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The major Tibetan and Himalayan Collections in France

Pascale Dollfus

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To the best of my knowledge, there is no exhaustive inventory – computerized or on paper – of the “Tibetan and Himalayan collections” in French museums, private collections, libraries, universities and research centers. There is not even a simple list of the institutions in possession of the material objects, photographs, films, sound recordings, maps and manuscripts concerning these areas. Everything remains to be done, and it will be a colossal job, and a fitting homage to the collectors and above all to the populations evoked by these objects. The task is well worthwhile, and no doubt many discoveries lie in store.

In the United States, two collectors (Shelley and Donald Rubin) have begun putting together a database devoted to art from Tibet and the Himalayas (www.tibetart.com). Their experience shows that Web access to objects originally meant to be viewed by only certain categories of persons, such as the “black paintings” presented in the chapels, closed to women, where the worship of the “Protectors of the religious law” takes place, or certain texts reserved for the initiated, does not provoke any negative reactions. Taken out of their context, such objects do not seem to be “culturally sensitive”.

In France, several museums have, of late, begun to compile a computerized inventory of their collections, sometimes even digitizing them. But apparently no cooperative effort has been envisaged. Yet it seems to me that it would be useful to establish a common list of terms or at least to agree on the headings and the definitions of the terms used before going any further.

Tibet, Tibetan, Himalayas, Himalayan: erratic terms

Under the heading “Tibet”, the French dictionary of proper names, *Le Robert 2*, gives the definition “Autonomous region of southwest China...”, while the French *Encyclopaedia Universalis* gets around the problem of political boundaries by using the phrases “traditional Tibetan civilization” or “geographical Tibet”.

Tibet is thus a vague entity whose contours vary with the author, the context and the times. The term Tibet can mean:

1. The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), an administrative region created in 1965 by the Chinese, also known as the "Treasure House of the West", or Xizang;

2. Tibet as claimed by the government of Tibet in exile, which takes in not only the so-called Tibet Autonomous Region, but also Amdo and Kham regions in the east, today part of the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan and Yunnan;

3. The area of Tibetan influence, an area that extends well beyond the boundaries of the People’s Republic of China to include the high valleys of the Indian Himalayas (Ladakh, Zaskar, Spiti, Upper Lahul and Sikkim), Nepal and Bhutan, which were influenced to a varying extent by Tibetan religion and culture;

4. The Tibetan linguistic zone, inhabited by groups whose native language is Tibetan and its various dialects, including notably Baltistan (Pakistan) to the west, which is predominantly Muslim.

The adjective “Tibetan” covers an even broader scope. “An object” can be defined as Tibetan according to various criteria: geopolitical, historical, linguistic, cultural and religious – all or which are often intertwined, but cover nevertheless quite different entities.

For the Musée Guimet in Paris, originally created to study the religious of the Far East, the epithet “Tibetan” implies “Tibetan Buddhism”. The *catalogue raisonné* of

“Tibetan Buddhist paintings” established by G. Béguin thus includes pieces from Tibet and the border regions, but also from Mongolia, northern China and Nepal.

At the Musée de l’Homme, on the other hand, geopolitics takes precedence over religious, linguistic or cultural criteria. The inventories mention only the names of the country and the locality (district, region or village) or sometimes the ethnic group (e.g. Sherpa) from which the object comes. For example: Ethnography, Nepal, 61.114.25 hand spindle with a spindle whorl, Dolpo

The large numbers of objects collected in the Tibetan linguistic and cultural areas of northern Nepal, India and Bhutan are not listed as “Tibetan”. Only those objects from “historical Tibet” are found under the heading “Tibet/Tibetan” or sometimes “Western China (Tibet)” – which is not innocuous. There is no cross-reference to other Tibetan-speaking groups which share a similar or related way of life, or to the ritual and liturgical objects used in Tibetan Buddhism, large numbers of which feature in the Mongolian collections.

At the Musée de l’Homme, depending on the criteria applied (geopolitical, linguistic, religious), the number of objects actually described as “Tibetan” ranges from 450 to 1400.

There is less of a problem with the terms “Himalayas/Himalayan”, which designate a relatively well-defined geographical space and are not politically sensitive. The Himalayas are a gigantic crossroads where three major cultural blocs meet and clash: Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman and Indian. The Himalayas can be defined in geographical terms as the region bounded on the north by the Tibetan plateau, on the south by the Indo-Gangetic plain, and stretching for a distance of nearly 3,500 km along the arc of the Himalayas from Afghanistan to the Yunnan region of China. If the mountainous relief was instrumental in creating a mosaic of small ethnic groups, each with its own language and customs, it was, paradoxically, also the source of the

common features shared by the Himalayan societies. Reference to a Himalayan zone, until now absent from the inventories, except when used to indicate the unknown provenance of the object, appears as a tool that is “good to think”. In constituting a database, it seems important to reason not only in terms of localities (village, valley, country), ethnic groups or populations, but also in terms of culture areas, or even areas of religious influence; this could be done through a system of links, cross-references and relevant articles.

Let's take for instance a butter tea churn collected in Ladakh, a Tibetan linguistic and cultural region located in the Indian State of Jammu & Kashmir. In addition to indicating its provenance (village, valley, country), the card should ideally refer to the broader areas to which the object belongs: Tibetan culture area and the Himalayan domain. In this respect, the database established by Neuchâtel's Musée d'Ethnographie (www.ch/neuchatel/men), which has processed 20,000 objects out of the 35,000 in its collections, is a failure. An on-line search yields four different headings: provenance (continent, country or ethnic groups), descriptive category, the object's number and the catalogue images. For the first heading that interests us here, among the “countries” we find: Bhutan, India, Ladakh, Nepal, Tibet; the ethnic groups given are: Tibetan and Naga. The various population groups of Nepal are not differentiated. There is no map showing the geographical spaces listed, irregardless of national borders, or as “countries” or the zones occupied by the only two “ethnic groups” referenced. The objects listed under the heading “country/Ladakh” or “ethnic group/Naga” do not appear under the heading “India”; the objects listed under “ethnic group/Tibetan” (56 numbers) include the 46 objects, mostly from Darjeeling in the northern foothills of West Bengal's Himalayas (India), listed under “country/Tibet” plus ten others chosen according to criteria I was unable to identify.

The Tibetan and Himalayan collections: one way of looking at things

The objects held in the French institutions reflect the history of the collections, but also the history of the real or imaginary relations between France and the regions of origin.

Tibet is a remote, mountainous country, which was one of the least known parts of the world until the middle of the nineteenth century. Great Britain, solidly established in the Indian subcontinent, took a particular interest in the area, which it saw as both a potential market and as a buffer between India and Russian expansion. Between 1870 and the end of the century, at least eighteen expeditions, British and Russian for the most part, succeeded the traders and Christian missionaries of centuries past. The French expedition of 1889 led by Dutreuil de Rhins, an officer of the colonial army, and by Grenard, a linguist, ended tragically with the murder of Dutreuil. Part of the baggage disappeared, among which the crates containing the maps, Dutreuil's notes and the ethnographic booty. According to the Chinese soldiers sent by the authorities, the villagers were particularly angered by the discovery of numerous ritual objects in Dutreuil's trunks. In 1904, the British intervened militarily in Tibet to prevent the Russians from establishing their influence. In 1913, following an agreement with Great Britain and the young Republic of China, Tibet, independent but having lost its eastern and northern provinces, placed under Chinese control, decided to close its borders to Westerners, except for one or two diplomats already in residence. The situation hardly favored wide collecting. In 1931–32, the Citroën "Croisière Jaune", between Beirut and Peking, took a more northerly route.

In reality, while we know metal sculptures and ritual objects from countries converted to Buddhism have been present in French museums for a fairly long time, the first collections stemming from on-site collecting expeditions were late in making their entry. The well-known Tibetologist Jacques Bacot*¹ (1887–1965), donated his collection – several hundreds of objects purchased over the course of his two voyages in the Tibetan steppe in 1907, and then in 1909–10 – to the Musée Guimet in 1912 and to

the Musée de l'Homme in 1931, 1933, 1934 and 1937. Likewise, the objects collected in the course of her extensive travels – between 1912 and 1944 in Tibet and the neighboring regions – by Alexandra David-Néel* (1868–1969), who was initiated in 1912 by a hermit in Sikkim, were bequeathed a year after her death to the Musée Guimet and the Musée de l'Homme.

These collections recall the travelers' adventures in the far reaches of China and Tibet, but above all they reflect their preoccupations. They speak to us of Buddhism, reflecting a highly stereotyped and outdated image that is still alive in the press, of a country dedicated to religion, populated by monks, saints and devotees, the last bastion of spirituality. The Musée de l'Homme thus has a fine collection of objects (monks' and masked-dance costumes and accessories, religious musical instruments, manuscripts, wooden book covers and printing blocks, a traveling lama's paraphernalia), which provides a forceful and coherent illustration of Buddhist concepts in the population; but there are no objects that might evoke the daily life of the nomadic herders, and very few describing the economic activities or the craftwork of the sedentary agriculturalists who are the majority population of these highlands.

Like Tibet, the Himalayas were long a preserve of the British, who installed a Resident in 1916 in Katmandu, and a few years later established administrators in Sikkim and Ladakh. In 1995, Nepal opened its doors to the Western world. The first French collecting trips took place there in 1960–70. Combined with fieldwork, these expeditions differed from preceding ones by the importance given to everyday objects and the thoroughness of the documentation that accompanied them (see below).

Between Asian art museums and museums of anthropology: a highly uneven distribution

The Himalayan and Tibetan collections are divided very unequally between museums that define themselves as museums of fine arts and archeology, devoted to the

major arts and focusing on the great religions (Hinduism and Buddhism), and museums (or museum departments) with an anthropological aim. Among the former are the Musée Guimet in Paris, the G. Labit museum in Toulouse, the Asiatica museum in Biarritz or the museums of Asian arts in Nice and Toulon; while the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, the now-closed Kwok-on museum and, to a lesser degree, the Alexandra David-Néel Museum in Digne-Les-Bains are of the latter kind.

This split between great religions/popular religions, major arts/minor arts, esthetic objects/ethnographic objects, ancient objects (pre-1850)/contemporary or pre-contemporary objects, however regrettable it may seem, is clearly reflected in Paris in the distribution of the pieces acquired by Jacques Bacot along the Sino-Tibetan border in the early decades of the twentieth century, a time that, G. Béguin notes (1965: 16), was particularly conducive to the purchase of religious objects, “the destruction of several Tibetan monasteries by Chinese troops in the uprising in the Kham having in effect thrown an abundant supply on the market”.

As donations, deposits and exchanges flowed in, this rich collection of several hundreds of items came to be divided between the Musée Guimet and the Musée de l'Homme (Asia department, ethnomusicology department and photo archives). To the first went the Buddhist painted scrolls (or thangkas) and sculptures, ritual and liturgical objects, manuscripts and xylographs as well as a selection of fine goldsmith's work and jewelry; to the second fell the non-religious pieces or those of “little artistic interest”, complete male and female costumes, masks and brocade robes worn by the monks when performing masked dances, riding accoutrements and accessories, writing equipment and materials, domestic artifacts ... Significantly, when the items were shared out, the Musée Guimet fell heir to the incense-burner, while the incense brought back with it went to the Musée de l'Homme; kept one or two elaborate copper teapots with overlaid silver decorations but refused the plainer ones, which entered the Asia department of the Musée de l'Homme, along with the bricks of tea and the wooden churns used to mix the

tea with butter and salt, and the wooden teacups from which it was drunk. Similar esthetic criteria decided the division of the jewelry and finery as well as the religious musical instruments (oboes, trumpets, drums...)

A century after their collection, the ECHO project will at last provide a means of bringing these objects together and adding the notes and photos taken by Jacques Bacot during his travels, which are at present dispersed in a number of places (photo archives of the Musée de l'Homme, the Musée Guimet and the Center for the Study of Tibetan Religions, etc.).

The principal collections open to the public: an initial survey

Paris

Musée de l'Homme

The Himalayan and Tibetan collections, held for the most part in the Asia department, but also in the Ethnomusicology department (collections of musical instruments and manuscripts containing musical notations, sound recordings) and, for a minor part, in the Comparative Technology department, include some 2,350 objects from four countries (India (265), Nepal (1,600), Bhutan (30) and China/Tibet (450).

Aside from three isolated pieces dating from before 1700 – a gilded bronze standing Buddha from the Thakuri era (Nepal 7th–8th c.); a large Tibetan scroll painted on both sides (16th/17th c.); and a female head from the Kapilavastu region – all of the objects date from the 20th century.

The oldest objects (c. 450 numbers) were acquired in the first half of the 20th century in Tibetan markets by Jacques Bacot* (1907, 1909), Alexandra David-Néel* (1918–1923), André Guibaut* and Louis Liotard* (1936–37, 1939–40), or collected nearly at the same time in the eastern Indian Himalayas among the tribal populations of Assam, in particular among the Nagas, by Doctor H.E. Kauffmann and by Gabrielle

Bertrand (165 objects, among which some fine basketry, weapons and superb costumes).

The Nepal collections (c. 1,600 items) are more recent. The fruit of collecting trips associated with fieldwork carried out in the 1960s and 1970s by anthropologists from the CNRS Cooperative Research program (RCP 65), they focus on a given group and have very little historical depth. Composed essentially of everyday objects (household utensils, agricultural tools, baskets, equipment for livestock, clothing), they deliberately do not contain any object of great cost, their professed goal being “to show Nepal in the most ‘human’ and truest light, delivered as it were from a certain aura of exoticism and unknowability, which, when it comes to the East, all too often prevents Westerners from seeing the genuine reality.” (*Népal, hommes et dieux*, 1970 : 9). Split up into many small categories of different objects, the interest of these collections lies in the rich documentation that accompanies them: valuable notes (dates, place collected, group, functions, etc.), photos, films, sound recordings, fieldnotes.

Of the twenty or so population groups in Nepal, six are well represented:

The *Tharus* of the Terai plain in the south (A.W. Macdonald coll.), with some interesting multicolored marriage baskets decorated with peacock feathers, seeds and shells, unfortunately in poor condition; terra cotta horses representing local deities; cotton clothing and women’s finery.

The *Newars* and the *Indo-Nepalese* groups from Kathmandu valley (G. Toffin, C. Jest, J. Millot, M. Gaborieau coll.) with various domestic artifacts (basketry, water jugs, potteries, wooden blocks for printing woven materials, spinning wheel.), a series of *topi*, caps made of cotton and worn by the men, goldsmith’s tools and jewelry, agricultural implements.

The *Tamangs* (Toffin coll.) and the *Limbus* (Sagant coll.), Tibeto-Burman speaking groups from the eastern and western middle mountains, with baskets, agricultural implements and, for the *Limbus*, a remarkable complete costume and

accessories of the *bijuwa* shaman : crown decorated with feathers and porcupine quills, shirt, long white skirt, belt with small bells, necklaces, drum...

The Tibetan-speaking groups of the high Himalayan valleys, with the Le Mouel collection from Langthang and especially the Jest* collection put together in the 1960s in Dolpo, which alone numbers over 550 items. This large collection touches on agriculture, herding, trade and transport and techniques of manufacture and processing, through objects made on site from previously purchased materials. In addition to this collection, there are sound recordings held in the Ethnomusicology department, a collection of 240 dried plants held in the Museum National d'Histoire Naturelle, five films (CNRS) and over 6,000 photographs, only a minute portion of which are deposited in the Musée de l'Homme photo archives.

In the 1970s, the creation of a new research team based mainly on botany, geography and geology (GRECO) combined with a change of focus in anthropology from the study of material culture and techniques to other objects of study, such as kinship, identity, mythology or religion, put an end to the collecting of objects and the systematic archiving of sound documents on Nepal. After 1975, no large collections concerning Nepal entered the Asia department of the Musée de l'Homme. Alternatively, some one hundred objects (cooking utensils, and household equipment, costumes and finery) from Ladakh, brought back by Catherine Mangeot at the request of Françoise Cousin, enriched, in 1995 and then in 2000, the Comparative Technology department.

The collections of the Musée de l'Homme contain none of the so-called "archaic" objects so popular today with Himalayan art dealers and collectors: no tribal masks, no carved wooden effigies.

Part of Marc Petit's large collection of Himalayan masks should go to the Quai Branly museum in the near future, which raises a problem, for the origin, date and even function of most of them are unknown, making them particularly unreliable. Apart from a few pieces connected with Tibetan Buddhism, whose use is attested among the

Tamangs, anthropologists have never encountered any such objects in 50 years of fieldwork. Some members of the scientific community doubt their “undeniable antiquity” advanced by T. Muray, who displays a series of masks on the Website *//asianart.com*, accompanied by the comment “Our ignorance is great with respect to these tribal masks. But their black shiny patina and their surfaces of multi-layered pigment all suggest an unspecified but undeniable antiquity. There can be little doubt that many of these masks are a hundred years old. Precisely how they were used we cannot say, but we may infer much by examining the principles of shamanism.” This remains to be proven.

The wooden effigies and carved posts of the bridges and fountains typical of certain regions, in particular far-western Nepal, raise an altogether different problem. Although I have no doubt as to their authenticity, I remain very reserved about buying ancient pieces for fear that their commercialization may lead to the looting on an international scale of what subsists in the localities ... unfortunately this has already begun.

Musée Guimet

Present from the museum’s very beginnings, founded in 1888 by Émile Guimet (1836–1918), who wanted to create a museum of religious history to promote knowledge of Far-Eastern civilizations, today the Himalayan art collection numbers some 1,600 pieces, the most ancient of which date back to the 11th century. The great majority of objects relate to Buddhism and Hinduism (images of deities and great teachers, religious objects and musical instruments, tantric practitioner’s set of ornaments and apron made of bones, handwritten books, etc.), and a few items of jewelry and secular objects remarkable for their elaborate gold or silver plate (teacup stand, tea pot, oil lamp).

This collection, today regarded as one of the richest and most diversified in the West, was constituted by a series of donations and bequests, notably donations by Jacques Bacot*, in 1912 (350 pieces); Madame G. Toussaint and her son M.F. Toussaint in 1939 (45 pieces) in memory of Gustave-Charles Toussaint* (1869–1938), a great traveler gifted with an inquisitive mind and an adventurous spirit, who served as a magistrate in Shanghai; Lionel Fournier*, an ex-industrialist who, reserving the usufruct, donated in 1989 his exceptional collection of Himalayan art (101 pieces outstanding for their antiquity and the rare nature of their iconography); and in 1993 the bequest of Jean Mansion*, photographer, traveler and collector (55 items).

The Jacques Pimpaneau collection

Formerly housed in Paris in the now-closed Kwok-on museum, this collection devoted to the Asian theater arts includes masks, costumes and costume accessories for secular performances and Buddhist masked dances from Tibet or from Tibetan communities in exile, as well as a collection of masks and puppets from Kathmandu valley (Nepal).

The Bibliothèque Nationale holds several hundred xylographs and manuscripts, among which the famous Pelliot collection, in the process of digitization.

Finally, again in Paris, there are four important photographic collections: the photographic archives of the Musée de l'Homme, the Musée Guimet, the Centre d'Études sur les Religions Tibétaines and the Centre d'Études Himalayennes.

In addition to the objects present in the museum collections, the photographic archives of the Musée de l'Homme has some 2,800 photos (B/W and slides) classified by country, ethnic group and subject, but also field notebooks containing sketches from the Guibaut and Liotard trips to the Tibetan plateau (inventory, 1999).

The photographic archives of the Musée Guimet contain 22,000 photos by Jean Mansion taken between 1975 and 1991 in Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and the Indian Himalayas (Garhwal, Kashmir, Ladakh, Sikkim and the Darjeeling region), some 3,600 slides of Nepal (Kathmandu valley) and 320 of Ladakh (sites and architectural monuments).

The Centre d'Études sur les Religions Tibétaines (22 avenue du Président Wilson, 75016, Paris), has 2,245 prints and 7,985 slides taken between the first decades of the 20th century and the present day in Bhutan, Nepal, Lahul and Sikkim (India), and in Tibet (inventory, 1999)

Finally, the Centre d'Études Himalayennes (UPR 299, Centre A.-G. Haudricout, 7 rue Guy Môquet, Villejuif 94801) has begun the digitization of the Corneille Jest photographic collection (c. 6,000 photos of Nepal).

Outside Paris, two museums defined as museums of art stand out for the importance of their Himalayan and Tibetan collections: the Georges Labit Museum in Toulouse and the Asiatica, museum of Oriental Art, in Biarritz.

The Georges Labit museum in Toulouse

The Himalayan collection started out with only a few items when it was founded in 1883 by the collector and traveler G. Labit (1862–1899). The number increased in 1970, with an important deposit by the State, to which a donation by J. Mansion* added, in 1993, 53 pieces, in the majority from Tibet. Today the museum boasts three rooms of Himalayan art displaying for the most part paintings, gilded bronzes, and cult objects from Tibet or Nepal, but also a small collection of jewelry, among which are men's copper, gold, turquoise and pearl ear-rings worn by noblemen and officials in Tibet.

Asiatica, museum of Oriental art, 1 rue Guy Petit, 64200 Biarritz

This museum, opened in 1999, presents the pieces collected by a pharmaceutical industrialist, Michel Postel who, returning to France after 50 years in India (1949–1999), presented his rich collection to the city, which set up a museum of which he is the present curator.

The outstanding feature of the collection, which includes a fine group of Tibetan Buddhist paintings, gilded bronzes and woodcarvings from temples in Kathmandu valley, resides in two series of objects from Himachal Pradesh (in the western Indian Himalayas): one is comprised of delicate sculptures in diorite from temples dating from the 9th to the 12th century; the second is the only group in the West of *mohras*, or metal faces of deities resembling masks, which are hung on the litters of the gods when carried in procession (www.museeasiatica.com).

The Alexandra David-Néel Foundation, 27 avenue Maréchal Juin 0400 Digne-Les-Bains

The Foundation shelters a museum located in the house where this woman of unique experience who lived to the age of one hundred spent the last years of her life in which we discover her trunks, clothing, notebooks, cameras, everyday utensils and a few Tibetan cult objects. The foundation also holds her photographs, a hundred of which were published in *Le Tibet d'Alexandra David-Néel*, Paris, Plon 1979 (www.alexandra-david-Neel.org).

Also worth mentioning are the museum of Asian arts in Nice (www.arts-asiatiques.com), whose Tibetan and Himalayan collections are comprised mainly of objects on deposit from the major Paris museums (Musée Guimet, Musée de l'Homme, Musée des Arts Décoratifs); villa Jules Vernes in Toulon, whose Tibet and Mongolia room, like a Buddhist temple, displays objects used by monks and three superb 17th- and 18th-century painted scrolls; or the Far-East department of the Musée d'Orbigny-Bernon in La Rochelle (Charente Maritime), which has a few gilded bronzes and Tibetan ritual

musical instruments donated or bequeathed by travelers from the city as well as pieces on deposit from the Musée Guimet.

This initial survey deals only with the numerically largest collections and makes no claim to being an exhaustive inventory of all of the Tibetan and Himalayan collections in France. In addition, there are, scattered around the country, museums, of Asian art or not, which have original and sometimes unique pieces, like the Tibetan staff used as a Gnomon, kept in the Musée International de l'Horlogerie in Lyons, or the "Tibetan" black stone pot decorated with beads bought in Kashmir by Louis Weiss and displayed in the ethnographic collection that bears his name, located in the Rohan castle in the little town of Saverne, near Strasbourg. Finally there are the many private collections, which have not been inventoried.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the Himalayan and Tibetan art market in the West exploded, owing in particular to the decision of Nepal and then Tibet to open their doors to the West, thus stimulating development of private collections in the area, rare until then, whose wealth can be glimpsed in the recent Paris exhibitions to which they loaned pieces. Among the non-anonymous collections, we can cite François Pannier, the man behind the Gallery Le Toit du Monde, for a fine collection of antique Newar objects; Philippe Tournet, also for both his antique Newar objects, both secular and ritual; Gérard Labre, for a collection of ritual objects (skull cap, tantric practitioner's bone apron, headdress); Marc Petit for his masks; or Josette Schulman, for a large collection of old Tibetan art. While the latter, dealers and collectors, usually restrict their interest to "ancient Asian arts" with religious connotations, others specialize in resolutely secular pre-contemporary or contemporary objects: corn measures, textiles, weapons, or cheap articles bought in the market (pins, beer cans, coins, medals, color prints, etc.). Finally, there are the private collectors, those mountaineers, many of whom have returned from their long expeditions to some Himalayan summit with ordinary objects

purchased in Kathmandu or en route, but also films and photos, as well as the associations, notably those in aid of the Tibetan people, that collect objects for an exhibition or a special event.

Collectors

Jacques Bacot (1877–1965)

Scholar, father of French Tibetology, accomplished translator and author of austere works on Tibetan grammar and cursive writing, but also of wonderful tales of his journeys (*Dans les marches tibétaines*, 1909; *Le Tibet révolté* 1912), Jacques Bacot was also an enthusiastic and intrepid traveler. He was born in Saint-Germain-en-Laye on the 4th of July 1877. As an adolescent, he accompanied his father, a friend of the explorer Brazza, to lectures sponsored by the Société de Géographie.

In 1904, following in the footsteps of his paternal grandfather, who was well traveled for his time, he undertook a world tour. In Indochina he discovered Asia and met the missionary priests of the Missions Étrangères, who would later extend him their hospitality and advise him when he set out for Tibet. In March 1907, he traveled in the region bounded by the three great rivers: the Salween, the Mekong and the Irrawady. He employed two interpreters on a regular basis: one for Chinese and the other for Tibetan, and two “boys”. At night he slept in temples, in a tent or at the house of some man he had happened to meet.

Outwitting the Chinese mandarins and the escort he had been saddled with, he managed to slip into Tibet, a the time closed to foreigners, “with no intention or means of going very far”, he would say. Amidst pilgrims, he thus circled the sacred Mount Kawa Karpo (“White Snow”). Back on the Mekong river, he attempted to organize a new expedition. His goal: Poyul, a small unknown kingdom, independent and mysterious, lying between Lhasa and the Chinese border. But the Peking authorities, having got wind of his plans, forced him to give up his plans. So he went on to Burma,

today Myanmar, and from there to Europe, in the company of Adjrup Gombo, a Tibetan from the high valley of the Mekong, a former Bonpo lama converted to Christianity, who had asked to follow him as far as France. Two years later, in 1909, Bacot was once more traveling in eastern Tibet, visiting regions devastated by the Sino-Tibetan war of which the West had heard nothing. In Paris, full of his experience of Tibet, its inhabitants and its language, he attended the lectures given by Sylvain Lévi, who held the chair of Indian Studies at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. When the First World War ended, Lévi asked him to teach the Tibetan language at the École Pratique, which he did brilliantly until 1936, at which time a position as Directeur d'Études de Tibétologie was created for him.

Bacot was extremely generous, and donated the best part of his collection, constituted during his travels in eastern Tibet between 1907 and 1909, to the Musée Guimet and the Musée de l'Homme, thus launching the true development, in both institutions, of the "Tibetan" sections.

Alexandra David-Néel (1868–1969)

Born in Saint-Mandé near Paris into a bourgeois family, Alexandra David spent an austere childhood, during which she ran away a number of times. At twenty, she mixed with idealistic socialists and anarchists, then went to England, where she joined the Theosophists, who introduced her to Oriental philosophy. Upon returning to Paris, she continued her quest at the Sorbonne, the Collège de France and the Musée Guimet. At the age of 23, she made her first trip, an 18-month voyage to India and Ceylon. When she returned to France, she studied voice and in 1895 was engaged to sing with the Hanoi opera. In 1904, she married Philippe Néel, a distinguished railway engineer, with whom she went to Tunisia. But in 1911 she left him and went to India, from where she would return only 13 years later, for a few months.

In 1912 she met a great master in Sikkim, who agreed to initiate her. In July 1916, together with Lama Yongden, her faithful companion and later her adopted son, Alexandra David-Néel went to Shigatse, in central Tibet, where she received the blessing of the Panchen Lama, the second-ranking authority in Tibet after the Dalai Lama. For her escapade, she was expelled from Sikkim by the British administration, then in control of these territories. Three years later, after a disappointing trip to Japan, Korea and Burma, she was back in Tibet, at the monastery of Kumbum in the eastern part of the country, where she studied the sacred texts of Buddhism. In 1921–1922, she traveled extensively in the eastern province of Kham, which she considered “in her experience as the most interesting part of Tibet”.

In the fall of 1923, still accompanied by Yongden, she decided to enter Lhasa disguised as a beggar-pilgrim. Taking only a bit of barley flour and some butter, walking at night to avoid being seen, the two travelers reached the holy city in February 1924, after trekking for five months in the depths of winter through one of the most rugged regions in Asia.

On her return to France, the traveler was covered with honors, medals, invitations, requests for books and lectures. In June 1926, she completed *Voyage d'une Parisienne à Lhasa*, a best seller which she would subsequently published in English as *My Journey to Lhasa* (1927). In the 1930s, one after another she published *Mystiques et magiciens du Tibet* (*With Mystics & Magicians in Tibet*), *Initiations lamaïques* (*Initiations and Initiates in Tibet*), *Au pays des brigands-gentilshommes* (*Tibetan Journey*), and some ten other books.

In 1938, at the age of 70, she was back in Tatsienlu, today Kangding, a trading town and Tibetan doorway into China. Having returned to France in 1946, she settled near Digne in her Samten Dzong, “meditation fortress”, where she died on 8 September 1969. Today her house has been turned into a Foundation bearing her name. It houses a rich store of memories, where one discovers the objects brought back by the explorer as

well as hundreds of photos selected from the many thousands she took in the course of her travels. After her death, several dozens of objects were also given to the Musée de l'Homme and the Musée Guimet.

Lionel Fournier

A man of taste and deep learning, dedicated to excellence, Lionel Fournier turned his back on a brilliant career as an industrialist to devote himself to the Himalayan world and learn its languages. One day, Gilles Béguin tells us, Fournier stopped in front of a painting representing a Nadi dakini displayed in a gallery window in the Rue de Beaune in Paris. And it was this painting that led the enlightened art-lover to set out on his relentless twenty-five year quest in the western art market for pieces combining high-quality art, original iconography and a strong symbolic content. Over time, he put together an exceptional collection of paintings, sculptures and ritual objects, particularly rich in archaic works, which he donated, reserving the usufruct, to the Musée Guimet in 1989.

André Guibaut (1904–1966 and Louis Liotard (1904–1940)

Born in the same year, André Guibaut and Louis Liotard met in the merchant marine. One was from a modest Bordeaux family, the other a Parisian, son of an African explorer and himself a friend of the famous explorer Brazza. It was their mutual love of adventure and their thirst for travel that took them to Asia. Their goal: to fill in a blank space on the map; to attempt to reconnoiter the unexplored territories of the far reaches of China, Tibet and Burma.

For two years they assiduously attended the courses given by Paul Rivet at the Institut d'Ethnologie, by Emmanuel de Mortonne at the Institut de Géographie as well as those taught by Paul Pelliot and Jacques Bacot. In 1936, under the patronage of the Société de Géographie and the Musée de l'Homme and with the support of the

Ministries of National Education, the Air and the Colonies, they embarked on 3 April at Marseilles to explore the Salween River gorges. André Guibaut, the expedition leader, was responsible for photography and anthropometric measurements; Louis Liotard was to keep a travel log, and to be in charge of cartography, astronomical observations, geological studies and to keep a weather log. Having begun their trip from Yunnan, they were the first westerners to cross the territory of the Black Lissus, a Tibeto-Burman-speaking group that made a livelihood from slash-and-burn agriculture, hunting and looting along the steep banks of the Salween. They made their way upriver to the Nu, then, after wintering at the Bahang apostolic mission, took the low road that followed the Salween, a wild gorge that had never been mapped, before joining the route taken by Bacot on his first journey to Tibet, and then descending the Mekong.

They returned to France after 18 months on the road and 2,500 km covered on foot or muleback, bringing with them the first complete map of the Salween valley, from the 26th to the 28th parallel, a map of the gorges giving access to Tibet, several hundred photos, pages of notes and a collection of objects for the Musée de l'Homme.

The spring of 1940 saw a debacle in both France and China, where Japanese had resumed their bombardments. Guibaut and Liotard nevertheless set out on a second expedition, this time to explore the bend of the Yellow River, home of the Ngolo-Seta, Tibetan nomads with a reputation as dangerous bandits. From Tatsienlu, where they met Alexandra David-Néel, the two explorers set a northerly route towards the Bayen Khara mountains. Following the slow pace of their yaks, stopping to watch the masked dances performed in the monastery courtyards, the little caravan came to the high plateau covered in short grass, the habitat of the nomadic herders. There, on 10 September 1940, they fell into an ambush. Liotard and the expedition's Chinese cook were killed, and the caravan wiped out.

A few weeks later, Guibaut reached Tatsienlu. When he had recovered, he placed himself at the disposal of General De Gaulle, who appointed him to the post of delegate

for the Comité National Français in China. Immediately after the war, he published a book dedicated to his companion, relating their adventures in Tibet : *Ngolo-Setas*, 1947 (*Tibetan Venture in the Country of the Ngolo-Setas. Second Guibaut-Liotard Expedition*, 1949). His diplomatic career as consul general and ambassador took him from Singapore to Amman, and from Laos to Italy via Morocco and Ceylon. Liotard, whose body was left in the mountain pass where he was assassinated, was awarded the Legion of Honor posthumously.

Corneille Jest (1930–)

Born in Strasbourg on 12 February 1930, Corneille Jest decided, after preliminary scientific studies, to go into anthropology. For several years he attended courses given at the Musée de l'Homme by the Centre de Formation à la Recherche Ethnologique (which trained students for anthropological research) and in particular those taught by Leroi-Gourhan, who later was the director of his thesis, devoted to the techniques and economy of a rural community in the French department of Aveyron: le Haut Levezou. In 1956, he obtained a position with the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, where he remained until he retired. His first expedition to the Himalayas was to Kalimpong, in Sikkim, during the summer of 1953. In 1960 he went to Nepal. In the fall of that year, accompanied by the British Tibetologist, David Snellgrove, he traveled to Dolpo, a Tibetan language and culture area near the China-Nepal border. He stayed there a year and went back again in 1963, 1965 and 1967. From his fieldwork he brought back not only material for a doctoral thesis, which he defended in 1972 in Paris and published with the Editions du CNRS in 1975 (*Dolpo, Communautés de langue tibétaine au Népal*), but also an impressive documentation: ethnographic objects, geological samples, dried plants and insects, sound recordings, photographs and films, which provided a lively complement to his description of the community's life and made a contribution to later comparative studies.

In 1965, together with other colleagues, he set up the CNRS program (RCP 65) for the study of the regions of Nepal, then in 1970, with a group of geologists and botanists, founded another program centered on the ecology and geology of the Himalayas.

Jest was a pioneer in the collection of ethnographic objects and audio-visual documents in Nepal, and his collections form the basis of the section devoted to the groups of this country in the Musée de l'Homme's Asia department.

Jean Mansion (1932–1992)

Born in Maizière-les-Metz, Jean Mansion entered the École des Beaux Arts in Nancy at the age of seventeen, then went on the Académie de la Grande Chaumière in Paris, where he remained until 1952. In 1955, he became a television cameraman, thus managing to combine his professional activities with his need to travel. A learned man, voracious reader and lover of cartography and aeronautics, Jean Mansion prepared his trips with care, assembling large amounts of documentation. Strongly drawn to the Himalayas, he made several trips to Nepal, Bhutan and the western Indian Himalayas, from which he returned with several thousands of photos. When in France, he was a regular visitor to the galleries of Paris. Between 1969 and 1990, Jean Mansion and his wife built up an original collection of objects from Tibet and Nepal.

After his death, the collection, composed of some one hundred pieces of great interest, and according to his wishes, was divided between the Musée Guimet in Paris and the George Labit museum in Toulouse, while part of the rich document swelled the library of the Musée Guimet and thousands of prints were deposited in its photo archives.

Gustave-Charles Toussaint (1869–1938)

Born in Rennes, Gustave-Charles Toussaint studied law. In 1893, he became a colonial magistrate and discovered in the course of his duties *Pondicherry*, Tananarive (Antananarivo), Hanoi, Peking and Shanghai. In 1936, he was appointed president of the Consular Tribunal of China in Shanghai, where he resided until his retirement in 1934. His inquisitive mind and adventurous spirit led him to travel extensively for personal pleasure: in Asia, of course, but also in the islands of the South Pacific and to eastern Greenland. In 1907, on a trip to eastern Tibet, he discovered a Tibetan manuscript of the mythical biography of the great tantric master Padmasambhava, which he devoted the next seventeen years to translating and published under the French title of “Le Dict de Padmasambhava”. In 1939, his widow and his son donated some 50 objects, in his memory, to the Musée Guimet, among which were 27 paintings.

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¹ The asterisk after the name of a collector indicates the presence of a biographical note at the end of the article.