



The patchwork panorama

Staffan Bergwik

◀ **DETAIL IN**
A PANORAMA
 from one of Sven
 Hedin's camps in the
 Himalayas in 1908.

How can we create a place from which we can view the world? What knowledge becomes possible from such a place, and what does the person standing there experience? Also, and most importantly: can we say that such a place has a history? On arriving home from his third trip to Asia, the Swedish geographer Sven Hedin taped together photographs of Himalayan mountains to make a geographic and visual panorama. His journey had taken him to the Tibetan Plateau between 1906 and 1909. This patchwork panorama – one of hundreds like it – was part of a wider ambition to create a perspective from which landscapes could be observed in their entirety. The ability to see the world from above was something that Hedin strived towards, for example by developing photographs. Altitude, distance and the landscape's internal relationships were among the phenomena he wished to determine.

Sven Hedin conducted four “expeditions” to “inner Asia” (as he called it) between 1893 and 1935, making numerous attempts to find ways of presenting an overview. In May 1908, up in the Angden-La mountain pass in Tibet, 5,643 metres above sea level, he stated that the magnificence of the surrounding scenery could not be described, it had to be seen: “the gaze reaches, with complete focus, to incredible distances. One is dizzy, feeling that the Earth has grown and assumed greater dimensions than before”. Once home in Stockholm again, Hedin worked on compiling hundreds of observations in drawings, paintings and photographs; all providing visual representations of the place that had caused these feelings of dizziness.

The Academy of Sciences was also involved in attempts to study nature from above. Hedin became a member of the Academy in 1902, and was its President in 1924–1925. At the same time, he was involved in trials for using airships for scientific observations. As a representative of the Academy of Sciences, Hedin was a member of the *Internationale Studiengesellschaft zur*



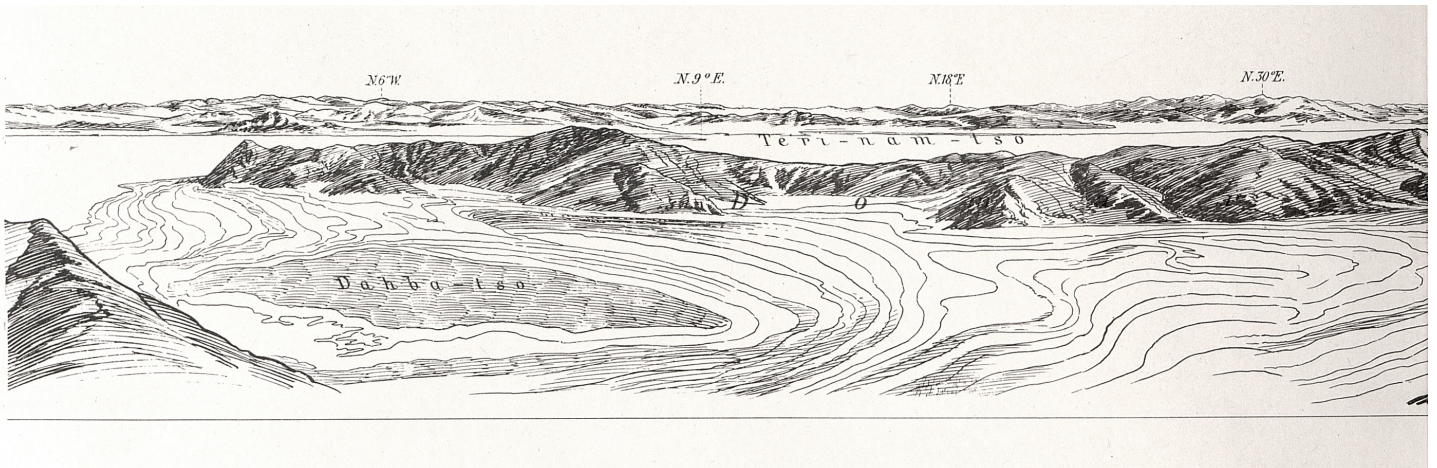
PANORAMA CREATED USING PHOTOGRAPHS taken by Sven Hedin during an expedition to “Transhimalaya”, 1906–09.

Erforschung der Arktis mit dem Luftschiff, chaired by Fridtjof Nansen. The purpose of the society was to produce studies of the Arctic from the air. The question of the airship’s significance for science was also discussed at the Academy; in October 1924, Hedin, Svante Arrhenius and other members presented a petition for the continuing manufacture of zeppelins in the German city of Friedrichshafen. Airships “appear as if they will be of the greatest significance for scientific research, particularly in the fields of geography and geodetics”. Hedin was one of the people who put forward the



clearest arguments for why the Academy should issue a statement on the airship's importance, "and have this statement come to public knowledge through the press, without delay". The airship era in research seems to have been most intensive in the 1920s; circumstances changed due to both the ill-fated Nobile Expedition to the Arctic, when an airship crashed on the ice pack off Svalbard, and the Hindenburg disaster in 1937.

Photographic technology, as well as mountain climbing and airships, were examples of how views from above were ascribed a particular character and

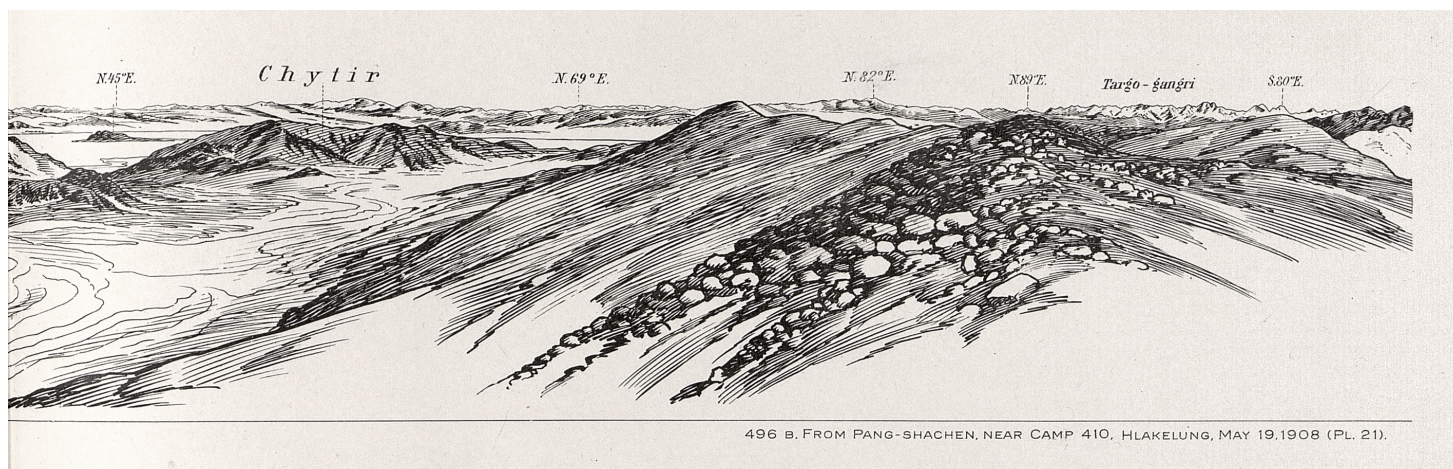


SVEN HEDIN ALSO USED PAPER AND PEN to capture panoramas during his expeditions.

legitimacy as bearers of knowledge. But there were many ways of constructing a raised observation point, and they all shared the desire to take the observer upwards, vertically. On his second expedition, between 1899 and 1902, Hedin studied desert areas in Asia, not least by travelling on camels. This animal was an efficient means of transport, but can also be understood as a technique for knowledge production. Hedin said that, from the camel's back, there stretched a "desert sea ahead of us". The camel was literally a raised place where Hedin produced many drawings, sketches and maps. From that position, he had an excellent view over "the flat country".

By the time of his last major expedition, which lasted from 1926 to 1935, there had been comprehensive technological change. Even though camels remained an important means of transport, Hedin now tried using aeroplanes, not least through a partnership with the German airline Lufthansa. They were interested in creating a route between Peking and Berlin, and this partnership offered Hedin opportunities for studying the landscape by "sailing among the clouds". Using the camel and the aeroplane, Hedin could position himself somewhere he was able to see the landscape's structure. The technologies changed, but the idea of a productive, vertically raised position for knowledge production remained intact.

Alongside his scientific efforts, Hedin developed literary approaches to create a sense of elevation. His book *Från pol till pol* [From Pole to Pole] was published in 1911, the title being the equivalent of the distance he covered in Asia. The front of the book shows a picture of the Earth from a distance, and one of the headings in the final chapter reads: "The Earth viewed from the Moon". The reader should imagine a visit to "the man in the moon". Hedin



directs the imagined lunar traveller's gaze towards the Earth, creating an overview effect: the Earth floated "just above our heads, sharply outlined against the coal-black heavens". It turned "the Pacific Ocean towards the moon [...]". The white stripes, that form a belt around the equator, are massed clouds, hunted across the sea by trade winds". The observer could also see "a large white fleck – that is the ice pack around the North Pole".

The taped-together photographs were thus just one of many examples of possible overviews. They were created through text and pictures, photographs, paintings and maps. They all placed the watcher in a place in which nature's proportions and structures – the landscape's "habitus", as Hedin called it on one occasion – appeared.

Hedin's panoramas from the Himalayas also indicate a larger historical context. Throughout the 19th century, naturalists strived to move from local observations towards the production of knowledge regarding global patterns in nature. Meteorology, climatology and oceanography were among the fields that contributed most to this undertaking. At the start of the century, natural philosophers such as Alexander von Humboldt claimed the elevated position to be desirable and, accordingly, he ascended many mountainsides in South America. An understanding of large-scale patterns in nature, scholars like Humboldt argued, required locations where they could be seen in an instant. This also meant closer links between scientific surveying and mountaineering. During the 19th century, the mountain was increasingly perceived as a privileged place of knowledge. The summit offered space for new types of studies; it provided opportunities to develop a "global perspective" on heaven and Earth.

The attempts to overview and map large natural contexts developed in parallel with the colonial infrastructure of the European empires. Their

geographic expansion made it possible to see the planet as a single, controlled entity. Sven Hedin's own science, geography, was definitely one of the colonial sciences.

And while, in the late 19th century, geographic research rooted itself in scientific institutions, opinions were changing about the field's aims and methods. Around 1900, many geographers had agreed that they had come to the end of the surveys that spanned the world and had taken hundreds of years; maps no longer had any terra incognita. Using metaphors, geographers such as Frenchman Jean Brunhes claimed that "the limits of our cage" had been reached. Instead, the planet's finite spaces must now be understood in more "intensive" and "vertical" manners.

Sven Hedin's many panoramas are provided with a background through this broad trend of geographic research, and the context can be widened further. In the 19th century, attempts were made to create a panoramic gaze in contexts that were not part of geographic research or of the Academy of Sciences. A series of comprehensive changes took place in around 1900 – in art and literature as much as in science – promoting new ways of experiencing time and space. An overview also became desirable in some fields of art and popular culture: a 360-degree panoramic painting, a statistical model or an aerial photo provided opportunities to see larger areas of nature and culture in one glance. Techniques for synchronicity were also developed in the world of books; for example, the first "simultaneous book" was published in 1912. It was printed on a two-metre-long sheet of paper, so the entire work could be seen at the same time and the reader's gaze would not be disturbed by turning the page.

The similarity with Hedin's panoramic picture is striking. Because the photographs have been taped together, the geographic gaze is not disturbed by the picture's edges. And, just as Hedin's photos are laid edge to edge, flowing into each other, the panoramic picture lay edge to edge with the larger historic context. Expressed in another way: there was traffic, a circulation, between different cultural and scientific activities, of which photography was a part.

The patchwork panorama was one way of both *creating* and *circulating* knowledge. Hedin transported the instruments of knowledge production, with great effort, all the way up to an altitude of 7,000 metres: cameras, paper, brushes, pens, books. They facilitated knowledge of the Himalayas' structure and they recreated an idea of visual representation as a particularly effective way of producing objective knowledge. In his book *Transhimalaya* [Trans-Himalaya, 1909], Hedin tells his readers that he habitually drew a panorama of the entire region within the horizon that each camp offered, a total of 552 panoramas. Using the patchwork panorama, it is possible to see a history of the place from which an overview is created.

★

The life of Sven Hedin is described in a hagiographic manner in Eric Wennerholm, *Sven Hedin: En biografi* (Stockholm, 1978) and in a more comprehensive and less hagiographic manner in Axel Odelberg, *Äventyr på riktigt: Berättelsen om upptäckaren Sven Hedin* (Stockholm, 2008). The quotes from Hedin's books come from Sven Hedin, *Asiatiska äventyr: I urval av Eric Wennerholm* (Stockholm, 1980); *Mitt liv som upptäcktsresande* (Stockholm, 1930); *Från pol till pol* (Stockholm, 1911); *Transhimalaya: Upptäckter och äfventyr i Tibet* (Stockholm, 1909). The discussion of airships at the Academy of Sciences is found in the Academy's minutes from 22 October 1924. Descriptions of natural science disciplines that aim to find global natural patterns are in Jeremy Vetter (ed.), *Knowing Global Environments: New Historical Perspectives on the Field Sciences* (New Brunswick, 2011). Studies of mountaineering and science are found in David Aubin, Charlotte Bigg & Philipp Felsch, "Introduction: The Laboratory of Nature – Science in the Mountains", *Science in Context*, vol. 22:3, 2009. The links between imperialism and the striving to see the planet as a controlled entity are covered in, among others, Deborah Coen, James Rodger Fleming & Vladimir Jankovic (eds.), *Intimate Universality: Local and Global Themes in the History of Weather and Climate* (Canton, MA, 2006). The description of geography as an imperialist science, including Jean Brunhes' words on the limits of the cage, builds upon Marie-Claire Robic, "Geography", Theodore Porter (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Science: The Modern Social Sciences* (Cambridge, 2003) and on Michael Heffernan, "Histories of geography", Nicholas Clifford et al. (eds.), *Key Concepts in Geography* (London, 2009). For descriptions of wider movements in the experience of time and space in the 19th century, as well as of the simultaneous book, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880–1918* (Cambridge, MA, 2009). For a Swedish perspective on these issues, see Anders Ekström, "Det vertikala arkivet: Om översiktsmedier och historiska svindelkänslor", Anders Ekström, Solveig Jülich & Pelle Snickars (eds.), *1897: Mediehistorier kring Stockholmsutställningen* (Stockholm, 2006).