



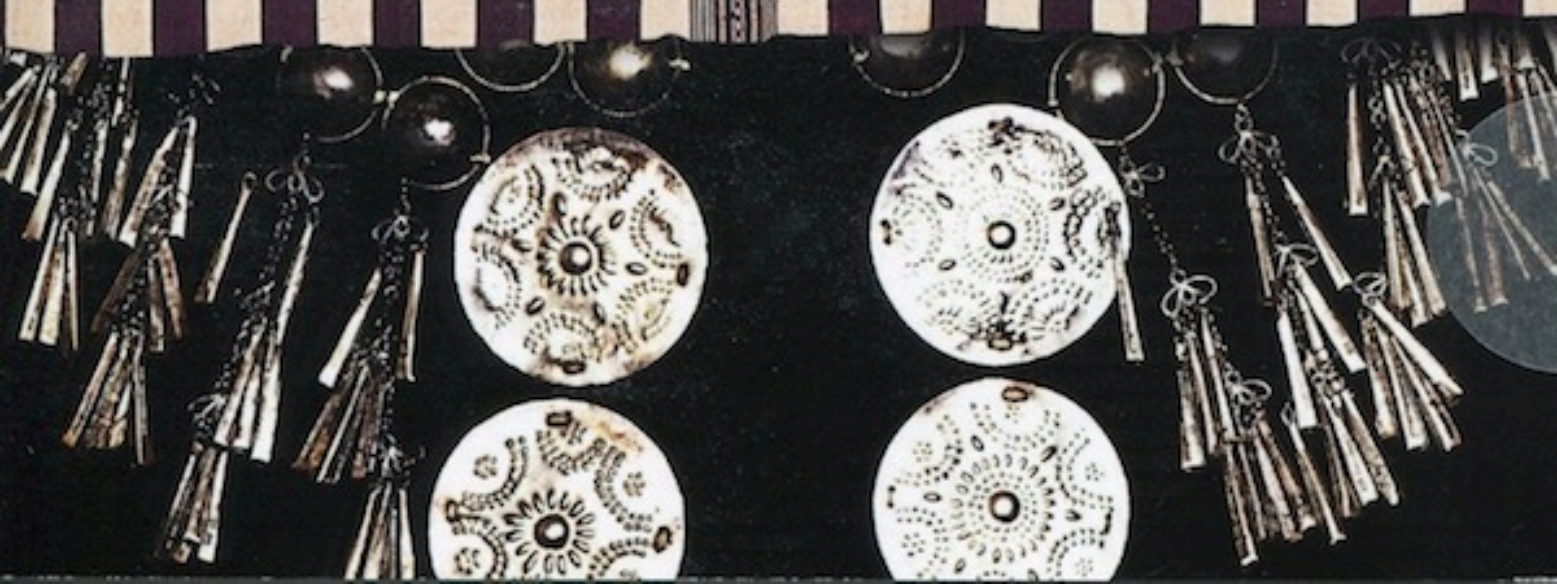


# DRESSING DIFFERENCE:

## EXPLORING ETHNICITIES IN MODERN BURMA



Questioning concepts of ethnicity and gender through  
costume and body adornment from the Burma Art Collections  
at Denison University and Northern Illinois University





This exhibition questions the practice of categorizing ethnicities as an artificial construct viewed by outsiders. It also questions the display of "desirable" artifacts arranged in pseudo-scientific order.

The focus is on one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world. Objects arrayed around the gallery conform to an imaginary map of Myanmar/Burma. Groups along the walls inhabit the uplands encircling Burma's Central Plain. The variety of hat styles displayed in the center of the gallery evokes the convergence and impact of intersecting trade routes.

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With diverse migratory origins and speaking a multiplicity of languages from three major linguistic families of Asia (Tibeto-Burman, Mon-Khmer, Tai-Kadai), ethnic groups are often distinctive in their choice of clothing and accessories. This exhibition features seven selected ethnic groups: the Chin, Naga, Kachin, Lahu, Shan, Wa, Karen, and also the Bamar. Visitors are invited to explore these groups and examine such notions through the multi-faceted lens of costume, headcovering, jewelry, weaponry, and the art of smoking.

## Costume

The choice of colors, the arrangement of patterns and the complexity of fabrication techniques transform clothing and accessories into carriers of powerful messages. They signal identity and gender within the group while mediating a person's or a community's relationship with non-members as well as the cosmos.

## Headcovering

Headcoverings are an essential item for conducting one's self in the public arena from birth to death. The heads of newborn babies are covered to protect them from malevolent forces. Coinciding with puberty, headcoverings affirm a teenager's transition from childhood to adulthood. In later adulthood they serve as symbol of social status for mature males and as indicator of marital status for women.

## Jewelry

Crafted in precious silver, jewelry is emblematic of the feminine world. Simple or intricate in form as well as technique, the motifs and patterns provide protective power and indicate a wearer's age, social standing, and prestige.

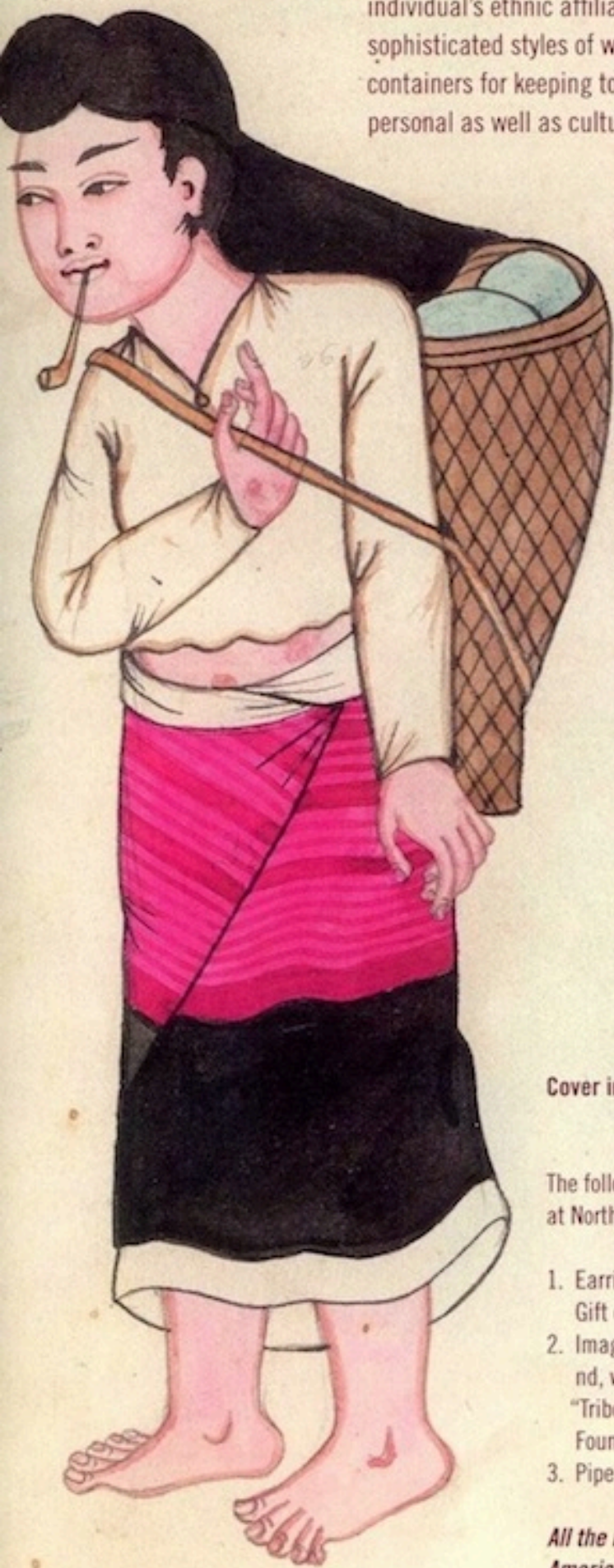
## Weaponry

Both utilitarian and ceremonial, weaponry is a quintessential expression of masculinity and associated rites of passage. Weapons represent not only military prowess and social status, but also moral achievement.



## Smoking as an art form

Smoking is an important vehicle for social exchange for both men and women. The accessories are often indicative of an individual's ethnic affiliation. The range of materials and sophisticated styles of workmanship that adorn pipes and containers for keeping tobacco, betel, and opium reveal personal as well as cultural aesthetics.



**Cover image** textiles from the Burma Art Collection at Denison Museum

The following pieces are from the Burma Art Collection at Northern Illinois University:

1. Earring, silver, h. 2 ¼ in., w. 5/8 in.  
Gift of Richard M. Cooler, BC2000.3.04
2. Image of Shan couple (from Wan Hsaw, Wan Hpai), anonymous, nd, watercolor on paper, from an ethnographic album, "Tribes of Burma", circa 1900, h. 11 in. x w. 13 in., 2005 Purchase, Founders Memorial Library at NIU
3. Pipe, clay, h. 5 in., w. 3 in., Gift of Paul J. Bennett, BC90.4.207

*All the materials presented in this exhibition were collected by American travelers, missionaries, diplomats or scholars who lived in these regions throughout the previous century.*