling, bending, and steaming, taking full advantage of wood's malleable character. But more than just shaped for utility, wood's plastic nature allowed for personalization: drum handles curved to fit to a particular hand, say, or a whale carved into the bottom of a boat seat to honor the animal below.

Driftwood, Shrubs

In the treeless arctic tundra, Inupiat were attuned to driftwood's seasonal cycles and local accumulation spots after it melted from Siberian ice. They collected it several times a year by boat or sled, and augmented it with a meager supply of local shrubs like willow and alder. But even with such limited resources, they managed to shape wood into tundra essentials. Curled and clawed, ice scratchers mimicked the sounds of seals on the ice, allowing hunters to crawl close for the kill. In open water hunts, they'd employ an atlatl, with a throwing board perfectly shaped from spruce driftwood to fit to a hunter's hand, with grooves for each finger. Slitted snow goggles staved off blindness from the bright spring sun or light bounced off the snow and ice. But a most ingenious tool for shaping wood wasn't a manufactured tool at all, but an Inupiat craftsman's teeth. When precision was needed, for the curved ribs of kayak frames, for example, pieces of wood were bitten and gnashed to crimp and bend them into shape.

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Spruce, Birch

Athabascans were blessed by an abundance of birch and spruce in their forest-scape homeland in Alaska's interior. They knew that wood on the compressed side of leaning trees was hard and strong and prized it for shaping sled runners that could withstand loads and landscape irregularities. It also made excellent bows and arrows—strong enough to fell mighty game like moose and caribou. It could also be easily shaved to create the straightest-flying arrows. They knew there was also strength in flexibility, so in the spring and summer they carefully stripped the outermost layer of birch bark to bend and stitch with threaded spruce root into lightweight berry baskets and watertight containers. Higher up the tree, the most nimble of birch branches became the elegantly arched frames of snowshoes that would let them glide atop the snow.

Driftwood, Shrubs

Living on the windy, exposed flats of the Bering taiga, the Yup'ik weren't gifted with an abundance of wood resources. But they made the most of what they could find, like lashing spruce strips together with roots to create lattice-like cones that trapped blackfish living in the tall grasses of lakes and slow-moving streams. They used adzes (wooden-handled themselves) to transform the sometimes large chunks of wood that drifted to them on rivers and ocean currents, including the strong curve between trunk and root of spruces, prized for boat stems. Smaller pieces of driftwood were carefully stitched into the rest of the frames of light, strong open boats that could carry whole families to seasonal hunting camps or haul back a whale quarry—sometimes loads of a few tons. Wood shaped ritual items as well, including elaborate masks that mirrored the round-cheeked, tusked faces of walrus. These were worn during dances where men dressed in gut parkas mimicked the powerful sea creature, bellowing and stomping and crouching to imitate a slide across the ice to invite and honor the spirits of these animals vital to their existence.

Cedar, Sitka spruce

Massive cedar flourished in rich rainforest soil, and its trunks were etched with figures that represented important people and events and became towering totems for the Tlingit and Haida. Similar carved figures or crests topped ceremonial hats, with broad brims of expertly woven spruce roots. Rituals for important moments like births and deaths meant dancing, face covered in a wooden mask carved into the shape of an auspicious animal. Shamans, who danced to cure the sick and to bring good weather and fishing, also donned masks, carved into shapes meant to appeal to the appropriate spirits. But all wasn't in the hands of the spirits. To make sure they hooked a halibut that wasn't too large to fit in a canoe without sinking it, clever Tlingit fishermen devised a special V-shaped hook—often made of yew or alder, and lowered with a red cedar fiber line—made specifically to fit a fish that was between 20 and 100 pounds. They'd usually carve an animal or human figure into it, an enticement they thought urged the fish to bite.

Driftwood

Along the sodden hills of the windswept Aleutian archipelago, even the tiniest of trees are nonexistent. But if it was to be driftwood only, the far-ranging Unangax (Aleut) seafarers were up to the challenge. For sea hunts of birds, whales, and other sea mammals, they heated driftwood boards and curved them into elongated visors that both kept the sun out of their eyes and amplified the sounds of prey by cupping them against their ears. Some of their Bering Sea-worthy open boats—shaped meticulously with a driftwood frame—could hold up to 20 passengers to ferry between the islands of the archipelago and farther afield on seal hunting expeditions. They also curved driftwood slats into the round rims of drums to accompany songs and dancing during the times when it was too cold to hunt, and to honor deceased relatives—often buried in wooden masks. When masks were worn for ritual dancing and drumming, they often took human form, or "false faces." After being worn just once, these wooden faces were either destroyed or left in the caves that dotted the Aleutian hills.

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LEARN MORE ABOUT THE ROOTS OF ALASKANS' WOODWORKING TRADITIONS AT [NPS.GOV/YUCH](https://www.nps.gov/yuch).

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