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Furnishing Foreign Relations: Benjamin Joy's Sea Chest

Rakashi Chand 00:04

[Music fades in] So the chest itself is a beautiful piece of furniture, when you look at it, when it's all the drawers are closed, it's this perfect little box. And then it's like magic to open up the different compartments and drawers. And it just continues to open and open and open and reveal other features. And it's just such a piece of furniture ingenuity, it's really a marvel to admire. And it's just glorious to see it with all of its different features and all the different things that can do. Sort of like you could say it's kind of like a transformer.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:40

[Intro music begins] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 00:53

This is Cassie Cloutier and this is The Object of History, the podcast of the Massachusetts Historical Society. Since 1791, the MHS has sought to collect, preserve, and communicate the building blocks of history. Each episode examines an object, document or set of items from the society's millions of manuscript pieces and artifacts. We take you on a behind the scenes tour of our stacks to explore the incredible stories held within our collections.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 01:30

In this episode, we learn more about an unassuming, but truly marvelous piece of furniture that once accompanied, the United States' first consul to India across the oceans. As you heard in the opening of this episode, the so-called Sea Chest transforms into something quite extraordinary. Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley and MHS reading room supervisor Rakashi Chand, help us learn more about the sea chest while Chief Historian and Stephen T. Riley Librarian Peter Drummey, tells us more about Benjamin Joy, a merchant who became the United States' first consul to India. Before we reveal the unique and stunning qualities of Benjamin Joy's sea chest, let us ask MHS Curator of Art and Artifacts Anne Bentley to describe the object to us.

Anne Bentley 02:26

Well, we have what at first looks like a very unassuming chest of drawers with five levels of drawers. And it's just a mahogany box sitting on a base that has these funny little rustic cabriole feet. And it's got scalloped apron on the front on both sides and some beautiful brass handles with escutcheons on each side for lifting this piece of furniture and carrying it. So, you know at first glance it's just a poorly finished chest of drawers with these big rustic round wooden knobs. And you think, 'Oh well okay, that's a decent chest drawer.'

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:19

Well, for our listeners, what are the dimensions of this object?

Anne Bentley 03:25

This is a pretty compact it's 40 and a half inches high, 34 inches wide and 26 inches deep. So, as I say an unassuming little bureau like you might find in any old house that doesn't trade in fancy goods. But you lift up the lid, the top of that, and it just blows your mind because all of a sudden, you're looking at a fabulous dressing case with a mirror, a large mirror. It's about 24 inches high. And I would say 14 inches wide, which is a large mirror. It's not original because the piece was built around 1795. So, this is a new mirror that's in there. But it's on a frame that ratchets up so you can lift this mirror up and it serves as a toilet case for you. Because if we go to the side and we look inside, we can see that on each side of the mirror are these wonderful tortoise shell wood covers, flight covers, on compartments of different sizes, and except for the two front knobs which are replacements, all of the rest of the little lids have their original turned ivory knobs. There are open areas where we have on each side glass bottles and with lids that are very, very close to fitting for liquids, whether they be colognes or, or whatever you might need for your toilet. On one side, you've got an area where you can put your rings. And then there's a compartment also that has space for scissors and combs and small, small pin knives and things repairing your fingernails. And the larger components, or the large compartments, I should say, are lined with tin to be waterproof. So go round to the other side. And it's quite similar. On this side is sort of the housekeeping part

because there's a pin cushion for pins and needles. And this would be where you have some of your sewing things to maintain your garments. But again, there are ring stands and glass containers. So, this is the top part of this. On the front of the case is a false drawer that takes the place of an actual drawer because that's how deep this container is on the top of the toilet. Below that we pull out a narrow drawer and we reveal a portable desk. When we pull it all the way out, it's got a felt top and inkwells in compartments that hold them very tightly so they don't rattle around. They're just stick in there and they don't move. And you also can lift up the desk part is hinged at the front. So, when you pull the door all the way out, you can lift it up like you do the mirror and slant the desk for writing for easier writing. And there's a pen stand on the left-hand side. And of course, underneath the desk that you lift up is where you would store all of your paper. Now we didn't store envelopes in those days because we didn't use envelopes. We folded up the letters and sealed them as they were. Below that in the next series of drawers, there are on each side there are two small drawers so that they take care of the two next layers of drawers. But in the center, we have one very, very deep drawer that contains a Wedgwood China washbowl. And it has two little bowls for shaving mugs for frothing your soap and everything. So, you have we've now gone through a toilet case, we've gone through an office desk, and we now have our bathroom so to speak, beginning with the wash basin. And below that the final layer of deep drawers has on one side, a chamber pot, which of course the actual chamber pot is missing because after all these years it was useful. And it probably got broken, but the lid for the chamber pot is still there. And you would pull these drawers out, and legs would drop down to use them in place because the drawer to the right has a white China bidet set into it. So of course, this is called Benjamin Joy's sea chest because Benjamin Joy, our first consul to India under George Washington purchased this in 1795.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 03:29

I can attest to the fact that it is quite heavy.

Anne Bentley 08:14

Yes. We do not use the handles on this because solid mahogany is a very, very heavy wood. This thing is not going to move anywhere on a pitching ship. It's a ship has to be really in dire straits for

this thing to slide anywhere. And for us to try lifting it by the handles the way it would have been in its heyday, we could very easily snap some of the original screws and damage everything. As I say it's not a sophisticated piece of furniture in terms of looks in terms of activities and what it can do, it's very sophisticated. But in terms of appearance, it is very much a colonial construct, trying to copy what may have been very elegant, European bespoke cabinets purchased by Dutch East Indies and British East Indies, very, very wealthy merchants. So, this is a local production. And this really quite charming when you look at it, it's and as I say it's very unassuming when it's all closed up. It's like Clark Kent, and then it turns into Superman.

Cassie Cloutier 09:55

But who was Benjamin Joy, the owner of this piece of furniture and one of the United States' first ambassadors? For a brief history of Joy and his family, we turned to Peter Drummey.

Peter Drummey 10:13

Benjamin Joy was a merchant had a long, interesting life, born here in Boston or in Newburyport, his family's from Newburyport, but may have been living in Boston. His father, John Joy, is a merchant and builder here in Boston. This is when this distinction between builders, constructors of houses and buildings, and what we later describe as architects, Joy was a son in a large family of many children. And the really important event in his life was that at the beginning of the Revolution born about 1757, or in 1757, depending on sources. His family left with the British at the evacuation of Boston in 1776. So, he spent his early adult years first in Halifax and later in England in London. So, he has a life apart from what's going on. He's an American born here, but lives through his young adulthood in England. And then he and one of his brothers, brother named John, named for their father, John Joy, come back to America after the end of the Revolution. And this is an interesting aspect about early America that many people who had left who are either from loyalists families as Benjamin Joy was, or people who had actively participated fighting against the Revolutionaries, were able to return after the peace in 1783. And either before he returned to America, or thereafter, Benjamin Joy was involved in the overseas trade. He's reputed to have made more than one voyage to India before in 1792. He is appointed the first consul of the United States,

this is the administration of Washington, to what we now say is Kolkata, Calcutta, the first diplomatic representative of the United States in what has become India, India, still separate states at that time.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:45

How does one become consul to a foreign nation? Does one need political connections?

Peter Drummey 12:51

Yes. There's a need for probably, political connections. It's also this is the new United States making things up as it goes along. That is Joy, Benjamin Joy is the first consul in Kolkata, Calcutta, but he's also one of the first diplomats appointed by the United States. That is, George Washington, nominates him in November of 1792 and his appointment is consented to by the Senate. But if you made a chronological list of American diplomatic appointments, he would be very, not just this important first appointment of consul in India, but also one of the first appointments of any diplomat from the United States to a foreign country. So, they're just getting started. But Joy needs two things. He needs both, essentially a letter of recommendation, and I think his signed by eight or nine substantial merchants who are familiar with this trade, essentially saying, this is the kind of person we need in this position. And I think that the government is perfectly happy to accede. This is sort of specific knowledge of both the person and the responsibilities will come for people who are not necessarily familiar with what that would look like. It's also the case he needs to be bonded. That is, he'll be involved in financial matters. So, the people who stand bond for him include Christopher Gore, who's later a substantial figure in Massachusetts business and politics, who's later the second president of the Massachusetts Historical Society. So, Benjamin Joy has both kind of connections with us at a remove.

Cassie Cloutier 14:50

Despite Joy's credentials, he did not exactly find a welcoming audience in India. MHS reading room supervisor, Rakashi Chand joins Peter and Anne in picking up the story.

Rakashi Chand 15:03

And when he arrived in India after this voyage, the British East India Company, of course, scoffed. No, no, no. But they said you can stay as an agent, not as the official formal consul.

Peter Drummey 15:21

He's the first person appointed consul, but his position is never recognized. And he perhaps develops a diplomatic illness. He resigns from his position because of ill health. But his positions never been recognized. So, he's essentially in limbo and India.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:43

Explain again, why they would not want to recognize the United States consul.

Peter Drummey 15:48

Well, they is not necessarily the British government. But it's important to remember that the East India Company, a private business enterprise, is essentially acting as a government. It has its essentially, its own apparatus of government, its own military forces, its own naval forces. It's essentially its own foreign policy, you could argue it's centrally important to the both the British Empire and the government of Great Britain. So, its influence is enormous. So, it is essentially going outside of what would be my treaty or law appropriate to influence policy. I think there's a concern that official recognition of a business that's underway, will rob the East India Company of influence. It's also I think there is a concern that the new United States neutral in the French Revolutionary Wars, that becomes long, Napoleonic Wars has an unusual status. It's a neutral country, but it's a neutral country that could end up opposing the interests of Great Britain and in fact, ends up as an opponent in a war fought, you know, 20 years later, but essentially, the concerns about having this foreign agency within England in some respects, they're correct about that. They haven't recognized anybody by the time of the War of 1812. That haven't recognized any diplomats from the United States. But the status of the United States of course, changes from neutral trial ports merchants to being active opponents in the War of 1812.

Cassie Cloutier 17:56

Joy appears to have used his time as the unofficial consul to also plan for his voyage home.

Anne Bentley 18:01

He resigned his commission because it was probably very frustrating for him not to have any official standing and returned home that voyage on the way out to India. We don't know how long it took him. But we know that on the way back it took 216 days, so I'm sure that the trip out was pretty difficult. So, when he was in Kolkata, I am imagining that he saw some sort of a chest like this in the homes of some of the diplomats he encountered because this was not an American thing. As far as I know, the only other chest like this not as complete, but like this is at the Adams National Historical Park used by the Adams Family, which would make sense because they were back and forth. And so, I suspect it's, this is copied in India, it is Indian mahogany, and they would have obviously with East India Company, they would have had access to the Wedgewood fittings that they put into this chest. I'm assuming that he commissioned this for the for the way back because it's a state room in a box essentially. We call it Benjamin Joy sea chest but that's a little misleading because sea chests are typically chests, just one open box with a hinged lid reinforced for carrying but this is where sailors and seamen kept their possessions in on board a very crowded ship because your room if you were a paying passenger would be pretty sparse. It would be a cubicle with the door. If you're lucky and you would have some sort of bedding, whether a hammock or whether a shelf on which is some type of mattress. And it was up to you to provide your luxuries and your essentials for the trip. So, if he did not have this on the way out, you can be sure, he made sure to have it on the way back because it's everything that you could possibly need for a voyage. And of course, the water they're using to bathe in is saltwater. So, 216 days of saltwater, I can imagine that is pretty itchy on the way home. But it is a handsome little piece. And just as I say totally unassuming until you start opening it up. And here we have it on display, it was sort of opened up bit by bit. It's like a transformer piece of furniture. You know, when you were a kid you had transformer cars, it turned into monsters. Well, this is a transformer chest of drawers.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:02

So, we've talked to two other people about Benjamin Joy's sea chest. Would you like to say anything about this remarkable piece of furniture.

Peter Drummey 21:12

We tell the story that this is something that was built for him during his attempts at securing a diplomatic position in India but built for him. And then he used that in his voyage back to America. And I think that's right. But his contacts with India are such that it seems to me at least possible that this chest made more than one sea voyage from India back here, but in fact represented something he may have purchased or had made previously to that. So may have made a voyage from India to England to America, back to India back to the United States. I mean, at that, it seems to me, furniture experts could probably say if that's what we're talking about a brief period of years, it seems to me interesting that this dirty chest could have been around much more of the world, even than we know that it did or understand and have done.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:17

India is so far away. What is the route that one takes?

Peter Drummey 22:23

The route from the United States is the traditional route that is in the sense of being not from Europe, around Africa and across the Indian Ocean, but from North America. And down through the South Atlantic, often by way of Brazil. Well, there's two paths essentially, sometimes ships go by way of the coast of Africa, and then around the south of Africa and into the Indian Ocean. And also, sometimes to the furthest east part of Brazil as a stop before the long voyage across the South Atlantic.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:02

Would the route back have been the same?

Peter Drummey 23:05

Most likely. This gets a little bit complicated because there are almost always voyages where there are stops along the way. And some of these are stops out of the way. I believe that Joy came back to America by way of at least the Azores or Portugal. I believe there is it may have been on this voyage that he's carrying a large barrel of wine for perhaps Washington or someone else that he's taken charge of a cargo as sort of essentially a personal responsibility in favor for someone. And that implies that there's a stop and the wine growing part of Southern Europe or the islands off of it on the way back to America.

Cassie Cloutier 23:53

We asked Rakashi Chand about Joy's written record. Did he record his impressions of the journeys he took on behalf of the United States? If not, what did he write about? And what became of him after he returned to Boston?

Rakashi Chand 24:08

So, we don't have a lot about the journey itself. We do have a few letters that he exchanges with people regarding why he decided not to continue in India and who would be the appropriate person to replace him, or actually, a person who had been chosen would not be the appropriate person. He also in letters that we don't have where he's corresponding with the Secretary of State at the time, Thomas Jefferson. He talks about the fact that there is more money needed for seamen in India because they are finding there's more sickness and they need to somehow secure the sailors who have arrived in India and to ensure that they can get to the hospital. And you know, let's Thomas Jefferson know that there is a very good hospital in Calcutta at the time, but we don't have a lot about him talking about the journey itself. Although you could sort of imagine what it would have been like, probably similar to many of the other journeys that he had made. This is somebody who is not unfamiliar with making international voyages onboard a ship. So, this is this is a seasoned virgin. And he did have his hand and lots of different activities that were happening around. He also goes on to be very important in Boston's history as well. We still have Joy Street in Boston, named

after his family, actually lining the north side of his property at the time. And he had a lot to do with establishing Beacon Hill and was an important player in Boston's history as well.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 25:48

Rakashi selected Joy's sea chest as her favorite object for a recent exhibit. We asked her to explain her choice.

Rakashi Chand 25:58

As an Indian-American growing up here in Boston, this is just the most fascinating connection between two nations both fighting for independence from the same colonizers. So, it's interesting to see the struggles, and the history and the philosophies that are shared between the two very young countries, if you think about it, and how the United States emerged and was able to throw off the British holds, and then India also, finally was able to do the same. And it's those shared notions of freedom, independence, democracy, these are connections that go far and deep. And you of course, many people in India were inspired by philosophy and authors coming out of America, right here in Boston. In fact, Henry David Thoreau, and it's just it's been this symbiotic relationship where culture that was in India was being brought to Boston, through ships, as people would go between the ports of Boston. And they would go all the way across to India, and then bring with them not just goods, and spices, and calico and indigo and other things to be traded, but also the ideas were also being brought, and religion and so many other things that were being shared between the two cultures, from a very, very early time. But then to have George Washington officially choose Benjamin Joy, as the first consul to India and to say we need to establish a relationship with India. So early on is really important. And it marks this beautiful beginning and connection between two countries that are continuing to grow and thrive even today. We're all learning from one another. So that being of Indian descent and living in America, this is a very important piece.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 28:04

Do you remember the first time you encountered the chest?

Rakashi Chand 28:09

The first time I encountered the chest was interesting, because it's a very unassuming piece when it's all closed up. And I passed it, and it was just sort of sitting in a corner by the elevator. And there was a small card on top of it that happened to mention what it was. And that took me aback. And I was like, 'Oh my gosh, this is the first connection with India. This is the first official connection between the United States of America and India.' And that really struck me. The fact that it was coming from India really struck me. And there was just this very unassuming piece sitting in the corner. Most people just pass right by it, it was only seen by staff members, because it was just outside of our, I believe our fourth-floor stacks, just waiting, waiting for some recognition. You would never know what was inside. And luckily, we don't have a lot of people grabbing the knobs and opening the drawers because it is a delicate piece. So, we don't want people touching our furniture that is very important with antique furniture. But it was just this amazing piece that was like a mystery and a surprise, you know, with each item that was enclosed within that piece of furniture. It was really something to come across it sitting quietly in the corner.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 29:43

You have talked to other groups outside the MHS about what we have here relating to these first encounters with the subcontinent. You've talked probably about the chest too.

Rakashi Chand 29:59

Yes. Yes, I have.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 30:00

What have been people's impressions about our holdings and about this unique piece of furniture?

Rakashi Chand 30:07

So, whatever I have told the Indian American community here in Massachusetts about what we hold, they are so impressed by what we have. And most people having come here are many have

actually emigrated themselves or have had their children born here. It's a, it's a growing newer group of immigrants from India, and it's a population that is increased quite a bit over the past 30 years. Surprisingly, the past 10 years, the numbers are much, much higher. And everyone feels that they don't have any connection, any anchor that connects them with the United States of America. And they can feel very foreign. But then when I start to point out how long India and Massachusetts have been connected, have constantly be in contact with one another, not just United States, but Boston. And the idea that ships were going to India all of the time and coming in from India all the time. It surprises people to know that it was not this sudden change. It was a continuity; it was something that spanned for hundreds of years that people would come and every once a while someone would come onboard a ship from India just to explore. And we have everything from photographs that people had taken while they were in India, to pieces of jewelry and textiles that people brought back with them souvenirs. We have letters that go back and forth. The American Ramabai Association was actually here in Massachusetts. So, there's a constant connection between Pandita Ramabai and the people in Massachusetts, who were actually supporting her schools in India. And she herself came here as well. And we even very recently, I realized that we have letters by [Rabindranath] Tagore, who is India's literary giant. So, knowing that that's here, and that he was here, he actually was here in Boston as well. It's always such a surprise for people and they say, 'Oh, my gosh, I do belong here.' It's a sense of belonging that that you can't just acquire something that when you see that there has always been that connection, there's always been this interaction and this exchange, it's so much more meaningful, and you feel right, and you knew that you belong. And then I think that's a wonderful thing to be able to show the future generations that are being born here as Indian-Americans, that there has always been this interaction and this connection.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 32:49

The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. To view the item mentioned in today's episode, and to learn more, visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast. We would like to thank Anne Bentley, Curator of Art and Artifacts,

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Cassie Cloutier 33:28

Music in this episode is by Dominic Giam of Ketsa Music and Podington Bear. See our show notes for details. Thank you for listening.