“Vanished Kingdoms: The Wulsin Photographs of Tibet, China, and Mongolia, 1921-1925” Opened May 22 at the Smithsonian’s Natural History Museum

“Vanished Kingdoms: The Wulsin Photographs of Tibet, China, and Mongolia, 1921-1925,” an exhibition of 39 color images derived from rare colored lantern slides taken by two adventurous Americans, Janet E. and Frederick R. Wulsin Jr. during the early 20th century, will be on view at the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History from May 22 through Oct. 9. This traveling exhibition is organized by the Peabody Essex Museum in Massachusetts in conjunction with the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University and the Aperture Foundation.

The Wulsin explorations in central and Southeast Asia were among the last examples of great campaign-style natural history collecting expeditions. Their work epitomizes the collecting zeal of 19th and 20th century natural historians who scoured the remote corners of the world to “discover” and document the Earth’s cultural and ecological diversity.

“The Wulsin’s herald from an era of scientific travelers whose adventures, observations and collections are an integral feature of the intellectual basis of natural history museums,” stated Smithsonian Natural History Museum director Cristian Sampér. “We are excited to be a part of the revival of the Wulsin’s work because of both its beauty and importance.”

The Wulsin expeditions, conducted on behalf of Harvard University and the Smithsonian Institution, were sponsored by the National Geographic Society, and resulted in the acquisition of many hundreds of botanical, biological and anthropological specimens – a few of which are included in this exhibition. The young Americans went on a nine-month journey through central China and photographed the places and people of Inner Mongolia, Gansu and the Qinghai...
provinces. While on their quest, Frederick established himself as a cultural anthropologist while Janet became one of the first American women to explore western China, Inner Mongolia and Tibet. They both were able to capture Ta’er, Labuleng and Zhuoni lamaseries, religious ceremonies and landscapes to create these unique, colored photographic images drawn from a rare collection of colored lantern slides.

Initially, the images were captured on two-inch by two-inch glass lantern slides which were then painstakingly hand-colored by Beijing artisans. The lantern slide was used during the second half of the 19th century and early 20th century primarily for illustrating lectures or for home entertainment. The projection transparency was made by exposing the glass plate, prepared with a photographic emulsion, under an enlarger with a negative as the primary source material. The prepared glass plate was exposed to the negative much like a paper print would be. The glass plate positive would then be developed, washed, fixed, washed again and, finally, dried. There were special photographic firms in Beijing that supplied painters to hand paint the glass projection positives. Using watercolor pigments and extremely fine sable-haired brushes, these skilled Chinese artists carefully laid down layers of color on the glass positives. This process had the possibility of taking days to complete depending on the level of detail in the image. The Chinese artists employed by Janet, interpreted the images by applying their knowledge of local customs, colors, and scenery to the slides in the form of intoxicating color paint. The result is an intriguing juxtaposition of Chinese design sensibilities and an American photographer’s eye.

The Peabody Essex Museum commissioned renowned digital artist Fernando Azevedo to create archival inkjet prints, which reveal, in large scale, the intricately detailed interiors as well as breathtaking landscapes found in the original hand-colored lantern slides.

**Exhibition catalog**

“Vanished Kingdoms: A Woman Explorer in Tibet, China and Mongolia: 1923-1925,” written by Mabel H. Cabot and published by the Aperture Foundation, interprets Janet Wulsin’s travels through her expedition images, as well as journal and diary entries. An illustrated lecture by Cabot is scheduled for June 2, at 12 p.m., in the Baird Auditorium followed by a book signing in the museum store, where the book will be available for purchase (hardcover $35).
Public Programs

The closing of the exhibit will coincide with the 800-year anniversary of the founding of the Mongol Empire. The Natural History Museum will celebrate this occasion with Mongolia Fest, Oct. 6 - 8. Visitors can learn about Genghis Khan and the fascinating history and cultures of Mongolia through the talents of musicians, calligraphers, artists, wrestlers and acrobats who will be performing in a special exhibition hall throughout the festival weekend. Artistic demonstrations will include mask and costume making by Natsag Gankhuyag and lessons in making felt with Rachel Suntop. Children can learn Mongolian games and calligraphy, and try on hats and armor that Genghis Khan would have worn. Special exhibits at the museum during Mongolia Fest will include the work of National Geographic photographer Gordon Wiltsie, historic costumes, and a full-sized ger (traditional dwelling). Smithsonian scientists working in Mongolia will be in the hall to answer questions and talk with visitors about their research. The festival also features a special Mongolian film series in the Baird Auditorium on Sunday, Oct. 8, which is free and open to the public.

About the Museum

The Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History, located at 10th Street and Constitution Avenue N.W., in Washington, D.C., welcomed more than 5.5 million visitors in 2005. The museum is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Please note the Natural History Museum will have extended hours this spring and summer. The museum will remain open from 10 a.m. to 7:30 p.m. every day from May 26 through Sept. 3. Admission is free. For further information, call (202) 633-1000, TTY (202) 357-1729 or visit the museum’s Web site at www.mnh.si.edu.

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