



Engraved Ivory Needle Case from Norton Sound, Alaska  
Unknown Iñupiat artist  
ca. 1890  
L: 8.5"; W: 1"  
T0608 a-e

By Amy Phillips-Chan

During the 2010 Otsego Institute Workshop, I enjoyed the opportunity to examine several objects in the Thaw Collection including an engraved ivory needle case that tied into my dissertation research exploring the artistry and language of ivory drill bows from the Bering Strait.

Constant production and mending of fur parkas, gloves, mukluks and skin bags required every Iñupiat woman to own an array of sewing equipment.<sup>i</sup> Along the coast of Norton Sound and northern Alaska women kept their needles in bone or ivory cases (*miqutikuwik*) often incised with graphic designs including concentric or barbed lines and nucleated circles.<sup>ii</sup> Northern needle cases typically included a seal skin strap with a knot or stopper at one end to keep the tube from slipping off and an ivory hook or loop at the opposite end for a woman to attach the needle case to her belt.<sup>iii</sup> Needles were tucked into one side of the seal skin strap and pulled securely into the tube (Fig. 1). Women also fastened small articles to the ends of needle case straps including sewing tools, such as thimbles and awls, as well as personal amulets or charms including beads, canine teeth, and labrets.<sup>iv</sup>

Needle case T0608 consists of a rectangular tube of ivory with a seal skin strap that passes through the center and terminates on one end with an ivory stopper incised with nucleated circles. The other end of the strap includes a double-U shaped ivory hook that would have traditionally been used to hold seal skin thimbles.<sup>v</sup> In place of a seal skin thimble, the artist has carved an ivory thimble decorated with rows of small circles to imitate pitting caused when pressing the butt of a needle against seal skin. The ivory case features engraved figures engaged in various winter activities, among them, a seal hunter returning home and greeting a figure on top of a sod house and two dogs pulling a sled of Iñupiat construction with high rails and upturned bow.

Motifs on needle case T0608 are densely filled with square hatching and darkened with ash or lead in a style related to old pictorial engraving that fluoresced in Nome, Alaska during the early twentieth century.<sup>vi</sup> Following the influx of gold seekers and tourists to Nome, Bering Strait villagers converged upon the burgeoning town where ivory carvings enjoyed immense popularity as trade items (Fig. 2).<sup>vii</sup> Carvers applied their pictorial motifs to traditional implements such as ivory drill bows and combs as well as new articles including ivory pipes, cribbage boards, napkin rings and knives. Victor Justice Evans collected an engraved ivory needle case with attachments

almost identical to T0608 suggesting artists also carved needle cases as examples of old tools for the new curio market (Fig. 3).

My initial research interest in ivory needle case T0608 focused on analyzing the motifs within the historical and artistic canon of Bering Strait pictorial engraving. However, during community research for my dissertation in 2012, I discovered ivory needle cases of similar form to T0608 are still being made in Nome, Alaska. Jerome Saclamana from King Island learned how to carve ivory needle cases by watching his father and now creates his own version with a carved seal or shaman case, sealskin strap, stopper, ivory thimble, and modified thimble hook (Fig. 4).<sup>viii</sup> The continued practice of carving ivory needle cases speaks both to the vitality of this artistic tradition and the importance of carving as a familial and cultural identifier. As experienced by my research into needle case T0608, increased engagement with Native American art through hands-on workshops such as the Otsego Institute help facilitate an interdisciplinary approach to objects layered with narratives of culture and place.

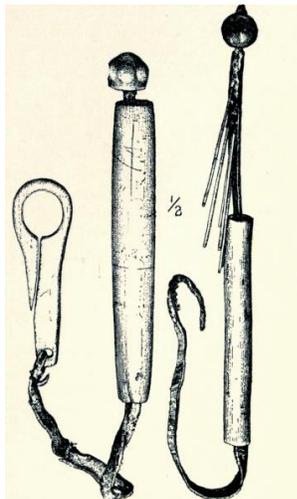


Figure. 1: Two needle cases. The needle case on the left is shown closed with a carved ivory knob and belt hook attached to a sealskin strap. The open case on the right illustrates needles inserted into a sealskin strap and a blue glass bead tied onto the end. From Murdoch (1892:321).



Figure. 2: Ivory carvers possibly from St. Lawrence Island working on the beach at Nome, Alaska. Sitting on the right is Walter Shields, superintendent of the northwest district of the Bureau of Education and reindeer supervisor in Nome. Photograph taken between 1911-18 by Dr. Daniel Neuman whose extensive collection of engraved ivories can now be found in the Alaska State Museum, Juneau. Photograph courtesy of the Alaska State Library, Dr. Daniel S. Neuman Collection, P307-0168.

<http://vilda.alaska.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/cdmg21/id/3057/rec/3>



Figure. 3: Engraved ivory needle case with a sealskin strap and ivory attachments similar to Figure 1. Collected by Victor Justice Evans in Alaska before 1931. Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History E360386.



Figure 4: “Seal shaman needle case and thimble” by Jerome Saclamana. Walrus ivory, baleen, sealskin. Photograph courtesy of Maruskiya’s of Nome.

<http://www.maruskiyas.com/store/products/seal-shaman-needle-case-and-thimble-jerome-saclamana>

<sup>i</sup> Ernest S. Burch Jr. (2006:208-12; 230) provides an instructive overview of a sewer’s scrapers, needles, bodkins and thread used to work skins and create articles of clothing in *Social Life in Northwest Alaska: The Structure of Iñupiaq Eskimo Nations*, Fairbanks, University of Alaska Press.

<sup>ii</sup> During exploration of the Bering Strait by the *HMS Blossom* in 1826-27, Lieutenant Edward Belcher made one of the first known acquisitions of an ivory needle case comprised of an incised ivory tube and a skin strap with an attached steel needle, ivory awl, single sewing hook, double hook that probably functioned as a thimble holder, and

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stone whetstone, British Museum, cat. no. Am.8213.a-f. Frederick William Beechey, Captain of the HMS *Blossom*, assembled a concise vocabulary mainly from Kotzebue Sound with Iñupiaq names for an ivory needle case recorded as “mik-kun-mik” and a sewing needle as “mik-koon.” Frederick William Beechey, 1831:376-77, Volume 2, *Narrative of a voyage to the Pacific and Beering’s Strait*, London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley. Almost 200 years later, Iñupiaq names for these sewing implements appear analogous, with a needle generally referred to as *mitqun* and an ivory needle case as *miqutikuvik* or “place for needles” in Qawiaq Iñupiaq. For Alaska Native discussion on ivory needle cases, see the transcribed conversation of Frances Charles, Anna Etageak, Art Ivanoff (Native Village of Unalakleet), Oscar Koutchak, Theresa Nanouk and Branson Tungiyon (Kawerak, Inc.) at the National Museum of Natural History and National Museum of the American Indian, 5/07/2001-5/11/2001. Available on the Smithsonian *Sharing Knowledge* website: <http://alaska.si.edu/record.asp?id=55>

<sup>iii</sup> In contrast, women from the lower Yukon and southward to the Kuskokwim appeared to favor a type of needle case made from a hollowed bird wing bone in which needles were placed loose in the case and contained by wood or ivory stoppers on each end, Edward Nelson, 1899:103, *The Eskimo About Bering Strait*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

<sup>iv</sup> Nelson (1899:PL. XLIV) illustrates a diverse assemblage of decorated needle cases with several carved to represent animal or human figures and one needle case (NMNH E24484) from Norton Sound laden with canine teeth, miniature awls, a thimble holder and various pendants. John Murdoch (1892:317-23) offers a detailed description of northern Alaska needle cases and accompanying attachments in *Ethnological Results of the Point Barrow Expedition*, Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office.

<sup>v</sup> Metal thimbles obtained in trade predominated Iñupiat women’s sewing kits by the end of the nineteenth century. However, Murdoch (1892:319) notes several older women in Point Barrow continued to use ring-shaped sealskin thimbles that consisted of two circular flaps folded over with a loop at the top for hanging onto a thimble holder.

<sup>vi</sup> Ivory carvers from Wales, Little Diomed, King Island and St. Lawrence Island often worked side by side on the beach at Nome resulting in the propitiation of an engraving style drawn from multiple artistic traditions. Elements of the Nome engraving style are delineated in my dissertation, Amy Chan, 2013, *Quliaqtuavut Tuugaatigun (Our Stories in Ivory): Reconnecting Arctic Narratives with Engraved Drill Bows*, PhD dissertation, Arizona State University.

<sup>vii</sup> For insight into the definitive role Happy Jack, an ivory carver from Little Diomed, played in developing the Nome curio trade, see Dorothy Jean Ray, 1980:3-12, *Artists of the Tundra and Sea*, Seattle, University of Washington Press.

<sup>viii</sup> Personal communication with the author, April 11, 2012. Ivory needle cases are referred to as *kanuyakuwik* in King Island Iñupiaq.