

Popular Dogs: Lhasa Apsos

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Eve Adamson

The show-prepped Lhasa Apso looks a little like the monks it was once bred to protect: cloaked in a heavy, floor-length robe of hair, eyes hooded as if to focus on more spiritual pursuits. Alert but tranquil, confident but cautious, circumspect in demeanor, the Lhasa Apso doesn't seem all that far from its roots in the Himalayas of Tibet. The Lhasa Apso has lived in the West for about a century, but it retains many of the qualities it once required for survival as the personal watchdog of Tibetan monks in their mountaintop monasteries, royalty in their palaces, and the aristocracy, who prized the clever little dogs both as alert watchdogs and cozy bedwarmers.

But can any breed survive intact in the Western world, with its fads and trends, show rings and pet homes, after thousands of years of isolated life in the East? The Lhasa Apso breed standard, a written description of the ideal Lhasa Apso, which hasn't changed much since its original version, is the key. This description of the Lhasa Apso serves as a guide for breeders, so they can best preserve the Lhasa as what it is: a unique little Tibetan dog with a drape of coat and a guardian instinct.

The Preservation of a Breed Standard

In 1901, Lionel Jacobs, a government official in India and organizer of the Northern India Kennel Club, penned the first written Lhasa Apso breed standard to describe a small breed of dog imported from Tibet—a dog that was not a Shih Tzu, not a Pug, not a Tibetan Terrier, but its own distinct breed, having survived for thousands of years isolated in the Himalayas. In 1934, the Kennel Club (of Britain) adapted Jacobs' standard almost verbatim, and in 1935, the American Kennel Club (AKC) adopted the British standard as Europe and America met and immediately fancied this "new" (but ancient) Tibetan breed.

For several decades, all over the world the Lhasa Apso breed standard was the same: an official written description of the ideal Lhasa Apso, closely based on the Jacobs standard. In 1978, the American Lhasa Apso Club (ALAC) altered the standard just slightly, changing a few items, such as the term "level mouth" to "level bite," and the accepted colors to "all colors equally acceptable with or without dark tips to ears and beard," as opposed to a preference for golden lionlike colors and dark tips expressed in the previous standard.

Other countries, such as England and Canada, also modified their own official breed standards, but the American Lhasa Apso standard remains closest to the original. Its continuing brevity and relatively minor changes have had little impact on Lhasa Apso type (a Lhasa Apso that looks like a Lhasa Apso), according to the majority of Lhasa breeders in the United States. "Our standard is essentially in the same form as it was in 1935 when the AKC first recognized the breed," explains Leslie Baumann, ALAC president, and a breeder in Valparaiso, Indiana.

"Overall, we've kept the original wording intact, just as we work to preserve the essence of original type in the breed. The original standard was written to describe what makes a Lhasa unique. In particular, it highlights what makes the Lhasa Apso different from other Asian breeds that would have been better known in the early 20th century," Baumann continues. "The author(s) did not believe it was necessary to describe normal canine structure in the Lhasa Apso standard. Thus, where the standard is not specific, i.e., shoulder layback, Lhasa breeders all agree that what we want is normal canine structure," she says.

Although today's show-ring Lhasa may not look like a working dog (wouldn't that luxurious coat get in the way?) most breeders also believe that changes in the Lhasa Apso, when they exist, are largely cosmetic. "The standard has changed little since its inception, and I don't think the Lhasa has changed all that much from its original form, either," says Pat Keen-Fernandes, ALAC Judges' Education Committee chairperson and a Lhasa Apso breeder in Knightsen, California. "It's still the same size and type," Keen-Fernandes says. "What has changed is the kind of care the modern Lhasa gets. They have better food, superior nutrition, better veterinary care and better grooming."

To continue to preserve the Lhasa's essential characteristics, Catherine Marley, M.D., ALAC Health and Genetics Committee chairperson and a Lhasa breeder in Cresskill, New Jersey, promotes an awareness of the Lhasa Apso's

original function and environment as a point of reference, even if today's Lhasa Apso doesn't have to endure the harsh climate of Tibet. "When people no longer recognize the utility of the animal and start breeding just for looks, fads take over," Dr. Marley says.

"If the breed standard leaves you at the station with nowhere to go, for instance on issues like topline and movement, which are not mentioned at all, then I believe you should go to where the dog evolved, what kind of environment it came from and what was necessary for the dog to survive in that climate," Dr. Marley says.

How does the breed standard reflect those traits necessary to survive in Tibet as a personal guardian, traits once required but still desired in the Lhasa Apso? Let's consider the details.

Character Counts

Some people wonder why the AKC categorizes the Lhasa Apso as a Non-Sporting breed instead of a Toy breed when it looks so similar to some of the other Toy breeds. But long coats and small size aside, the Lhasa Apso isn't a typical lapdog, such as the Shih Tzu or Pekingese. Instead, the Lhasa has a working-dog heritage. "Lhasas were interior watchdogs and small guarding dogs that didn't just live in the two palaces in Lhasa," Baumann says. "They were popular little dogs amongst the nobility of Tibet. They patrolled the walled courtyards of the upper classes' homes and alerted the household if strangers approached."

The Lhasa's job as guardian required acute alertness with finely tuned hearing and a natural instinct to distinguish friend from foe. "Lhasa Apsos were bred uninterrupted for thousands of years, and they remain independent survivalists, wary of strangers and loyal, alert companions, not blindly trusting lapdogs," Keen-Fernandes says. Yet, the Lhasa is also "gay" and "assertive" according to the standard, qualities Baumann believes are as important as the quality of being chary of strangers. "Their assertiveness was evident from the first contact that Westerners had with the breed, and contributes to the smart, independent, loyal and engaging personality we see today," Baumann says.