

ARTS COUNCIL OF MONGOLIA



French Photographer captures Mongolia 100 years ago

Fascinating then-and-now exhibit on display until July 1

By Jessica Lumb



It is hard for many of us to imagine what Mongolia was like 100 years ago, let alone 100 years, but a new exhibition at the Mongolian National Modern Art Gallery, Ulaanbaatar provides insight into exactly that perspective.

On Monday April 30, a photographic exhibit titled "Mongolia 100 years ago in French Photographers Camera" was opened by Yo Otgonbayar, Mongolia's Minister of Education, Culture and sciences, and H.E M. Yves Delaunay, Ambassador of France in Mongolia. Two hundred and fifty people attended the very successful event which was largely covered by the Mongolian press and media. The exhibition shows a collection of photographs that make up a portion of French banker and philanthropist Albert Kahn's "Archives of the Planet."

In 1909 Kahn set out on a project to create a colour, photographic record of human life on earth as a way of fostering peace and cross-cultural understanding between people. He believed he could use the newly developed Autochrome – the first true, color photographic process – to catalog the "human tribes of the world" and celebrate the humanity we all share. Over a span of 20 years, he funded a group of adventurous photographers to travel to over 50 different countries and they recorded over 100 hours of footage and some 72,000 images. Although they became one of the most important collections of color photography to ever exist, they have remained relatively unknown for decades until they were rediscovered in the 1980's. However, a number of different projects have recently brought new life to the collection of which Mongolia is lucky enough to be a part.

The Albert Kahn museum in Boulogne (Département des Hauts de Seine, near Paris) is now the owner of the Albert Kahn collection of pictures from around the world," said Sophie Lataillade from Alliance Française Mongolia, one of the exhibition partners. "Each year, they show one country's collection. This year in Paris (from November 2011 to November 2012), the museum is exhibiting the Mongolia collection. The Mongolian ministry of education, culture, and sciences, together with the French Embassy in Mongolia, signed a cooperation agreement with the museum to have a part of the exhibition in UB at the same time."

Yo Otgonbayar, Minister of Education, Culture and Science visited France for the opening of the exhibition there. "This exhibition was very famous," he said. "We are trying to have some of the photographs, especially the ones of historical people, left in Mongolia. But this is very hard because of copyright issues; so for the time being, we will have an opportunity to show this exhibition to the Mongolian people."

One hundred years ago in 1912, photographer Stephane Passet made the first of two trips to Mongolia (the second was a year later in 1913) and it is these travels that are the subject of both exhibitions. In Paris, around 180 plates and films are being shown; while 52 photographic reproductions and a slideshow of images that were unable to be printed, together with an original film, make up the exhibition in Ulaanbaatar. Subjects of the photographs include portraits and people; monuments, architecture; religion, stupas and lamas; and panoramas comparing UB then and now.

"Photographer Stephane Passet was coming to Mongolia via the Sahara in the summer of 1912, but he couldn't enter because of Mongolian soldiers at the

border," said Otgonbayar. "He came back again in 1913 through the Hiagt border of Mongolia. Mongolian historians have been researching the photographs to find out who the pictured people were. They might have been Tushee Gun Chagdarjav, Minister of Finance; 2 time Prime Minister Daminbazar, or Badamdorj, another historical figure. There is also one interesting photo of Ulaanbaatar from Tsasgani Ovoo taken in 1912. For the exhibition we took a present-day photo of Ulaanbaatar. It's very interesting to compare the two photos which show how Ulaanbaatar has developed."

"The photographs were taken exactly 1 century ago," says exhibition curator Emeline Bettex. "It's the view of Mongolia by a French photographer at that time, so that's an important testimonial about the state of the country at that time. It can be very interesting for Mongolian people to see the pictures of a foreign photographer who visited the country a century ago. Especially for the pictures taken in Ulaanbaatar, people can see how it has changed and be reminded of how it was before."

"The most important thing is that these photographs are in color (still very rare at that time) and are the first ones taken in color of Mongolia." Autochrome is an additive color, mosaic screen plate process, consisting of layers of glass plates covered with microscopic grains of potato starch and photo emulsion, through which light passes to capture the image. When it was first marketed in 1907 it was a revolution in photography, bringing to life what had up until that point been only seen in black and white.

"The "autochrome" technique used at that time by operator (photographer) Stephane Passet, is among the first photographic technique in history of color photography," said Sophie. "It allows us, a hundred years after they were taken, to get into the amazing reality of that time. For example, we can see the color of clothing, buildings and artifacts" which are also a very important heritage for today's researchers and scientists."

A close look at any of the photographs reveals the microscopic mosaic which made up the plates – red-orange, green and blue-violet dots that blend together in the eye, reconstructing the color of the light photographed through the filtered grains.

During his travels, Passet only spent a few days in Mongolia, "capturing aspects, customs and ways of going about human activity that were bound to disappear in a matter of time". Although Ulaanbaatar is obviously a very different place, many of the images are astonishingly similar to life in the countryside today.

"I think it is also the exhibition's purpose to open a reflection about time and space, the past and the future of Mongolia," says Sophie.

Sadly, Albert Kahn went bankrupt in the stock market crash of 1929 and began selling his collection; so it is impossible for us to know how many documents had been created at this time. Thankfully, public authorities of the Département des Hauts de Seine (the administrative authority, region around Paris), decided to buy his house (which is now the Albert Kahn museum and garden), together with the collection, enabling us to glimpse into the world that has significantly changed.

"Mongolia 100 years ago in French Photographers Camera" is collaboration between the Albert Kahn museum, the French Embassy, The Alliance Française, ACM and the Ministry of education art and culture of Mongolia and will be shown at the Mongolian National Modern Art Gallery until July 1. One hundred years later, Albert Kahn is still bringing cultures together.



Yves Delaunay, Ambassador of France and Yo Otgonbayar, Minister of Education, Culture and Science open the exhibition



Lama standing next to prayer wheel



Khalkha married woman



Gandan Area, Nitsel Khuree, 1913



Maitdar temple, Nitsel khuree, 1913

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