

This single shoe is exactly the sort of artifact that makes working in a museum like ours so wonderful. It is obviously a lovely shoe but what draws me to it is our lack of knowledge about it. It came to us 20 years ago with very little information and frankly still remains a bit of a mystery. The date and location of manufacture and wear are unknown to us but we can infer quite a bit from its features.

When we purchased it at auction in 1989, Christie's auction house described it as " a single shoe of ivory silk embroidered by hand in brightly coloured silks with the Arms of Spain (castille quartering Leon) upon an Imperial eagle, and initials F & Y, possibly for Ferdinand and Isabella, enhanced with paste and sequins, with polychrome rope soles – probably a Phillipines export, circa 1800.

When I look at the shoe which would technically be called an espadrille I am immediately drawn to its duality. The juxtaposition of the delicate ivory silk slipper with the stately and military style embroidery of the imperial eagle on the vamp is very interesting as is the fact that the shoe is a masculine oxford cut which has been embellished with paste rhinestones set with elaborate silver embroidery. The sole is also of special note because it are made in the traditional espadrille style using coiled rope. However this sole is made from brightly coloured cotton rope which creates a very pleasing random and colourful pattern, rather than the common jute or sisal rope sole of a more utilitarian pair. The shoe shows significant signs of wear on the sole with several accretions of dirt, and the shoe's lining is torn and worn from wear. The tie closure is lost to us and so I can only speculate that it would have been a colourful ribbon.

The term espadrille is French but derives from the Catalan word *espardenya* which comes from the word *esparto* meaning a coarse European grass used in making rope. In the 20th century espadrilles became well known in the fashion world as a comfortable warm weather shoe and were often a symbol of easy luxury as they are often worn by men and women in times of leisure in warm climates. Their history began however as daily-wear shoes worn by male workers and soldiers; fashioned from simple woven flax uppers that were stitched to a pitch-hardened rope sole. They were inexpensive, comfortable and easily produced.

We can narrow the date of manufacture and wear for this shoe to sometime in the early 1800s because of the use of metal eyelets. It is most likely a commemorative shoe from South America, possibly worn to celebrate a Spanish historical date or moment. I'm unsure of why Christie's auction house gives it a possible origin from the Philipines, perhaps someday the mate will show up in another collection with more information and the mystery will be solved. Until then we'll continue to enjoy the mystery of this one.