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OF
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extraordinary
portrait of
Tibetan life

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Place of exile



Before the Chinese invasion, Sera was one of the largest monasteries in Tibet. It is now based in India, where **Sheila Rock** made her voyage of discovery. Ailsa McWhinnie reports

SINCE THE DAWN of photography, the fascination among Western photographers for recording rites and customs that are alien to their own culture has been a strong one. From Edward Curtis' now controversial portraits of Native American Indians, right up to Steve McCurry's recent book on the temples at Angkor, 'other worlds' have provided endless inspiration for the enthusiastic photographer.

The ultimate success of the results often depends on the extent to which the photographer is willing to immerse his or herself in the idea, and whether they have the desire to just follow it through to see where it ends up. Such is the case with Sheila Rock's long-term project on the Tibetan monastery of Sera. Her first pictures were taken in 1998, and now, five years on and four visits later, more than 100 of them have been collected in a book, to be published by Columbia University Press.

Like many of the best things, circumstance took Sheila to Sera. She and her boyfriend had been in Sri Lanka, and as they were about to leave for India, a woman they had got to know asked if they would take a parcel to a young monk at Sera, which is based in Mysore. Never having heard of the monastery before, and not knowing a great deal about Buddhism ('I look Tibetan, but I'm not,' she says), Sera came as quite a surprise to Sheila. 'It was like going from Oxford Circus to the countryside,' she recalls. 'The village five miles down the road was chaotic and colourful, then as you drive into the ➤

Left 'This young monk was so involved in his reading that he didn't hear me creep up,' explains Sheila. 'He looked up when he heard the camera click, so I then shot some conventional portraits, but they weren't as successful as this first one'



◀ Tibetan community you just think, “Ah! Quiet!” There’s noise and activity, but the energy is very very different.’

Having found the 16-year-old monk, and given him his parcel of a T-shirt and ball, Sheila found herself being drawn into the atmosphere and tempo of the monastery, so ended up staying for several days. Her first few pictures were taken during this brief visit, but soon after her return she realised she wanted

Above ‘This young boy had been following me around, saying nothing. Suddenly he happened to walk into the right space, where the light fell beautifully on him – one of those chance moments where all the elements were right’

to tell the monastery’s story in more depth.

Fortuitously, she had got to know a geshe (senior monk), named Genden, during her first visit, so she turned to him for assistance in developing the idea. ‘Genden was instrumental,’ she explains. ‘I wouldn’t have been able to do anything without him. It would have just been a superficial view.’

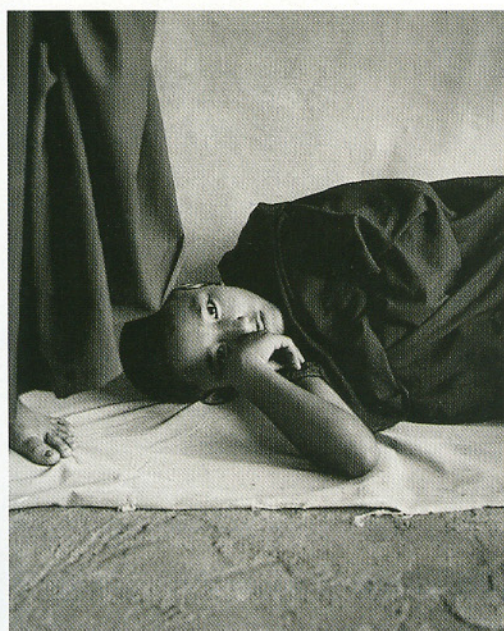
The geshe was able not only to gain her access to areas where no ordinary visitor

'I didn't want to bring a political element to my pictures. They're not Don McCullin hard-nosed portraits. I think they're quite romantic'

would be permitted, he also arranged for her to start at the top, as Sheila recalls. 'Just before I left England, I got a call from Genden, telling me not to come to Sera first, but to meet him at Drepong, which is another big monastery. His Holiness the Dalai Lama was going to be there, and Genden hoped this would give me an opportunity to meet him.'

All Sheila had to show the Dalai Lama was a few Polaroids she had shot previously, but he was very supportive, welcoming any interest in Tibetan culture, because of the plight of the people. At the end of her brief 10-minute session with him, the Dalai Lama's secretary offered to take a picture of them both together. As they posed, His Holiness squeezed Sheila's hand tightly. That was the beginning of the project proper.

In her mild, thoughtful voice, which retains



just a hint of the American accent she came to England with in the early 1970s, Sheila recalls how she strapped a backdrop, a great deal of Kodak Tri-X film, and her Hasselblad camera to the roof of a Mini to travel to Sera and, once there, how she hired a Tibetan assistant. 'I would set up in the courtyard, and just stand and look around – do my "casting",' she laughs. 'I would say to my assistant, "I like him", and he would approach the monk in question.'

Less is more

When on a commercial shoot that involves the fashion and portrait photography for which she is renowned, Sheila shoots at least five to seven rolls per subject to ensure she's got something she deems 'worthy.' Once at the monastery, however, its pared down lifestyle seemed to reflect in her way of working, and she found she was shooting just one roll of 120 film per portrait. 'I think part of the reason is that there's no artifice, no barriers to break down. On a commercial shoot, on the other hand, there's a reason for it – it's because the person needs to look ➤

Above 'As part of one of their rituals, the monks circle the temple seven times. This one came past once, so the next time around I stopped him to take his portrait. On his following circuit he reappeared with a friend and asked me to take their picture together!'

Left 'This is probably the most posed of all my images. I did a number of pictures showing just parts of the monks in the frame, bringing in other people but without their presence being too obvious'



Left 'I wanted to show the diversity of people who live at Sera – it's a wonderful collection of humanity, from wealthy to poor, but everyone is equal. It was a spontaneous decision to get this monk to hold out his robes, I just thought it would make a graphic composition'

Right 'On this occasion in 2002 I visited Sera specifically for Tibetan new year, which takes place in February. The monks have time off to visit their families and take part in ceremonies, for which this monk was rehearsing. The face appearing at the window was just a happy accident'

➤ fabulous, to be sold in a particular way.'

Sheila admits to a certain moodiness about these portraits, simply because it's a style she's attracted to. But what comes through when I see laid out on her living room floor the 40 or so prints (about to be shipped to New York for an exhibition) is the very strong link between her fashion and portraiture style, and this body of work. 'I don't think a reportage photographer would have approached it in this way,' she admits. And that's the key to these images. There is a stillness and an intensity about them which is uncommon in classic



reportage photography. Our general perception of reportage photographers is of a very fast-moving, constantly rushing figure. This doesn't tally with Sheila's approach. 'I didn't want to bring a political element to my pictures,' she explains. 'They're not ➤

Below 'I positioned myself by an open door while these monks were chanting sutras, but no-one even looked at me'

Sera monastery

The Serah monastery was established close to Lhasa, Tibet, in 1419. Despite the partial demolition of the original monastery during the first 30 years (1951 to 1981) of Tibet's occupation by the Chinese, Sera monastery still exists, albeit with only a few hundred monks compared with the 8,000 that lived there prior to the invasion.

In 1959, the year of the Tibetan uprising, nearly all the Buddhist monasteries were destroyed by the Chinese military. Hundreds of monks from Sera were killed, and ancient texts destroyed. Despite this, many monks survived to escape across the Himalayas into India, and managed to re-establish Sera in Mysore, southern India. It now houses some 5,000 Buddhist monks living in exile.

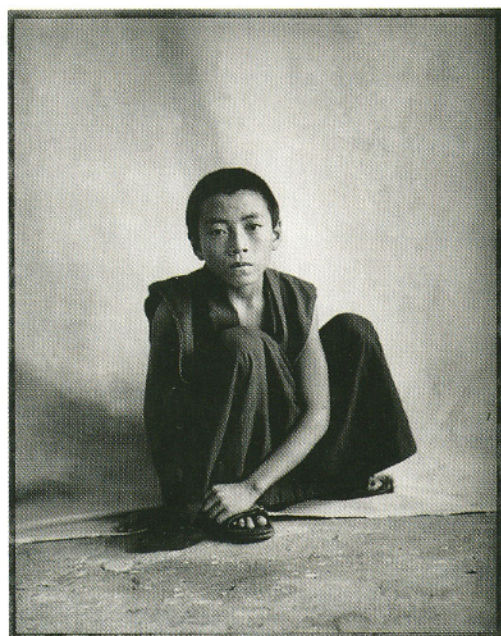




Above 'All the younger monks have chores, and this one was a breadmaker. The monks are completely self-sufficient, and the kitchens are huge, as several thousand people have to be fed three times a day'

◀ Don McCullin hard-nosed portraits. I think they're quite romantic.' Given her style, it comes as no surprise, then, to learn that the photographer she holds higher in esteem than any other is Irving Penn.

This influence comes through particularly powerfully in her 5x4in portraits, several of which are reproduced here. 'I had an insect



Right 'This young monk was playing nearby where I had set up my 5x4in camera and backdrop, and I just thought he had an amazing face'

'I would set up in the courtyard, and just stand and look around – do my "casting"'

bite that stopped me moving around for about five days,' she recollects. 'I ended up setting up just outside of the compound I was staying in. I would hobble around to choose the subjects, and for each portrait I shot only about four sheets of film – not many. I made some of the nicest portraits there.'

My impression of the slow-paced serenity of making these portraits is shattered when Sheila shows me a snapshot taken behind the scenes by her assistant during one such image. It's only just possible to make out Sheila behind her 5x4in camera, thanks to the throngs of other monks, fuelled by their curiosity, who have stopped to watch the proceedings. It could almost be mistaken for a film shoot.

As we talk, the conversation moves onto another of her long-term personal projects, a study of horses, which is still ongoing. Her passion for this body of work is equal to that for the monks of Sera, and has its similarities, too. Rather than a straight documentation of the equestrian world, Sheila is more interested in conveying the spirituality of the horse, its power, and its strength. The parallels with her work on the monastery are obvious.

As America's foremost Tibetologist, Robert Thurman, says in his introduction to Sheila's book, 'How peaceful and yet full of life is this world of study, prayer, meditation and being human with a purpose!' And if Sheila Rock is anything, it's a human with a purpose. ○

Sera: The way of the Tibetan monk, by Sheila Rock, with a foreword by Robert Thurman, is published by Columbia University Press, price £31/\$44.95, ISBN 0 2311 2890 8

