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Small Objects

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:00

[Music fades in] How do you imagine news of the Emancipation Proclamation spread across the Civil War-torn United States in 1862? Do you imagine a Union military officer standing in front of an assembled crowd, reading from a large sheet of paper proclaiming that, henceforth, wherever the United States Army went, it would spread freedom in the rebellious states. This pivotal act and moment in American history seems to demand such a dramatic scene. For many 1000s of enslaved people in the South, however, word of emancipation may have come not through the booming voice of an United States soldier, but from a small, fragile playing card sized pamphlet that carried the words of freedom.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 00:56

[Intro music begins] This is Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai.

Cassie Cloutier 01:10

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 01:44

In this episode, we are looking at small objects from the MHS collections. Inspired by a visit from Dr. Madeline Zehnder, a postdoctoral fellow in the literary and epistemic history of small forms research training group at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. We examined some small print items, and asked Curator of Art and Artifacts, Anne Bentley to show us some of the smallest objects in the collection.

Cassie Cloutier 02:13

Let us begin this exploration of small items by first turning to the small copies of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation that brought Dr. Madeline Zehnder to the MHS.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:29

Madeline, you first came to the MHS to look at several copies of the mini–Emancipation Proclamation.

Madeline Zehnder 02:38

That's right.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 02:39

Tell us about these objects.

Madeline Zehnder 02:41

So, these are very small kind of playing card sized paper pamphlets that produce what's commonly referred to as the Preliminary Proclamation of Emancipation. And so, this is a text that Lincoln created in September of 1862, kind of announcing that the final Emancipation Proclamation, which he would issue in January 1863, was forthcoming. And these particular editions, these little pamphlets were produced by a Boston area abolitionist named John Murray Forbes. And there are many things that are fascinating to me about these artifacts. The first being that Forbes prints these pamphlets in late December 1862, as he's getting kind of nervous about whether Lincoln is actually going to release the final proclamation as promised. And I think that they are these artifacts are a great illustration for the political uses of print, right? So, print gets out there, it makes this promise more real, more tangible. The other thing that's interesting, of course, is that these pamphlets are so tiny. Of course, this makes them cheap and easy to carry. And Forbes was particularly attracted to these affordances because he hoped and indeed intended for these pamphlets to be sent to soldiers in the Union Army and also to be distributed to formerly enslaved people in the U.S. South. And

this is something this is a plan that he developed in collaboration with a number of people, including Massachusetts Governor John Andrew, who was really instrumental in kind of sending packets of these pamphlets to regiments in the Union Army scattered across the U.S.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 04:39

And do we know if the soldiers actually distributed them?

Madeline Zehnder 04:43

We do know. There are a few accounts of soldiers describing receiving copies of the they call it the sort of Governor Andrew addition, right? So, they've received pamphlets of the Emancipation Proclamation from Andrew and one account that we have comes from Thomas Wentworth Higginson, who at the time was the commander of the first South Carolina Volunteer Infantry Regiment, which was one of the first black regiments in the Union Army. And he describes kind of riding through South Carolina in early January 1863, and handing out copies. And he writes in his account, 'We seldom found men who could read it, but they all seem to feel more secure when they held it in their hands.' And of course, this is sort of a filtered account, right? This is kind of his perspective on what was happening. But I think that this is kind of an interesting scene, he paints because of the way that it demonstrates the object value of these pamphlets as well as their textual value, right? And I think, especially in a state, like South Carolina, where it was illegal for enslaved people, to even hold much less read books and pamphlets that these materials were sort of surprisingly radical simply because of the way they were designed. Even though they don't look like what we typically expect, when we think about a proclamation, sometimes it's large format, or something that is a speech rather than a piece of text.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 06:27

When you think of a proclamation, you think of something that is printed on a scroll, perhaps, and someone is reading it with a booming voice to a big audience. But this proclamation, which was so important to the Civil War, and to the course of American history, at least in this format, is so small, and intimate, and spreads from person to person. And I just love how Higginson describes it

in the passage that you read, that people are clutching on to this holding on to this as what was the specific term?

Madeline Zehnder 07:08

He says that they, they seem to feel more secure when they held it with their hands. So, it's almost like a talisman, which is a way that soldiers in the Union Army talk about small books more generally too as kind of protective tokens that are carried close to the body.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 07:31

I was thinking that that would be language that freed people were using, but you're suggesting that this is language that soldiers are using.

Madeline Zehnder 07:39

I think it could be both. One thing that Forbes is thinking about as he's starting to plan the production of this edition is the fact that people who are sort of self-liberating from enslavement to Union camps, sort of who are fleeing slavery, freeing themselves have little in terms of legal documentation to prove their freedom. And I don't want to argue that Forbes is saying these little pamphlets are going to be sort of ersatz replacement, freedom papers, right, manumission papers. But I think that there is kind of a relationship there between print that is carried with you, that serves a very powerful purpose that has some ability to shape your ability to move through space. We also have accounts from people like William Wells Brown, or Frederick Douglass, who, when they are learning to read, describe carrying small books in their pockets. And so, their small book is something that can be concealed, right, very easily, and is something that facilitates the acquisition of literacy in a way that kind of keeps the user in control.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 09:09

So, it sounds like these small books were prevalent enough in American society, that Forbes would have been familiar with them, may have given him the inspiration to say, 'oh, okay, let's print x number of copies of these and have them distributed.'

Madeline Zehnder 09:29

Yes, absolutely. And when you first see these pamphlets, in a library or in an archive, they look almost identical to religious tracts that are being produced at the same time by major religious publishers like the American Tract Society. And, you know, I think, especially even if you're looking just at print that was designed for use by soldiers during the Civil War, so really narrowing it to this very specific period, this small size is just everywhere. So, I don't think Forbes got the idea of from nowhere, I think he was really thinking strategically about what was going to be cheap and what was going to be something that could travel really rapidly.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 10:18

Looking at these small copies that the MHS has, they're about the size of a playing card, you say. Is the paper quality pretty cheap?

Madeline Zehnder 10:29

It's fairly cheap. I mean, the copies have held up relatively well, which may reflect the fact that they were not actually copies that circulated. In addition to sending copies of these pamphlets to regiments. Forbes himself also included copies and letters to various dignitaries, sort of as a souvenir, almost of this important moment in American history. What is kind of striking about the paper in terms of the pamphlets' construction is that they have these colored paper covers. Some of the ones in the MHS collections are pink, and one is this kind of striking orange that bears pretty close resemblance to paper that was also used for printing tickets, and other sort of pieces of ephemera around this period, which is another kind of material clue about who might have been producing these pamphlets. And I think is also some indication of just how quickly they were being produced too. I mean, there wasn't enough time or there weren't enough resources to make sure that every copy was identical. Just the paper that was there as the paper that was used for the covers of these materials.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 11:52

And how are they bound?

Madeline Zehnder 11:53

They're bound with a single stitch of cotton threads. So, they're pretty delicate.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 12:00

What is the content of the pamphlets themselves? So, I take it it's the entire text of the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation by President Lincoln. Is there anything else?

Madeline Zehnder 12:13

Yes, so the cover reads on the Preliminary Proclamations, the Proclamation of Emancipation by the President of the United States to take effect January 1st, 1863. So, with this title, again, Forbes is really pushing for that final proclamation to come out. On the back cover of the pamphlets, Forbes decided to include a quote from the Vice President of the Confederacy, so Alexander Stephens, and it's a quote from a speech in which Stephens call slavery, 'The chief cornerstone of the Confederacy.' And there are a number of ways to interpret the inclusion of this quote, but I think one is to sort of indicate that the Confederacy is going to fall, right? Slavery is going to be abolished by Lincoln in this proclamation. The thing that is the cornerstone of the Confederate States is going to be no more. Forbes hesitated a little bit about including that quote in his correspondence. He kind of goes back and forth with a few people trying to think about whether he should put it in. He says, at one point, 'Well, if people don't like that, I've added this, they can just tear the covers off and circulate the interior text of the Proclamation.' So that's something that is another affordance of producing this in book form. If you've got a scroll, or a broadside, you have less space for adding in these extra elements. So, by producing these little pamphlets, Forbes gets a bit more wiggle room about how he's framing Lincoln's Proclamation.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 14:02

And you have been very careful to say that this is from the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation. After the Proclamation becomes reality, is there another printing?

Madeline Zehnder 14:14

Yes, there is. There are fewer extant copies of that second printing, and I don't know whether that means they simply didn't survive or Forbes didn't have as many printed, but they do replicate the final text of the Proclamation with the sort of signal difference between the preliminary and the final declaration being that Lincoln says that formerly enslaved men can be accepted into the Union Army in combat roles, so as soldiers, and that's also something that's important to Forbes, who throughout the war works as a recruiting agent for the Union Army. So, there's sort of another way to think about the printing of that final proclamation as something of a recruiting tool that could be really sort of distributed to people that Union soldiers were encountering.

Cassie Cloutier 15:12

Dr. Zehnder's search for these small print volumes brought her to the MHS. While she was visiting the Historical Society, we invited her to sit down with Anne Bentley, our Curator of Art and Artifacts. When we told Anne that we were working on an episode with the theme of small items, she quickly retrieved some of her favorite small artifacts from the collection. Dr. Zehnder joined us in asking Anne some questions.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 15:44

Tell us about the objects you've brought out today.

Anne Bentley 15:48

Well actually start with the biggest of our small things here, which are the bijou books of the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There are a set of four printed volumes, printed in Oxford, England, about 1900. Check the Gospel according to St. Luke, Oxford, printed at the University Press, London, bijou edition. And they are absolutely lovely little volumes bound in crimson leather with gold leaf titled, The Gospel According to whichever Saint you happen to be looking at. Lovely gilding on the four edges of the pages. And they are, let's see, roughly, I'd say two inches by one and a half inch wide, and a quarter of an inch thick each. And each one of these has

its own red leather envelope with a snap closure. And they fit tightly into that and all four of them fit into the case that we have on our shelf. And I don't know that there was any particular reason to print a bijou addition other than that it could be done, and they are very charming. And we're happy to have them in our collection.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:25

Were are they ever used?

Anne Bentley 17:27

Not these ones. They are pristine. They're as lovely and gorgeous as the day they were made. But I could see where somebody might want to pocket one and have it handy to read as desired.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 17:41

One would need a magnifying glass to go with it.

Anne Bentley 17:44

Well, I can actually read them without a magnifying glass, and I use a loop a lot in my numismatic work, but I didn't need it to read these. So, they're pretty clear for those who have decent eyesight. I suppose if you're an elderly person, you've already got a magnifying glass handy on your person. So, you'd be able to read them.

Madeline Zehnder 18:09

What are some of the challenges of preserving little books like this?

Anne Bentley 18:14

The main challenge for something like this is to create an outer case that's large enough that they don't get lost on the shells, or fall through the cracks literally, which is why we had an outer clam shell box, which is essentially a base and attached top that shuts over it like a clam shell. And then once we got that I was able to create a tray for the inside that separates the four books into their

separate compartments so that on the shelf, they aren't jostled or falling around. So that managed to keep them safe and secure and cushioned. And that it's large enough that we can see it and we don't lose it on the shelf.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 19:04

Now let's go down in size.

Anne Bentley 19:06

Okay, down in size is the one of the smallest landscape paintings we have in our collection. It's actually an amateur painting on cardstock that is set into an oval pendant that has a hair chamber on the back that way we have for our morning pendants. But instead of hair is a piece of paper that is inscribed in ink, built in 1790 by General Othniel Taylor, and it's a portrait of Othniel Taylor's residence. I'm not sure where the residence was, but it's got a lovely colonial clapboard house that's barely visible amongst four lovely cedar, cedar trees, the tall cedars and a large elm or other shade tree behind it. It's a very bucolic painting in shades of grey, green and blue with a lovely light brown, clapboard house. It's a very sweet painting. And it's, it's kind of nice to think of the person who just wanted a memento of this family home. It's definitely on paper or cardstock. Because it's a very textured application of paint. It's not like a miniature, that's watercolor on ivory, say, and it's quite smooth. This is more like a gouache, or even, or even an oil painting. It's because it's got enough body and texture to have a little dimension to it. It's just very sweet. It's just a lovely bucolic calm portrait of their house.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 21:10

So, it would have been used as a memento, as something to travel and remind you of a place.

Anne Bentley 21:17

It could. It's actually it's placed horizontally in a vertical pendant. So, the bale, the loop hanging is on the right hand side rather than at the top where you would expect it. So, if you were to hang it, it would you'd be looking at it kind of sideways. So, probably it was something that they just put on a

little easel or even just flat on the table and enjoy it that way. But it's just it's kind of fun to see what people do and how attached they are to their homes. You know, and it's fun to see these things and maybe put little stories to them if you're if you're wondering why they did this and what they did with it. But it's always one of these little mysteries that we can only wonder and make suppositions and make little stories about so but it's very sweet. So, that was the second largest item in this little batch I brought down.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:21

So, Anne, how common was it to have small prints like this?

Anne Bentley 22:26

Not very common at all. In our miniature collection of paintings, which numbers over 100 at this point. There are only two landscapes. So miniature landscapes as miniature paintings are not that common.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 22:49

What is the definition of a miniature?

Anne Bentley 22:53

Of a miniature? I don't know that there's a definitive definition, but I would say it's a it's a small painting or drawing or print that can be held in the hand that's what I would call a miniature. It's a something that you could wear, or you could put on a small easel on a table. I think once you get larger than able to hold in your hand it's not a miniature anymore, then it becomes something that you can actually hang or display easily. So, that would be my definition of a miniature and that's pretty much how we codify things upstairs in miniatures storage. You can get things a little bit larger than a miniature, but they aren't truly a miniature then that's there's something it has to be bijou. It has to be small, small enough to be very personal.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 23:56

In a previous episode we talked about Elizabeth Freeman. Is that a miniature?

Anne Bentley 24:03

Yes, she's a miniature. Yes, Elizabeth Freeman is a miniature. In fact, a number of people who are used to seeing only photographs of her are continually astonished to discover how small it actually is in person. And that's a true miniature, but as a miniature she is she's a little bit on the large side. As a miniature you can hold her definitely in your hands. But many of our miniature portraits are smaller than that.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 24:33

So, this takes expert skill to produce these.

Anne Bentley 24:37

Absolutely. The tools are so small, in terms of brushes. If you ever see photographs of an 18th century miniaturist's palette. It's astonishing to see these brushes of two or three hairs. Just absolute micro-application of whatever medium you're using is one way that they achieved these incredible detail. Some of our miniatures, when you look at it under a loop under a magnifying glass, it's just, it's astonishing what pops out in terms of attention to detail.

Madeline Zehnder 25:20

So, Anne, you said that these portraits are much more intimate than portraits that would be hung on a wall. Do you notice that in terms of how the images themselves look are these sort of more personal images of people or are they just smaller portraits?

Anne Bentley 25:40

I think that the intimacy is partly a factor of their size. And the fact that you unlike a painting that's on a wall that you can see from wherever you are in the room, for a miniature painting, you have to get up really up close and personal to truly appreciate it and enjoy all of its depth and all of its nuance. When you hold them say a foot away, they look one way but as you draw them toward you,

if it's someone who does a lot of pointillism for the background, and you realize that this what looks to be uniform code of paint is actually 1000s upon 1000s of tiny, tiny dots of the paint applied very delicately. It's just is astonishing. Truly is an amazing thing to really examine a miniature in person. Photographs don't do them justice. So, I think a large part of the intimacy is the fact that one person sees them at a time in very close quarters, so to speak. And a lot of the miniatures were made, specifically as love tokens, so to speak. Captains would have miniatures of their wives and wives would have miniatures of their husbands. And as we say, there's the hair chamber on the back for the hair of the beloved. So, that that completes the image so to speak. It's a combination of those factors, I think it's the nearness and the fact that you have to be close to them to appreciate them and it just sort of envelops you as you're looking and examining. You have to pay attention. You can't just glance at them and walk away. You have to pay attention. So, all of that combines to create a just a lovely rapport between you and the object that you're examining. And a lot of them for women are on these lovely oval, goldfield cases with a veil so that they could wear them over their heart. Or they could have, Abigail Adams had a bracelet with her sons in miniature that she could wear on her wrist and see her sons that way. And in an age before photography that was one way of keeping the beloved whether here or departed near to you and to your heart.

Madeline Zehnder 28:12

Thank you. I like what you say about the miniature making you pay attention in a different way. I think when we change the scale of something you sort of you have new demands on your attention. You notice details you haven't noticed before and yeah, thanks.

Anne Bentley 28:38

Coins and metals are among the smallest items that are in my purview. And they range from, I do have the occasional medalette we call it. It's very small that ranges from seven millimeters which I would say is about a maybe an eighth of an inch, incredibly small. And then they go up to medallions which can be 14, 15, 18 inches in diameter. The bulk of our collection is medals, but we do have some coins and among the coins, the smallest of those are the California gold rush, gold coinage, and these are bullion that was secured during the Gold Rush. The United States annexed

California right at the end of our war with Mexico in 1848. In January, I believe in 1848, a gentleman by the name of Marshall discovered gold in the American River near Sacramento. And by May 1848, the Gold Rush was on and within a period of 18 months, something over 75,000 people came from the east to stake their claim and get rich during the California Gold Rush. Of course, very few did. Most of the people that got rich were those supplying all of these 1000s of people who needed food and shelter and equipment. And all of this material came in through the custom house. So, the custom house being a government agency did not accept gold dust, ingots, gold pieces. They only accepted legal tender specie of the United States or other countries. So that pretty much the flow of coinage was towards the official customs house. And that left a shortage of coins for those who were prospecting in the area. They had nothing with which to pay for their equipment. So that meant that several private entities started minting coinage using local bullion, which was not refined. So, they created these small gold coins. And they based the weight of these coins on legal U.S. legal tender, and they even used some designs that were similar to official coinage. But they were very careful to put California gold or California on their pieces that way because there was no law against private minting. As long as it wasn't intended to defraud the customer by counterfeiting American coinage or creating other legal problems like that. So, in its heyday, 18 different firms were creating these gold coins for the inhabitants and the prospectors in the miners to use in their daily life. And we have three one half dollar coins that I have to get my loop to see these because they are they're literally a quarter of an inch in diameter. And none of them even weigh half an ounce, they're way less than that. So, they all pretty much have a similar design that references the United States gold coinage of the period. So, the obverse the front is liberty. And she's surrounded by I believe 13 stars. And it's very classical Junoesque liberty in the manner of the U.S. Mint at the time. And the reverse, has a laurel wreath with 1852 at center. And it says 'half doll' for dollar, California gold. And we've got three of these. One is dated 1852. The other two are dated 1853. And these actually were used as specie as a medium of exchange during the shortage in the third period of the Gold Rush.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 33:57

Well, Anne, these might be pretty, but they do not seem to be all that practical.

Anne Bentley 34:03

The gold?

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 34:03

Yeah, they're so small.

Anne Bentley 34:05

Well, it made more sense than trying to weigh a pinch of gold dust. To weigh these things, they barely don't weigh on a scale that only goes to three decimal points. So, you can imagine with a handheld scale out in the boondocks, they're trying to weigh a pinch of gold on a breezy day. So, this was a sensible solution to that particular problem. Since all of the legal tender legal specie was going to the government offices in the area because they would not accept any of the local gold issues.

Cassie Cloutier 34:46

After speaking with Anne, we continued our conversation with Dr. Zehnder and began by asking her impressions of the objects that Anne had just shared with us.

Madeline Zehnder 34:56

Well, I think one thing that was striking to me it was just the range of sizes that you see in the things that already seemed small. Those tiny, tiny California gold coins, which are like the size of a fingernail, are clearly small. But so is something like that miniature painting, which is sort of palm sized. And I think it just, it really sort of drove home to me how smallness is always relative, but it's also something that kind of invites you to engage in the act of comparison and to start kind of putting things into relation. So that that was one of the things that stood out seeing that kind of range of material that she pulled.

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 35:41

When we spoke a couple of days ago, you were talking about, or you were comparing and contrasting the scope and size of the United States and then these small objects that people carried with them. Could you talk a little bit about that and tell us what we learn from looking at small objects and small print?

Madeline Zehnder 36:06

Yeah, so I think the familiar story about early America is one that hinges on the vast and the large, and the great. And this language crops up all over 18th and 19th century writing. But, if you're thinking about scale, you need kind of two poles, right? So, you need the small and the large. And one thing that I am trying to do in my project is to think about the ways that I focus on the small, the portable, the pocket sized, can show how various groups of 19th century Americans are navigating the feeling of living in a huge country with living in a place with an expanding and scattered population. A focus on the small can help show us is just a kind of how contingent and fragile this vastness and largeness really is.

Cassie Cloutier 37:33

The Object of History was produced by the research department at the Massachusetts Historical Society. To view some of the items mentioned in today's episode and to learn more, visit our website at www.masshist.org/podcast

Kanisorn Wongsrichanalai 37:52

We would like to thank Anne Bentley, the Curator of Art and Artifacts at the Massachusetts Historical Society, and Dr. Madeline Zehnder, a postdoctoral fellow in the literary and epistemic history of small forms research training group at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Cassie Cloutier 38:12

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