Curatorial Assessment: Sidney and Sharon Mishkin Collection Lot 1

Holly Bean, October 2017

This collection holds a diverse variety of objects from South China and neighboring countries. The objects range from hats, incense burners, to water puppets and inkwells. All of the objects were collected by Sidney and Sharon Mishkin during their 2004, 2009, 2011, and 2012 trips.

China: These objects were collected during the Mishkins’ two most recent visits to China in 2011 and 2012. They mostly came from the Yunnan, Guizhou, Yangshuo, Hong Kong, Zhaoxing, and other undocumented southeastern locales in China. The majority of the items collected were various hats, especially children hats, from the Naxi, Miao, Dong, and Gejia people. Other objects collected were incense burners, a Feng Shui compass, jade statues, porcelain bowls, a cricket carrier, and a sickle carrier. These objects represent the Mishkins’ interest in both the symbolic and the everyday aspects of life in these various areas. These objects offer an expansion in the museum’s current collections from southwest China.

Vietnam: These items were collected in 2009 on the Mishkins’ trip to Vietnam. Prior to receiving these items, Vietnamese objects in the collection consist of forty-five items, the majority of which are either armaments or musical instruments. The addition of the Mishkin Vietnamese objects adds miniature models of traditional water puppets. Sidney Mishkin’s journal entries give information on their prices and general information. Other items are two hats, a headscarf, and an incense burner.

Laos: The object collected from Laos would be an excellent addition to the collections, as the country is underrepresented at the Mathers Museum. Currently there are only nine objects from Laos, all of which are musical instruments. The Mishkin headdress from Laos is from the ethnic minority group the Black Hmong.

Burma/Myanmar: The items collected from Burma/Myanmar consist of a variety of items. There is a decorated mask, a lacquer bowl, an incense burner, two tattoo styli, a tattoo catalogue, an inkwell, a ceramic pipe, a betel nut cutter, a bracelet, a belt, a purse, headdresses, and more. The practice of tattooing is very important in Burma/Myanmar, especially with the Shan people who traveled to villages to give tattoos. Many of the other items were collected from the ethnic minority of the Akha. The Akha people tend to live in remote villages and abide by the “Akha Way,” the strict system of beliefs, transmitted orally. They have a very rich culture and these objects represent a great addition to the collections since there are no other pre-existing objects from these people.

Nepal & Cambodia: The Nepalese collections already present at the Mathers is relatively large at 290 pieces. These pieces are mostly musical instruments, bracelets, or lamps. The addition of the one headdress from Nepal would be beneficial for comparative study of Southeastern Asian headdresses. The Cambodian object, a bronze pipe, would also be an excellent addition because there are only a few Cambodian objects in the Mathers Museum, religious and instrumental.

Research Potential: The Mishkin collection is a valuable addition for the Mathers Museum because of its diverse research potential. There are a number of similar types of objects that are from multiple countries—incense burners, children hats, and headdresses—allowing for comparative study. The cultural richness and political country boundaries mean that are items from ethnic minorities separated by international boundaries, as well as from radically different culture groups that live in close proximity.
There are objects from underrepresented countries, such as Cambodia, Vietnam, Burma, and Laos which would help enhance the Mathers’ collections and diversity of strong collections. Another added benefit is the amount of documentation that is available. During their travels, Sidney Mishkin made journals and detailed notes on where, when, and how he collected many of the objects. Sidney’s writings and his recollections show that in this context, even replica items are distinguished as purposeful acquisitions.

Burmese tattoo catalog (2017-xx-0023) [photo v02]
Buddhist incense burner from China (2017-xx-0029) [photo v01]

Headscarf, Flower Hmong people, Vietnam (2017-xx-0004) [photo v03]
Miao child’s hat from China (2017-xx-0008) [photo v01]

Model water puppet from Vietnam (2017-xx-0036) [photo v01]