

CROSS-CURRENTS



EAST ASIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE REVIEW

The Legacy of Theos Bernard at UC Berkeley

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In 1936–1937, Theos Casimir Bernard made an extraordinary pilgrimage to Tibet in search of adventure and spiritual enlightenment. Bernard was already an ardent practitioner of hatha yoga but was eager to gain knowledge of the esoteric teachings within yoga. His journey was well documented in photographs and moving images, as well as by his own descriptions, which he published in 1939 in the book *Penthouse of the Gods: A Pilgrimage into the Heart of Tibet and the Sacred City of Lhasa*. During his journey, he collected manuscripts, paintings, prints, and sculptures that he intended to be used in teaching esoteric Buddhist studies in America.

By his untimely death in 1947, Theos Bernard had not yet established the Tibetan temple and study center of his dreams. His estate went to his father, Glen, who sold some of his books and art but warehoused the bulk of the collection. Eleanor Murray, Glen's companion during his later years, inherited Theos's remaining art, film, and photographs. The estate initiated a competitive process, and although other institutions also vied for the Bernard-Murray Collection it was ultimately awarded to the University of California, Berkeley, largely because Berkeley has specialized film, art, photography, and archive facilities. The university also boasts an active Tibetan and Buddhist studies program that was an important component of its proposal.

The estate was assigned to four campus facilities: the Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive, the Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, the Bancroft Rare Book Library, and the C. V. Starr Library. The Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAM/PFA) holds over two hundred items of fine art from Theos Bernard's estate, including *thangka* paintings, painted fabric banners, mandalas on canvas, cloth prints, metal sculptures of Buddhist deities, and two illuminated texts, as well as more than 30,000 feet of 16-mm film on 126 reels of joined pieces and 124 short rolls. The film materials primarily document religious events and daily life during Bernard's 1936–1937 travels in Tibet, but they also include some footage of his

time in Egypt and India, as well as demonstrations of yoga postures. The Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology received the estate's still photographs, textiles, rugs, and some ritual material. The Hearst houses 6,790 35-mm negatives, almost all of which are documented in contact prints, as well as some 4,000 4x6-inch and 800 8x10-inch prints. The Hearst manages 539 catalogued objects from the Theos Bernard collection: a variety of textiles, jewelry, pieces of luggage, and other material from Bernard's estate. The Bancroft Rare Book Library houses the estate's archival material, including letters and notes, and the C. V. Starr Library includes rare books from the collection.

Recent public interest in Tibet and Buddhism, coupled with the enormous popularity of yoga in the United States over the last few decades, has resulted in the recent publication of two interesting biographies of Theos Bernard. Buddhist teacher and author Douglas Veenhof's *White Lama: The Life of Tantric Yogi Theos Bernard, Tibet's Lost Emissary to the New World* (2011) is a readable and sympathetic account of Bernard's odyssey. The author relies on the archives and resources of UC Berkeley, as well as nine other known archives of Bernard material.

Tibet scholar Paul Hackett's book, *Theos Bernard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life* (2012), presents a more complete and complex picture of historical circumstances in India, Tibet, and China in the late 1930s. Hackett also offers a less flattering description of Bernard and his exploits than Veenhof, challenging some of Bernard's claims of initiation and spiritual achievement, and calling into question the validity and sincerity of his intentions. As a curator, I owe a great deal to Hackett and Veenhof for their wonderful work in researching and documenting Theos Bernard's life story, and I rely on their biographies and Bernard's own account for the following description of his brief life and adventures.

Theos Bernard's Life Story

Theos Bernard was born in Los Angeles in 1908 and raised by his mother in Arizona after his parents split up, but it appears he was destined to move in circles far outside those of his half brothers and neighbors growing up. He attended university in Arizona and received a law degree, but his health during his university days was troublesome. Rheumatic fever weakened his heart, but through yoga Theos was able to regain a remarkable level of strength. His eventual trip to the high altitudes of the Himalayan region seem a testament to the healing qualities of advanced yogic practice.

Theos's illness proved to be an important junction in his life, as he turned to his mother's extensive library of books on Eastern philosophy during his convalescence. He was inspired to study philosophy and religion and never went back to the law. His mother was not his only family member with interests in Eastern philosophy; his father, Glen, and his uncle (Glen's half brother), Pierre, were already deeply involved in the study of yoga, Ayurvedic medicine, philosophy, and Tantric practices. Theos was drawn to follow in their footsteps; however, his relationship with both men was never easy, clearly complicated by a distrust between the older men based on their very different attitudes towards yoga; Pierre pursued a flamboyant and populist approach, while Glen was more conservative and academic. Pierre Bernard had begun studying Vedic scriptures during his teenage years in the 1890s. Through an unlikely meeting in Iowa with an Indian Vedic philosopher named Hamati, Pierre became involved in ancient Indian practices, including the study of Tantric practice, which included body control, secret initiations, and rituals well outside the mainstream thought and practice of the day. Pierre's early practice was centered in San Francisco, but he eventually moved east and established a Tantric center in New York. In 1933, after a summer and fall spent studying psychology and philosophy, Theos learned about his uncle's successful career transition from Tantric guru to banker and went to visit him in person at his New York retreat, the Clarkstown Country Club in Nyack.

Theos's father, Glen Bernard, was also steeped in Vedanta and yogic sciences, having apprenticed with Hamati, Pierre Bernard's highly educated Syrian-Bengali teacher, for twelve years. Although Glen had abandoned his wife and young son shortly after the boy's birth to pursue this passion and visit his teachers in India, by the time Theos was an adult, the father and son had reconciled. It was Glen who would become Theos's most influential early teacher and who was probably the "guru" that Theos mentioned in his subsequent writings.

Theos met his first wife, the wealthy and well-connected Viola Wertheim, during his first visit to his uncle's country club, and within six months they married. For the next few years, Viola pursued medical studies while Theos attended graduate school at Columbia University, studying anthropology, philosophy, and religion and struggling to find the right fit for his academic and practical interests. During this time, he spent a summer in New Mexico working with Native American tribes under the auspices of Columbia's anthropology department.

In 1936, Theos and Viola embarked on a whirlwind trip to Asia. In India they met up with Glen, with whom they traveled for a time. Viola soon returned to her medical studies in

America, while Theos stayed on in India to pursue his interest in esoteric studies. Although ostensibly conducting field research for his doctorate at Columbia, Theos's main interest was in finding a teacher who could impart the secrets of Tantric practice. He planned to write his academic thesis on the relationship between the ancient Hindu Tantric practices and their incorporation into Buddhist practice, and his theory was to personally test the use of yoga to achieve a form of Buddhist liberation. However, when he discovered that Tantric Buddhism was no longer actively studied and practiced in India, and that the only region that retained these teachings was Tibet, he began the 1,500-mile journey into what was at the time a very isolated and closed country.

In preparation for the trip Theos had started studying Tibetan in 1936 and was already a highly accomplished yoga master, but he needed help in both his application to visit Tibet and his journey there. He found that assistance in Gegen Dorje Tharchin, a Tibetan Christian who aided him at every turn. In addition to his many other talents, Tharchin published a Tibetan monthly, *The Mirror*, in Kalimpong, India, which announced the various activities and comings and goings along the India-Tibet border. In March 1937, Tharchin published a small notice in *The Mirror* announcing Theos Bernard's desire to go to Lhasa on a pilgrimage. This announcement, as translated and quoted by biographer Paul Hackett, read:

An American Sahib named Mr. Bernard, having come to Kalimpong, has been studying the Tibetan language, He, himself, [has] great faith in the Insider's Doctrine [Buddhism], and with his preliminary exceptional study of Tibetan, has expressed his wish for a means of spreading the teachings of the Insider's Doctrine [Buddhism] in America. From the depths [of such aspiration, he] ransomed a Kangyur, (and) with this established foundation, once [he] has also acquired a Tengyur, he has indicated that he definitely plans on founding a large temple in America. This is the news in brief. (Hackett 2012, 153–154)

Tharchin continued to post notices of Theos's desires to travel to Lhasa and his intentions to study Buddhism in Tibet in his newspaper. He also became Theos's translator and constant companion throughout his journey.

While other travelers and seekers struggled with bureaucratic hurdles and were denied access to Tibet, or hindered in other ways, Theos Bernard's persistence paid off. On May 2, 1937, he met in Kalimpong with Sir Basil Gould, the British Political Officer for Sikkim, who, having heard of Bernard's interest in Tibetan language and Buddhism, granted him permission to

travel the trade route into Tibet that was controlled by the British Raj. Nine days later, Bernard left Kalimpong for Gangtok (Sikkim) and then traveled over the Himalaya to Gyantse, where he waited for final permission to enter Lhasa.

His Journey

The Tibetan government strictly controlled permission for entry into Tibet; indeed, those who tried to venture in without permission were dealt with harshly. In addition, Tibetans caught assisting travelers who lacked the proper paperwork could be, and at times were, put to death. It is important also to remember that during this time, in the late 1930s, both the world and this tiny Himalayan nation were in a precarious state. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama had died in December 1933, and the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and leader of the Tibetan people had not yet been identified. After much lobbying and letter writing, Bernard received final permission from Reting Rinpoche to travel onward and set out from Gyantse for Lhasa on June 18, 1937. His success in obtaining permission can be attributed in large part to his innate charm and proven ability to befriend people in positions of power.

While in Kalimpong, Theos had introduced himself to the most important and influential Westerners and Tibetans in town. He set a rigorous schedule of study for himself, attempting to master the difficult Tibetan language while at the same time participating in as many parties and opportunities to socialize as was humanly possible. He met teachers who could open doors for him intellectually, like the monk Geshe Wangyal. (*Geshe*, not unlike *Doctor of Philosophy*, is a title for a distinguished scholar who has studied all Tibetan texts and is ready for initiation into secret Tantric practices.) Theos maintained a close relationship with Geshe Wangyal, meeting with him frequently during his stay in Kalimpong.

Like other adventurers of his time, Theos traveled and stayed in places along his route—sometimes at quite nice accommodations, like the Himalayan Hotel in Kalimpong; other times, from his descriptions in *Penthouse of the Gods*, at nothing more than hovels out of the rain. In Kalimpong, Theos began in earnest to woo the aristocratic Tibetans who would eventually come to his aid and make his journey and his stay in Tibet a truly magical experience. He quickly learned the arts of gift giving, socializing with the community, and ingratiating himself into the small but elite group of Tibetan ministers, both active and retired, whom he met in this Indian

border town. The archive at UC Berkeley includes many photos of Theos as he prepares to depart from Kalimpong into Tibet.

Theos followed a traditional route across the Himalayan range, through Sikkim, and over the Yarlung Pass into Yadong. Most of his journey was on horseback. At each stopping-off point he presented his documents, and the community provided him with lodging and meals of varying quality. Most importantly, the documents he possessed required the community to provide him with fresh horses to continue his trip to the holy city of Lhasa.

From his photographs from this time, we can discern that Theos favored typical Tibetan dress over Western apparel. He is frequently depicted in a traditional *chuba* (robe), occasionally wearing elaborate silks while moving through gardens and temples. While waiting for permission to go forward to Lhasa, Theos spent some time in the town of Gyantse, where he made every effort to impress on his hosts his sincerity in wanting to study Tibetan Buddhism and culture. He tried to dress the part, and he spent many hours with elite Tibetans. To assist in solidifying his status, Tharchin reported on Theos's generosity in his newsletter, *The Mirror*.

Theos did a good job of getting himself noticed by people who could help him and greatly benefited, as a result, from the support of Tibet's powerful and wealthy elite. Thanks to his persistent pursuit of the "well connected" while in Kalimpong, Gangtok, and later Gyantse, Theos was welcomed, accepted, and feted by these rulers of Tibet. He did not seem to get along particularly well with the British officials in the area; while he maintained contact with them, he tried, quite successfully, to remain separate, relying instead on the generosity of the Tibetans for his lodging and transport.

His main goal was to visit the Potala Palace in the city of Lhasa, and in the summer of 1937, he finally was permitted to move forward into the holy city, where he spent two and a half months with one of Tibet's wealthiest families. Throughout this time he corresponded daily with his wife, Viola, writing late into the night on a typewriter that he carried throughout his travels. Theos clearly understood the extraordinary nature of his journey and documented it in a highly personal way. From his writings, we gather that he believed the notoriety he gained would only aid him in attracting followers to his Tantric and yoga practice.

Theos's powerful host in Lhasa was Tsarong Shape (also known as Tsarong Dzasa), a loyal friend of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama and a politically astute man with a sophisticated knowledge of Tibet and the outside world. He basically adopted Theos, gave him a lovely place

to live, and introduced him to more people than even Theos could have imagined. Tsarong was called by some “the uncrowned king of Tibet,” confirming his status as one of the country’s key leaders. It was through Tsarong that Theos had the good fortune to meet Regent Reting Rinpoche.

The stated purpose of Theos Bernard’s trip to Tibet was to seek spiritual guidance in esoteric Buddhist practices and to acquire initiations directly from a great Tibetan mystic. During his time there, Theos met with heads of government and the head lama of the Sakya lineage, who sent him home with letters for President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Unfortunately, those documents remained undelivered.¹ He also visited the great monasteries at Sera, Ganden, and Gyantse, in addition to the Potala in Lhasa.

As his journey progressed, Theos became determined to acquire the important religious texts, artwork, and examples of ritual artifacts that would permit him to continue his studies of this complex language and culture at home and to serve as what he viewed as a legitimate promoter of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As a result of his charm, good looks, and convincing commitment to yoga, he met many Tibetan leaders, and he pledged to them that he would establish a center for the study of Tibetan Buddhism in the United States when he returned. His message was well received, and he gradually bought or was given texts that added up to a tremendous library, along with many fine works of art.

Many of the still photographs and some of the moving images in the collection at UC Berkeley document Theos’s encounters with the religious and monastic aspects of historical Tibet. He filmed live dance sequences, processions, and images of artists creating *thangka* paintings and printed books. Most of these are black-and-white images, but there are also some silent color film sequences. He shot many rolls of black-and-white 35-mm film documenting the sites and people he encountered on his journey, resulting in a remarkably rich resource on historical Tibet. Upon his departure, Theos is reported to have brought out fifty mule loads of these images, as well as the Tibetan scriptures and ritual art he had collected during his brief stay.

His Return

In the years after he returned from Tibet, Theos embarked on lecture tours and wrote articles describing his travels, attempting both to popularize yoga and Buddhism and to promote

himself. He was featured four times in eighteen months in *Family Circle* magazine. He took to calling himself the “white lama” (*Daily Mail*, November 12, 1937 in Veenhof 2011, 250) and claimed to have been initiated into secret Tibetan Buddhist practices. He also boasted that the Tibetans recognized him as an incarnation of Padmasambhava, the eighth-century teacher whose image is venerated throughout the Himalayas (a claim first stated in print in Bernard 1939, 100).

Theos Bernard’s life was tragically cut short in 1947 when he attempted to return to Tibet and apparently fell victim to the disturbances in India and the region during Partition. In his biography, Hackett tackles the various speculations and rumors surrounding Bernard’s disappearance, including the possibility that he was murdered. Although there is no definitive evidence, what is known for sure is that he disappeared without a trace.

His Legacy

Although we at UC Berkeley have yet to stage a major exhibition of Theos Bernard’s collection, a small exhibition of select items from the collection was shown at the Blanton Museum at the University of Texas, Austin, in 2012. Important preliminary research into the collection’s paintings and other art is ongoing. One of the most significant aspects of the Bernard collection of Tibetan art is its provenance. We are fairly certain that Bernard assembled the bulk of the collection in Tibet in the late 1930s, which sets it apart from other Tibetan collections in America that have been assembled more recently and from varied sources. A brief introduction to two of the most important paintings in the BAM/PFA collection follows.

Padmasambhava

This image of Padmasambhava (figure 1) is one of the most interesting and important paintings in Theos Bernard’s collection. Padmasambhava, or Guru Rinpoche, was one of the earliest teachers to bring Buddhism from India to Tibet in the eighth century. He remains highly revered by Tibetan Buddhists and his image adorns temples, monasteries, and *thangkas* across the Himalayan region, including in Tibet and Bhutan. He is easily recognized by his dress of royal robes and jewels and particularly by his unique adept’s hat. At the top of the painting is an image of Amitabha (the Transcendent Buddha of the West or the Buddha of Infinite Light) Padmasambhava is said to be an emanation of this deity. This *thangka* serves as a document detailing the lineage of Padmasambhava. The images on the *thangka* suggest that

Padmasambhava is believed to be a manifestation of a deity but is generally regarded and depicted as a historical person.



Figure 1. Padmasambhava *thangka*.

In the upper left-hand corner of the painting is Buddha Shakyamuni, and in the upper right-hand corner is the Karmapa Rangjung Dorje (1774–1840) (historical personage). The inclusion of the latter enables us to pretty clearly date this painting to after 1840. Below Amitabha (deity) is Avalokiteshvara (deity). To Padmasambhava's right is one of his fierce forms, the red guru Drakpo (this is his fierce form, not the figure at the bottom of the painting); to his left is the blue lion-faced dakini Simhavaktra. To Padmasambhava's lower right is his consort Mandarava, a Bengali princess, and to his lower left is his other principal consort, Yeshe Tsogyal, queen of Tibet, who became a yogini. The three figures across the bottom, from left to right, are Vaishnavana (a heavenly king), the goddess Paldem Lhamo (a protector deity) in union with Mahakala, and a protector deity subdued by Padmasambhava.

The painting was probably a gift to Theos Bernard from Dorje Wangyal Chokte, a young fort commander in Gyantse. Chokte befriended Theos and trusted his intentions to spread Buddhism in America. Hackett describes the day of Theos's departure for Lhasa and Chokte's gift of teachings and this wonderful *thangka*, quoting from Theos's own writings:

But still more touching is the gift that he [Chokte] brought with him. He had told me on my visit of a Thangka which he had that had been blessed, has remained in his family ever since. I had been told by others of this possession which he had, and that if I could but have it, I would be sure of success in my purpose to spread their teachings. Of course, I seemed ridiculous [*sic*] to ever think of being able to possess this venerated object of faith, but now that he was sure of my feelings in these matters, he had brought it to me after the necessary ceremony at his monastery by the head Lama. (Hackett 2012, 187)

Theos Bernard noted that the back of the *thangka* has “an inscription of the Lama who had it created with the seal of both of his hands on the back” (figure 2). In his correspondence, Bernard writes that it is “a large painting of Guru Rinpoche, or Padma Sambhava [*sic*] seated on his lotus” (quoted in Hackett 2012, 451, n. 33). Such an inscription may be telling as to the provenance and history of a painting. Handprints and footprints are found on the backs, as well as the front, of some *thangkas*. The backs of many *thangkas* also feature small inscriptions of sacred syllables that are a part of the process of consecrating the image. Handprints may be those of a highly revered lama, but they are not always accompanied by inscriptions. In this case, the small inscription in the middle of the back contains the sacred syllables, and the larger inscription is a bit of a mystery. Dr. Jacob Dalton, UC Berkeley's leading Tibetan Buddhist

scholar, confirms that the larger inscription refers to a particular Tibetan Buddhist sect and is not related to either Gyantse or Theos Bernard.



Figure 2. Inscription on the back of the Padmasambhava *thangka*.

Tsongkapa

The second image illustrated and described here is of Tsongkapa (1357–1419), the founder of the Geluk order and a highly revered Tibetan teacher (figure 3). He is shown in this large horizontal composition flanked by the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara, and the Buddha of Eternal Life, Amitayus, surrounded by their associated deities. Tsongkapa emerges on a cloud emanating from the heart of Maitreya (the Buddha of the Future), shown seated in his Tushita heaven above him.



Figure 3. Tsongkapa *thangka*.

Tsongkapa wears the tall yellow hat of the Geluk order, and his hands are in a teaching *mudra* (gesture), holding the stem of the lotus between thumb and forefinger. He is flanked by two lotus stems, supporting the sword of wisdom on his right and the Transcendent Wisdom Sutra on his left, indicating that he is an incarnation of Manjushri.

Both the Padmasambhava and Tsongkapa *thangkas* have been conserved and thus preserved for generations to come. We anticipate that with time and funding we will be able to

conserve more of the collection and, eventually, in collaboration with other units on campus, mount an exhibition featuring the art, photography, and film of the Bernard-Murray Collection at the new UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive.

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Notes

- 1 Although Bernard wrote to President Franklin D. Roosevelt in January of 1939 with news that he carried letters from the “King-Regent of Tibet,” Tsarong-Shape, and wished to personally deliver them, he was encouraged to send them to the chief of protocol, most certainly due to the delicate balance of power that was developing between the United States and China. Veenhof describes the dynamic and states that “it probably reflects diplomatic calculations rather than simple disinterest” (2011, 274–275).

References

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