

# ‘A Unique View from Within’: The Representation of Tibetan Architecture in the British Library’s Wise Collection

*Diana Lange*

In the early 1990s, the historian Michael Aris (1946–99) noted that the British Library’s Wise Collection ‘may represent the most ambitious pictorial survey of Tibetan topography and culture ever attempted by a local artist’ (Aris, 1992). The artist’s ambition is reflected in a set of drawings that are probably

the most comprehensive set of large-scale visual representations of Tibet and the Western Himalayan kingdoms of Ladakh and Zangskar in the mid-19th century.

When I started working on the Wise Collection in 2009, I took up the threads of one of Michael Aris’s

‘projects in progress’ at the time of his death in 1999. In my research, I use the Wise Collection as a case study to examine the processes by which knowledge of Tibet was acquired, collected and represented and the intentions and motivations behind these processes. With the forthcoming publication of the whole collection and the results of my research (Lange, forthcoming), I intend to draw attention to this neglected material and its historical significance. In this essay I will give a general overview of the collection and discuss the unique style of the drawings. Using examples of selected illustrations of towns and monasteries, I will show how Tibetan monastic architecture was embedded in picture-maps and represented in detail.

The Wise Collection comprises six large picture-maps drawn on 27 sheets of paper in total. Placed side by side, five of these picture-maps add up to a 15-metre-long panorama showing the west-east route between Leh in Ladakh and Lhasa in Central Tibet and the north-south route leading from Lhasa southwards to Bhutan and today’s northern India

(Fig. 1; see also Fig. 5). The sixth picture-map shows a 1.9-metre-long panorama of the Zangskar valley. In addition, there are 28 related drawings showing detailed illustrations of selected monasteries, monastic rituals, wedding ceremonies and so on. Places on the panoramic map are consecutively numbered from Lhasa westwards and southwards in Arabic numerals. Tibetan numerals can be found mainly on the backs of the drawings, marking the order of the sheets. Altogether there are more than 900 numbered annotations on the Wise Collection drawings. Explanatory notes referring to these numbers were written in English on separate sheets of paper. Some drawings bear additional labels in Tibetan and English, while others are accompanied neither by captions nor by explanatory texts. The drawings are all in watercolour on European paper with the watermarks of English paper mills dated between 1829 and 1856, or on Asian paper made from plants.

The Wise Collection is named after Thomas Alexander Wise (1802–89), a Scottish polymath and

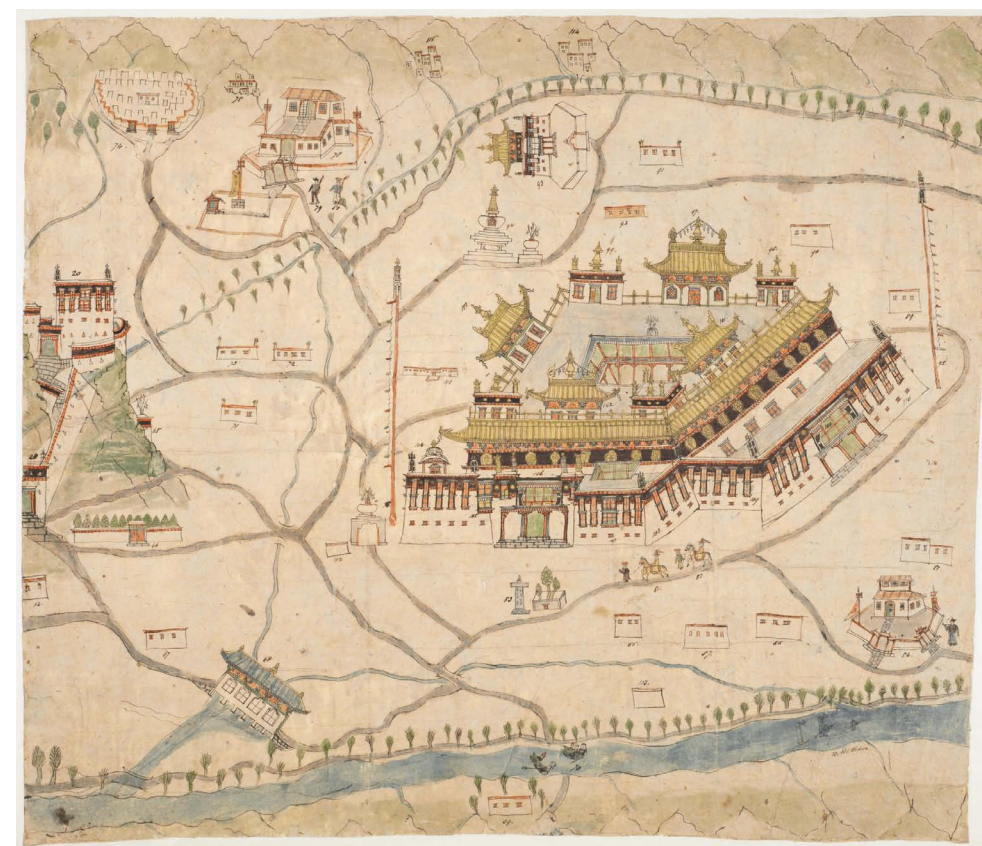


Fig. 1 Map of Lhasa, showing the Potala Palace and Jokhang. Painted by an unknown Tibetan monk, commissioned by Major William Edmund Hay (1805–79), Lahaul (present-day India), c. 1857. Watercolour on paper, folio 1: 82.6 x 103.4 cm, framed; folio 2: 78.5 x 88.9 cm. Wise Collection (Add.Or.3013, Folios 1 and 2)



collector who served in the Indian Medical Service in Bengal in the first half of the 19th century (Lange, 2015). The circumstances of the creation of the collection remained unclear for a long time, but a typewritten note of the British Library from the 1960s states that the 'drawings appear to be by a Tibetan artist, probably a lama, who had contact with Europeans and had developed a semi-European style of drawing'. The recent discovery of a publication by Charles Horne (1823–72) represented a breakthrough in my research since it offers an identification of the person who commissioned the Wise Collection's drawings—one William Edmund Hay (1805–79), a former Assistant Commissioner in Kullu, in today's northwest India. This 1873 publication is a paper on the 'Methods of Disposing of the Dead at Llassa, Thibet, etc.' and includes two drawings. Referring to the source of these drawings, Horne states:

In the year 1857 one of the travelling Llamas from Llassa came to Lahoul, in the Kûlû [Kullu] country on the Himalêh [Himalaya], and hearing of the [Indian] mutiny was afraid to proceed. Major Hay, who was at that place in political employ, engaged this man to draw and describe for him many very interesting ceremonies in use in Llassa, [...]

(Horne, 1873, p. 28)

Horne also stated he had had facsimiles made of Major Hay's drawings (*ibid.*) (I assume that the original drawings were also coloured). Two details, one from the Horne paper and one from the Wise Collection, point to a correspondence in the style of the drawings (Fig. 2). The style of the accompanying explanatory notes in the Horne paper and in the Wise Collection also matches—such as the numbering and the spelling of Tibetan terms, and the Tibetan handwriting. Moreover, the handwriting on the Wise Collection's drawings and in the additional explanatory texts corresponds to Hay's handwriting from his private letters (letters from Hay to Leopold von Orlich, 9 February and 9 August 1845, British Library, India Office Records and Private Papers [Mss Eur F335/6: 1845]). William Howard Russell, former special correspondent of *The Times*, visited Shimla in July 1858 and mentioned in his diary that 'Major Hay, formerly resident at Kulu, is here on his way home, with a very curious and valuable collection of Thibetan drawings [...]' (Russell, 1860, p. 136). This statement most likely also refers to the drawings that belong to the British Library's Wise Collection today.



Fig. 2 (Left) Detail of an illustration in Horne's paper (After Horne, 1873)  
(Right) Detail of a Wise Collection drawing (Add.Or.3028)

At the current state of research, no statement can be made as to the precise circumstances under which Wise acquired the drawings, but it is likely that he purchased them from Hay.

The Wise Collection can be studied from different disciplines. The picture-maps can be assigned primarily to Tibetan cartography, while most of the accompanying drawings can be assigned to ethnographic drawings. The most important feature of indigenous cartography from Tibet is that its impetus was overwhelmingly religious. Cosmographic maps—the most common type of cartographic illustrations in Tibet—must also be distinguished from geographic maps, in other words, those that relate to specific localities, especially major religious centres and particular monasteries. The Wise Collection maps may be categorized as geographic maps, among which pilgrimage maps, such as those of sacred places like Lhasa, appear to be the most common (Schwartzberg, 1994, p. 670 f). Therefore, it is not surprising that one of the six maps in the Wise Collection depicts Lhasa and its surroundings in great detail (see Fig. 1).

The map of Lhasa, oriented north-south, is drawn on two sheets of paper joined together. It has 114 numberings, but no explanatory texts or captions are provided. In Tibetan painting in general there are well-developed canons of composition and principles of aesthetics that guide the artist. In geographic maps, however, individual cartographers appear to have enjoyed considerable personal discretion: it was not uncommon to use different scales and to draw important features large enough to show all their essential attributes (*ibid.*, p. 671). Thus the Lhasa map is dominated by illustrations of the town's most significant buildings—the Potala Palace on the

viewer's left and the Jokhang temple on the right. Other places are shown on a much smaller scale but rendered in intricate detail and displaying distinctive characteristics of the buildings and their environment, such as the former Mentsekhang medical school (on the summit of Chakpori Hill, left of the Potala), Gesar Lhakhang (on the summit of the Bamori mountain, [viewer's] bottom left), the Ramoche temple (above the Jokhang), the Turquoise Bridge (to the lower left of the Jokhang) and the Chinese yamen below the Potala Palace. Still other, not unimportant buildings are drawn rather generically, such as the former state monasteries Drepung and Sera, respectively shown at the top left of each sheet, and the numerous little monasteries and temples around the Jokhang.

There appears to be no general rule with respect to the 'correct' orientation of features on maps in Tibet (*ibid.*), but buildings are commonly oriented

so that the map-reader can see the front facade or the main entrance. On the Lhasa map, the Jokhang's main entrance faces south and not west, as it does in reality. In contrast, Ramoche's entrance faces east—as it does in reality. It was also not uncommon for Tibetan cartographers to shift the locations of buildings or objects on a map in order to draw attention to them. For instance, on the Lhasa map, the Lukhang, or temple of the *nagas* (serpent spirits), in reality from this viewpoint located behind the Potala Palace, is shown to the left of the palace on a small island in a lake surrounded by trees.

The use of multiple perspectives is common, showing some features, such as buildings, mountains and trees, from a horizontal perspective, others from an oblique perspective and still others such as lakes and large compounds from a vertical perspective (*ibid.*). The use of a multi-perspective



Fig. 3 Nechung Monastery  
Painted by an unknown Tibetan monk,  
commissioned by Major William  
Edmund Hay (1805–79), Lahaul  
(present-day India), c. 1857  
Watercolour on paper, folio: 65.5 x 57.4 cm  
Wise Collection (Add.Or.3043)



axonometric view is also common, as in the case of the illustration of the Jokhang. The style of the Lhasa map shows that the map-maker was familiar with indigenous Tibetan cartography and was guided by its specific characteristics. The map is accompanied by complementary drawings showing events and selected places on the map in greater detail, such as ceremonies in the monasteries of Nechung and Tsomoling.

Nechung Monastery is located in the upper-left corner of the Lhasa map, from the viewer's point of view, close to Drepung Monastery (see Fig. 1). A low, flat-roofed building, Nechung is surrounded by trees and marked with the number 45; it is small in comparison to Drepung. It was the residence of Pehar, the chief protector of the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, and the seat of the State Oracle. The ritual drawing shows the big two-storey main temple and the courtyard with three entrances surrounded by small outbuildings (Fig. 3). According to monks from Nechung, the southern entrance door was used exclusively by the State Oracle (personal communication, June 2012). Special characteristics of the buildings are shown in distinct detail, such as the carved heads decorating the main entrance and the stone pillar topped by a small pagoda and with a tree beside it; the tree and the pillar can still be found in photographs taken as late as the 1920s. In addition to the architectural characteristics, the drawing provides insight into monastic life, with an illustration of a ceremony taking place in the courtyard. The numberings on the drawing are provided with a full explanatory text, according to which the ceremony took place in May and the central figure represents a lama acting as the State Oracle.

Founded in the late 18th century, Tsomoling was one of the four Royal Monasteries of Lhasa. During the Dalai Lamas' youth, the regents of Tibet were chosen from the abbots of these monasteries (Ferrari, 1958, p. 93; Richardson, 1998, p. 303). The Wise Collection illustration shows the monastery complex with a front yard, multi-storey temples and a large courtyard (Fig. 4; not included in the exhibition 'Monumental Lhasa'). The dark yellow section between the front and back of the temple represents a roofed area. The temples are provided with numerous architectural details, such as door mountings and roof ornaments. As in the case of Nechung, special characteristics of the building complex are shown in precise detail, such as the two wells and the transom window on the roof area. This drawing also provides a representation of monastic life in its illustration of an Ache Lhamo (lit., 'Sister Goddess'), or Tibetan folk opera (see Henrion-Dourcy, 2006). The explanatory notes state that the ceremony took place in August and that the performers came from Tashilhunpo Monastery as well as from Lhasa. The drawing bears 25 numbers supplemented with Tibetan captions.



Fig. 4 Tsomoling Monastery  
Painted by an unknown Tibetan monk, commissioned by Major William Edmund Hay (1805–79), Lahaul (present-day India), c. 1857  
Watercolour on paper, folio: original size 77 x 49 cm  
Wise Collection (Add.Or.3042)

The illustration of Samye Monastery, oriented west-east, is embedded in the map of Central Tibet (Fig. 5). Samye is located around 50 kilometres southeast of Lhasa. Built in the 8th century, it is considered the oldest Buddhist monastery in Tibet and was conceived as the realization of an ideal universe in the form of a mandala. The main temple in the centre represents Mt Meru, considered to be the centre of the world in ancient Indian philosophy. The ground is surrounded by a high wall representing the ocean. There are temples of different shapes at each of the cardinal points representing the continents, flanked by smaller island temples on either side. Four stupas, each in the colour of its geographical position, are placed at the main temple's corners (south-west—red; north-west—black; north-east—blue; and south-east—white). The two small temples to the north and south

(viewer's left and right) of the main temple represent, respectively, the moon and sun. There is a gate in each of the four cardinal directions (Richardson, 1998, pp. 315 f.; Ferrari, 1958, pp. 44, 113 f.). Most of the temples depicted are not definitively identifiable or are shown at different locations than in reality: for instance, the large multi-storey temple with two roofs and a courtyard surrounded by a wall and representing the temple of Pehar, who, as the protector of the Gelug school, is also Samye's protective deity, is shown in the (viewer's) bottom left (southeast), whereas in reality the temple is located in the bottom right corner (northeast). Despite these geographic inconsistencies, special characteristics of the main temple are shown, such as the stone pillar next to the main entrance. The monastery was badly damaged in 1816 by an earthquake and in 1826 by fire, and repairs were only

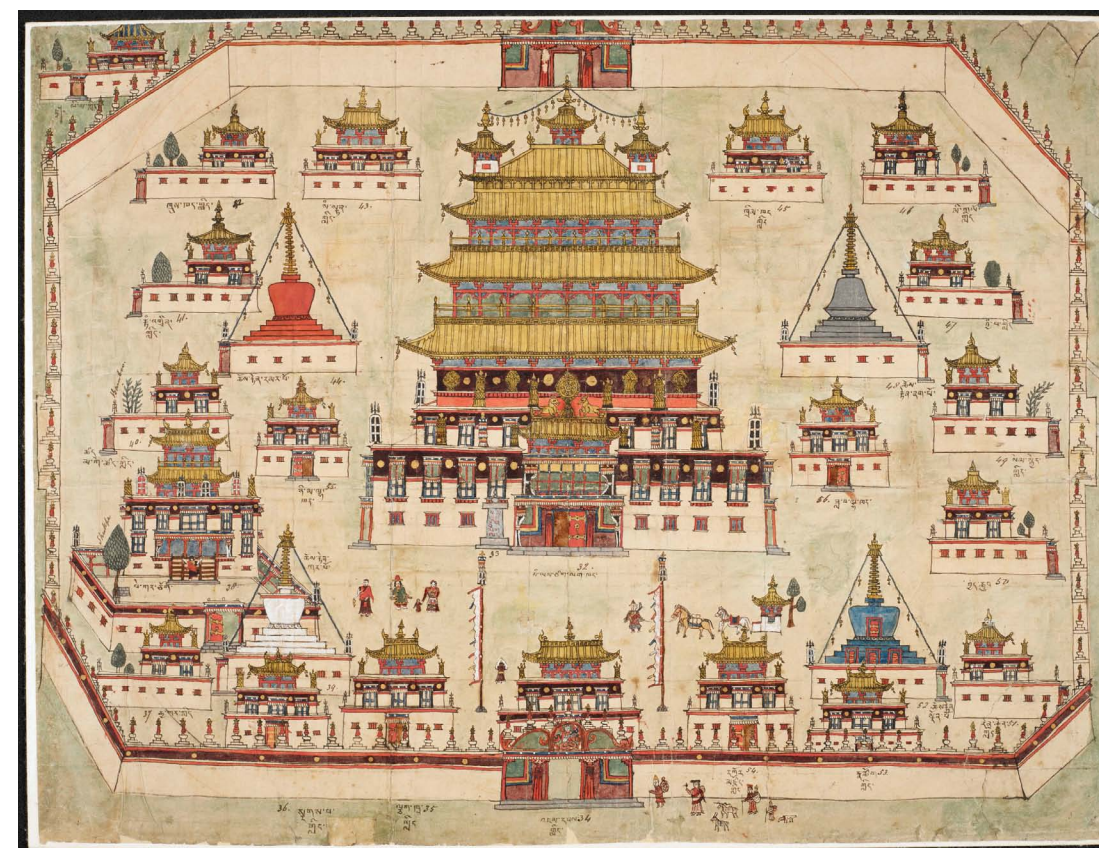


Fig. 5 Samye Monastery  
Painted by an unknown Tibetan monk, commissioned by Major William Edmund Hay (1805–79), Lahaul (present-day India), c. 1857  
Watercolour on paper, 65.5 x 80 cm, framed  
Wise Collection (Add.Or.3017, Folio 3)



completed in 1854 (Chan, 1994, p. 296; Petech, 1973, p. 170), especially the four golden roofs. On this drawing the building complex is shown without any damage and in very good condition, indicating that the artist must have visited the place in or after 1854.

In contrast to illustrations of Lhasa, relatively few monastic plans of Tashilhunpo exist. The illustration of Shigatse town and Tashilhunpo Monastery, oriented north-south, are embedded in a map of southern Tibet, on three joined sheets of paper (Fig. 6). There are 46 numberings on the map, but no explanatory text or captions are provided. The monastery is depicted in great detail. The mausoleums of four Panchen Lamas—marked by their Chinese-style roofs—are shown in a straight line at the back of the building. The complex is surrounded by a high wall, and the big wall where large thangkas were displayed is shown in the upper right-hand corner. The walled area with the trees directly adjacent to the monastery represents the monastery garden, and the building complex placed directly below the monastery shows the Dechen Podrang, or Panchen Lama's summer palace. Other particular sites in the environs of Tashilhunpo are shown on the map, such as the old fort or Shigatse Dzong to the east of the monastery. Below the fort there is the Chinese yamen and parade

ground. To the west of Shigatse—on the left edge of the map—an illustration of Sakya Monastery, the principal seat of the Sakya school, is shown. The depiction clearly shows the southern and the northern parts of the monastery complex. The walled building complex between Tashilhunpo and Sakya probably represents Narthang Monastery, which was famous for its printing house.

Joseph Schwartzberg states that places of religious importance figured prominently on primarily secular maps, even those believed to have been drawn primarily for intelligence purposes at the behest of the British (Schwartzberg, 1994, p. 672). The Wise Collection maps are neither primarily secular nor religious maps but represent an interesting mix of both categories. The result of a collaborative project, the drawings created by a local person and commissioned by a non-Tibetan represent complex, in-depth knowledge of Tibet. Traces of this collaboration can be found at various points. Next to detailed illustrations of places of religious importance the maps provide information that makes Tibet accessible for outsiders, such as topographical features and a large quantity of detailed illustrations of infrastructure. By comparing the picture-maps with earlier Chinese, Tibetan and European maps, a hybrid character can be defined. So far, no other maps

dating to the same period that are even approximately comparable to those of the Wise Collection have been found. The artist combined different styles to draw these unique maps that comprise both a Tibetan style, including captions, and European-style accuracy. Captions are quite common not only on Tibetan wall paintings but also on thangkas, especially medical thangkas, while the 'European-style accuracy' refers to the extensive explanatory notes on separate sheets of paper and the comprehensive character of the collection in general. The maps when joined represent the first attempt by an indigenous artist to show a panorama of the whole of Tibet. The monk-artist has built up his map from the route that traders, caravans and pilgrims used from Ladakh on their way to Central Tibet for centuries. Since, according to Horne, he was not commissioned by William Edmund Hay to gather information on Tibet before he started his journey, he seems to have been asked to 'draw and describe' Tibet from memory. With reference to the extent of the collection—the large number of images and the prolific details—he must have known Tibet quite well and must have been a very keen observer. He produced a visual account of Tibet that transmits valuable ideas about his perception and representation of the territory. Although the collection was compiled under British patronage, it succeeds in revealing an authentically Tibetan world view. These images offer the opportunity to see mid-19th century Tibet and the Western Himalayan kingdoms of Ladakh and Zangskar through the eyes of the observer at that time; in the words of Michael Aris, they show us 'a unique view from within' (British Library, 2016). Diana Lange holds a PhD in Central Asian Studies. She is a research associate at Humboldt University in Berlin.

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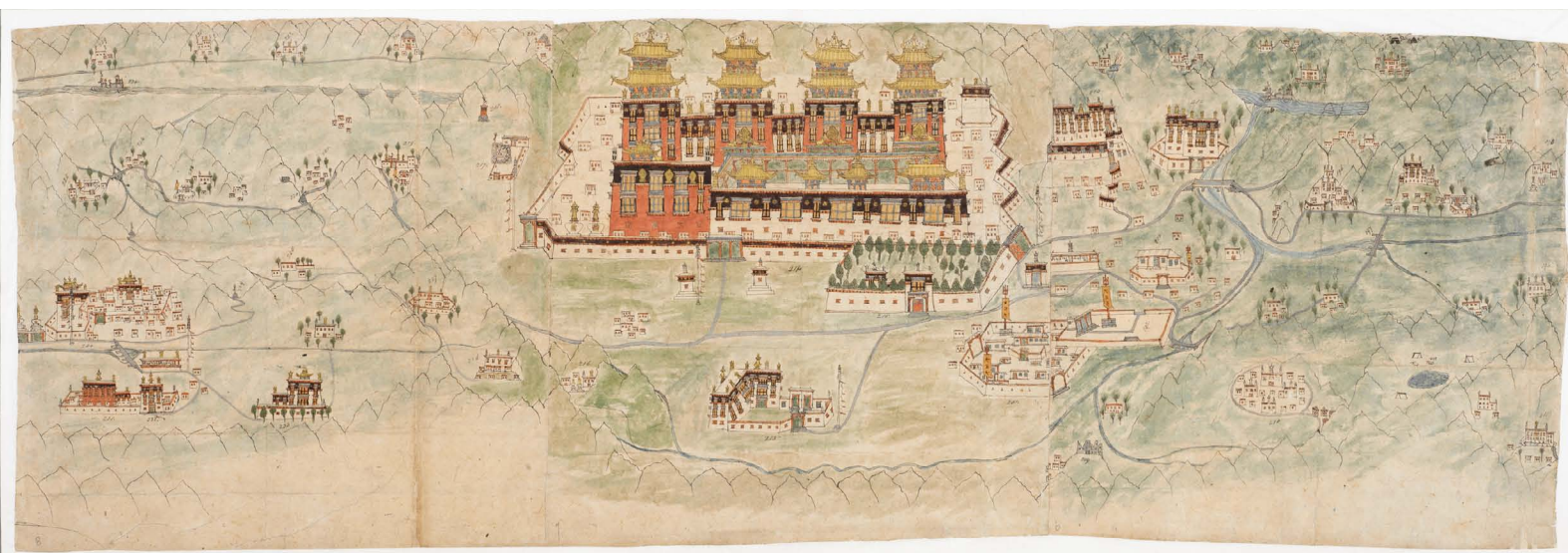


Fig. 6 Middle part of a panoramic map of southern Tibet showing Tashilhunpo Monastery. Painted by an unknown Tibetan monk, commissioned by Major William Edmund Hay (1805–79), Lahaul (present-day India), c. 1857. Watercolour on paper, 68.1 x 163.3 cm, framed. Wise Collection (Add.Or.3016, Folio 2)