

AN AMERICAN EXPEDITION TO NORTHERN BURMA

IN JANUARY 1935, the Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition set out from Rangoon to explore the upper reaches of the 'mighty Chindwin River' on behalf of the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH). The three-month expedition gathered the museum's founding biological and anthropological collections from an under researched area to the east of Burma's border with Assam and to the south of Tibet. *Confluences: An American Expedition to Northern Burma, 1935*, explores the complex social life of this extraordinary enterprise through an assortment of objects that were both carried to the field and collected en route.

Expeditions have long been the subject of natural history and anthropology exhibitions. Most have emphasised the biographies and activities of organisers, sponsors, and field scientists, but *Confluences* is unusual because it focuses on the working methods of the expedition rather than on the biographies of the explorers. At the heart of *Confluences* is the idea that expeditions were cosmopolitan adventures that relied on the adroitness and cooperation of numerous local indigenous agents, as well as professionals, in order to make scientific discoveries.

The expedition was financed by Arthur S. Vernay, an established New York City-based dealer in English antiques, an intrepid field associate in the American Museum of Natural History's Department of Mammalogy, and a museum trustee. He assembled a diverse party of natural scientists and *shikari* (big-game hunters). Henry C. Raven, a comparative anatomist at the museum, joined as the lead scientist, principal filmmaker, and photographer. The caravan was a confluence of Yunnanese muleteers, Burmese guides, and Goan skimmers, who, along with British party members, were assembled from throughout the Raj. The exploratory journey brought the caravan in touch with various residents of northern Burma – Burmese, Kachin, Shan, and



Naga Basketry Helmet (Hat) with Crest of Hair from Upper Chindwin, Burma. Collected by the Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition in 1935. American Museum of Natural History

Naga peoples, who provisioned the enterprise and procured specimens for the museum.

The Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition made news not primarily for its collections and its scientific findings, but for what newspapers sensationalised as the most significant episode of the journey: the first contact with the 'head-hunting' Nagas of Burma. At the time, such exoticising accounts of contact were an important justification for expeditions, attracting nation-wide publicity and the support of museum patrons.

Structured as an itinerary, the exhibition reveals working relations among participants of every kind, whose encounters shaped the collections that were to enter the museum. It comprises a compelling selection of the expedition's ethnological objects and specimens, documentation, photographs, and film footage, drawn together from across various departments of the AMNH and exhibited for the first time.

The exhibition includes alternative, contemporary readings of the three-day sojourn among the Nagas as it was depicted in photographs and on film. A 'sound collage' by Dr. Sentienla Toy Threadgill, a New York-based Ao Naga

ethno-musicologist, made up of interviews and music, accompanies a brief segment of the silent 110-minute expedition film, *The Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition to Northern Burma, 1935*.

Dr. Threadgill's piece brings the expedition to the present, moving the film beyond its archival life to address some of the sonic sensibilities and cultural interactions of the Burma-India borderland. Overall, *Confluences* sets in motion a dialogue about the fieldwork of the various participants who were active in producing a natural history of northern Burma, and, by extension, the world.

From 4 April to 4 August at the Bard Graduate Center, 18 West 86th Street, New York, www.bgc.bard.edu.

Catalogue: *Confluences: An American Expedition to Northern Burma, 1935* by Erin L. Hasinoff, published with Yale University Press, available at the BGC Gallery, or from their website, or www.yalepress.yale.edu.

Related Programmes:
Family Day: A Journey Through Burma on 4 May; A Botanical Treasury: Plant Fibers, Forest Resources, and the Culture of Tea in Northern Burma, on 23 May 6-8pm; Burmese Dinner and Lecture on 6 June.



A Goan skinner and Charles S. McCann preparing bird skins. 'Lonkin to Hpakan, Jan. 1935'. Photograph by H. C. Raven. American Museum of Natural History Library.

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A fine gilt bronze figure of Tara. Tibet, 14th/15th century. H 30 cm.

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