

Imagining Tibet: Representations in the National Museum of Scotland

Tenzin Ju

These days, it feels like Tibet is vanishing. It has disappeared from the list of countries in geography textbooks, global maps, visa forms, and the roll calls of international sports like the Olympics and the World Cup. In the mainstream press, stories from or about Tibet are increasingly rare. The idea of Tibet is melting from public consciousness much like the glaciers of the Himalayas. Once featured in numerous Hollywood films and international best-selling books, Tibet now lingers mostly in museum exhibits. Even this fragile space is under threat, as the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) transnational influence works to overwrite "Tibet" with "Xizang," an imposed name of central Tibet. For many of us in the diaspora, time in the West deepens our longing for home. As a result, stepping into a new city often means scanning for a museum, searching for a Tibetan corner, however small. It has become a ritual of mine, a way to feel home from afar.

When I first arrived in Edinburgh in August 2021 with a group of Tibetan friends, we stayed at Brae House on 31 Abbeyhill. It is just a few minutes' walk to the west from the Palace of Holyroodhouse and the Scottish Parliament. From our flat, we had a clear view of Arthur's Seat, and seeing it reminded me of a small hill called Mugri (མུག་རི།) near our village in Tibet. Mugri was like a molehill compared to the other mountains in the region. Next morning, climbing Arthur's Seat was the obvious thing to do. It was a short but refreshing hike. From

Arthur's Seat we walked to Himalaya Café at 20 Clerk Street, taking the route along Holyrood Park Road beside the Commonwealth Pool. I later learned that Himalaya Café is much more than just a place to grab a meal. As the only Tibetan café in Edinburgh, it doubles as an information centre, a community hub, a cultural embassy, and even an emotional support station for homesick Tibetan and Himalayan students like me. It is the kind of place where you can walk in for a cup of tea and walk out with housing advice, a job lead, and three new friends. I've never met a Tibetan who's visited Edinburgh and hasn't been there.

After a delicious free brunch, I asked Reka, the café's owner, how many Tibetans lived in Edinburgh. "Around thirty," she said—a number that didn't surprise me, considering there are only about a thousand Tibetans across the UK. As we chatted, I mentioned how the café's layout, colours, the shrine, thangkas (ཐང་ཀ་ཀ། Tibetan scroll paintings) of Buddhist deities and overall feel reminded me of something between a Tibetan home and a temple. That seemed to resonate with her, because she quickly suggested we visit the Tibetan section at the National Museum of Scotland.

We strolled down Newington Road from Clerk Street, casually scanning the storefronts, Chinese restaurants, Halal grocery shops, and rows of charity shops. Unlike chain-store colonised British high streets, each had its own clutter and charm. When we reached the Law School (also known as Old College), we wandered inside, took a few photos on the lawn in the centre courtyard, and then exited through the south-facing door at the back. A quick right turn, then a left, and we were standing in front of the National Museum of Scotland (NMS) on Chamber Street—curious and a little excited to see how Tibet had found its place within

those walls.

The Tibetan Section

The museum's original entrance, once elevated and accessible only via a grand staircase, has been reconstructed to enhance accessibility. Now, side entrances at street level lead visitors into the vaulted Entrance Hall, which was formerly a basement storage area. Flanking the museum's entrance are statues of two figures: William Henry Playfair and William Chambers. Playfair was a distinguished 19th-century Scottish architect renowned for his neoclassical designs (Edinburgh World Heritage, 2025), while William Chambers was a prominent publisher and philanthropist (Evendo, 2025). These statues serve as symbolic guardians of the museum, embodying the importance of the rich history and cultural legacy that the institution preserves. The Entrance Hall, once a utilitarian space, now features vaulted ceilings and stone archways that create a unique atmosphere for visitors. Ascending from the Entrance Hall one reaches the Grand Gallery, a space characterised by its soaring glass roof and delicate cast-iron balconies. Captain Francis Fowke, who designed this space in 1866, was inspired by London's Crystal Palace (ArchDaily, 2011).

On the southern wall of the Grand Gallery, three doors lead into the main exhibition halls of the museum. If you walk to the left the Tibetan collection, part of the 'Living Lands' theme, is in the second hall. The first thing that caught my eye was a Tibetan prayer wheel (See figure 1).



Figure 1: Tibetan prayer wheels at the National Museum of Scotland

Prayer wheels are woven into the very fabric of Tibetan life. They come in brass and copper, in wood and stone, in forms as varied as the people who turn them. You'll find them in monasteries, built into the walls of public halls, in family kitchens, and carried by elders in various sizes and styles (see figure 2). The reason people turn these wheels is because they contain tightly wound scrolls of printed mantras, prayers, sacred scriptures. Spinning the wheel is thought to be just as powerful as chanting the words aloud. They all spin the same way, clockwise, except those of the ancient Bon (བོན།) tradition,¹ which move in the other direction. To turn a wheel counterclockwise, in the Buddhist context, is to accumulate negative karmic imprints, which is the ticket that leads to rebirth in one of the three lower realms.² I often caught sight of curious tourists turning the prayer wheel the wrong way. Circling back to set

1 Bon is said to be one of five major Tibetan Buddhist sects. Their wheels move counterclockwise, which they believe is the correct direction as the mantras and sacred texts contained within them are folded rightward. This practice aligns with the tradition of reading texts from left to right. It is also said they believe they will meet the Buddha halfway, as he moves clockwise.

2 The three lower realms are the realm of Hell, the realm of Hungry Ghosts, and the realm of Animals.

it right once they had moved on became a habit of mine. There was something instinctual in it, like brushing dust off a sacred book. Back home, only mischievous children dared spin them anticlockwise in defiance of a grandparent’s watchful eye. Such rebellion was met with discipline, a stinging reminder across the backside, so I was never a rebel. What made this prayer wheel special was that it was not just a display. Unlike many other museum pieces, it was alive, moving, turning and chanting the mantras.



Figure 2: Tibetan prayer wheels of different types, designed by Loplao

A dead taxidermied dri (འདྲི།) (See Figure 3) stands two meters away from the prayer wheels along the southern wall. Its presence demands attention. Though labelled simply as “Yak” (གཡལ་གཡ།), her slenderer frame, finer features, and moderate size distinguish her as a female, which is called a dri in Tibetan. Yak refers only to the male. Such inaccuracies are common in general public spaces, but high-profile national museums like this could easily avoid them if they employed Tibetan museologists. For a Tibetan, the difference between yak and dri is like the difference between a bull and a cow. The dri is equally essential to nomadic life

on the plateau, though less acknowledged in Western portrayals as the word yak invades its place. This dri's underside shows signs of wear, her belly hair thinning and frayed, a clue to the season of her death. In early spring, yaks and dris begin to shed their thick winter coats in preparation for the warmer months ahead. This transitional fur loss is mirrored here, suggesting the animal may have died or been culled in that season.



Figure 3: A taxidermized dri (འབྲི།) at the National Museum of Scotland

Behind this dri stretches a full-wall mural: sweeping Tibetan highlands dusted with snow, brown slopes rolling toward the sky, barren and vast. Interspersed are photographs of nomads and their animals like dris and yaks burdened with household loads, trudging over uneven ground. The imagery conveys not only landscape but livelihood. A museum caption reads:

Tibetan nomads herd Yak. These large animals are remarkably agile on the high mountain passes, helping nomadic people make

difficult journeys across rocky landscapes. Yaks are very strong and are used to move camps to new sites. Their hair, which is warm and waterproof, is often used to make tents.

While the yaks and dris of the Tibetan plateau are agile, strong, and biologically adapted to harsh high-altitude environments, they are herbivores typically found grazing in expansive grasslands. Presenting this taxidermied dri on a setting of polished blue slate stones contrasts with the traditional portrayal of these animals in Tibetan art and photography, where they are usually depicted in natural, grassy landscapes (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: Exhibit of Tibetan Yaks at Lhasa Yak Museum in Tibet

After the initial nostalgia of encountering the dri and the prayer wheels wore off, spending more than ten minutes in the Tibetan section revealed a wealth of smaller, more intimate collections. These included items related to pilgrimage, clothing and crafts, spiritual utensils, and belongings of the Tibetan aristocracy from Lhasa, the capital of Tibet. Among these, one object deeply intertwined with my childhood stood

out: a man's *gau* (གཞུ།) (see Figure 5), an amulet case.



Figure 5: A man's *gau* (གཞུ།), an amulet case, at the National Museum of Scotland

In my village every child wore a *gau*. Either around the neck or slung over the shoulder for spiritual protection. Inside each *gau* were sacred contents: images of deities, written mantras and prayers, pieces of cloth blessed by revered lamas, and other holy relics. I remember my own *gau*, filled by my parents with great care. Among the many sacred items, it held a small image of the Dalai Lama, hidden behind a picture of another lama whose image wasn't censored in Tibet. The cord that held the *gau* was itself blessed, and as children visited monasteries or received blessings from different lamas, they were given protection knots, *sung du* (སླང་ཐུང་།). These were tied onto the cord, accumulating over time. In some cases, the number of *sung du* would become so great that they completely obscured the *gau* itself.

While the *gau* and the *sung du* served as spiritual armour, they

also became home to less welcome residents, lice and their freshly laid eggs. Worn for years without ever being washed, the gau and its attachments offered the perfect refuge for these tiny intruders. Hygiene standards were different back then, especially in rural Tibet. Bathing and hair-washing were rare, particularly for children. I still recall how the backs of my hands resembled what we called “crow’s hands,” darkened with layers of dust from wiping my nose while playing in the dusty village playgrounds.

To the left of the smaller collections, a large map of Tibet was printed on the wall (Figure 6). I was pleased to see the Museum had titled the map ‘Tibet’, in defiance of China’s directives. While the map accurately depicted the overall size of Tibet, its internal regional divisions were misrepresented. Specifically, it named only two of Tibet’s three traditional provinces.



Figure 6: Map of Tibet at the National Museum of Scotland, where Kham is merged into Amdo and U-Tsang.

Tibetans divide their country into three main regions: U-Tsang,

Kham, and Amdo, which are collectively known as the *cholka-sum* (ཆོལ་སྐོར་གསལ་མཚན།), meaning “three regions.” However, this map merged Kham into the neighbouring regions of U-Tsang (referred to as the Tibet Autonomous Region) and Amdo (as Qinghai Province), thereby erasing Kham as a distinct region. This was a significant distortion of Tibet’s traditional geography (Figure 7).



Figure 7: Map of Tibet depicting its three traditional regions, produced by Free Tibet

The absence of Tibet as a country on global maps, the misrepresentation of its internal geography, and the Sinicization of Tibetan place names have impacted how people perceive and understand the Tibetan landscape. For instance, when trying to locate a Tibetan place on Google Maps, using its traditional Tibetan name is often pointless. Most of the time, one must resort to the Chinese version. A clear example is the Yellow River. Even though it originates in Tibet, searching for its Tibetan name *Rma Chu* (རྩ་ཚུ།) often provides no results. Only the English name “Yellow River” or the Chinese name *Huáng Hé* (黄河) will bring it up. This erroneously hints, to people who do not

know Tibet, that Tibetan places are Chinese. Particularly, the erasure of Tibetan terms from popular maps and digital spaces echoes Philipson's (2018) concept of *linguistic imperialism*, wherein a dominant language actively hinders the survival and growth of minority languages. The replacement of "Tibet" with "Xizang" by Western museums such as the Musée Guimet and the Musée du quai Branly, under the influence of CCP directive (Lawson-Tancred, 2025), shows that Chinese linguistic imperialism extends well beyond digital maps.

The History

My past four years of lectures, tutorials, and heated debates about decolonization and imperialism at the University of Edinburgh have shaped the way I think about museums. I can no longer avoid questioning how the museum objects were collected and the historical contexts behind their acquisition. When I searched for the history of the Tibetan collection at the NMS, I found the literature to be scarce. Inbal Livne appears to be the only scholar who has worked on this collection, having written her PhD thesis on the subject. From Livne's work, it becomes clear that the Tibetan collection at NMS was largely formed through the efforts of amateur collectors operating in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She identifies three primary categories of these individuals: missionaries, military personnel, and colonial collectors (Livne, 2010). Each group's motivations and the circumstances surrounding their acquisition of Tibetan objects were shaped by the historical context of the time.

Missionary collectors such as Annie Royle Taylor, J.W. Innes Wright, and H.F. Ridley were primarily motivated by evangelical aims.

Their collecting activities predated the 1904 Younghusband Expedition. Many of the objects they gathered were brought back to Scotland to create educational displays intended to generate support for future missionary efforts. At the same time, these collectors sought to better understand Tibetan culture and Buddhism. Annie Taylor's collection, for example, includes everyday items. Museum records note that some of these belonged to her Tibetan companions, Puntso and Sigu (Livne, 2013). Innes Wright, while working as a missionary, also sold parts of his collection to institutions such as the National Museum of Scotland and the Liverpool Museum, suggesting financial motives alongside his religious pursuits (Livne, 2013).

Military collectors entered the scene more forcefully during the British military incursions into Tibet with the 1904 Younghusband Expedition. Scottish officers such as Colonel Frederick "Eric" Marshman Bailey, Major W.J. Ottley and Captain J.F.C. Dalmahoy acquired Tibetan objects under circumstances often tied directly to acts of war. In some cases, these objects were looted from monasteries or other sacred spaces during violent conflict. For example, Ottley's collection was regarded as a "trophy" of war, and as Livne notes, his donation to the museum appears to be as much about immortalising his personal legacy as it was about cultural preservation (Livne, 2013). The Younghusband Expedition was the first Western military invasion of Tibet, and it looted a lot of Tibetan Buddhist art, bringing its beauty to the attention of the West.

Livne terms the third category as "colonial collectors." This includes figures who were neither missionaries nor military personnel, but who were nonetheless deeply entangled in the networks of empire. This group includes individuals like Lilian Le Mesurier, Lord and Lady

Carmichael, and Agnes Symington Christison (Livne, 2010). Their reasons for collecting varied, ranging from personal curiosity to familial ties or academic interests. These reasons all demonstrate the deep appeal of Tibetan art beyond its cultural boundaries. According to Livne, Le Mesurier's collection offers insight into a more personal engagement with Tibetan material culture, while Christison's collections from Darjeeling and beyond reflect the layered and hybrid nature of colonial life in Tibet and Himalayan regions (Livne, 2010; 2013).

While the Tibetan collections at NMS reflect imperial motives and colonial imbalances, their current preservation is thoughtful and respectful despite some minor inaccuracies. The museum also serves as an important platform for showcasing Tibetan cultural heritage. Had these objects not been taken by their "collectors," many might have been lost or destroyed during the Cultural Revolution in Tibet (1966–1976), when an estimated 90% of monasteries were demolished (Cimmino, 2018). As Livne (2010; 2013) notes, provenance plays a crucial role in revealing the "biographies of objects and people" (p. 291), and through these objects one can trace personal ambition, institutional priorities, and imperial ideologies. Many of these items are also valuable historical materials from an independent Tibet.

On a personal level, even if tourists spin the prayer wheel the wrong way, the museum mistakes a dri for a yak, and the museum map overlooks the region I come from, this Tibetan display still holds deep meaning for me. It's where I go when I miss home, and the first place I take visiting friends—just like you'd invite someone into your own home. Its ambiance and the quiet presence of familiar objects often transport me back to the world I grew up in. Nevertheless, as a

Tibetologist, I am aware of the precarious position Tibet and Tibetans occupy on international platforms, in museums, and within academic institutions shaped by complex political, cultural, and demographic dynamics. As Kelsang (2025) observes, despite the prominent display of Tibetan collections in Western museums, the presence of Tibetans as curators, interpreters, and collaborators remains scarce. This absence allows Tibetan collections to be framed through the perspectives of Chinese and Western curators, often at the expense of Tibetan voices and agency.

Works Cited

- ArchDaily. “*National Museum of Scotland / Gareth Hoskins Architects.*” *ArchDaily*, 2011, <https://www.archdaily.com/181861/national-museum-of-scotland-gareth-hoskins-architects>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2025.
- Cimmino, R. “Threat from Tibet? Systematic Repression of Tibetan Buddhism in China.” *Harvard International Review*, Fall 2018, <https://hir.harvard.edu/repression-tibetan-buddhism-china/>.
- Edinburgh World Heritage. “*The Playfair Statue.*” *Edinburgh World Heritage*, 2025, <https://ewh.org.uk/the-playfair-statue/>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2025.
- Evendo. “*Explore the Heritage of William Chambers Monument.*” *Evendo*, n.d., <https://evendo.com/locations/united-kingdom/edinburgh/attraction/william-chambers-monument>. Accessed 15 Apr. 2025.

Kelsang, Tenzin. “From Loot to Legacy: Rethinking ‘Tibetan Art’ in Western Museums.” *post: notes on modern & contemporary art around the globe*, 16 July 2025, <https://post.moma.org/from-loot-to-legacy-rethinking-tibetan-art-in-western-museums/>. Accessed 20 July 2025.

Lawson-Tancred, Joseph. “Paris Museum Sued for ‘Erasing’ Tibet from Gallery Name.” *Artnet News*, 3 July 2025, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/french-museums-open-letter-2531117>. Accessed 23 July 2025.

Livne, Inbal. “Hostage to Fortune or a Considered Collection? The Tibetan Collections at National Museums Scotland and Their Collectors.” *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 23, 2010, pp. 84–97. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41416857>.

Tibetan Collections in Scottish Museum 1890–1930: A Critical Historiography of Missionary and Military Intent. PhD thesis, University of Stirling, 2013.

National Museums Scotland. “*Architecture Trail*.” *National Museum of Scotland*, 2025, <https://www.nms.ac.uk/national-museum-of-scotland/see-and-do/tours-and-trails/architecture-trail>. Accessed 16 Apr. 2025.

Phillipson, Robert. *Linguistic Imperialism*. 2018. ResearchGate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/31837620_Linguistic_Imperialism_R_Phillipson. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.