

Confluences:
An American Expedition
to Northern Burma, 1935
On View April 4–August 3, 2013



Naga basketry helmet
with crest of hair
from Upper Chindwin,
Burma. Collected by
the Vernay-Hopwood
Chindwin Expedition
in 1935. American
Museum of Natural
History 70.0/6374.

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On view

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This remarkable exhibition features an assortment of rarely viewed objects carried on the expedition and collected in the field, including clothing, saddles, weapons, photographs, and film footage.

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*, on view at the Bard Graduate Center Focus Gallery from April 4 to August 3, 2013, explores the complex social life of this extraordinary enterprise through an assortment of objects that were both carried into the field and collected en route. Erin L. Hasinoff, BGC–AMNH post-doctoral fellow in museum anthropology, organized the exhibition in collaboration with BGC graduate students.



Expedition party and mule train. “Mandalay to Lonkin, Jan. 1935.” Photograph by H. C. Raven. Image VHC-D25, American Museum of Natural History Library.



Naga man's belt with attached wooden sheath (catalogued as “Chin”), from Hahti, Upper Chindwin, Burma. Collected by the Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition in 1935. American Museum of Natural History 70.0/6359.

Background

Expeditions have long been the subject of natural history and anthropology exhibitions. Although most have emphasized the biographies and activities of organizers, sponsors, and field scientists, *Confluences* focuses on the working methods of the expedition. At its heart 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 Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin expedition was financed by Arthur S. Vernay, an established New York City–based dealer in English antiques, an intrepid field associate in the AMNH’s Department of Mammalogy, and a museum trustee. Vernay 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, Goan skimmers, and British party members assembled from throughout the Raj, including Major Stephen F. Hopwood, chief conservator of forests for the Indian government. The exploratory journey brought the caravan in touch with various residents of northern Burma—Burmese, Kachin, Shan, and Naga peoples—who provisioned the enterprise and procured specimens for the museum.

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

The Exhibition

Structured as an itinerary, *Confluences* reveals working relations among participants of every kind, whose encounters shaped the collections that were to enter the museum. The exhibition includes a fascinating selection of the objects the expedition carried and collected, including basketry hats, a pack saddle, sandals, indigenous clothing, a pellet bow, spear, crossbow, and knives. These, along with documentation, photographs, and film footage drawn from various departments of the AMNH, are displayed here for the first time. The exhibition includes present-day interpretations of the expedition’s three-day sojourn among the Nagas



Goan Skinner and Charles S. McCann preparing bird skins. “Lonkin to Hpakan, Jan. 1935.” Photograph by H. C. Raven. Image VHC-E2, American Museum of Natural History Library.

Naga basketry helmet from Upper Chindwin, Burma. Collected by the Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition in 1935. American Museum of Natural History 70.0/6375.



as it was depicted in photographs and on film. A “sound collage” by Dr. Sentienla Toy Threadgill, a New York-based Ao Naga ethnomusicologist, 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.

Publication

Confluences: An American Expedition to Northern Burma, 1935 is accompanied by a fully illustrated book by Erin L. Hasinoff. The first section, using primary sources from the AMNH and elsewhere, provides a sketch of the Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition in which the author discusses its planning and the activities of the participants in relation to AMNH expeditionary history and to the natural history of northern Burma. The second section highlights student contributions and the teaching potential of archived expedition materials and collections. Published with Yale University Press (March 2013, paperback, 100 color and black-and-white illustrations, 128 pages), the catalogue will be available at the BGC Gallery and through the Web site (bgc.bard.edu).



Focus Gallery

The Focus Gallery presents small-scale exhibitions, primarily curated by faculty, that embody ambitious research and teaching. Each exhibition is part of an academically innovative project that also includes graduate seminars, public programming, and publications both in print and on line. Graduate students and gallery staff collaborate with faculty throughout the research, planning, and presentation stages. Envisaged as a kind of laboratory, the Focus Gallery projects promote experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media, and reflect the BGC's commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

Gallery Programs

Lectures, study days, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition. *For more information, please call 212-501-3011 or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.*

Exhibition Tours

Guided tours for adult and school groups are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and on Thursdays from 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all group visits. *To schedule a tour, please e-mail tours@bgc.bard.edu or call 212.501.3013.*

Spear catalogued as "Naga 'Chin,'" from Upper Chindwin, Burma. Collected by the Vernay-Hopwood Chindwin Expedition in 1935. American Museum of Natural History 70.2/2207.



From left to right stand: Major Guy Rowley, Arthur S. Vernay, and Colonel Randolph C. Morris. "Singkaling Hkamti to Hahti, Mar. 1935." Photograph by H. C. Raven. Image VHC-M16, American Museum of Natural History Library.

The Bard Graduate Center Gallery is located in New York City at 18 West 86th Street, between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Thursday from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. The admission fee is \$7 general, \$5 senior and students (valid ID); admission is free Thursday evenings after 5 p.m. *For information about the Bard Graduate Center and upcoming exhibitions, please visit bgc.bard.edu.*

For press information and images, please e-mail press@bgc.bard.edu or call 212-501-3074.

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