

The Gompa Apsos

by Cassandra de la Rosa
AKC Gazette, March 2006, pg. 65 & 66

It's a familiar scene on television: A guest nervously displays a garage sale treasure while antique experts expound on the piece's history and rarity. Its value is enhanced because for centuries no one has marred its form or finish by changing it to suit popular taste. In some ways, dog breeders are like antique collectors: Our goal is to preserve our chosen breed's original form and function. We believe breeds are devalued by marring the characteristics that make them unique.

Living creatures such as the Lhasa Apso, however, are not pieces of furniture that can be frozen in time. Experts must rely on a personal interpretation of the breed's standard to determine how closely we have preserved the original. This is difficult because our standard is a subjective analysis of a breed that developed over centuries in Tibet. Imagine a colony of Lhasa Apsos bred as they were in Tibet and largely free from a century of Western influence: Would they differ from the breed we know, and if so, how?

There exists today the Gompa Lhasa Apso Preservation Program, an ongoing effort devoted to the well-being of an unusual line of Tibetan dogs. (*Gompa* is the Tibetan word for a monastery's main meditation hall.) These 'monastery dogs' are direct descendants of the Apsos at the Drepung monastery in Tibet. In the mid-1980s, nine Apsos bred by Tibetan Lama Gyen Yeshe were brought to Canada. By 2000, that owner was no longer able to care for the dogs; they and their offspring were taken to Virginia as part of a successful rescue. Since then, organized efforts have been made to maintain the dogs and preserve the purity of the line. None has been bred outside the family group that came from Tibet. Of the approximately 80 Gompa Lhasa Apsos in the United States, 36 are capable of carrying on the bloodline.

Like messengers from the past, the Gompa dogs connect today's Apsos with the shaggy little dogs who once ran freely through the halls and passageways of Tibetan monasteries. Although genetically equivalent to the Lhasas in current breeding programs, the Gompa Apsos have not been selectively "bred to type." They are reminiscent of the dogs one would have seen in Tibet prior to the 1950s. Their coats, for example, are the same as those shown in pre-1950 photos of Apsos taken in Tibet.

A few Gompa Apso dogs were brought to our 2004 national specialty and presented in a structured program, where they created a sensation. Spectators were not allowed to touch the dogs (who appeared smaller than many current Lhasas), but could clearly recognize classic and unmistakable breed type.

Volunteers who keep the Gompa Apsos are committed to preserving the Tibetan lineage. They have created a database for documenting and tracking key physical characteristics, developed guidelines for living with and caring for the dogs, implemented an organization structure to manage the program, and established a breeding program based on small-populations genetics. There are no plans to seek AKC registration for the dogs. Like a Chippendale table or Paul Revere bowl, the Gompa Lhasas speak for a time past and its value to those who live today.

Thanks to Debby Rothman for her assistance with this column. Go to www.GompaLhasaApso.com for more information on the Gompa Lhasa Apso Preservation Program.

Cassandra de la Rosa