



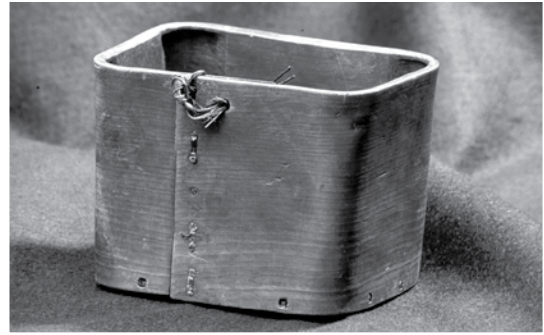
BENDING TRADITIONS

Archaeological finds from western Alaska illustrate that the art of bending wood is at least 2,000 years old. Some think that creating objects from flexible materials – leather, baleen, and bark – led Alaskans to experiment with bending wood. Whatever its origins, wood bending is practiced by all of Alaska’s Native societies. On Kodiak, the tradition is at least 800 years old. At a well-preserved village site near Karluk, archaeologists recovered hundreds of bentwood box fragments around the remains of sod houses.

BENTWOOD AND ALUTIIQ CULTURE

The variety of bentwood objects used by Alutiiq people is remarkable. In classical Alutiiq society, hunters wore elaborately decorated hats made of bentwood, paddled kayaks whose circular cockpits were fitted with a rim of bentwood, and kept themselves dry by fastening cuffs of bentwood around the sleeves of their gutskin rain shirts. Women collected berries and plant foods in bentwood buckets, cooked meals by dropping hot rocks into bentwood containers, and stored water and urine for household tasks in vats made of bentwood. And at winter festivals, revelers beat skin drums, shook puffin beak rattles, and wore spiritually powerful masks all made with hoops of bentwood. Bentwood objects were common in Alutiiq communities.

This widespread use of bentwood objects illustrates both the importance of bending as a manufacturing technique and the skill of craftsmen. Bending wood is not very difficult, but it takes time. A carver must pick his material carefully, work it with precision and patience, and know how the wood bends. If you rush, the piece may break. But when a thin piece of wood is successfully bent, beautiful objects can be made. From a single plank, artists create strong, useful, and exceptionally beautiful objects.



Bentwood box, AD 1400-1750, Koniag, Inc. Collection, Karluk One Site, photo courtesy Chris Arend, Alutiiq Museum library.

THE PROCESS

To create bentwood objects, carvers worked with planks of wood, using stone adzes to shape the plank and hand held carving tools to thin it. For oval forms, they thinned the inner edge of the plank in areas they intended to curve. For square forms they cut kerfs – small notches in planned corners to allow the wood to bend and compress.

Like all plant fibers wood is elastic. It can be manipulated with pressure, heat, and moisture to change its shape. How did Alutiiqs bend wood hundreds of years ago? They may have used steam, or they may have soaked a shaped piece of wood in a slow running stream for several months to make it pliable.

Working with heat or moisture, an artist bent the rim of a container into shape. Artists may have tied a cord around the rim to help it hold its shape while drying. When the bent rim was dry, the next step was to fasten its ends together. Craftsmen did this by drilling small holes through the rim and lacing them together with spruce root, baleen, or sinew, or using small wooden pegs. The final step was to add a base by pegging and gluing a flat piece of wood to the rim. The result was a strong, watertight container.