

ASIAN ART NEWSPAPER, "UNDER INDIAN SKIES"
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Asian Art Newspaper explores the world of 19th-century Indian Photography on show at the David Collection, Copenhagen in Under Indian Skies.

The invention of photography in 1840s revolutionised the way in which the world was documented and interpreted, not only in Europe, but also in Asia. As early as mid-19th century, the British authorities in India launched an impressive photographic survey of architecture. Enthusiastic amateur photographers soon followed suit with atmospheric images of life during the period, from high to low, from maharajas to snake charmers, and elephants and tigers to the beauty of the Taj Mahal. These photographs offered an eager and curious public in the West a glimpse of the exotic east, a way to experience the sites and cultures of a far-away land from the comfort of their home.

This exhibition of 19th-century photographs offers a first-hand impression of Victorian India and the Raj, as seen through the eyes of primarily Western photographers. At the beginning of the 1850s, photography made its breakthrough in colonial India. With its impressive architecture, including Mughal palaces and mausolea, ruins, exotic landscapes, as well as the many different ethnic groups and cultures, the country offered fantastic opportunity for these early photographers to create striking images. Princes, maharajas, ministers and soldiers could all be recorded in detailed splendour. There was also a chance to document ordinary people and daily life: stone-cutters and woodcarvers, carpenters and dyers, mahouts with their elephants, cotton harvesters and gardeners, acrobats, snake charmers, dancers, musicians and religious processions. The list is endless. Photography was used as a form of documentation by the Indian government – for scientific, documentary (ethnographic and archaeological) and propaganda purposes. The professional or commercial photographers set up studios in the most populated cities and also went on excursions to photograph the cultural and historical sites to turn into postcards, supply domestic and international newspapers, and create souvenirs for the general public. There was also a great need for photography in journals and trade and society directories.

The bulk of the photographers that made a name in India during this time were mainly Westerners, a mixture of amateurs, military men and commercial photographers, such as Felice Beato (1832-1909), Samuel Bourne (1834-1912), Colonel Willoughby Wallace Hooper (1837-1912), Sir Donald Horne Macfarlane (1830-1904) and Captain Linnaeus Tripe (1822-1902). The most famous Indian photographer of the era was Lala Deen Dayal (1844-1910). Dayal began in the mid-1870s as a commissioned photographer; eventually he set up studios in Indore, Mumbai and Hyderabad. He became the court photographer to the sixth Nizam of Hyderabad, Mahbub Ali Khan, Asif Jah VI, and was later appointed as the photographer to the Viceroy of India, Lord Dalhousie, in 1885. He went on to receive the Royal Warrant from Queen Victoria in 1897, after accompanying, in India, the Royal Tour of the Prince and Princess of Wales in 1875-76.

However, photography was not reserved for exotic images, scientific documentation or portraiture. The exhibition incorporates what may well be the first examples of war photography. The photographers travelling to India to undertake ‘reportage’ photography were akin to explorers and their journeys were difficult expeditions, during which with great effort – and an army of helpers – they surveyed the remotest regions. A Felice Beato photograph in the exhibition of Sikandar Bagh, Lucknow, shows bodies of slain rebels strewn across the courtyard floor of a ruined palatial building. However, the image is not what it first appears. It is believed that Beato, who had arrived in India several months after the event, had bodies disinterred and arranged to reproduce the grizzly scene: achieving a photograph that would gain attention and sell. These gritty images earned him the reputation for being one of the world’s first war photographers.

By the 1860s, professional photography was well established in India, numerous commercial studios had been established in such places as Shimla, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. Samuel Bourne was a British photographer known for his prolific work in India, from 1863 to 1870 and together with Charles Shepherd set up Bourne & Shepherd, opening a studio first in Shimla in 1863 and later in Kolkata. Bourne & Shepherd were responsible for some of the most iconic photographs of the time and their images were distributed internationally. Bourne was a relentless traveller, commenting in correspondence, ‘As there is now scarcely a nook or corner, or glen, a valley, or mountain, much less a country, on the face of the globe which the penetrating eye of the camera has not searched’. Continuing, ‘From the untrodden snows of the Himalayas to the burning shores of Madras the camera is now a familiar object’. At its peak, Bourne & Shepherd had agencies in London and Paris, and they were commissioned to photograph many important Raj events, including the Delhi Durbar held to commemorate the coronation of King George V and Queen Mary as Emperor and Empress of India in 1911. Sadly a fire at the premises of Bourne & Shepherd over 25 years ago destroyed a large part of its archival collection and the building itself, which had slowly fallen into a sad state of repair over the years, finally closed in June 2016 – the end of one of the world’s oldest established photographers.

Another such business was founded by Johnston and Hoffmann, who had commercial studios in India between 1870 and 1918. PA Johnston and Theodore Hoffmann founded their photographic studios first in Calcutta and then in Darjeeling in 1890 and were used extensively for government and surveying work by the British in India.

Another part of the story of early photography in India is the well-supported photographic societies that had begun to be formed in the 1850s – mainly in Bombay, Calcutta and Madras. The East India Company actively encouraged the use of photography as a means of documenting the land, not only for military purposes, but also for the burgeoning interest in archaeology and the lost civilisations of India. Such societies also published their own journals, which formed a valuable source of information – not only on the latest developments in photography – but also about their subject matter.

The photographs from the first decades of photography were composed in much the same way as paintings of the same period. The technical challenges were immense and exposure times, for instance, were extremely long, so everything had to be planned to the smallest detail.

By its selection of pictures from a private British collection, the exhibition at the David Collection focuses on some of the challenges and subjects that preoccupied the earliest European and Indian photographers. It also displays the distinctive beauty of vintage photos created with difficult to handle apparatuses, large glass negatives, long exposure times, and complex chemical processes.

The exhibition consists of over 80 photographs and photo albums from around 1850 to the beginning of the 20th century. The catalogue by the British photo historian John Falconer, was for many years was responsible for the photograph collections in the British Library's Indian and Oriental departments. In addition to the presentation of the 83 selected photographs, the book contains two essays: the history of photography in India and the early photographic processes respectively.

Until 28 April, Under Indian Skies, 19th-Century Photographs from a Private Collection, The David Collection, Copenhagen, davidmus.dk. Under Indian Skies by John Falconer, published by Strandberg Publishing, DKK 200.

Another source on early Indian photography is Reverie and Reality, Nineteenth-Century Photographs of India from the Ehrenfeld Collection.

