N. Whitehead

John Gabriel Stedmans collection of Amerindian artifacts

In: New West Indian Guide/ Nieuwe West-Indische Gids 60 (1986), no: 3/4, Leiden, 203-208

This PDF-file was downloaded from <http://www.kitlv-journals.nl>

NEIL LANCELOT WHITEHEAD

JOHN GABRIEL STEDMAN'S COLLECTION OF
AMERINDIAN ARTIFACTS

In vol. 53 of the *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, Richard and Sally Price reported their examination and location of a collection of Bush Negro artifacts, made by John Gabriel Stedman in the eighteenth century and long thought lost, in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden. For an absorbing account of how Stedman's collection came to be deposited in that museum and how it was identified, readers should consult that article. My purpose here is to complement that research with a brief report on the collection of Amerindian artifacts that was made by Stedman at the same time as the Bush Negro objects, and which were also found by the Prices in the museum at Leiden.

In general, Stedman's Amerindian collection is of less significance than the Bush Negro one, not least because only nine items are still extant in the former, but also because of the greater abundance of Amerindian objects to be found elsewhere in European museums. Nonetheless those objects that do remain are now nearly two centuries old and, especially when examined alongside similar articles of more recent origin, leave a clear impression of a strong cultural survival and continuity in Amerindian art and manufacture. Given the long history of European and Amerindian contact on the Wild Coast, where this collection was made, this fact is in itself noteworthy especially since it is possible to discern the pressure, even at the time that Stedman made his collection, of the European presence on the Amerindian political economy through the manufacture of certain items specifically for a "tourist" market. Stedman himself noted this phenomenon in relation to the sale of war-trophies, such as scalps and human bones, to the Europeans in Paramaribo (1796, I:401), although the "authenticity" of

his own collection is somewhat marred by the inclusion of at least one article that was obviously produced for this market (see below).

An illustration of all the original twenty-four items in Stedman's collection may be found in the *Narrative* (1796, I:406-407). These are now catalogued in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (360:5661-5681) under twenty-one descriptions, the compilers of the catalogue having apparently received only nineteen of the items from Stedman's collection, as well as having introduced two extraneous items and failing to distinguish the canoe and paddles that Stedman listed separately. Of these twenty-one items only nine could be located, although fourteen were listed as available; according to the museum's own records, the rest are missing. There is thus a possibility that a further five items may yet be found.

Table I summarizes these findings with some detailed remarks on those objects actually located.

TABLE I

STEDMAN no.	LEIDEN no. 360-	ORIGINAL DESCRIPTION (1796,I: 406)	REMARKS
1	5661	is an Indian coriala or canoe, which is generally made of one tree.	Missing. Probably of Warao origin since they were the major traders of canoes to the Dutch.
2	5661	Paddles in place of oars.	Missing. Probably same origin as above.
3	5662	A sieve called <i>manary</i> .	Located. Of Carib origin. Used for sieving manioc flour, but far too small to be of practical value, thus probably made specifically for the tourist trade.
4	5663	An Indian fan, or <i>way-way</i> .	Located. Of Carib origin; used for tending a cooking fire and identical to modern examples.
5	5664	A stool called <i>mulee</i> .	Missing. Of Carib origin; still being made today. Stedman's example appears to follow the traditional "crab" shape, jaguars and caymans are also often evoked in their design.

6	5665	A <i>pagala</i> or basket.	Located. A small version used for carrying personal items; of Carib origin and displaying motifs representing moving water and insect carapaces.
7	5666	A <i>matappy</i> or cassava press.	Unlocatable.
8	5667	An Indian bow.	Located. Probably of Carib origin, over 6 ft. long, made from hardwood with sharpened ends. It might also have functioned as an impromptu spear.
9	5668	Arrows for shooting fish.	Missing. Arrows of these kinds are common among the Amerindians of this area. Many others may be found in the museum's collection. Missing Unlocatable. Neither this nor the above item were used by the coastal Amerindians. They may have been traded from the interior especially for Stedman's collection.
10	5669	A blunted arrow for birds.	
11	5670	Common arrows barbed.	
12	5671	Small poisoned arrows.	
13	5672	The pipe or tube to blow them.	
14	5673	A crown of various feathers.	Located. The feathers are chiefly those of the macaw and, except in the brilliance of the plumage, this head-dress is identical to one collected over a century later in Suriname which lies alongside it in the museum (no. 1817 N-168).
15	5674	An apron called <i>queiou</i> .	Located. Of Carib origin. Made from red, yellow, black, white and blue beads of European manufacture, strung in diamond motifs, representing an

			insect carapace (see-5665 above).
16	5675	An Indian earthen pot.	Unlocatable.
17	5676	An <i>apootoo</i> or Indian club.	Unlocatable. However, item no. 924-77 in the museum's collection is a club very similar to that shown in Stedman's illustration and the catalogue card refers to the <i>Narrative</i> ; further documentary research might show this item to be part of Stedman's collection.
18	(5677)	An Indian cotton hammock.	Not catalogued. The item bearing the identification 360-5677 is in fact an Amerindian "trumpet flute" or <i>kuti</i> not part of Stedman's collection.
19	-	A sash of tigers' or wild boars' teeth.	Not catalogued.
20	-	A magic shell or gourd.	Not catalogued.
21	5678	An Indian flute called <i>too-too</i> .	Located. Of Carib origin, this example is decorated with the scorpion motif.
22	5679	A flute made of the human bone of an enemy.	Missing. Such items were often traded to Europeans (see above), whose presence on the Wild Coast had induced a state of exceptional militancy amongst the Amerindians of this area.
23	(5680)	An Indian flute or syrinx called <i>quarta</i> .	Not catalogued. The item bearing the identification 360-5680 is in fact an Amerindian flute similar to -5678 (above) and is marked with diamond and frog motifs.
24	-	A stone to grind cassava, called <i>matta</i> .	Not catalogued.

Arms, Ornaments & Furniture of the Indians.

Engraving from Stedman's *Narrative* 1796, I:406-7.

(I am most grateful to Dr. G. van Wengen, L. van Putten and W. Grijpma for their assistance in the location and identification of articles in the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde. This research was supported by the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation.)

REFERENCES

PRICE, RICHARD & SALLY, 1978-9. John Gabriel Stedman's collection of 18th century artifacts from Suriname. *Nieuwe West-Indische Gids* 53:121-40.

STEDMAN, J.G., 1796. *Narrative of a Five Years Expedition Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam*. London, J. Johnson & J. Edwards.

NEIL LANCELOT WHITEHEAD
Institute of Social Anthropology,
Oxford University, U.K.