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## The Unseen Somervell



'Phari and Pauhunri 1922.'

It is difficult to be certain how many paintings T H Somervell completed during the 1922 and 1924 Everest expeditions. After almost 20 years of research, I estimate the combined total as between 140 and 180. Of these, perhaps a third survive, and there are others that he painted in later years. Some pictures have a story to tell and Somervell's paintings of Everest are no exception. The paper and canvas for these pictures would have been sent by sea to India, transported by train to Darjeeling, and from there carried by pony and yak into Tibet. In this article, I present 11 of Somervell's pictures of the two Everest expeditions. They are a selection of Somervell's unseen paintings of Everest, Tibet and Sikkim. All pictures are watercolour unless otherwise described. Three are undated.

### 'Phari and Pauhunri 1922'

Although considered by Tony Astill of *Les Alpes Livres* to be a watercolour by E F Norton, I think it more likely that this picture is by Somervell. The evidence for attribution to Norton is a similar sketch that was reproduced in *Everest Revealed* by Norton's grandson<sup>1</sup>. However, the sketch 'Chomolhari' referred to below is on an almost identically sized and shaped sheet of plain grey paper, suggesting that the two sheets had been detached from the same folio. In addition, a picture with this title was exhibited by Somervell at the Alpine Club in 1922 and 1923. There is no record of Norton exhibiting any of his pictures. I suspect that the resemblance of this watercolour to the sketch by Norton in *Everest Revealed* is likely to be coincidental.

1. C Norton, *Everest Revealed*, The History Press, Cheltenham, 2014.



'Everest and Lhotse from near Kampa Dzong'.



'Everest from Base Camp 1922'.

### 'Everest and Lhotse from near Kampa Dzong'

This small pastel bears the inscription, 'Everest and Lhotse from E [field glasses] first view of E [Everest] from Kampa Dzong'. Somervell probably sketched this undated work on 13 April 1922, as Norton also sketched Everest from Kampa Dzong on that date. Mallory had written these lines in 1921:

*It was a perfect early morning as we plodded up the barren slopes above our camp (at Kampa Dzong) ... we had mounted perhaps a thousand feet when we stayed and turned, and saw what we came to see. There was no mistaking the two great peaks in the west: that to the left must be Makalu, grey, severe and yet distinctly graceful, and the other away to the right – who could doubt its identity? It was a prodigious white fang excrecent from the jaw of the world.'*<sup>2</sup>

### 'Everest from Base Camp 1922'

This image is of a small black and white postcard-sized reproduction of one of two paintings exhibited at the Redfern Gallery in 1926, in an exhibition arranged by Somervell's father. The majority of the pictures exhibited related to his two Everest expeditions. Both pictures were entitled 'Everest from Base Camp'. This one may be watercolour. The other, probably oil, was used to illustrate *The Fight for Everest: 1924* by E F Norton. This reproduction is held in the archives of the London Missionary Society at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, London. The present whereabouts of both of these pictures is unknown.

### 'Peaks at the Head of the Goraphu Valley 1922'

At the end of the 1922 Everest expedition, Somervell and Crawford returned to Darjeeling independently of the rest of the expedition. They crossed from Tibet to Sikkim and, as Somervell was to write for the *Fell and Rock Climbing Club Journal*.

2. G L Mallory, in C K Howard-Bury, *Mount Everest: The Reconnaissance*, 1921, Arnold, London, 1922.



'Peaks at the Head of the Goraphu Valley 1922'.

*...we journeyed into a small valley near the northern border of Sikkim called Goraphu. As far as we knew we were the only Europeans who had ever been in this valley ... July 16th [1922] dawned gloriously, and we saw in all their magnificence the fine peaks on the northern side of our valley; four or five of them, from 20,000-22,000 feet high with terrific precipices and hanging ice ...'<sup>3</sup>*

So this picture may have been painted on that date. It was exhibited at the Alpine Club in 1923 and was in Somervell's personal collection at the time of his death in 1975. His widow exhibited this watercolour as well as 'East Face of Everest 1924', referred to below, at Abbott Hall Gallery, Kendal in 1976.

### 'Valley in Sikkim 1922'

This watercolour was probably painted in late June or July 1922. Somervell used paper watermarked 'Michallet', which is different from the plain grey paper used for 'Chomolhari' and 'Phari and Pauhunri' described above. The scene is unknown but the monsoon is in progress. This picture was also one of 50 exhibited at the Redfern Gallery in 1926 and was acquired by one of Somervell's aunts, Dora Rachel Howard (1862-1947).

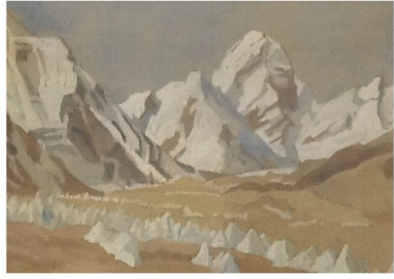
### 'East Face of Everest 1924'

This striking oil picture, dated 1924, and another similar one held by the Alpine Club, were inspired by the view of the east face of Everest from the

3. T H Somervell, 'Climbing North of Kangchenjunga', *Fell and Rock Climbing Club Journal* 1923, p272-6.



'Valley in Sikkim 1922'.



'Pumori'.

Raphu La. Somervell walked from camp three to the Raphu La alone on 12 May 1922. Two days later, he walked there again and was joined by Mallory who wrote:

*[Somervell's] most important activity when we were not on the mountain was sketching. His vast supply of energy, the number of sketches he produced and oil paintings besides, was only less remarkable than the rapidity with which he worked. On May 14th he again walked over the uncrevassed snow-field by himself to the Rapiu La. Later on I joined him, and as far as I could judge, his talent and energy were no less at 21,000 feet than on the wind-swept plains of Tibet<sup>4</sup>*

This picture and its companion were most probably painted at Neyyoor in south India in early or late 1924. Somervell's work as a surgeon had taken him there the previous year. Somervell did not visit the Raphu La in 1924 and it seems highly improbable that these pictures were painted during the 1924 expedition itself.

'East Face of Everest' may have been part of a consignment of some 50 paintings that Somervell sent to his father in November 1924, and may have been exhibited at the Royal Geographical Society in 1925 and the Redfern Gallery in 1926. It may well have been exhibited again at the Alpine Club in 1936 as 'Shoulder of Everest' and again at the Alpine Club in 1954 as 'South-east Face of Everest'. This picture was in Somervell's collection at the time of his death. In *After Everest* he wrote:

*Whatever may be the route by which the world's highest mountain is eventually scaled, I am certain that it will not be by these south-east cliffs of grooved ice and pounding avalanche. A more terrible and remorseless mountain-side it would be hard to imagine.<sup>5</sup>*

### 'Pumori'

I am uncertain as to whether this watercolour dates from 1922 or 1924. Somervell painted at least one picture of Pumori in 1922 but may have only

4. G L Mallory, in C G Bruce, *The Assault on Mount Everest: 1922*, Arnold, London 1923.

5. T H Somervell, *After Everest*, Hodder, London, 1936.



'East Face of Everest 1924'.

used this size of paper in 1924 and not in 1922. The rounded bulk of Pumori is seen above the main Rongbuk glacier. On the moraine sit the ice pinnacles that remain a prominent feature of the East Rongbuk and Rongbuk glaciers, although diminished by climate change. This picture was part of an exhibition in 1978 at the Science Museum, London to mark the 25th anniversary of the first ascent of Everest. It is now held in their reserve collection.

### 'Kangchenjunga 1939'

Somervell would have seen Kangchenjunga in 1922 and 1924, and he visited Darjeeling again in 1928 and 1943. He wrote: 'March 31st [1924] Gnatong-Jelep La. 'What a glorious morning! A fine view of the complete Kangchenjunga range, clear and orange-white in the morning sun.'<sup>6</sup>

Somervell's mother died in October 1938 and it is likely that he returned to Britain at around that time, possibly staying until 1939. So this picture, oil on board, may have been painted in early 1939. At over one metre in length, it is more likely that this picture was painted in the United Kingdom than in India. The panorama includes, from left, Jannu, Kabru, Talung Peak, Kangchenjunga and Pandim. Of the six oil pictures of Kangchenjunga I have seen, it is easily the finest and is in the possession of a school in the West Midlands.

### 'From North Col of Everest 1924-47'

In *After Everest*, Somervell recorded his attempts to take a photograph from camp four on the morning of 2 June 1924. It was on this day that Somervell

6. D J Seddon *TH Somervell*, published privately, 2016.



'Kangchenjunga 1939'.

and Norton with accompanying high-altitude porters set off for camp five. The photograph was included in *After Everest* and may have provided inspiration for this vast painting. At 122cm x 201cm it is by a long way the largest of Somervell's pictures.

Somervell was resident in the UK between April 1945 and early 1948, and for at least part of that time was living in Cambridge. His youngest son, Hugh, died there in 1947 and it is possible the tragedy may have impelled him to paint this picture. Somervell may also have been inspired to paint on this large scale by Nicholas Roerich who he had met in 1944. Roerich was known for his large landscape pictures of the Himalaya. This picture is in the possession of a school in the West Midlands but they have no record of the circumstances by which the painting was acquired. There is no record of it being exhibited. In 2018, it was consigned to Christie's with the title 'On the Way to Everest'. Once a more accurate identification was available, the school opted to retain the picture in its collection.

The view is north-west from the North Col. The peaks seen on the skyline include, I think, from extreme left, Menlungtse, and to the right, Cho Oyu and Gyachang Kang. Khumbutse, the next mountain west of Everest, is seen above the Lho La, and behind it, the bulk and rounded summit of Pumori. To the left is the western flank of Everest and to the right the slopes of Changtse. The main Rongbuk glacier is seen lower centre, and upper centre is the West Rongbuk glacier leading to the Nup La.

#### 'Chomolhari 1922-74'

Somervell had first seen Chomolhari in 1922. Over 50 years later, this peak remained a source of inspiration for this picture and another completed in 1972. Most unusually, he has included a figure in the foreground with hat and



'From North Col of Everest 1924-47'.



'Chomolhari (Detail)'.



'Chomolhari 1922-74'.

Somervell occasionally gave his pictures two dates. There is no explanation for this given in any of his books or articles. I have interpreted these 'double dates' as indicating that the inspiration for the picture dates from the first year given, and the picture itself was painted in the second year given. Howard Somervell died in January 1975 and of his later pictures, this is one of the best, with the form of the mountain clearly depicted and flowing brushwork for windblown snow. There is a telling similarity to the sketch of 1922.

#### 'Chomolhari (detail)'

This undated and unfinished sketch of Chomolhari may be from the same folio as 'Phari and Pauhunri'. This might date it to 7-8 April 1922. The geometry and angles of the mountain would have appealed to Somervell. This sketch although unsigned, was in the collection of his son Jim Somervell. It seems unlikely that this was one of two paintings of Chomolhari exhibited at the Alpine Club in 1923.



'Matterhorn 1967'.



'Mount Fuji 1963'.

### **Conclusion**

There are of course many pictures by Somervell that are unseen. He exhibited perhaps over 800 pictures in his lifetime. If he painted 50 pictures a year, his lifetime's output could have exceeded 3,000. I have traced some 500.

A fuller account of the life and work of T H Somervell, together with images of 200 or so of his pictures may be found in the Alpine Club Library or the Armit Library near Ambleside. I would be pleased to have any information regarding paintings by Somervell that may be in the possession of readers of this article. [djseddon@btinternet.com](mailto:djseddon@btinternet.com)