

A MONUMENT OF TIBETAN CULTURAL IDENTITY

NATASHA N. KIMMET



Fig. 1 Photograph by Prodhan (Sikkimese; dates unknown); *The Potala Palace, Lhasa: The Seat of the Dalai Lamas*; 1948; film negative; courtesy of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (Is.I.A.O.) in l.c.a. and Ministero degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale; Neg. dep. 7710/02 + 8037/05 © Museo delle Civiltà

POTALA PALACE

Lhasa, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China)
1645–1694

SUMMARY

Art historian and architectural specialist Natasha N. Kimmet explores the construction of Tibet's most famous monument, the Potala Palace, from its roots in ancient fortress architecture to the reproduction of its image around the world as both a Buddhist icon and symbol of the Tibetan nation. Built by the Fifth Dalai Lama and his regent to mark the reunification of Tibet under the Geluk tradition after decades of civil war, the thirteen-story seat of government is a centerpiece of the Himalayan religious and political landscape.

The Potala Palace in Lhasa (figs. 1 and 2) is Tibet's most iconic monument and symbol of Tibetan cultural and national identity. The palace's massive scale and prominent setting reflect the prestige and power of its charismatic inhabitants—the Dalai Lamas—from its construction in the seventeenth century to the end of the centralized Tibetan Ganden Podrang government in 1959.

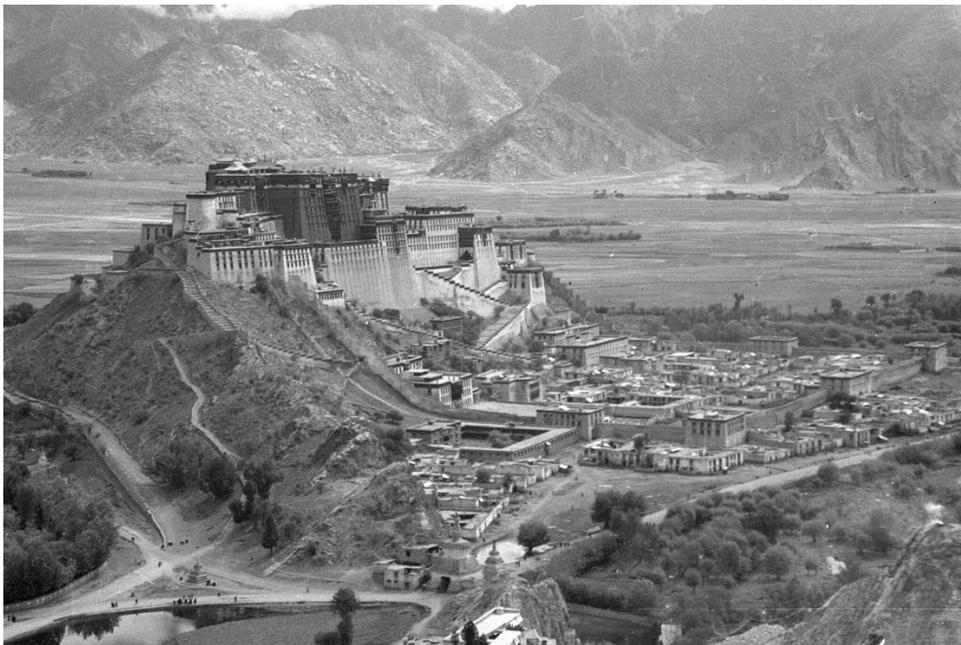


Fig. 2 Photograph by Prodhon (Sikkimese; dates unknown); *The Potala Palace, Lhasa: The Seat of the Dalai Lamas*; 1948; film negative; courtesy of Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (Is.I.A.O.) in l.c.a. and Ministero Degli Affari Esteri e della Cooperazione Internazionale; Neg. dep. 7710/02 + 8037/05 © Museo delle Civiltà

In 1642, following decades of civil war, the “Great Fifth” Dalai Lama (1617–1682) and the Geluk tradition of Tibetan Buddhism consolidated their power through strategic alliances with

Mongol leaders and unified Tibet (fig. 3). The Great Fifth relocated the seat of Tibetan government from nearby Drepung Monastery to Lhasa and undertook a massive nation-building campaign centered in the historical Tibetan capital and Potala. His imposing palace-fortress visually commands the entire Kyichu River valley from atop the Red Hill at the western periphery of Lhasa, a site selected for its associations with bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara and the imperial kings of Tibet. The Dalai Lamas positioned themselves as emanations of Avalokiteshvara and incarnations of the first Tibetan emperor, and thus used the Potala to anchor and legitimize their identity as Tibet's supreme spiritual and temporal leaders.



Fig. 3 The Fifth Dalai Lama, with Hand- and Footprints; Tibet; late 17th century; pigments on cloth; 30½ × 19-5/8 in. (77.5 × 50 cm); Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet, Paris; MG19107; photograph by Thierry Ollivier © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY

An architectural masterpiece, the Potala is made more potent as a vast repository of cultural treasures revealing the wealthy patronage, mobility of artisans, and cross-cultural networks of exchange involved in its decoration. The landmark was pivotal to Lhasa's transformation into a vibrant social center, and increasingly attracted foreign dignitaries and pilgrims for state

functions and Buddhist rituals. The Potala has been replicated in a variety of visual forms to convey religious, cultural, and political messages to diverse audiences (figs. 4 and 5).



Fig. 4 The Potala and the Principal Monuments of Central Tibet; Tibet; 19th century; distemper on cloth; 38 3/4 × 28 3/8 in. (98.5 × 72 cm); Musée national des arts asiatiques Guimet, Paris; MG21248; photograph by Jean Schormans © RMN-Grand Palais / Art Resource, NY



Fig. 5 Putuo Zongcheng Temple at Chengde, China; October 1, 2007; photograph by Gisling; published under a Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 license

THE MONUMENT: ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The thirteen-story Potala epitomizes classical Tibetan architecture (fig. 6).¹ It developed from early Tibetan castles and fortified settlements, with its modular structure embedded in the rocky landscape, and combines the functions of fortress, palace, and monastery. The battered rammed-earth walls and austere facade articulated by timber-framed windows and balconies contribute to the overall symmetry, order, scale, and proportions of the classical Tibetan order. The interior is lavishly decorated with wood carvings and textiles, mural paintings depicting important historical events and people, and exquisite movable objects, including scroll paintings (thangkas), sculptures, religious texts, and objects made of precious materials. The collection of thousands of metal sculptures represents workshops across Tibet, Nepal, India, Mongolia, and China, and spans a history of over one thousand years.²



Fig. 6 David Bickerstaff (Australian, b. 1959); Lhasa Potala Palace; 2015; digital photograph courtesy of David Bickerstaff

The Potala was constructed in two major phases, beginning with the White Palace (1645–1648) under the direction of the Fifth Dalai Lama, and followed by the Red Palace (1690–1694) built by the Great Fifth’s regent Desi Sanggye Gyatso (1653–1705) (fig. 7). The Dalai Lama died in 1682, but his death was concealed by the regent to allow completion of the Red Palace and to maintain political continuity. The White Palace contains assembly halls, libraries, and private monastic residences. Notably, the tantric college and personal monastery of the Dalai Lamas, Namgyel Monastery, was relocated from Drepung Monastery to the western courtyard for performing prayers and rituals for the welfare of Tibet. The Red Palace, with its golden roofs, is integrated with the central portion of the White Palace. It houses chapels, assembly halls, and the reliquary stupas of eight Dalai Lamas. Long switchback staircases visually and functionally tether the palace to Zhol Village at its southern base, where administrative buildings and state-run craftsmen’s workshops were established. Construction of such a monumental building required a workforce comprising thousands of master craftsmen, artisans, engineers, and

conscripted laborers. Subsequent related buildings include the Lukhang Temple, built by Sanggye Gyatso and the Sixth Dalai Lama behind the Potala as a private esoteric meditation retreat, and the Norbulingka Palace, built as a summer residence during the life of the Seventh Dalai Lama.

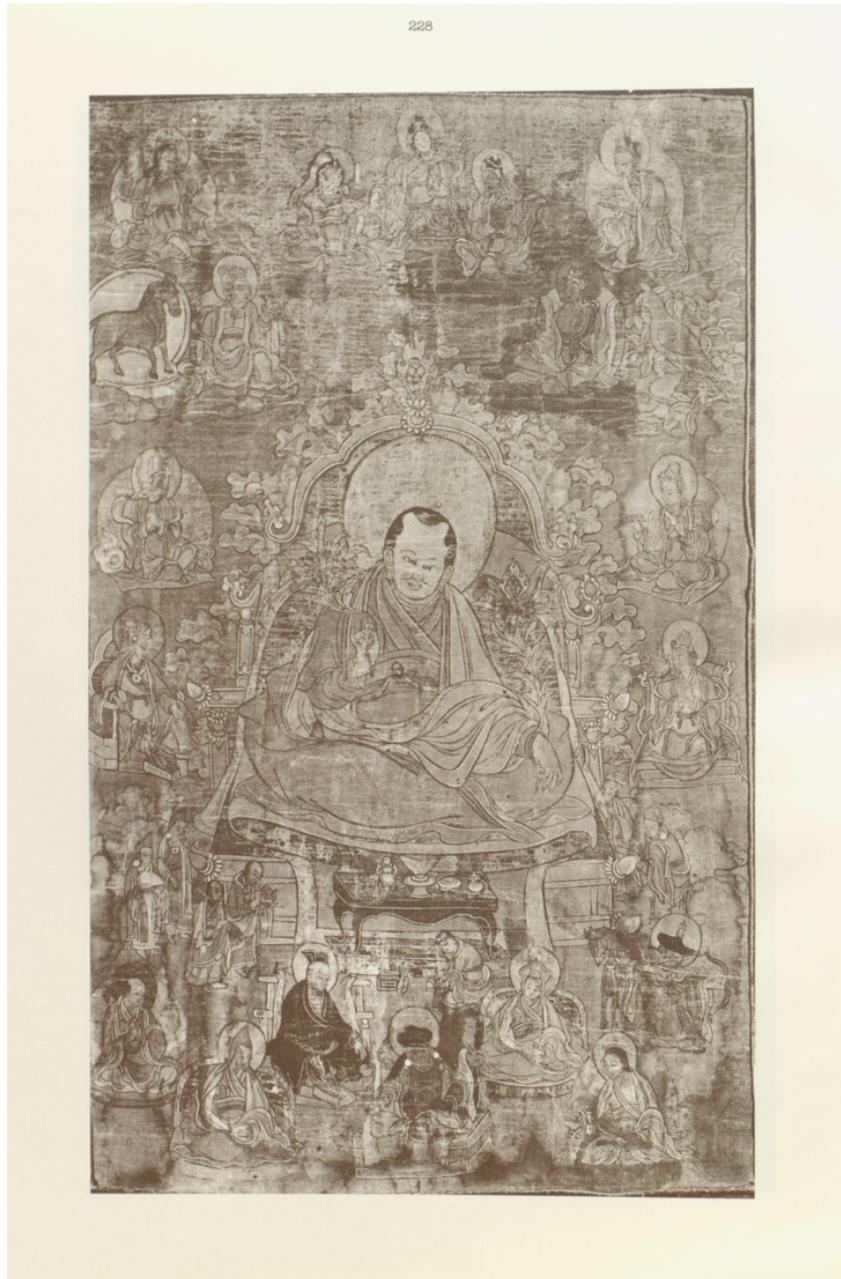


Fig. 7 Desi Sanggye Gyatso (1653–1705); Tibet; 17th century; woodblock print; dimensions unknown; Biblioteca nazionale centrale di Roma; HAR 74196; image after Tucci 1949

THE SYMBOL: PLACEMAKING AND NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

For many Tibetans, Tibetan political unity and identity are anchored by the charisma of the Dalai Lamas and the prestige of the monuments they promoted. In 1642, when the Fifth Dalai Lama assumed spiritual and temporal leadership of Tibet with the support of the Khoshud Mongol leader Güüshi Khan (Gushri, 1582–1655, r. 1642–1655), he commenced an ambitious project of placemaking and identity construction in Lhasa. He employed various tactics to aggrandize his identity as the spiritual protector and political unifier of Tibet. According to Tibetan tradition, Lhasa's Red Hill is the earthly manifestation of Avalokiteshvara's Buddhist paradise (Pure Land) Mount Potalaka. By selecting this location and name for his palace, the Great Fifth established the Potala as a paradise and himself as an incarnation of Tibet's protector bodhisattva. The Potala is further linked to the first emperor of the Tibetan Empire, Songtsen Gampo (r. 618–649), believed to be an incarnation of Avalokiteshvara and, despite the absence of archaeological evidence, to have built a palace in the same location.

This religio-historical lineage is strengthened through the writings of Sanggye Gyatso and mural paintings in the Potala.³ The earliest murals—painted in the Great Eastern Assembly Hall in 1647/1648 by Choying Gyatso (1622–1665)⁴—narrate the history of Buddhism in Tibet up to the Fourth Dalai Lama. A mural series in the Great Western Assembly Hall visually testifies to the Great Fifth's reunification of Tibet, together with murals in the upper galleries illustrating the construction of the Potala and his other achievements.⁵

Lhasa's Jokhang Temple has attracted Buddhist pilgrims since the seventh century. The Potala was promoted as an equally prestigious monument in the Geluk-administered restructuring of Lhasa as a cosmopolitan ceremonial center with renewed appeal for pilgrims, merchants, scholar-diplomats, and artisans from Asia and distant locations. A network of new (predominantly Geluk) landmarks was established in relation to new circulation routes, creating a structured way of viewing and experiencing the capital.⁶ Lhasa was reorganized around three arteries for circumambulation of its sacred sites: the inner circuit (*nangkor*) around the Jokhang, housing Tibet's most sacred image, the Jowo statue of Buddha Shakyamuni; the middle circuit (*barkor*) around the full temple complex, expanded under the Great Fifth's administration; and the outer

circuit (*lingkor*) around most of Lhasa and its main religious monuments, notably the Potala. Additionally, new annual festivals and (ostensibly) religious ceremonies were introduced, with ritual processions highlighting the Geluk state and Dalai Lama lineage (fig. 8).⁷ By visiting these monuments and engaging in pilgrimage, rituals, trade, and governance, Lhasa’s inhabitants and visitors reinforced the new Tibetan national identity centered in Lhasa and its monuments.



Fig. 8 Hugh Richardson (British, 1905–2000); Monks on the “Golden Procession”; Potala Palace, Lhasa, Tibet; ca. 1936–1950; negative film nitrate; 2 1/6 × 3 1/3 in. (55 × 85 mm); Pitt Rivers Museum; PRM 2001.59.9.38.1; image © Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford, 2001.59.9.38.1. CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0

REPRESENTATIONS OF THE POTALA AND THE CULTURAL TRANSFER OF A SYMBOL

Cross-cultural encounters in the Tibetan capital shaped the production and dissemination of Potala-centric images. In the eighteenth century, a unique genre of portable scroll paintings emerged featuring sacred Tibetan monuments, the majority of which depict Lhasa with the Potala—sometimes paired with the Jokhang—as the central subject (fig. 4).⁸ The paintings are devotional, instructive, and promotional—they prescribe specific religious sites to be visited by Buddhist pilgrims to accrue merit, function as devotional objects conveying Lhasa’s holy aura, and promote political and social order concentrated in Lhasa’s major institutions. The patrons, artists, and audience came from across the Tibetan cultural region.

Lhasa captured the attention of Christian missionaries, explorers, and political officers from Europe, Russia, the United States, and Japan who created their own images of the capital, particularly through photography. During the nineteenth century, foreign nations competed for control of trade and diplomatic relations across Central Asia, with Tibet at the center of the “Great Game” between the British and Russian Empires. As religious devotees, Buddhist pilgrims from Mongolian regions of Russia could still visit Lhasa. But Tibet’s “closed door” policy—a reaction against encroaching imperialism—kept Lhasa largely inaccessible to Westerners from the late eighteenth century until 1903–1904, when the British Younghusband expedition forcefully entered the capital. In their sketches, photographs, and writing, British diplomat-officials used the same prominent monuments seen in indigenous paintings to convey Tibet as a unique, independent nation—distinct from China, yet requiring British protection.⁹ The Potala was often replicated in images made for foreign audiences, bolstering its status as Tibet’s preeminent landmark.

The most significant three-dimensional “Potala” is the Putuo Zongcheng Temple in Chengde, China (fig. 9). Built around 1767–1771 during the Qing dynasty reign of the Qianlong emperor (r. 1735–1796), it draws on the Potala’s associations with spiritual and secular authority.¹⁰



Fig. 9 Putuo Zongcheng Temple at Chengde, China; October 1, 2007; photograph by Gisling; published under a Creative Commons CC BY-SA 4.0 license

The Potala was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1994. Today it is a museum and tourist attraction administered by the People's Republic of China.¹¹ It is integral to China's ongoing transformation of Lhasa, such as through elaborate performances at the palace that serve to reposition Tibetan historical narratives within the history of China. The palace has not been inhabited by the Dalai Lamas since 1959, when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama fled to India following the forceful annexation of Tibet by the prc in 1950. But the cultural resonance of the Potala as a symbolic center of Tibet and Tibetan identity continues to be promoted and reinforced globally (fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Images of the Potala Palace reproduced on a postcard and collectible cards from cigarette packages; first of half of 20th century; photograph by Natasha N. Kimmet

FOOTNOTES

¹ André Alexander, *The Temples of Lhasa: Tibetan Buddhist Architecture from the 7th to the 21st Centuries* (Chicago: Serindia, 2007); Natasha N. Kimmet, “Nako—The Village ‘Adorned with Temples’: Residential Architecture on the West Tibetan Frontier (c. 18th to 21st Centuries)” (PhD diss., University of Vienna, 2018); Knud Larsen and Amund Sinding-Larsen, *The Lhasa Atlas: Traditional Tibetan Architecture and Townscape* (Boston: Shambhala, 2001), 39; Fernand Meyer, “The Potala Palace of the Dalai Lamas in Lhasa,” *Orientalia* 18, no. 7 (July) (1987): 32.

² Ulric von Schroeder, *Buddhist Sculptures in Tibet*, 2 vols. (Hong Kong: Visual Dharma Publications, 2001) and Ulric von Schroeder, *108 Buddhist Statues in Tibet* (Chicago: Serindia, 2008).

³ Kurtis R. Schaeffer, “The Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lopsang Gyatso,” in *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, ed. Martin Brauen (Chicago: Serindia, 2005), 64–91.

⁴ Illustrated in Ping Cuo Ci Dan, ed., *Pho brang po ta la'i ldebs bris ri mo'i 'byung khungs lo rgyus gsal ba'i me long/ Budala gong bi hua yuan liu / A Mirror of the Murals in the Potala* (Beijing: Jiuzhou tushu chubanshe, 2000), 51–82.

⁵ Samten G. Karmay, “The Mural Paintings in the Red Palace of the Potala,” ed. G. Samten, *The Arrow and the Spindle: Studies in History, Myths, Rituals and Beliefs in Tibet 2* (2005): 109–18; illustrated in Ping Cuo Ci Dan, ed., *Pho brang po ta la'i ldebs bris ri mo'i 'byung khungs lo rgyus gsal ba'i me long/ Budala gong bi hua yuan liu / A Mirror of the Murals in the Potala* (Beijing: Jiuzhou tushu chubanshe, 2000) 83–102.

⁶ Kurtis R. Schaeffer, “Ritual, Festival and Authority Under the Fifth Dalai Lama,” in *Power, Politics, and the Reinvention of Tradition: Tibet in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. PLATS 2003: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford 2003*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library 3/13 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 187–202.

⁷ Hugh E. Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year* (London: Serindia, 1993); Kurtis R. Schaeffer, “Ritual, Festival and Authority Under the Fifth Dalai Lama,” in *Power, Politics, and the Reinvention of Tradition: Tibet in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. PLATS 2003: Proceedings of the Tenth Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, Oxford 2003*, ed. Bryan J. Cuevas and Kurtis R. Schaeffer, Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library 3/13 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 187–202.

⁸ Bríd Arthur, “Envisioning Lhasa: 17th–20th Century Paintings of Tibet’s Sacred City” (PhD diss., Ohio State University, 2015) and Bríd Arthur, “Visions of Lhasa: Exploring Tibetan Monument Paintings,” *Orientalism* 47, no. 7 (October) (2016): 49–55; see also Gilles Béguin, “The Great Monuments of Lhasa as Presented in the Architectural Paintings of the Musée Guimet,” in *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*. Pommaret, ed. Françoise Pommaret, Brill’s Tibetan Studies Library 3 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 53–63; Natasha N. Kimmet, “Anchored in Architecture: ‘Monumental Lhasa’ at the Rubin Museum of Art,” *Orientalism* 47, no. 7 (October) (2016): 40–48.

⁹ Peter Bishop, “The Potala and Western Place Making,” *Tibet Journal* 19 (1994): 5–22; Clare Harris, “Tibet: Photography and the Construction of Place,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Photograph*, ed. Robin Lenman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 626 and Clare Harris, “British and German Photography in Tibet in the 1930s: The Diplomatic, the Ethnographic, and Other Modes,” in *Tibet in 1938–1939: Photographs from the Ernst Schäfer Expedition to Tibet*, ed. Isrun Engelhardt (Chicago: Serindia, 2007), 73–90; Clare Harris and Tsering Shakya, *Seeing Lhasa: British Depictions of the Tibetan Capital 1936–1947*, Exhibition catalog (Chicago: Serindia, 2003).

¹⁰ Anne Chayet, *Les temples de Jehol et leurs modèles tibétains* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1985), 134.

¹¹ Clare Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) discusses postcolonial politics and the making of this museum.

FURTHER READING

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Pommaret, Françoise, ed. 2003. *Lhasa in the Seventeenth Century: The Capital of the Dalai Lamas*. Leiden: Brill.

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