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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
May 2010

Exhibition of historical photographs explores the fascinating story of John Claude White

New York— *A British Life in a Mountain Kingdom: Early Photographs of Sikkim and Bhutan* is the first exhibition of photographs by John Claude White. White, a British government officer and civil engineer, spent much of his career stationed in places that one hundred years ago were, and to an extent remain, shrouded in a certain veil of mystery: India, Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan. The exhibition presents original prints and large-scale reproductions from three important photography albums, two of which are on view in their original bound form.

White's memoirs and body of work reveal his captivation with mountains from an early age. Though born in Calcutta, he spent his teenage years studying in Bonn, Germany in the 1880s, where he was undoubtedly intrigued by the recent "golden age" of mountaineering of the mid-19th century that saw the first ascents of many Alpine peaks. White was given the chance to live amongst some of the world's most formidable mountains himself in 1888 when he was assigned to the Sikkim-Tibet Boundary Commission, tasked with mapping and surveying the regions' borders. Unlike his counterparts who owned large homes in India and traveled occasionally to their posts in the outlying Himalayas, White settled with his family in Sikkim, where they remained for over two decades.

White was a pioneer of mountain photography, spending weeks at a time photographing his official and personal explorations as he visited every corner, trekked every valley, and climbed every mountain pass in Sikkim and Bhutan. Carving its way through difficult terrains at any given time was White's mule- and yak-led caravan, which included numerous assistants, surveying equipment, cumbersome photographic equipment, a large format camera, and specially made cases used to store chemically-pretreated glass plate negatives. Indeed, White's work marks the end of the era of large format, glass plate cameras, as small-scale portable cameras were introduced at this time. White's images offered the world rare glimpses into these isolated Himalayan lands, illustrating his articles on Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal for *National Geographic Magazine*.

His personal knowledge of the landscapes and peoples of the regions through which he traveled sets White apart from most of his contemporaries. His images have an intimate quality and beautifully represent the mountains and architecture he loved, and those whom he called "companions" and "friends." Particularly unique was his friendship with King Ugyen Wangchuk of Bhutan, whose country he traversed and photographed widely. White and his party were the only Westerners to attend and document the King's coronation in 1907, photographs from which can be viewed in the scrapbook made by White's son-in-law, Henry Hyslop. Visitors can virtually flip through a digitized version of Hyslop's scrapbook at a nearby computer station.

The exhibition represents the range of White's interests and encounters. His images of mountains reveal awe for their enormity and majesty. His photographs of solitary yak herds and lone structures capture the area's rugged and barren, yet peaceful landscape. White himself is included in some of his most fascinating images. One photograph, taken in Bhutan in 1907 during celebration for the King of Bhutan's coronation, shows White and three other British officers sitting and standing amongst the King and members of his delegation. On the surface, the groups could not look more different, yet they are there, together. It serves as a visual representation of the two worlds that White successfully straddled during his unique career. In later years, White recalled, "[As] years passed I grew to love the work, the country, and the people, and I never regretted my decision to throw my lot in with theirs."

A British Life in a Mountain Kingdom: Early Photographs of Sikkim and Bhutan will be on view August 6, 2010 – January 10, 2011.

About the Rubin Museum of Art

RMA holds one of the world's most important collections of Himalayan art. Paintings, pictorial textiles, and sculpture are drawn from cultures that touch upon the arc of mountains that extends from Afghanistan in the northwest to Myanmar (Burma) in the southeast and includes Tibet, Nepal, Mongolia, and Bhutan. The larger Himalayan cultural sphere, determined by significant cultural exchange over millennia, includes Iran, India, China, Central Asia, and Southeast Asia. This rich cultural legacy, largely unfamiliar to Western viewers, offers an uncommon opportunity for visual adventure and aesthetic discovery.

Admission to RMA is \$10 for adults; \$7 for seniors, neighbors (zip codes 10011 & 10001 with ID), and artists (with ID); \$2 for students (with ID); free for seniors the first Monday of every month; and free for children under 12 and for museum members. Gallery admission is free to all on Fridays between 6pm and 10pm.

Open Monday 11 am to 5 pm, Wednesday 11 am to 7 pm, Thursday 11 am to 5 pm, Friday 11 am to 10 pm, Saturday and Sunday from 11 am to 6 pm; closed on Tuesday. To reach the museum by subway, visitors may take the A, C or E to 14th Street; the 1 to 18th Street; 1, 2, 3 to 14th Street; F and M to 14th Street; N, R, Q, 4, 5 and 6 to 14th or the L to 6th Avenue. By bus, visitors may take the B20 to the corner of 7th Avenue and 17th Street.