

# A MUNDANE CRAFT ELEVATED FOR A COMMEMORATIVE PARADE

ALICE TRAVERS



Fig. 1 Saddle Carpet; presumably Punkhang family estate, Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet; 1930s; wool pile and weft, cotton warp; 25¼ × 48½ in. (64 × 123 cm); The Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 2002 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund 2002.1.40; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of Art

## SADDLE CARPET FOR THE YABZHI PUNKHANG CEREMONIAL CAVALRY

Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet  
1930's

## SUMMARY

Military historian Alice Travers introduces the carpets and weaving-traditions of Tibet through a wool saddle carpet, used in New Year cavalry parades in Lhasa. Tibetans have been making carpets in unique knotting and pile-weaving methods for millennia. This carpet was woven in Gyantse, known for carpet production, in the 1930s for the aristocratic Yabzhi Punkhang family, who provided riders for a parade established by the Fifth Dalai Lama to celebrate Tibet's seventeenth-century reunification by G $\ddot{u}$ ushi Khan's Mongol cavalry.

Pile weaving is an ancient tradition among the populations of Central and North Asia. In Tibet, it dates back at least to the period of the early kings (7th–9th centuries).<sup>1</sup> These carpets (*den*, a generic word meaning seat, cushion, or mattress) were made mainly of the abundantly available highland sheep's wool, which, despite its somewhat rough quality, is ideal for pile rugs due to its flexibility and luster (fig. 2).<sup>2</sup> Tibetan carpet production can be divided into two main categories: the primitive planted-pile carpet (*tsukden*), which is still woven by nomads and farmers on horizontal frames and back-strap looms, and the knotted-pile carpet (*drumtse* or *rumden*), thought to have appeared later, which is woven on a stationary vertical loom (*taktri*) and involves an archaic method of tying multiple knots around a continuous warp (*gyu*) thread (fig. 3). The Tibetan pile-weaving tradition is based on a unique cut-loop weaving technique that is distinct from all others worldwide, but that also reflects centuries of cultural exchange.<sup>3</sup>



Fig. 2 Ernst Schäfer (German, 1910–1992); *Lhasa, der Wollhafen mit Details* (Lhasa, wool port with details); Lhasa; 1938 or 1939; photograph; Sven-Hedin-Institut für Innerasienforschung; Bild 135-S-12-43-38; image courtesy Bundesarchiv, Koblenz



Fig. 3 Charles A. Bell (British, 1870–1945); Boy grinding indigo and woman weaving a carpet, Pen-jor Lhun-po, near Gyang-tse; Drongtse, Palha family estate near Gyantse, Tsang region, central Tibet; 1933–1934; photograph; India Office Records, British Library, London: Photo 1112/6(93); image © British Library Board

## SADDLE RUGS

Saddle rugs (*taden* or *gaden*) and other woven equestrian decorative elements like forehead trappings composed a ubiquitous category of knotted, pile-woven carpets (fig. 4). Because Tibetan wooden saddles required a lot of padding for both horse and rider, saddle carpets usually came in pairs: a larger one placed under the saddle and a smaller one on top, which served as a cushion to provide warmth and comfort to the rider.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 4 Ernst Schäfer (German, 1910–1992); *Kala, Maultier des Postreiters* (Kala, mule of the post rider); Tibet; 1938 or 1939; photograph; 7 × 9½ in. (18 × 24 cm); Bundesarchiv, Koblenz; Bild 135-S-01-17-03; image courtesy Bundesarchiv, Koblenz

The top saddle carpet presented here has a wool weft (*pun*) and a cotton warp and is made, like most others, of two parts woven separately and then sewn together, with visible holes bordered in leather to accommodate straps (fig. 1). It has been identified by the Tibetan scholar Kesang Tashi as belonging to a set of twenty-four pieces woven in the 1930s for the ceremonial cavalry of Yabzhi Punkhang; all these carpets are recognizable not only in their identical structure and design (figs. 1, 5 and 6), but also because they display an inscription (a rare feature on carpets) allowing us to contextualize the object: “*yab phun rta dmag*,” that is, “cavalry of the yab [gzhis] phun [khang family].”<sup>5</sup> The Punkhang noble house goes back to the Eleventh Dalai Lama (1838–1856), whose family entered one of the most prestigious subgroups of the Lhasa aristocracy (*kudrak*), the *yabzhi* (literally, “the estate of the father”), which comprises six ennobled families of former Dalai Lamas.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 5 One of Three Saddle Carpets, from a set of twenty-four woven in the 1930s for the cavalry of Yabzhi Punkhang; central Tibet; 1920–1930; wool pile and weft, cotton warp; 24 3/8 × 46 7/8 in. (62 × 119 cm); The Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 2002 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund 2002.1.39; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of Art.



Fig. 6 One of Three Saddle Carpets, from a set of twenty-four woven in the 1930s for the cavalry of Yabzhi Punkhang; central Tibet; 1920–1930; wool pile and weft, cotton warp; 24 3/8 × 45 1/4 in. (62 × 115 cm); The Newark Museum of Art; Purchase 2002 Helen McMahon Brady Cutting Fund 2002.1.41; photograph courtesy The Newark Museum of Art

## THE CEREMONIAL CAVALRY OF THE NEW YEAR STATE CEREMONIES

The ceremonial cavalry of Yabzhi Punkhang took part in the commemorative parade of Güüshi Khan’s troops in and around Lhasa, which was part of the annual Great Prayer (*monlam*) Festival, instituted by the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682).<sup>7</sup> The military parade was supervised by two Yasor commanders (*Yasor chikhyab* or *Yasor tripa*), government lay officials (*drungkhor*) of the fourth rank appointed every year to the task of embodying the Mongol general of one of the two wings (*yeru* and *yonru*). The parade of the cavalry started on the twenty-second day of the first month with the “preparation of the camp at Lubu” (*Lubu gardrik*), followed by the “review of the troops at Trapchi (or Drachi)” (*Trapchi tsisher*) held on the twenty-third day, and the “gallop behind the fort” (*dzonggyab zhambel*) in a meadow north of the Potala Palace on the twenty-sixth day, when cavalymen competed in marksmanship while galloping.<sup>8</sup>

High-ranking aristocratic lay officials had to provide around five hundred troops for the events, adorned in ancient military costumes and with their horses decorated with pomp. They were chosen from the servants of their domains: the Doring noble house had to provide twenty-five men; the two Yasor commanders and each lay minister had to provide twenty-four men; the regular army generals (*dapon*) thirteen men; the aristocratic sons seven men, and so forth.<sup>9</sup>

Yabzhi Punkhang *kung* (or duke) Tashi Dorje (b. 1888) was appointed a minister (*kalon*) from 1938 to 1946, and his son Gonpo Tsering (b. 1918) was nominated as Yasor commander in 1940 (fig. 6).<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the Punkhang family had to provide for the festivities, depending on the year, between seven and twenty-four fully equipped cavalymen, including their saddle carpets.



Fig. 6 Hugh E. Richardson (British, 1905–2000); Phunkhang Yabzhi Kung, His Wife and Son; Tibet; 1948; negative film nitrate; Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 2001.59.7.7.1; image © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 2001.59.7.7.1

In pre-1959 Tibet the finest carpets were woven in small workshops in the area of Gyantse and were sold for domestic use or export. From the 1920s, carpets were produced either by a guild created by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in Gyantse or in workshops located on the aristocratic estates of the Palha, Doring or Gabzhi, and the Langtong and Changra houses, all located near Gyantse, as well as on the Gyantse estate of the Punkhang family to which this set of saddle carpets belongs.<sup>11</sup>

### **THE PUNKHANG CEREMONIAL CAVALRY'S SADDLE RUG: A TWENTIETH-CENTURY IMITATION OF AN ANCIENT MODEL**

Because carpets represent a mundane craft, by comparison with the Tibetan sacred arts, they display an overall striking level of diversity resulting from unconstrained artistic creativity.<sup>12</sup> The decoration of saddle rugs is based on that of larger, rectangular bed-size rugs (*khaden*, roughly three by six feet); they display the usual border strip, elaborate designs allowed by the pile-weaving technique, and similar colors adapted to their particular dimensions, for instance, with only one medallion or round-shaped flower on each side.<sup>13</sup> The top saddle carpets considered here have an oblong shape resembling the Mongol saddle, which is considered the oldest model. (Top saddle carpets came in two other shapes, namely, a distinctly Tibetan rectangular shape, sometimes with notched ends [fig. 7], and the "butterfly" shape replicating the shape of British saddle cloths, favored in later times.)<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 7 Ernst Schäfer (German, 1910–1992); *Lhasa, die große Neujahrsparede* (Lhasa, the great New Year's parade); Lhasa; 1938 or 1939; photograph; 7 × 9½ in. (18 × 24 cm); Sven-Hedin-Institut für Innerasienforschung, Bundesarchiv, Berlin; Bild 135-S-16-18-03

Note the saddle rug of rectangular shape with notched ends.

This saddle carpet is executed in predominantly blue, red, and white. The border strip is filled with scrolling foliate forms, and each field contains shrubs with lotus flowers. The center of each field is occupied by one medallion, the Chinese symbol of longevity *shou*, which appears quite frequently in Tibetan ornamentation and was probably chosen to match the trousers of the cavalymen's costumes, which also displayed a red (and sometimes blue) longevity symbol. Since the set of saddle carpets was meant for ceremonial use to commemorate the seventeenth-century Mongol cavalry, the oblong Mongolian shape and parts of the decorative elements of this saddle carpet point to a fashion of older times, while other elements clearly indicate the twentieth-century context of production.<sup>15</sup>

*To the memory of Kesang Tashi (1943–2021)*



## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 12; Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 17.

<sup>2</sup> Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000); Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers. Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 22.

<sup>3</sup> Philip Denwood, *The Tibetan Carpet* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1974), 82; Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 18; Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 20.

<sup>4</sup> Philip Denwood, *The Tibetan Carpet* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1974), 71–72. See Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 59, and Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 90–91, for two examples of intact sets.

<sup>5</sup> As emphasized in Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 124, it is rare to find written evidence of the provenance of a rug incorporated into the object itself. Regarding the dating of the set, the authors have written that the set was originally produced as a result of the nomination of Punkhang as minister in the 1930s (Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 57), based on Punkhang Diki Dolma's oral account. Thus, their mention of the 1920s as the period of production of the saddle rug in their caption (124) is certainly erroneous; also, it is probable that the set initially comprised twenty-four items (57) instead of twenty (124). These saddle rugs have reached us today after being sold at some point by the Tsunmo Khangsar family of Lhasa, into which a younger son of the Punkhang family had been married (59). A fourth saddle rug of the same set has been published in Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 95.

<sup>6</sup> The Lhasa aristocracy comprised around 213 families and was internally divided into four subgroups, three of which (*sde dpon*, *yab gzhis*, and *mi drag*) formed a higher-ranking minority of twenty-seven families, while the majority of the noble houses were referred to simply in their capacity of private land owners (*sger pa*). Alice Travers, "The Careers of the Noble Officials of the Ganden Phodrang (1895–1959): Organisation and Hereditary Divisions within the Service of State," in *Revisiting Tibetan Culture and History. Proceedings of the Second International Seminar of Young Tibetologists*, Paris, 2009, ed. Kalsang Norbu Gurung et al., vol. 1, 2011, 155–74, [https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret\\_21\\_08.pdf](https://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/ret/pdf/ret_21_08.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> A 1943 photograph by Ilia Tolstoy and Brooke Dolan of this saddle carpet, used by the Punkhang Cavalry during the New Year festivities, is reproduced in Rosemary Tung, *A Portrait of Lost Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pl. 112, with the caption “Horsemen dressed in the uniforms of Mongolian cavalry ride out to the Trapchi Plain.”

<sup>8</sup> On these ceremonies, see Joachim Karsten, “A Note on ya sor and the Secular Festivals following the Smon lam chen mo,” in *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History, and Culture: Proceedings of the Csoma de Körös Symposium Held at Velm-Vienna, Austria, 13–19 September 1981*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner, vol. 1 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1983), 117–48; Hugh E. Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year* (London: Serindia, 1993), 31–57; Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 56.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the total number of the troops, see Joachim Karsten, “A Note on ya sor and the Secular Festivals following the Smon lam chen mo,” in *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History, and Culture: Proceedings of the Csoma de Körös Symposium Held at Velm-Vienna, Austria, 13–19 September 1981*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner, vol. 1 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1983), 136.

<sup>10</sup> At that time, in 1939 through 1947, Gonpo Tsering was western governor of Gyantse (*rgyal rtse rdzong sdod nub pa*), and in the same year, 1940, he married the princess of Sikkim Kumari Pema Choden (Kukula). For biographies of Yabzhi Punkhang father and son, see Luciano Petech, *Aristocracy and Government in Tibet, 1728–1959*, Serie Orientale Roma 45 (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1973), 27, and Joachim Karsten, “A Note on ya sor and the Secular Festivals following the Smon lam chen mo,” in *Contributions on Tibetan Language, History, and Culture: Proceedings of the*

*Csoma de Körös Symposium Held at Velm-Vienna, Austria, 13–19 September 1981*, ed. Ernst Steinkellner, vol. 1 (Vienna: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1983), 129n71. For 1947 as the year of end of charge as Gyantsegovernor for Punkhang Se (sras), see Government of India Press, *Who's Who in Tibet*, Corrected with a Few Subsequent Additions up to 30th September 1948, vol. L (Calcutta: Government of India Press, 1949), 141, and Hugh E. Richardson, H. E. Richardson, and British Trade Agent, *Lhasa Letter for the Week Ending the 11 May 1947 from H. E. Richardson, British Trade Agent, Gyantse and Officer in Charge, British Mission, Lhasa* (British Library, India Office Records, L/P&S/12/4202, 1947).

<sup>11</sup> Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 40.

<sup>12</sup> Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 51; Myers, introduction to Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, with an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 12.

<sup>13</sup> Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten (Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 26.

<sup>14</sup> Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 90–91; Trinley Chodrak and Kesang G. Tashi, *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*, ed. Kesang G. Tseten

(Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press, 2000), 59. For an example of a butterfly shape, see Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 90–91, 40, 57.

<sup>15</sup> Though the identical top saddle rug reproduced in Thomas Cole, *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*, With an introduction by Diana K. Myers, Exhibition catalog (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2011), [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.patterns_of_life_96), 95, has not been identified by the author as belonging to the Punkhang cavalry set, the analysis concerning its dating is most interesting, as it points to the presence of contradictory elements: the oblong shape of the saddle carpet and its border design (the scrolling foliate forms) indicate a piece of the mid-nineteenth century or even earlier, while the angularity of the foliage, the longevity symbol, and the lotus flower in the field all point to a later production.

## **FURTHER READING**

Chodrak, Trinley, and Kesang G. Tashi. 2000. *Of Wool and Loom: The Tradition of Tibetan Rugs*. Edited by Kesang G. Tseten. Trumbull, CT: Weatherhill in cooperation with Orchid Press.

Cole, Thomas. 2011. *Patterns of Life: The Art of Tibetan Carpets*. With an introduction by Diana K. Myers. New York: Rubin Museum of Art.  
[https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4.\\_patterns\\_of\\_life\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/4._patterns_of_life_96).

Richardson, Hugh E. 1993. *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year*. London: Serindia.

## CITATION

Alice Travers, "Saddle Carpet for the Yabzhi Punkhang Ceremonial Cavalry: A Mundane Craft Elevated for a Commemorative Parade," *Project Himalayan Art*, Rubin Museum of Art, 2023, <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart/essays/saddle-carpet-for-the-yabzhi-punkhang-ceremonial-cavalry>.

## ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

This essay is featured in *Himalayan Art in 108 Objects*, a publication from the Rubin Museum of Art that illuminates Himalayan art through a collection of significant objects from the Neolithic era to today. Along with a [digital platform](#) and traveling exhibition, this publication is part of the [Rubin's Project Himalayan Art](#), an integrated initiative that presents a sweeping introduction to Himalayan art. Located in New York City, the Rubin Museum of Art explores and celebrates Himalayan art, cultures, and ideas, and serves as a space for reflection and personal transformation. Learn more at: <http://rubinmuseum.org/projecthimalayanart>