



Archbishop Farfán. From the studio of Martin Chambi.

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## RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

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### MARTIN CHAMBI, PHOTOGRAPHER OF THE ANDES

*Roderic A. Camp*  
*Central College*

From 1908 until 1973, unknown to most of his countrymen and to Latin Americanists, a Peruvian photographer with an artist's eye compiled a remarkable visual and artistic record of the Peruvian highlands, a record that is just being brought to light. During these years, Martin Chambi, a professional, creative photographer, took more than sixteen thousand photographs, all of which have been retained by his family. Through the efforts of Edward Ranney and the photographer's oldest son, Victor Chambi, this invaluable resource will soon become available for use by authors, artists, and scholars of Latin America. Ranney, a free-lance photographer and a student of archeology, first became aware of Chambi's work during his field trips to Cuzco, Peru, where he spent many months producing his own work, including a forthcoming photographic document on Inca architecture. As he became more familiar with the elder Chambi's work, Ranney soon realized the early artistic eye of this photographer and the superb documentary record he left behind of people, places, and historical events in Cuzco and its surrounding archeological sites and indigenous cultures.

In the hopes of preserving this record, Ranney persuaded the Earthwatch Foundation of Belmont, Massachusetts, to finance two expeditions to Cuzco. With the extensive cooperation of the Chambi family, these expeditions carried out a twofold purpose: to clean, organize, reprint, and catalog all of the significant negatives in the Chambi collection; and to research and interview surviving contemporaries of the photographer in order to document his life and artistic contributions. The ultimate goal is to establish two archives of his work, with the

permanent collection to remain in Cuzco under the supervision of the Chambi family. Further, it is hoped to make his work known to scholars and the public in general through the publication of his photographs and through a major exhibition in the United States.

As the expedition delved into the work of Martin Chambi, it became clear that the initial suspicions of Edward Ranney were correct and that Chambi was not just an ordinary commercial photographer; rather he was a creative photographer who very early experimented with setting and light similar to North American photographers of the stature of Edward Weston. As early as the 1920s, his work shows an extraordinary sense of composition, whether it be a formal studio portrait or the capturing of a dawn at Machu Picchu.

Exactly who was Martin Chambi, and how did such an artist develop his skill during the turn of the century in the Peruvian Andes? Chambi was born in 1891 in the isolated Andean village of Coasa, in the Puno district of Peru. His parents were farmers, but his father was interested in art and in obtaining a better education for Martin and encouraged him in a direction other than farming. As a young boy, Martin came in contact with some British mineowners who, impressed with his lively intellect and curiosity, wanted him to return with them to England. Instead, Chambi went to Arequipa in 1908, where he went to work as an apprentice under the supervision of Max T. Vargas, a commercial photographer. Vargas soon realized that his student's talent was superior to his own, and Chambi took over much of the work of the studio. But Chambi's independence could not be constrained for very long; in 1917 he left Arequipa to establish his own studio in the small town of Sicuani, on the road to Cuzco. There he had a small but successful business, and on 28 November of the same year, he published the first picture postcard in Peru.

He married Manuela Judia López and, always restless, moved to Cuzco. Although he had intended only a temporary stay in this provincial capital, he was captivated by the setting and the people and remained there for the rest of his life. His marriage and his move to Cuzco contributed to his development as an artist. His wife, who had completed secondary school, became his most helpful but severest critic, encouraging him to redo his work to improve the technical quality of his prints. Furthermore, during the 1920s and 1930s, Cuzco was a very active intellectual center. Chambi, who had developed interests outside photography, including indigenous music, painting, crafts, and folklore, became an active member of Cuzco's bohemian crowd. He was influenced in the composition of his own work by that of Francisco Olazo, a Peruvian painter with whom he developed a long friendship. Other friends who were leading journalists, writers, archeologists, and artists of the times encouraged him in other directions and began to use his work to illustrate their own publications.<sup>1</sup>

Chambi also found convivial companions in Cuzco for his travels to remote ruins and Indian villages. One of the few intellectuals of his time to retain a constant and favorable interest in indigenous culture, Chambi, with a large view camera slung over his shoulder, travelled for weeks on end to record the habitats and customs of native villages. He gave equal attention to the archeological treasures scattered throughout the Cuzco region, probably the most important in

South America. Because of his travels, his photographs often provide the only documentary record of communities and archeological sites before they were changed by man. For example, it is his photographs, taken soon after Hiram Bingham rediscovered Machu Picchu, that often illustrate contemporary articles about those ruins. Like the Cassasola family in Mexico, Chambi also recorded notable historical events, such as the first successful Andean air flight from Lima to Cuzco by Italian aviator Enrique Rolandi.

But the 1920s was also a decade characterized by innovative intellectual activity. With the help of his closest friends, Chambi founded the American Institute of Art, an institutional center still active today in Cuzco, which promotes indigenous artistic crafts. It was during this same period that his work began to receive artistic recognition outside Cuzco. Although he had won several regional prizes and medals for his work, he received his first and only major international award in December 1925, when the International Artistic Exposition in celebration of the centennial of Bolivia gave him a first prize gold medal in La Paz. Such South American recognition initiated his familiarity with a large circle of Argentine, Chilean and Bolivian artists and intellectuals. This contact was encouraged by cultural ties between Cuzco and Buenos Aires (Buenos Aires had more contact with Cuzco than did Cuzco with Lima, because of direct railroad communications). Later, in the 1930s, Chambi's attitude toward painting and the relationship of photography to painting expanded. It was also during this decade that he founded and became the informal director of the Academy of Plastic Arts in Cuzco, an organization responsible for sponsoring the work of many intellectuals and artists, both locally and from abroad. Later, this institute became the School of Plastic Arts, and it currently educates many young artists.

Although a man's professional achievements cannot be separated entirely from his personality, it is useful to note that Chambi's character had a considerable influence on his success as an artist and the nature of his work. As one of his friends recalled, "He was a person who had the highest degree of human sensitivity." Because of his modest personality, his sincerity, and his interest in other human beings, his house became a hotel and salon for visiting artists and intellectuals. He also made a special effort to help indigent artists maintain themselves or travel back to their native communities. At the same time, his personality probably accounted for his ability to take photographs without disrupting his subjects. His friends were legion, whether in a distant highland village or in Cuzco itself, and his workday was slowed by the number of people he would talk to. Unfortunately, the generosity so attested to by his friends also accounts for others taking advantage of his work and for the lack of recognition by other photographers and his own government. One of his most famous photographs, entitled the "Sadness of the Indian," has been republished more than three thousand times, once as a Peruvian postage stamp. In this and most other cases of publication, Chambi was never credited as the artist nor did he receive any economic compensation.

In spite of this lack of recognition, Chambi has left both a human and an artistic heritage.<sup>2</sup> He and his wife bore six children; four went into artistic endeavors, and three of these became photographers or filmmakers. Further, many



Peasants to be tried. Palace of Justice, Cuzco, circa 1925.





Party at the Club Cusco in honor of the Italian aviator, Enrique Rolandi.

of his disciples are currently practicing photographers in Peru. His position as one of the fathers of modern creative photography in Peru was finally recognized at the end of his life by the National School of Graphic Arts in Lima, which asked him to serve as the patron of the first graduating class of professional photographers in 1971. In the words of two of his contemporaries:

“I see his importance in two ways. First, as a professional, he was an innovator in the art of photography here in Cuzco. The other photographers were a bit antiquated in their work. He was the first to play with light and contrasts in his photographs. Second, I see him as an artisan who documented streets, customs, places, monuments, and people of Cuzco, a work of great historical value, especially before the earthquake of 1950.”

“In order to know a people or a place, one needs ambassadors. To me Chambi represented Peru in the art of photography to all of Latin America. He never had any official help from any institution or government, but even today, the importance of his work in this light has not lessened. I think of him as a magician of the lens.”

It is hoped that the work of the Earthwatch expeditions will renew this heritage, and make Martin Chambi a new twentieth-century ambassador of Peruvian culture to the rest of the world.

#### NOTES

1. Chambi's work has appeared in a half-dozen works by his contemporaries, but the reproduction is of a very inferior quality. For the trained eye, the technical quality of his work can be seen in the reduced reproductions used by Francis Toor, *Three Worlds of Peru* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1949). His work also appeared in numerous Latin American newspapers, including *La Prensa* (Buenos Aires), *Revista de Revistas* (Mexico City), *El Mercurio* (Santiago), and *Variadades* (Lima).
2. Although small in number and largely confined to the 1920s and 1930s, before he reached his maturity as an artist, Chambi had the following shows:

- 12 Oct. 1917 Artistic Center at Arequipa (Arequipa, Peru)
- 1921 Agricultural, Livestock, Industrial Exposition of Arequipa (Arequipa, Peru).
- 28 Jul. 1924 Show in the Provincial Council of Cuzco (Cuzco, Peru)
- 28 Jul. 1925 Council of Puno (Puno, Peru)
- 30 Dec. 1925 International Artistic Exposition of La Paz, Bolivia (La Paz, Bolivia)
- 28 Jul. 1927 Hotel Gran Bolivar (Lima, Peru)
- 28 Jul. 1928 Regional Exposition of Arequipa, by Arequipa Rotary Club (Arequipa, Peru)
- 15 Aug. 1934 Plastic Arts Competition (Cuzco, Peru)
- 18 Mar. 1935 Joint Show with the painter Francisco Olazo at Alzedo Salon, of the National Academy of Alzedo Music (Lima, Peru)
- 13 May 1935 Vargas Brothers Art Studio, the San Agustin Archway (Arequipa, Peru)
- 1935 Local Alcedo Mining Center (Lima, Peru)
- 1936 Viña del Mar, Casino Viña del Mar (Santiago, Chile)
- 21 Mar. 1936 *La Nación* Bldg. (Santiago, Chile)
- 13 May 1964 Show with Victor Chambi at the First American Convention of the International Federation of Photographic Art (Mexico City, Mexico)
- 30 May 1969 "Photographs of Peru" sponsored by the Peruvian Institute of Hispanic Culture and by Peruvian Photo-Cinema Club (Lima, Peru)