

GERTRUDE BENHAM

World Cultures collection

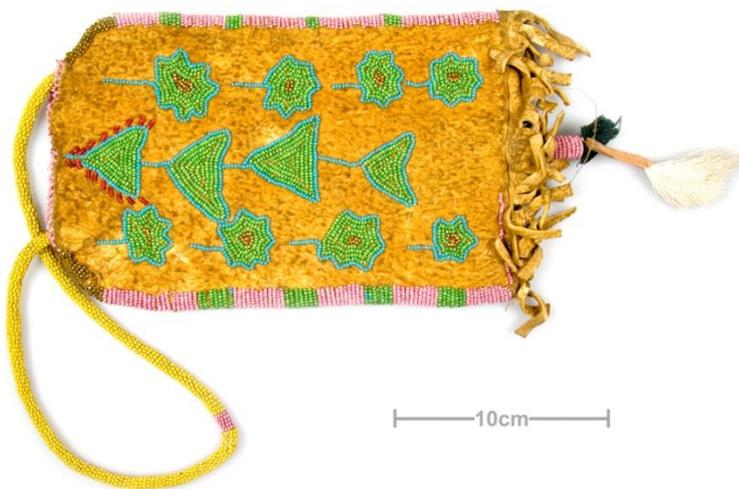
In 1935 Gertrude 'Truda' Benham (1867-1938) arranged to donate over 800 objects to the museum. These were objects she had collected over a period of 30 years in which she travelled the world. A few short years later Benham died aboard a ship on her way to retirement in Devon, after her eighth journey around the globe. Benham was originally from London so it may seem surprising that she chose to donate her collection to the museum in Plymouth. However, her reasoning is clearly outlined in an interview she gave to Marjorie Hessel Tiltman in 1934: 'Some years ago I landed at Plymouth and visited the museum, which I thought most beautifully arranged. So I asked the authorities if they would like my collection and they said that they would be glad to have it.'

Benham was a remarkable woman. Her achievements as a climber are noteworthy in their own right, but she was also probably the most widely travelled person of the early 20th century. Her collection exists as evidence of her story, but imagine if she had had the chance to write down some of the stories behind them as she had planned.

We will probably never know exactly what motivated Gertrude Benham, but it seems that it was her interest in natural history and mountaineering that led her to explore and her interest in people and handicrafts that led her to collect.

Canada

Gertrude's first adventure outside of Europe was to Canada in 1904. Her interest in mountain climbing had been inspired by holidays to the Swiss Alps with her father. Her trip was extremely successful and she ascended several challenging peaks. During one expedition she unwittingly beat an American to the top of a mountain which had already been named in his honour. Not long later Benham herself was honoured in a similar way, when three peaks in the Selkirk Range were called the Truda Peaks in recognition of her achievement of being the first woman to climb Mount Rogers (3241m) and Swiss Peak (3208m).



Leather bag with bead decoration. Canada.



Bark box decorated with porcupine quills. Canada.

Trek across Africa

In 1912-13 Benham undertook an epic journey across the African continent from Kano in Northern Nigeria to Chinde, Mozambique. Most of the journey (more than 3000 miles based on the route she followed) was on foot. She was accompanied by a cook and a team of porters to carry her 7 luggage containers. She only resorted to travelling by boat or steamer when absolutely necessary and just the last few miles of her trip were by train.

At the beginning of the 20th century this trip was no mean feat and it was particularly unusual as Benham was a woman. She wore a home-made Khaki skirt and a pith helmet and carried no weapons. She described herself as being 'armed only with an umbrella', but came to no harm, although one night four lions did investigate her tent!



Leather bag made by the Hausa people, Nigeria.



Basketry food cover. Sudan

The Himalaya

During World War I Benham was unable to travel outside of the UK. But as soon as the War was over she travelled to Northern India, the Himalaya, which had become her favourite place. By October 1919 she had completed a trek that she refers to as the 'Hindu Pilgrimage Route'; a demanding journey through the Himalayan mountains from Naini Tal, near the Nepalese border, to Leh, the major city in Ladakh.



Boots worn by Benham on her 'tramps to Leh' and embroidered handkerchief used as a covering for a gift. India.



Tibet

Benham was particularly keen to visit Tibet, so from October 1923 she spent many months applying for the necessary permissions to cross the border. However, she was determined to enter via a forbidden route so her frequent requests were repeatedly denied. Benham was so persistent that her correspondence had its own file in the offices of the Anglo-Indian Administration. In 1925 she relented and decided to visit Tibet via the permitted route, but certainly made no friends while she was there. Major Bailey, the political officer who oversaw entry and exit over the border, wrote: 'She has made a thorough nuisance of herself the whole time she has been in Tibet, complaining of the behaviour of Tibetans and everyone else towards her and of conditions in Tibet generally.' When Benham returned to the Himalaya in 1931, it seems that she tried again to enter Tibet illegally. She made camp close to the border, but well away from the prying eyes of government officials. She expressed an intention to travel across to Tibet, but we will never know whether or not she actually succeeded in her mission.



Tangka depicting the wheel of life central to Tibetan Buddhist belief, Tibet.



Woman's amulet box or ga'u, to keep Buddhist relic or prayer. Tibet.