



EARLY PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY FROM SOUTH ASIA

Allegory & Illusion



FOREWORD BY
E. Alkazi

WITH A NOTE BY
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THE ALKAZI COLLECTION
OF PHOTOGRAPHY

RUBIN
MUSEUM
OF ART

IN ASSOCIATION WITH
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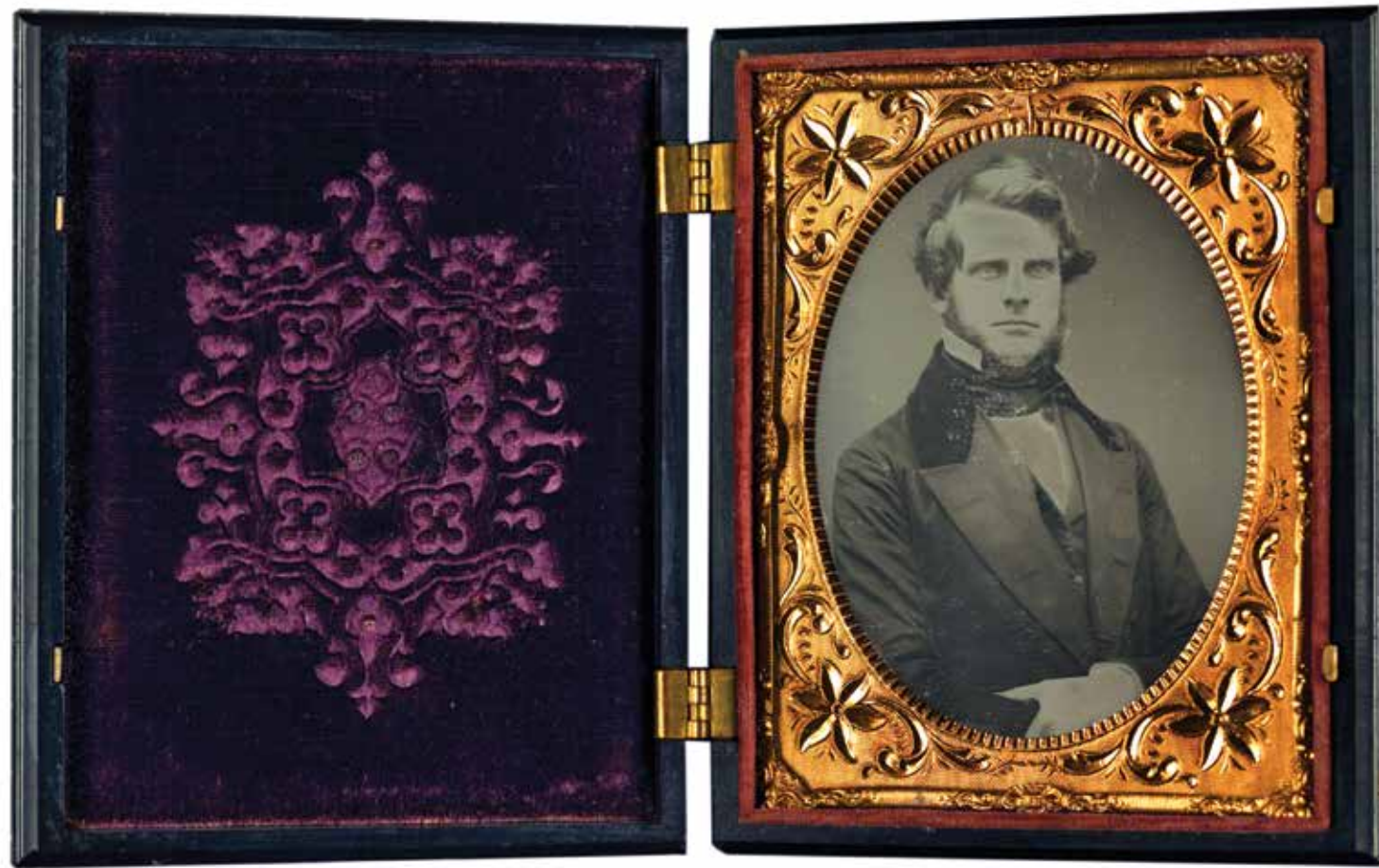
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'We didn't trust ourselves at first...to look long at human beings and believed that the little tiny faces in the picture could see us, so powerfully was everyone affected by the unaccustomed clarity and the unaccustomed truth...'

— Walter Benjamin in *A Short History of Photography*, 1931



CURATORIAL NOTE

UNACCUSTOMED TRUTH: THE PORTRAIT IN PHOTOGRAPHY

Beth Citron and Rahaab Allana

The German artist Karl Blossfeldt (1865–1932), while peering at a daguerreotype portrait, was astonished upon seeing his own species imprinted on metal in an unconventional manner. The power of a portrait lies in an uneasy acceptance that while you reflect upon the subject—the eyes, those tiny impressions of light upon paper, look back at you. In this respect, photography as an arts practice has repeatedly genuflected to the portrait—a means of staging the self.

Drawn exclusively from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, this exhibition pays homage to some of the earliest, most iconic samples of photographic portraiture from South Asian countries which are well represented in this private archive—comprising the modern nations of India, Sri Lanka, Burma, and Nepal. The former three countries came under the British Empire, while the last was a sovereign kingdom, and together, they established a unique regional history of photography. As part of historic record, these images represent more than just a community of subjects adhering to a portraitist's dexterous manifestation of their outward appearance. The essence of the collection emanates from history painting, figuration, vernacular culture, globalisation, and mass media-related issues, creating a dynamic understanding of the past by disturbing preconceived notions about the colonial era—or the unidirectional gaze. Ethnography, identity, integration, and assimilation are therefore some of the key notions that underlie practices of capturing people and domesticating space—reordering how an image may be perceived in our digital present.

One may pose the question, what can the portrait from South Asia seek to do or to change today? Ed Drew, the American military man who recently captured portraits of his peers in Afghanistan by the wet plate process, says that the experience for him was 'meditative', and hence, we too suggest that these images resonate with our own quest for easing communication across borders, in a world where the notion of home and exile are constantly at play. The photographers at work went across continents and formed a visual thesaurus that challenges known stereotypes of what constitutes historical fact and time. The conditions under which some of these images were made diversifies the relationship between political events and photographic practice, yet our understanding resists a teleological narrative taking into account not only the role of the medium and the state of technology but, significantly, photography's non-linear systems of exchange, circulation and collection.

Sri Lanka, Burma, Nepal and India are at present some of the nations that constantly grapple with communal and cultural identities. Their exchanges over the last two centuries have yielded a composite understating of a religious and social nature, tied together by a syncretic practice of Buddhism, one that resonates deeply within the scope of the Rubin Museum of Art itself. The people who emerge from these images are not foreigners in the land, or those who have made it their colony—but the inhabitants. These are not images of people who have been merely consumed by conflict and colonialism, but who have paved a path of resistance by displaying their entitlement to their homes with dignity and austerity.

Fig. 1.1

Unknown Photographer;
Littlefield Parsons & Co.,
(Case Maker)

**Portrait of Henry Marsham
Havelock-Allen, V.C. (1830-
1897)**

Tinted Daguerreotype,
c. 1850, 108 x 82 mm
[Quarter-plate Union Case]
ACP: 97.16.0001



Fig. 2.1
Cambridge and Company
'Parsees'
Albumen Print, c. 1890,
184 x 234 mm
ACP: 94.66.0013

FOREWORD

SHARING OUR HERITAGE

E. Alkazi

Chairman, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

In an enthralling albumen portrait of members from the Parsi community shot in the 1890s, the photographer, presumably employed by Cambridge and Company, demonstrates a formal yet empathetic rendition of a joint family—the striking matriarch in the centre with her grandchildren at her feet. The Parsis of Gujarat and Bombay, many of whom I knew and worked with—are a community recognised for their refined sense of taste, their dignified attire, their depth of knowledge and their patronage of industry and art. It was said that they literally absorbed India when they first arrived from Persia (Iran). Using a common metaphor—if the people of India were a bowl of milk, the Parsis represented a fistful of sugar that dissolved in it, enriching it. Their dedication thence to institutional development and merging in Maharashtrian society more specifically, informed my own sense of a cultural heritage and assimilation when I first came to Bombay from Pune in the 1940s.

Over the last several years, while travelling from city to city, I have been brought to think about my own sense of home and family—one that has changed with every passing year. As Arabs in India, our family managed a lucrative business, but at every stage we adopted India as our home as much as it accepted us as a people. With the passage of time, we were witness to the Second World War, the Partition of India, to the Gulf wars as some of us eventually settled in Kuwait. I was, however, always drawn back my own origins—and during my years away from India collected what I could of its history from other nations. This drive was as real as it was metaphysical—the need to retrieve, preserve and enhance the core of my identity wherever I went.

The idea of an evolving identity and the need to return to my 'origins' has hence underlain my sense of what I have collected—as well as why and for whom I have collected. In this exhibition, the likes of Felice Beato, Johnston and Hoffman, Herogg and Higgins, Matzene, and Skeen together with Shapur Bhedwar, Hurrychand Chintamon, Abbas Ali—challenge the conventions of society through the aesthetic and controversial exposure of the people from across the South Asian region. Their means of sharing their resources, their knowledge and skill has today changed our understanding of an Asian identity for time to come. They were collected so as to grapple with the world of cultures—the ethics of sharing and giving back to people, what was so generously given to me *by* people. In this respect, photography allows for a dynamic vision—it projects actions, creates both mergers and contrasts, it tells a tale of make-believe and incontestable truth. But photography is more personal than what it captures—as time passes, families part and objects like the photograph change course and arrive in different places. Imagine then the portrait here of the Parsis—did they ever pose as a family again, and what were the destinies and legacies of those in the image?

The search for an answer is not only the beginning of our understanding of a collective history—but that the identity of the self can be elsewhere and everywhere on earth.



Fig. 2.2
Unknown Photographer;
Unknown Artist
Maharani Krishna Kumari of Nepal
[wife of Maharaja Dev Shamshe Rana]
Gelatin Silver Print and Oil Paint,
c. 1900, 293 x 237 mm
ACP: D2003.13.0046

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART

Jan Van Alphen

Director of Exhibitions, Collections & Research, Rubin Museum of Art

Allegory and Illusion: Early Portrait Photography from South Asia comprises an exhibition and book that have come together in the true sense of partnership and collaboration. The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts and Mapin Publishing, two valued partners for the Rubin Museum of Art, have collaborated to produce a book to complement the exhibition presented at the Museum in the fall of 2013. The exhibition, too, is a collaboration between Beth Citron, curator at the Rubin, and Rahaab Allana of the Alkazi Foundation, who worked together to choose images and to write an interpretive documentation. Relying on the rich resources and generosity of the Alkazi Foundation, the two curators have been able to enhance the presentation with albums, video documentation, and backdrops to encourage active visitor participation in the exploration of photographic portraiture.

The related publication, with contributions by Allana, Citron, and Christopher Pinney—a noted visual anthropologist, offers visitors another, perhaps deeper, way to consider the history and the literal and metaphorical meaning of early portrait photography in South Asia. Especially in India, the story of the emergence of these photographs out of the tradition of court painting and colonial attitudes is complex and compelling. The photographs are not always or only what they seem.

We at the Rubin Museum of Art are grateful to be a part of this collaboration, offering such a layered yet accessible presentation of this fascinating material.



Fig. 2.3
Teak wood standing camera with extendable tripod

The lens used is G. Rodenstock (made in Germany), with a 6.4 x 8.5 inch plate size. Rodenstock was a firm making optical instruments, which became famous for creating the first bifocal lenses in the 1930s.

STIRRED BY PHOTOGRAPHY

Christopher Pinney

Stir. v. To move, set in motion [...] To move (something) from its place; to shift, displace [...] To agitate [...] so as to alter the relative position of the parts of [...] To move from a fixed or quiet position [...] To bring into notice or debate; to move, raise, moot (a subject or question)" (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*)

This exhibition looks not just at India (as is usually the case), but Ceylon, Nepal, and Burma also make their appearance in the early history of photography in the region. The category here is the South Asian subcontinent. Area-specialist pedants may object that Burma is conventionally South-East Asia according to current area studies conventions. But at the time that the images shown here were made, it was ruled from British India. The sweep of images presented here directs our attention to questions of nomenclature, definitions, demarcations, units of identity and also to the ways these might have endured or changed over the course of time (Fig. 3.1).

Why Photography? That is potentially privilege a medium that we might want to recategorise as a form of late painting, as there are so many variables, so many potential alliances and conjunctions. We need to decide which are the most useful formulations, and the most productive and illuminating configurations. Is it Photography *in* South Asia, *from* South Asia? It is presumably the photographer, any photographer in or from South Asia, since there are images here by South Asians, some also by colonisers, and many by commercial entrepreneurs whose main client base may not have been South Asian. But should we focus on photographers, or would *the camera* serve us better—the camera in South Asia?

Should we say photographs of South Asia, or photographs of people in South Asia? At the level of basic genre we can say that this is an exhibition of portraiture rather than landscape or architecture. How we configure the broader set of conjunctions will in part determine what kind of exhibition this is. Are you looking at images that speak to the history of South Asia or the history of photography? Clearly this can never be only one or the other, but every spectator will push that question along a sliding scale, tilting the balance one way or another. This essay tries to think through the issues at stake in this choice. All the photographs here, traces of specific moments, became starting points of a complex enquiry. Reframed in this exhibition, all these images are beginnings, not end points.

If the tilt of our evaluative scales points towards South Asia rather than photography, we are then faced with a further set of choices. How do we conceptualise this identity in space and time, i.e. regionally and historically? We might default to an Indic tradition, a world of Sanskrit texts lost in the mists of time that continue to exert a gravitational pull. There is much in that



Fig. 3.1
Evans & Co., Bradbury, London
Political Map of Asia
Ink on Paper, c. 1880-1920,
278 x 372 mm
The Alkazi Collection of
Photography

tradition that promises to cast light on the images here. Consider Ananda Coomaraswamy's typically erudite and dazzling essay on traditional conceptions of ideal portraiture in India, first published in 1939. He cites texts that eulogise an ideal, canonical mode of portraiture and contrasts this negatively with the depiction of human likeness which is "not heavenward looking" (*Sukranitisara* IV.4.76) and identify the difference between "the deified man and the man as he had been on earth" (*Pratimanataka*; Coomaraswamy 1943:117) (Fig. 3.2).

This disinterest in individuated exteriority, the commitment to "impersonality and serenity" (1943:126) and to what is "essential and original" (1943:127) might explain those photographic portraits collected here that appear to privilege formality and frontality, the self-presentation of the body as "effigy". We might choose to see in the images collected here evidence of a self-representation by South Asians when confronted with the camera (Fig. 3.3).

RETHINKING THE FIGURE IN EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY FROM SOUTH ASIA

Beth Citron

The layered history of the figure in South Asian art spans Mohenjo Daro to Mumbai, sacred and secular forms, and every imaginable artistic medium and moment. And yet, within this well-established narrative, striking questions remain to be answered that would challenge the linearity and chronology of the representation of the figure: on the role of early photography from the subcontinent in its own history of art and also on the relationship of figuration to portraiture, the latter being a core subject of the new medium of photography in South Asia. The exhibition *Allegory and Illusion: Early Portrait Photography from South Asia* focuses on portrait-based representations of people from the modern nation states of India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and Burma, including a significant and varied selection of painted photographs from India and Nepal. A group of painted photographs, in particular, poses important questions regarding the integration of photography into an existing South Asian art history and about how the conceptual address of portraiture (as a Western conception introduced in the Mughal period) and figuration (already integral to Indian art) may or may not coexist in some of these works. This brief exploratory essay considers both of these issues and hopes to show the critical importance of these topics to the body of work in *Allegory and Illusion*.

Photography arrived in South Asia in 1840, within a year of its invention in Europe. Its early history in India specifically has been tied explicitly to colonial histories in recent scholarship,¹ leading to but one reason why photography from this period is most often passed over in mainstream academic and popular histories of South Asian art. (For example, the concluding chapters in Vidya Dehejia's classic primer *Indian Art* proceed from "The Luxuries of Mughal Art" and "Rajput Mewar" to two chapters on colonial art in India—"Churches of Portuguese Goa" and "Art of the British Raj"—with little mention of photography at all, and only a single example of a work by an Indian photographer—Lala Deen Dayal (1844–1905)—during the period of British rule.) Yet, as has been described recently by Partha Mitter in an essay on early photography in India,² there is an important link between Mughal aesthetics and the styles associated with early photography in South Asia. This has led Christopher Pinney's prompt to re-categorise this material "as a form of late painting" in his essay in this volume, contra earlier claims that this work may merely represent the decline of painting in South Asia.³

The purpose of this essay, then, is to inscribe the early history of photography in South Asia not only with a genealogical trace to earlier and later painterly practices but also to suggest that the medium evolved to create unique conceptions with regard to the idea and image of the figure.

Rajput along with Mughal aesthetics can be seen in a selection of works in the exhibition, including Fig. 4.1, which closely resembles Rajasthani paintings of Srinathji worship, in

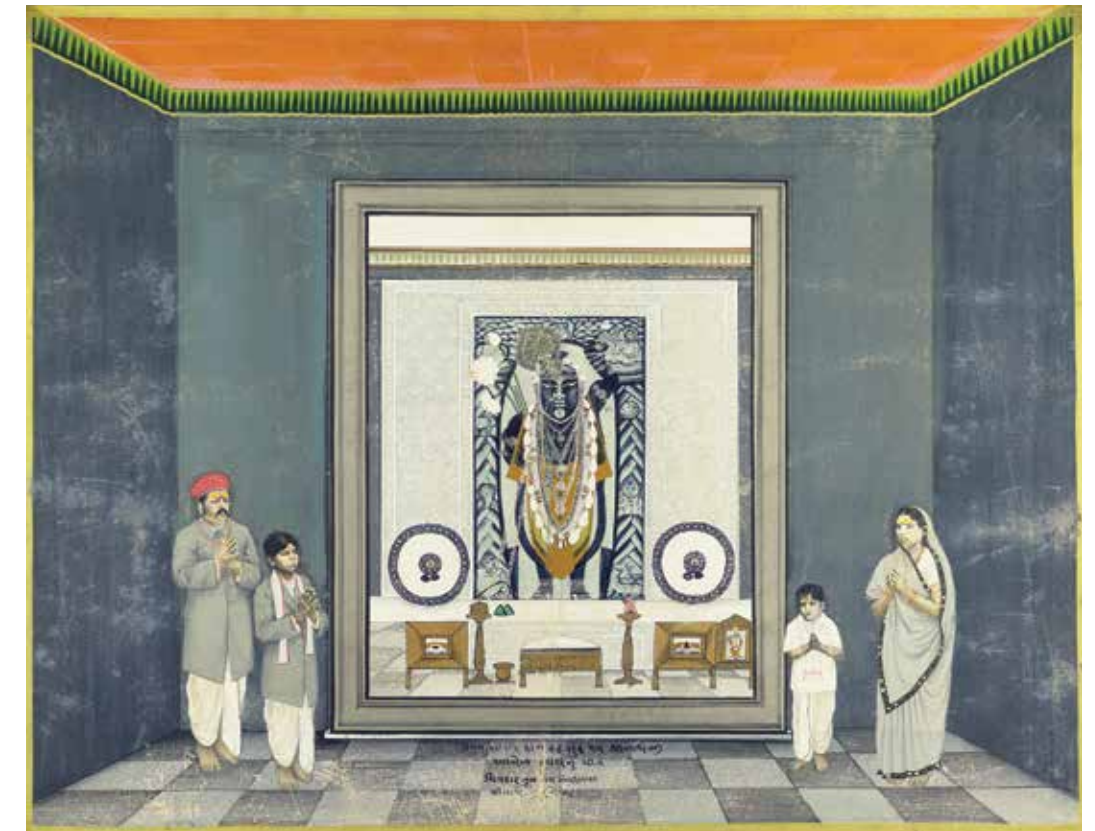


Fig. 4.1
Unknown Photographer; Chitrakar
Jujiram Gopilal Nathdwara, Mewar
Family Worshipping Srinathji
Albumen Print and Watercolour,
c. 1900, 450 x 605 mm
ACP: D2009.07.0016

Fig. 3.4 (p. 16) for its following of Mughal conventions while depicting deities as infant rulers, and in Fig. 4.2 and Fig. 4.3 for their quotation of Mughal perspective and architecture. All four photographs convincingly and intentionally stake claims to stylistic continuities with Indian visualities and histories. If these linkages are not enough reason to push for the inclusion of 19th- and early 20th-century photography into mainstream South Asian art history, let us also look at the ways in which painted photographs of this period anticipate a constellation of essential characteristics of modernism in the visual arts—such as flatness, abstraction, quotation, and the embrace of new technology itself—that become defined as part of a modern discourse internationally as well as in India only in the next century, and especially in the medium of painting. Through these tropes we may see how this critical moment of photography is not just a potential extension of "late painting" but also an intermediate, inter-medium link between two periods of South Asian art history (until now, described by scholars mostly as a history of painting). Photography from this era also marks a transition between a period led by sacred and royal arts and one marked by secular and autonomous modes of expression for various audiences, as photography for the first time offered a range of access points for both royalty and the middle classes.

Evidence of this period as a *stylistic* bridge is embodied in qualities of the painted photographs *Maharaja Venkat Raman Singh of Rewa* (Fig. 4.4), *Portrait of a Seated Woman* (Fig. 4.5) and *Lady Painting a Portrait* (Fig. 3.15). In Fig. 4.4, we see the main figure seated next to a

STATUESQUE ENTHRALLMENT THE BODY IN EARLY SOUTH ASIAN PHOTOGRAPHY

Rahaab Allana

In a popular and controversial contemporary exhibition titled *Beneath the Skin*, the people of various erstwhile colonies have voiced their deep concern about the evolution of thought around the treatment of human remains. In this landmark exposition about physical identity and the genetic line, there appears to be a rupture between public sentiment and institutional concerns—specifically among those objects deemed ‘sacred’ by one community—then preserved and displayed as works of art by mainstream museums in other countries. The curators are now re-evaluating how cultural organisations should handle such bodies in order to preserve the dignity of the dead. Furthermore, many museums now sense mounting pressure and increasing demands from the former colonies to repatriate ancestral remains so as to give generations of affected families a sense of peace by laying such ‘objects’ to rest.¹

When G. Thomas in his pioneering book on photography in India asked “How can we wide-angle our minds to encompass these vastnesses?”, his reference was also to the varied strains, conflicted nature and anticipated functions of photography in the subcontinent² (Fig.5.1). Cultural estrangement and imperial hubris were writ large in the ideologies and institutional and visual practices of the 19th century, and as the author Suren Lalvani argues—this was executed unequivocally through photography with the representation of ‘bodies’ as portrait studies. The imaging of a ‘likeness’ became a means of negotiating interpersonal engagement—those who were classified within images and the patrons for whom they were made³ (Fig.5.2). The reaction of the public in the aftermath of the colonial era as cited above is an indicator that objects were constantly changing hands and recasting themselves with new identity in new lands, but there is now a renewed drive to return what was once misplaced.

With the subject of the ‘body’ or ‘figure’ (lit. portrait) at the heart of this exhibition, the following essay then attempts to gauge the ways in which early photographic portraits primarily from South Asia not only exemplify a historical/contextual understanding of people or community within conventional tropes but also provoke new forms of cultural production in contemporary practice. The contemporary often pays homage to the archive as a source of ‘retrieval’ and it is here that some of the most searching questions about the origination of photographic styles, their social effects, and public reception can be posed. I draw on interconnected works from each of the four projected countries represented here: Nepal, Burma, India, and Sri Lanka, the last three of which came under the banner of the Imperial Britain in or before the 19th century. In doing so, I suggest that they explored the ‘portrait’ as a broader field of approaches to the ‘body’, through the practice of what I call ‘point blank’ photography—forever stretching the applications of the medium in shaping identity and

Fig. 5.1
Unknown Photographer
The Hairy Family of Burma
Albumen Print, c. 1890,
235 x 182 mm
ACP: 96.05.0021



PHOTOGRAPHERS, STUDIOS, PROCESSES AND FORMATS

Shilpi Goswami, Deepak Bharathan and Jennifer Chowdhry

“The history of photography is the story of men, honest and true, who set themselves to bend their mastery over a medium, in order that they might leave a lasting ‘image’ that could communicate not only across borders and boundaries, but also down the passage of time and distance.”¹



Fig. 6.1
J.C.A. Dannenberg;
Unknown Artist
**Maharaja Jaswant Singh of
Bharatpur (1851–1893)**
Albumen Print with Mixed Media,
1863, 144 x 110 mm
ACP: 98.72.0021

This section provides an overview of the varied photographers, studios and manual processes involved in the late 19th to early 20th century in South Asia, showcased in the images selected for the exhibition *Allegory and Illusion*. There has been a conscious effort to lay emphasis on the photographer’s biography, the technological means and the formats through which images were circulated. Hence the proliferation of card mounted images such as carte-de-visites, cabinet cards, postcards and stereoscopes have been indicated wherever pertinent as they changed the commercial and stylistic dynamics of photography’s commercial reach in the world.

INDIA

An account of early portraiture from India in this exhibition can be traced back to the 1850s seen in a beautifully cased **daguerreotype** (Fig. 1.1) of Havelock-Allen (1830–97), son of Henry Havelock who was killed in shell-fire in Lucknow during the Uprising of 1857. Allen had a distinguished military career that ended during the Tirah expedition in 1897, where he was shot by a Khaibari tribesman on the Afghan frontier.

The daguerreotype, a painted miniature format of which is seen here (Fig 6.1), was the first-known photographic process, dating to 1839 and was invented by the Frenchman Louis-Jacques-Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851). A daguerreotype is a photograph on a copper plate covered with a layer of finely polished silver. The image consists of tiny particles deposited on the polished silver surface. Depending on the viewing angle, a daguerreotype can appear as a positive or negative.² Hand colouring was frequently applied to provide finishing touches to the image. A major disadvantage that ultimately led to the decline of this process was that every daguerreotype was unique: as multiple copies were not possible it was necessary to expose additional plates in order to circulate the image widely.³

The British photographer Charles Shepherd (fl. 1858–1878, commercial) collaborated with Robert Tytler (1818–1872) to take a portrait of Bahadur Shah, former king of Delhi. He went into partnership in c.1862, and established the studio **Shepherd and Robertson**, running it in Agra and then Simla and making extensive topographical and ethnographical studies of northern India. **Samuel Bourne** (1834–1912), a bank clerk and amateur photographer from Nottingham arrived in India in January 1863, establishing the firm of **Howard, Bourne, and Shepherd** in Simla, which changed to **Bourne and Shepherd** (Fig. 6.2) in 1865. Further branches were established in Calcutta in 1867 and Bombay in 1870. The firm Bourne and Shepherd published a number of catalogues of *Photographic Views in India*. Bourne left India in 1870, followed by Shepherd by about 1878, yet the firm remained active even after their departure.⁴ The studio still continues to function in Kolkata under an Indian owner, Mr. Jayant Gandhi, making it one of the oldest running photo studios in the world.

The firm **Johnston and Hoffmann** was a premier commercial photographic studio in Northern India.⁵ The exhibition includes an **opatype** (see p. 2) by them. Joseph Glover and John Bold The Younger, a watch-and-clock-maker of Liverpool in the UK, patented the basic opatype technique, involving wet collodion and albumen in 1857.⁶ The “opatype” (also called “opaltype” or simply “opal”) is a positive photographic image made from a negative upon a light-sensitive coating on opal glass. Opal glass, also called milk glass, had a white translucent surface made by the addition of oxides to basic silica soda glass. The hand-colouring methods used for opatypes, often emulated miniature techniques.⁷

Colonel Willoughby Wallace Hooper (1837–1912) was a British amateur photographer and was originally part of the Seventh Madras Light Cavalry in 1858 and remained in South Asia until his retirement in 1896. During the 1860s he produced a series of images of the Indian “types”, collaborating with the Madras army veterinary surgeon, George Western (1837–1907).⁸ He also photographed victims of the Madras famine of 1876–78 (Fig. 6.3).⁹

Randolph Bezzant Holmes (1888–1973) was a commercial photographer in pre-Partition India. He was the son of William Dacia Holmes, who opened the Holmes Studio in Peshawar in 1889 and continued his photography business at Peshawar after the death of his father in 1923. Holmes also opened a branch of the [sic] firm in the cantonment of Nowshera in the North West Frontier Province in 1910. Both were important military and civilian photographers, who recorded the history of the frontier. At the time of Partition, the family emigrated to New Zealand and the business was closed down. R. B. Holmes acted as photographer to the North West Frontier Force in the 3rd Afghan War of 1919 and during the later Waziristan Campaigns.¹⁰ Most of his photographs are of military subjects, though he also produced landscapes and portrait studies of Indian “types,” such as this study of an ‘Afghan tribesman’ featured in the exhibition (see Fig. 5.15).¹¹

Darogah Abbas Ali (Darogha Ubbas Ali) (see Fig. 3.9) was an amateur photographer from Lucknow (fl. 1860s–70s). Abbas Ali was a municipal engineer in Lucknow, probably trained at