

Engraved Ivory Needle Case and Bird Bone Needles

Unknown Inupiat artist

ca. 1890

L: 8.5"; W: 1"

T0608 a-e

<http://collections.fenimoreartmuseum.org/node/5186?mode=default>

By Krista Ulujuk Zawadski

The engraved *kakpik* (needle case; plural: *kakpiit*) and *miqquitiit* (bird bone needles; singular: *miqqut*) in the Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art are from Norton Sound, Alaska in western Alaska Yupik territory. Inuit languages spoken from Alaska to Greenland, as well as northern Quebec and Labrador have different words for commonly used objects [1]. For example, in the Yup'ik language, the needle case is called *mingqusviutat* [2] or *mingqucivik* [3] while it is called *uyamiutaq* in the Inukpial language [4]. *Kakpik* is an Inuktitut word, the language spoken by Inuit in the eastern Arctic. As Inuktitut is my language, I will use the terms *kakpik* and *kakpiit* to refer to the needle case and *miqqut* or *miqquitiit* to refer to the needles.

The *kakpik* includes an ivory thimble, an ivory stopper, a hook-shaped stopper and a sealskin strap. *Kakpiit* are made to protect precious needles, such as the four *miqquitiit* inside its strap (Figure 1). *Kakpiit* could be made from a number of materials, including bone, ivory or wood, and at times sealskin or bird bones. The shape and decoration of *kakpiit* varied across the circumpolar world, but they were typically cylindrical or rectangular. Tubular *kakpiit* made from shafts of caribou leg bones were common across the Arctic and are used with leather or sealskin straps that are pulled through to hold the needles. Rectangular *kakpiit* were hollowed needle cases of ivory or wood and stuffed with moss to hold the needles. (Figure 2)

Although *kakpiit* are invaluable objects in the material culture of circumpolar peoples, the *miqqut* is also significant in the Arctic, as it enabled the creation of warm and beautiful clothing.

Miqqutiit were made from a variety of materials. While Boas points out that “very few remember the bone needle” [5], Inuit today still recollect how to make miqqutiit from bone, ivory, native copper and steel Boas also notes that “in ancient times, needles were made of bone, generally taken from the foreleg of a fox. Later they were made by cutting off a very narrow piece from a saw-blade” [6]. Effie Kakayak Otaoyoakyok recalls using native copper in the Western Canadian Arctic to make miqqutiit [8], my research indicates that bone needles were generally made from bird bones. The extraction of needles from bones requires the use of bone blank, which are bones that have been clean and prepared for use. Lines are etched along the length of the bone blank, and needles are snapped off from the bone blank along the etched lines. (Figure 3) Although ivory from walrus and narwhal was also used to make needles, in conversation with Dr. Sven Haakanson while at the Otsego Institute for Native American Art History, I learned that bird bone makes much more flexible needles than ivory. Ivory needles were generally used for heavy work, such as the sewing of sealskin covers over umiaq or qajaq frames [7]. These were often carved out of ivory, as opposed to the use of a blank.

Miqqutiit can also be made from caribou bones. Rachel Uyarasuk shares knowledge about miqqutiit: “Needles were made from the hind leg of a caribou, in particular from the calcaneus. It is said that this bone makes a good needle, as it is sharp... The awl was also made from the calcaneus of the hind leg, as they are known to be sharp, or they could have used ivory. These were used to puncture holes in skins ... and were called *ikiuqqut*” [10]. A bodkin or awl was used to pierce the eye of the needle, and “a small, flat, wooden tablet... is used for supporting a bone or an ivory needle while the eye is being pierced” [11].

In my own work at home in Nunavut, I have been learning to make bone needles. Every spring I have been fortunate to receive geese bones from family members, from which I make miqqutiit from bone blanks. I also do research based on knowledge shared with me by fellow Inuit, and from written sources such as Bennett and Rowley’s work with Inuit elders [12], I build my understanding of the technology used to create miqqutiit. Engagement with knowledge holders, as well as museum collections, is an invaluable resource in this endeavor and an important element in the process of cultural revitalization. Engaging with the kakpiit, and especially the miqqutiit, in the the Eugene and Clare Thaw Collection of American Indian Art has provided me

an opportunity to expand my own knowledge about miqquitiit, as well as motivation to continue learning about kakpiit and miqquitiit in my home community.

Figure 1: Bird Bone needles inside Leather Strap (Catalogue Number T0608 a-e, Fenimore Museum) (Photo Credit: Dr. Sven Haakanson).

Figure 2: Rectangular kakpik stuff with moss, and ivory needle (Catalogue Numbers 977.16.22a-b, Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre) (Photo Credit: Krista Ulujuk Zawadski)

Figure 3: Miqquitiit made from bird bone, Dorset culture (Catalogue Numbers 982.50.81a-g, Prince of Wales Northern Heritage Centre) (Photo Credit: Krista Ulujuk Zawadski)

Figure 4: Julia Silverman, Amanda Thompson, Krista Ulujuk Zawadski and Victoria Sunnerman examining the kapik (Catalogue Number T0608 a-e, Fenimore Museum) (Photo Credit: Dr. Sven Haakanson).

[1] Dorais, Louis Jacques. 2010. *The Language of the Inuit: Syntax, Semantics, and Society in the Arctic* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press).

[2] Fienup-Riordan, Ann. 2005. *Yup'ik Elders at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin: Fieldwork Turned on Its Head* (Seattle: University of Washington Press), 195.

[3] Fitzhugh, William, and Susan A. Kaplan. 1982. *Inua: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo*. (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution), 134–35.

[4] Fitzhugh and Kaplan, "Inuit: Spirit World of the Bering Sea Eskimo", 134.

[5] Boas, Franz. 1901. *Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay* (Bulletin of the American Museum of Natural History, Vol. XV. New York: American Museum of Natural History), 469.

[6] Ibid. p. 469

[7] Nelson, Edward William. 1900. *The Eskimo About Bering Strait* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press), 106.

[8] Bennett, John, and Susan Rowley. 2004. *Uqaluraiit: An Oral History of Nunavut* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press), 304.

- [9] Boas, "Eskimo of Baffin Land and Hudson Bay", 469
[10] Bennett and Rowley, "Uqalurait", 305
[11] Nelson, "The Eskimo About Bering Strait", 106-107.
[12] Bennett and Rowley, "Uqalurait."

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