

# LENSES OF MODERNITY: PHOTOGRAPHY IN TIBET AND THE HIMALAYAS

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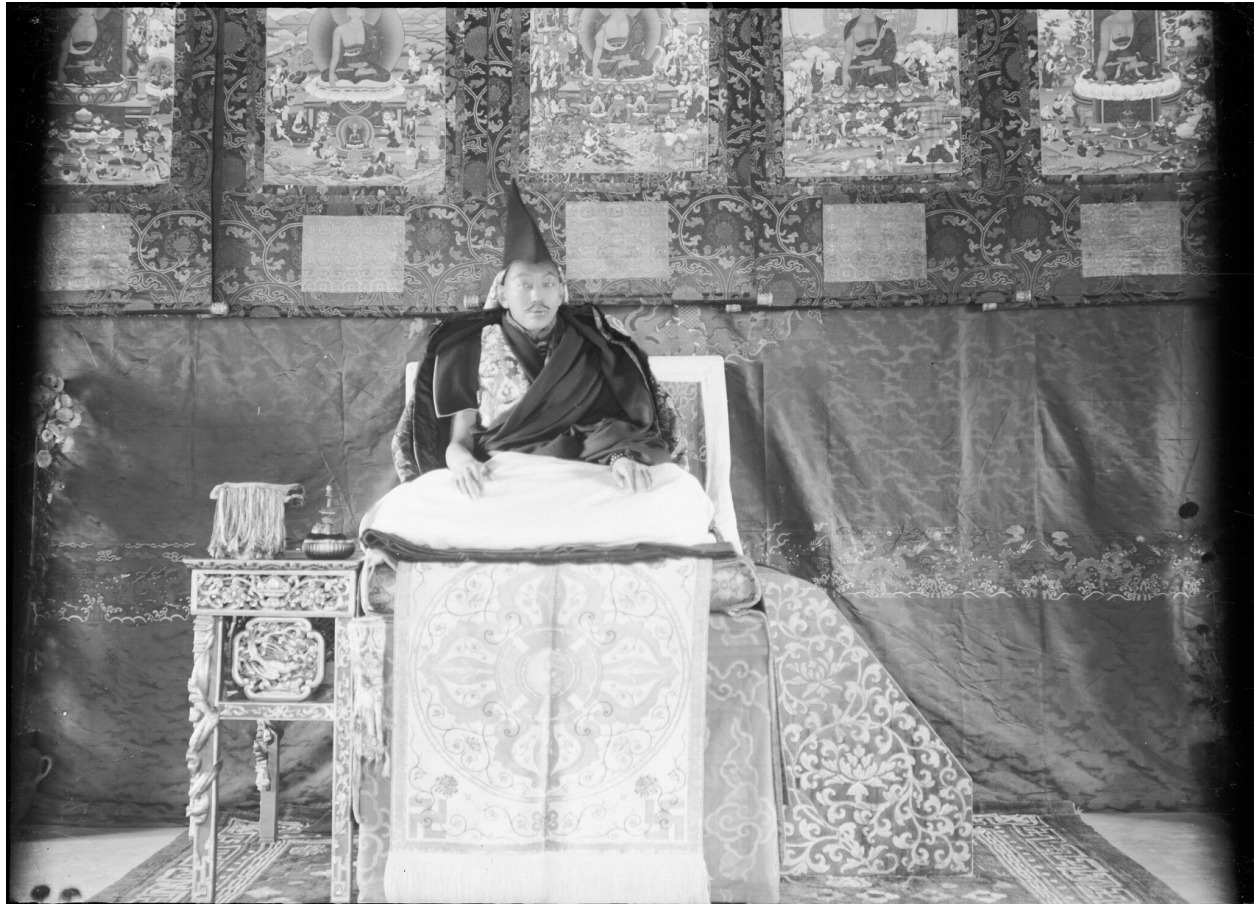


Fig. 1 Sir Charles Bell (British, 1870–1945) and Rabden Lepcha (Sikkimese, act. early 20th century); The Thirteenth Dalai Lama on Throne in Norbulingka; Norbulingka, Lhasa; October 14, 1921; lantern slide from negative; 3-3/16 × 3-3/16 in. (8.1 × 8.1 cm); Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford; 1998.285.88.2; photograph © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford

## PHOTOGRAPH OF THE THIRTEENTH DALAI LAMA

Lhasa, U region, central Tibet  
1921

## SUMMARY

The early twentieth century saw the opening of photography studios in many Himalayan cities. Tibetologist Riga Shakya examines the complexities of early photography in Tibet and the Himalayan regions as a story of British colonialism, Tibetan nation building, and personal self-representation. Photography profoundly changed how Himalayan people saw themselves. A camera enabled agency in Tibetan elite and Nepalese merchant communities and inspired artists like Amdo Jampa to create new ways of artistic expression.

Photography is considered one of the most transformative technologies of the twentieth century. At the turn of the century, visual representations of Tibet were relatively rare. This black-and-white photograph depicts the Thirteenth Dalai Lama Tubten Gyatso (1876–1933) sitting on a ceremonial throne atop an ornate, multicolored dais at Norbulingka, his summer palace. The Dalai Lama is the highest-ranking lineage in the Geluk Tibetan Buddhist tradition, and successive reincarnations have served as the spiritual and political leaders of Tibet since the seventeenth century. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama ruled during a period of tremendous change in the greater world and across the Tibetan Plateau.<sup>1</sup> In the face of invasions by both the Qing and British Empires, he traveled across Asia, declared Tibetan independence in 1913, and implemented printing, military, and infrastructural reforms to attempt to modernize Tibet.<sup>2</sup>

Taken by British colonial officer Sir Charles Bell (1870–1945) and his Sikkimese orderly Rabden Lepcha on the morning of October 14, 1921, during the 1920–1921 British mission to Lhasa, the photograph is possibly the first taken of the Tibetan ruler in Lhasa. Bell, who served as political officer in Bhutan, Sikkim, and Tibet, writes in his diary that the Dalai Lama was particularly attentive to the staging of the photograph, “giving an order here, making a slight change there.”<sup>3</sup> Developments in photographic technology and the Tibetan experience of British colonialism meant that the “Great

Thirteenth” was the first Dalai Lama to be photographed. Tubten Gyatso’s embrace of the photographic medium is emblematic of Tibet’s encounter with modernity, and the photograph reveals how the history of photography in Tibet and the Himalayan region is entangled with that of colonialism and nation-building.

## **EMPIRE, NATION, AND THE PHOTOGRAPHIC ARCHIVE**

The visual history of modern Tibet is often thought of as the opposition between colonial stereotypes and indigenous visions. Yet the relationship between these impulses was often fraught and blurry. As scholar-soldiers, British colonial photographers were engaged in the production of useful knowledge about the region for the benefit of the empire. Following the British invasion of Tibet in 1904, photographers like Bell also saw their work as dislodging the existing cachet of exotic images that contributed to Orientalist visions of Tibet as Shangri-la.<sup>4</sup> They did so by embedding themselves in the highest echelons of society and building intimate relations with Tibetan aristocrats and lamas who would provide them unprecedented access to private and public life in Lhasa (fig. 2).<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 2 The Newark Museum, "Newark Museum: The Forbidden Cities of Tibet," *YouTube*, July 7, 2017, 7:37, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=5uSTf8WcVcs&feature=shares>

The photographic records of this encounter consist of portraits of the Tibetan elite at work and play, as well as detailed ethnographic photographs of rituals, festivals, and scenes of daily life.<sup>6</sup> Rather than reproducing an unequal relationship of power, these photographs reveal a relationship that depended on intimacy, intermingling, and mutual accommodation. The institutional and informal afterlives of the colonial photographic archive, created in part with the collaboration of indigenous image-makers—such as Rabden Lepcha (fig.3)—would establish visual tropes, such as the portrait, the “Potala shot,” and the ritualized scene, which would come to represent “the historical and political image of Tibet.”<sup>7</sup> Such tropes were reproduced in the ethnographic photography of the Tibetan borderlands by and during the nation-building projects of republican and later Communist China.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 3 Sir Charles Bell (British, 1870–1945); Rabden Lepcha in Delhi; ca. 1915; glass negative; 5 3/8 × 3 1/2 in. (13.8 cm × 8.8 cm); Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 1998.285.603; photograph © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford



Coupled with the flow of trade into Lhasa from India, Western fashions and commodities—including cameras—became popular with progressive members of the Tibetan and Himalayan elite who were sympathetic to modernizing reforms. This would result in a generation of Tibetan photographers, such as the politician and general Dasang Damdul Tsarong (1888–1959), who used the name George, and Demo Rinpoche, the nephew of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama. These indigenous photographers were early adopters who began to realize the power of the lens as a tool of self-representation (figs. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4 Chen Zonglie (Chinese, b. 1932); Jigme Taring, Tibetan nobleman and official, holding cine camera with still camera hanging at his side; Lhasa, Tibet; possibly 1958; dimensions unknown; photograph from Xinhua News Agency



Fig. 5 Unknown photographer; Lhasa Newars with Camera; Lhasa, Tibet; 1940s; dimensions unknown; image after Lhasa Newar: Nepalese Traders on the Silk Road Facebook group, courtesy Transhimalayan Arts

## SHUTTERS AND SELVES

Historically, the only visual representations of Tibetan religious leaders took the form of thangkas or devotional tapestries and gilt statues that captured idealized images of the subject based on Buddhist aesthetics. The reproducibility of the photographic image

meant that Buddhist rulers like the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, the Eighth Jibzundamba in Mongolia (figs. 6 and 7), and the monarchs of Bhutan and Sikkim would begin to be seen in a new light by audiences at home and abroad. The legitimacy of sovereign Himalayan nations would be confirmed by the photographic record.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, subjects across the Himalayas would be able to visualize their rulers and religious leaders beyond fleeting glances at state and religious ceremonies (fig. 8), arousing feelings of national belonging and devotion in a distinctly modern way.

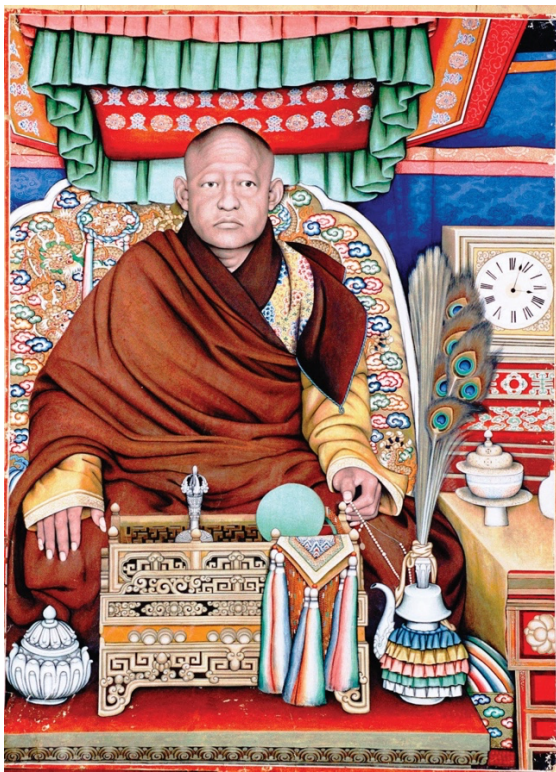


Fig. 6 Balduugiin “Marzan” Sharab(Mongolian; 1869–1939); Bogd Khan, Eighth Jibzundamba (ca. 1869–1924), and Yeke Dagini Dondugdulma, His Wife (1876–1923); photographically derived paintings; Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; image courtesy Bogd Khaan Palace Museum Facebook page



Fig. 7 Balduugiin “Marzan” Sharab(Mongolian; 1869–1939); Bogd Khan, Eighth Jibzundamba (ca. 1869–1924), and Yeke Dagini Dondugdulma, His Wife (1876–1923); photographically derived paintings; Fine Arts Zanabazar Museum, Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia; image after Tsultem 1986, 176





Fig. 8 Unknown photographer and artist; The Ninth Panchen Lama; hanging on a pillar in Lhaxhang, Lukhil Monastery, Likir Village, Ladakh, India; painted photograph, framed; dimensions unknown; photograph by R. Linrothe, 2015

While the image-making practices of British colonial missions would popularize photography among the indigenous elite across the Himalayas, it was merchant communities such as the Lhasa Newars and Kashmiri Muslims who would ensure its popularity among the local populace. Newar and Kashmiri traders had been living in the urban centers of Lhasa and Shigatse since the seventeenth century. Following the enthronement of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1940, these transnational communities capitalized on their access to camera equipment and chemicals and opened the first

photography studios in urban centers like Lhasa and Darjeeling. Middle-class families began to sit for staged portraits and family photographs in front of scenic backdrops, holding props like bicycles and radios, or dressed in Western clothing to reflect their status as modern subjects.<sup>10</sup>

Changing notions of selfhood under the influence of the camera lens (fig. 1) were also reflected in the fine arts. Painters like Amdo Jampa (1911–2002), a pivotal figure in the development of modern Tibetan art, were inspired by the ability of the camera to capture the likeness of the subject. While he began his training in thangka painting, Amdo Jampa would go on to study Chinese classical painting, and Western classical and modernist art, as well socialist realism, through a remarkable career that spanned the best part of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Appointed court painter to the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, he worked from photographs and incorporated photorealistic portraiture techniques into traditional Tibetan forms, typified by his murals at the Norbulingka. His mural painting of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's enthronement ceremony marks the first realist depiction of the Dalai Lama's personage, and its creation is considered "a remarkable event in Tibetan art history" (fig. 9).<sup>12</sup> Amdo Jampa's openness to new forms of expression served as an inspiration to a later generation of Tibetan contemporary artists who came to prominence in the post-Cultural Revolution era and created their own forms of visual culture.<sup>13</sup>

## **CAMERA TIBETICA**

Photography has long been privileged as a historical source due to the tangible and visceral encounter with the past that it offers, a lens more conducive to a subjective reframing of the history than that of text. Yet historical photographs of Tibet often raise more questions than they provide answers, for as Roland Barthes observed, these images only contain traces of things past.<sup>14</sup> Today, galvanized by social media, more



photographs of the Tibetan Plateau and the greater Himalayan region circulate than ever before. Thinking about photography in Tibet and the Himalayas as a practice with a distinct history allows us to see the diverse ways in which local visual cultures responded to and were shaped by the encounter with modernity.



Fig. 9 Amdo Jampa (Tibetan, 1911–2002); Detail of Mural of Fourteenth Dalai Lama Receiving International Dignitaries; Norbulingka, Lhasa, Tibet; 1956; photograph © Thomas Laird, 2018 from *Murals of Tibet*, TASCHEN

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> 'Jigs med bsam gru, "Rgyal Ba Sku Phreng Bcu Gsum Pa Thub Bstan Rgya Mtsho'i Chos Srid Mdzad Rnam," in Gong Sa tA La'i Bla Ma Sku Phreng Rim Byon Gyi Chos Srid Mdzad Rnam (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2000), 705–835, <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/W25268>.

<sup>2</sup> See Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913–1959: The Demise of the Lamaist State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Charles Bell, *Portrait of the Dalai Lama* (London: Collins, 1946), 336.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the British invasion of Tibet, see Alex McKay, "The British Invasion of Tibet, 1903–4." In "The Younghusband 'Mission' to Tibet," *Inner Asia* 14, no. 1 (2014): 5–25.

<sup>5</sup> Clare Harris and Tsering Shakya, *Seeing Lhasa: British Depictions of the Tibetan Capital 1936–1947*, Exhibition catalog (Chicago: Serindia, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Hugh E. Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year* (London: Serindia, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Hugh E. Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year* (London: Serindia, 1993), 24.

<sup>8</sup> Yudru Tsomu, "Taming the Khampas: The Republican Construction of Eastern Tibet," *Modern China* 39, no. 3 (May) (2013): 319–44; Yuyuan Liu, "Exhibition Review of the Story of Light and Shadow: 20th Century Chinese Photography from Huang Jianpeng's Collection," *Waxing Moon* 1, no. 1 (2021): 131–39; Michael Aris et al., *Lamas, Princes, and Brigands: Joseph Rock's Photographs of the Tibetan Borderlands of China*, Exhibition catalog (New York: China Institute in America, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> For example, the British political officer John Claude White photographed the 1907 coronation of the first Bhutanese king Ugyen Wangchuck. John Claude White, *Sikkim & Bhutan: Twenty-One Years on the North-East Frontier, 1887–1908* (London: E. Arnold, 1909).

<sup>10</sup> The most famous of these studios is Das Studio founded by Newari merchant Thakur Das Pradhan, which remains open today in Darjeeling. Unnamed photography studios in Lhasa are mentioned in Clare Harris and Tsering Shakya, *Seeing Lhasa: British Depictions of the Tibetan Capital 1936–1947*, Exhibition catalog (Chicago: Serindia, 2003), 102. For more on the Nepalese and Muslim communities of Tibet, see David G. Atwill, *Islamic Shangri-La: Inter-Asian Relations and Lhasa's Muslim Communities, 1600 to 1960* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

<sup>11</sup> See Khri gong o rgyan tshe ring, *A mdo byams pa dang dge 'dun chos 'phel* (Chengdu: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 2017)..

<sup>12</sup> Tsewang Tashi, “Modernism in Tibetan Art: The Creative Journey of Four Artists” (PhD diss., Norwegian University of Science and Technology, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> This is attested to by prominent contemporary Tibetan artists such as Gonkar Gyatso and Tsewang Tashi. The latter recently gave a talk at Columbia University about the intersecting lives of Amdo Jampa and Gendun Chopel; see Tsewang Tashi, “Early Modern Art in Tibet: Gendun Chopel and Amdo Jampa” (Virtual lecture, Columbia university, New York, November 19, 2020).

<sup>14</sup> Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

## FURTHER READING

Harris, Clare, and Tsering Shakya. 2003. *Seeing Lhasa: British Depictions of the Tibetan Capital, 1936–1947*. Exhibition catalog. Chicago: Serindia.

Harris, Clare. 2016. *Photography and Tibet*. London: Reaktion.

Tashi, Tsewang. 2014. “Modernism in Tibetan Art: The Creative Journey of Four Artists.” PhD diss., Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

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## ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

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