

# *In the Blazing Light of Tibet*

*Christian Luczanits*

Behind that snowy rampart I knew was Tibet, strange and dark with its veil of mystery stretching far into the north across barren plateau and guardian mountains. It seemed the greatest human presumption to think of venturing beyond those snows. As far back as I can recall, I had always wanted to go to Tibet, and I can remember, during the years away at school, how Bill Cummings and I had planned a thousand times the trip we should some day take. (Vanderhoef, 2008, p. 1)

In the above notation made by F. Bailey (Billy) Vanderhoef, Jr (1913-2008) after seeing the Himalayan range in the spring of 1938, the fanciful image of Tibet that had long been perpetuated in the West is once again clearly apparent. Indeed his travelogue, probably written shortly after the eight-week trip he made there together with his friend and fellow student Wilbur (Bill) L. Cummings, Jr (1914-43), frequently juxtaposes the idea of a mystical mediaeval interior with that of a modern outside world. In fact, times had changed drastically by 1938. What had begun as a trauma for independent Tibet through the so-called ‘Younghusband expedition’ in 1904 had by now warmed into a cordial relationship between the British government in India and its Tibetan counterpart (Bishop, pp.

185-96). Although it was in principle still a closed country, a considerable number of Westerners were able to realize their dream to reach Tibet. Vanderhoef and Cummings had the explicit aim of making up-to-date photographic documentation, in particular colour photography of Tibetan murals. In the following discussion, what is available of their photography today is analysed in the general context of early photography of Tibet, especially that of the 1930s. The Italian tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci’s (1894-1984) journeys to West Tibet (in 1931, 1933 and 1935) and Central Tibet (1937 and 1948) are, for example, well known not only through his travel accounts and numerous scholarly works, but also through the photographs of Pietro Francesco Mele and Fosco Maraini, who accompanied Tucci to Central Tibet. The German ornithologist Ernst Schäfer’s (1910-92) 1938-39 expedition through East Tibet has also recently received renewed attention through a new publication of his photographs (Engelhardt, 2007). However, first and foremost were the numerous British government representatives settled in Gyantse in the western part of Central Tibet (Tsang) in accordance with an arrangement made between the British and Tibetan governments in the aftermath of 1904, as well as in Gangtok in Sikkim.

It was primarily due to this connection that these British civil servants, and others associated with them, were able to enter Tibet, the most prominent being the British diplomat and tibetologist Hugh Richardson (1905-2000). His photographs (Richardson, 1993), and those of various others who were in Tibet during that period, have now been made available online through a project directed by Clare Harris at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford (see ‘The Tibet Album’ at <http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/>).

This collection alone shows how much the British government representation – which even established dak bungalows en route that were also used to facilitate travel – became the focal point of access to ‘mystical’ Tibet. The British presence also enabled Americans to gain entry, among them Theos Bernard (1908-47), whose collection of artefacts and photographs is now housed at Berkeley Art Museum, and the two travellers whose photographs are the subject of this article. One may well see this arrangement as the beginning of tourism in Tibet, even if it was very exclusive.



(Fig. 1) The caravan disappearing in fog

As recorded in an interview, Vanderhoef and Cummings had been friends since childhood and classmates at Harvard (Hedges, 2006 [1983]). Although only 24 years old at the time of the Tibet trip, Billy Vanderhoef was already experienced as both a traveller and a photographer in Asia. Two years earlier, he had accepted the challenge of documenting South Asian cave murals in colour with another classmate of his at Harvard, A. Townsend Johnson, for a comparative publication of these paintings that came out not long afterwards (Rowland and Coomaraswamy, 1938). Although he formally studied Oriental art at Harvard under some of the renowned scholars of the time – Edward Forbes (1873-1969) initiating the mural documentation just mentioned – his studies were from then on replaced by further such in situ photographic documentation, and remained unfinished due both to an accident and the imminent world war.

Vanderhoef had already proved his expertise in photography, and Cummings appears to have been equally skilled. Essentially following a well-trodden path, their photographs are, however, remarkable as a reflection of their photographic virtuosity, technical curiosity and broad interests. Besides recording their journey and experiences, the two young photographers obviously made an attempt to communicate those impressions that are difficult or virtually impossible to capture. For example, they did not hesitate to photograph their

caravan disappearing in the dense fog on their way to Tibet (Fig. 1). Even if Vanderhoef did not explicitly write about it as such, this image may well have been chosen to represent their rite of passage from the known world to that of unknown Tibet, which they entered via Natu pass from Sikkim.

Many of their pictures appear to capture the light from the glaring sun at this high altitude, a recurrent theme in Vanderhoef's travelogue as well. In the photograph in Figure 2, the depiction of the women sitting in the field with a low sun almost directly behind them not only makes it apparent that their elaborate headdresses had a protective function – it is no wonder they even wore them in the fields – but also shows their aesthetic appeal, with the light caught in the white diagonal bands that served to stabilize the elaborate construction. A view of Gyantse from a location within the monastery to the west of the Kumbum – a complex 42.5-metre-high stupa with more than seventy chapels on thirteen floors, pictured here along with the whole city and the fortress in the background – reproduces the reflection of the sunlight on the mountain ridge connecting the monastery with the fortress, and on the roofs of the houses and the monastery buildings (Fig. 3).

The play of light, the extreme contrast of light and shadow, and the transition from a dark interior to a glaringly bright exterior, were also employed in photographs of street scenes. Be it locals and pilgrims passing beggars lined up along a wall, a monk hastening away through one of Gyantse's streets, the passage through a gateway in the city, a couple of begging pilgrims sitting against a stone wall with their prayer wheels, or a group of Gyantse women chatting, the photographers often captured such scenes with their subjects paying little attention to or even being completely unaware of them. Quite a number of photographs portray itinerant as well as local craftsmen: the one of the pot-mender seated on the street against a rough clay-brick wall, for example, combines their interests in both light and handicrafts (Fig. 4). In this beautiful composition, the pots, the yak dung for feeding the fire and the basket are in bright sunlight, whereas the mender's face is hidden by smoke; however, the sun is reflected on his balding head, revealing the wrinkles on his forehead and thereby indicating the hardships of his job. Silversmiths are among the other craftsmen depicted, and a whole group of pictures is dedicated to the manufacture of paper.

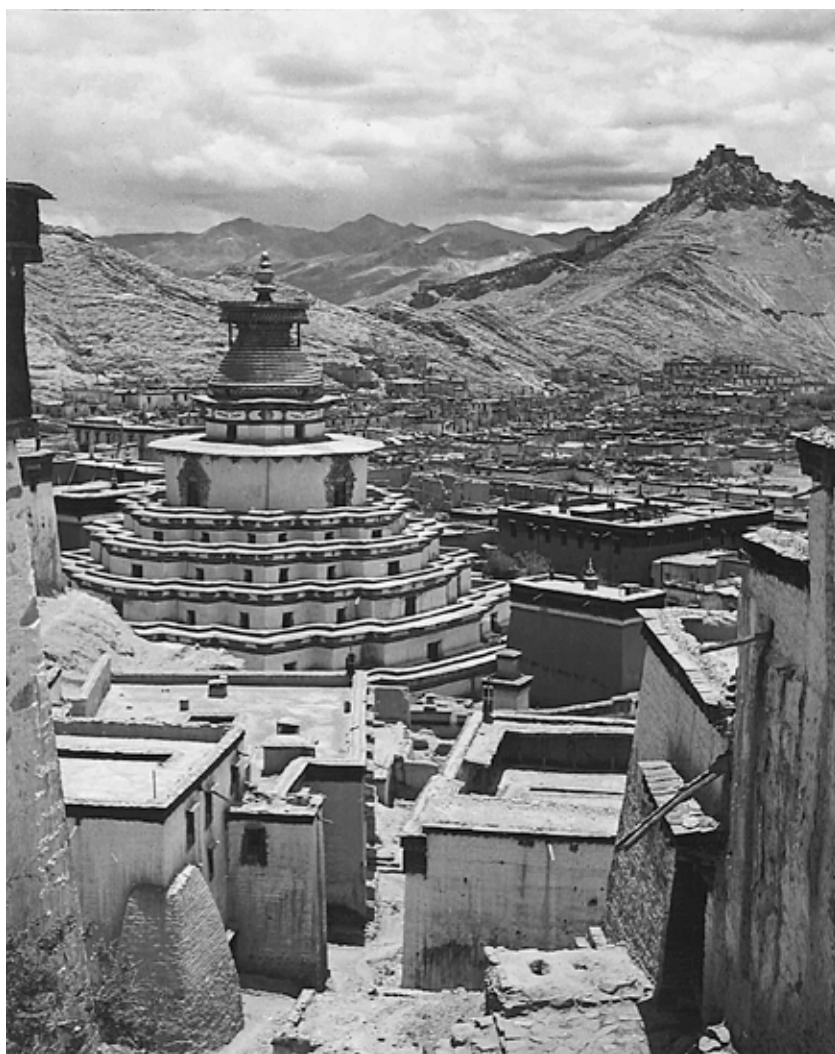
Through a joint initiative of the Santa Barbara Museum of Art and the University of California, Santa Barbara, all the photographs in Vanderhoef's possession have been scanned and are now available online together with his travelogue, edited by José Ignacio Cabezon (Vanderhoef, 2008; <http://www.religion.ucsb.edu/tibetjourney1938/>). An album of photographs owned by Cummings's family has been scanned as well, and it is planned to make these photographs equally available. Yet these personal collections can only represent a fraction of



(Fig. 2) Women with the traditional Gyantse headdress resting in a field



(Fig. 3) A view of Gyantse in bright sunlight



(Fig. 4) Pot-mender working on the street in Gyantse



what the two photographers originally took. Colour photography of murals and other art was an explicit goal of the trip, and a request in this regard was granted by one of the Tibetan governors, the trade agent (Vanderhoef, 2008, p. 67). However, among the photographs available to us only one, black-and-white, picture was taken inside a temple, namely a general view of the Arhat Temple (Neten Lhakhang) of the Main Temple (Tsuglagkhang) at Gyantse showing the central image of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni and four other statues of the *arhats* to the left of him seated in their caves.

Nevertheless, a short illustrated article published in *Life* magazine on 12 June 1939 proves that they did in fact succeed in taking colour photographs of murals (Vanderhoef, 1939). One of the illustrations shows a section of the narrative murals in the roofed corridor of the Main Temple's second storey, which at that time were hidden under a layer of dirt and grease. Thinking that these paintings were much older than those in the Kumbum (although they are in fact roughly contemporaneous), the photographers obtained permission to clean the wall, and apparently focused their documen-

tation on it. Earlier, they had also attempted to record the many shrines of the Kumbum, but this proved difficult because they are so narrow.

*Life* also published a colour photograph of the giant cloth image of the future Buddha Maitreya, unrolled once each year at Gyantse during the early morning hours of the 15th day of the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar as the culmination of a festival celebrating Shakyamuni's birth, enlightenment and *parinirvana* (Saga Dawa) (Fig. 5). Vanderhoef notes:

When we saw it closely, it appeared to be the most amazing piece of work. Every bit of the picture was made of pieces of brocade cut to fit exactly a previously made plan and then sewn together with incredible neatness. It was simply painting with cloth, and must have been an immense task. Beside the work involved, the Tangka must have cost an enormous sum to make, for it is entirely composed of the finest and richest of brocades. We were interested to find that parts of it were made of Genoese velvet, some of Florentine cut velvet, some of Persian gold tissue, some even of French seventeenth century silk brocade, besides bits of Chinese, Indian and even Japanese material. (Vanderhoef, 2008, p. 81)

This exquisite giant appliqué, in a style very close to that of the 15th century murals of the Gyantse Kumbum, was still displayed very recently, certainly in 2000.

From the very beginning, Vanderhoef and Cummings also intended to purchase good-quality artefacts, which was apparently much more difficult than they had expected, since such items were not sold in shops or in the market. Nevertheless, it appears they were able to collect quite a few pieces, as Cummings's family (in 1954) and Vanderhoef (in 1991) both donated a substantial number of Tibetan items to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, of which the latter was also trustee. Perhaps most outstanding among them is a complete bone apron probably worn by dancers representing one of the wrathful chosen divinities (T. *yidam*) of the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon (Fig. 6). There are also a number of high-quality *thangkas* and sculptures ranging from the 18th to the 20th century, as well as several book-covers and other interesting artefacts, among them a jade bowl with its leather case. Together with some of their photographs, these and other items



(Fig. 5) Giant cloth *thangka* unrolled at Gyantse





(Fig. 6) Ritual apron  
Tibet, 19th century  
Bone, leather and brass  
Length 86.4 cm, width 71.1 cm  
Santa Barbara Museum of Art  
Gift of Mrs Wilbur L. Cummings, Sr in  
memory of her son, Wilbur L. Cummings  
(Photography by Scott McClaine)

from their trip were recently on display in a small exhibition at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art devoted to their Tibetan experience.

According to Vanderhoef's travelogue, they were obliged to make haste on their inward journey in order to witness the monastic dances at Gyantse preceding the display of the cloth *thangka* mentioned above, but were still too late; they were, however, fortunate to see them at Nenying monastery before reaching their destination (Vanderhoef, 2008, pp. 58-61). Their return was equally hectic, leaving them no time to visit any of the other monasteries on the way. Now, torrential monsoon rains accompanied their passage back into the modern world.

Even after their successful trip, Vanderhoef retained the mystical image of Tibet in his travelogue. At first glance, the photography appears to speak an entirely different language. Apparently, the two photographers tried to record their visit, including their personal impressions, as far as was possible and socially acceptable. Social restraint or restrictions may be responsible for the fact that while images of public celebrations are abundant, there are no photographs of the many invitations by Tibetan government officials and to the houses of noble families they enjoyed in Tibet. The photographs available to us, thus, do not record a major part of their experience that receives considerable attention in the travelogue.

Interestingly, even that which is considered the most mystic aspect of Tibet in the travelogue – the impressive monastic

rituals with their associated paraphernalia – does not seem to have been photographed either. It may even be the case that the travellers did not consider ritual to be a subject worthy of photography at all, since it was during a major ceremony in the Assembly Hall of Gyantse's Main Temple that they discovered the murals decorating the corridor. In fact, contemporary photographs of rituals performed in the interior of temples are extremely rare, and appear to have been very difficult technically due to the dark environment (see, for example, *Ceremony inside a monastery, Gyantse* from 'The Tibet Album'; [http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/photo\\_BMH.F84.1.html](http://tibet.prm.ox.ac.uk/photo_BMH.F84.1.html) [accessed 6 July 2008], as well as the three pictures following). Thus, excluding what is considered most mystical about Tibet, photography does not present an even picture either. Quite literally, photography at that time captures only the exterior exposed by the blazing sunlight of Tibet but leaves the dark interiors unrecorded, and thus open to continuing speculation.

At the time of writing, Christian Luczanits was visiting professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His visit was part of an academic quarter programme focusing on Tibetan and Himalayan art made possible by a grant from the Shelley and Donald Rubin Foundation.

This article was initiated by Susan S. Tai, Elizabeth Atkins Curator of Asian Art at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art, who also supplied all the background material and the photographs. Unless otherwise stated, all photographs are by F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr. and Wilbur L. Cummings, Jr.

#### *Selected bibliography*

- Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing, and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape*, Berkeley, 1989.
- Isrun Engelhardt, *Tibet in 1938-1939: Photographs from the Ernst Schäfer Expedition to Tibet*, Chicago, 2007.
- Lorna Hedges, *Interview of F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr* (transcribed by A. Adameck), Santa Barbara, 2006 (1983).
- Hugh E. Richardson, *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year*, London, 1993.
- Benjamin Rowland and Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Wall-painting of India, Central Asia & Ceylon: A Comparative Study With an Introductory Essay on the Nature of Buddhist Art*, Boston, 1938.
- F. Bailey Vanderhoef, Jr, 'Tibet Lamas Display Giant Portrait of Buddha in Annual Dawn Ceremony', in *Life*, 12 June 1939, pp. 24-26.
- , (José Ignacio Cabezón, ed.), *A Glimpse of Another World: A Journey Through Western Tibet (1938)*, Santa Barbara, 2008.