PAINTED PHOTOGRAPHS

Coloured Portraiture in India

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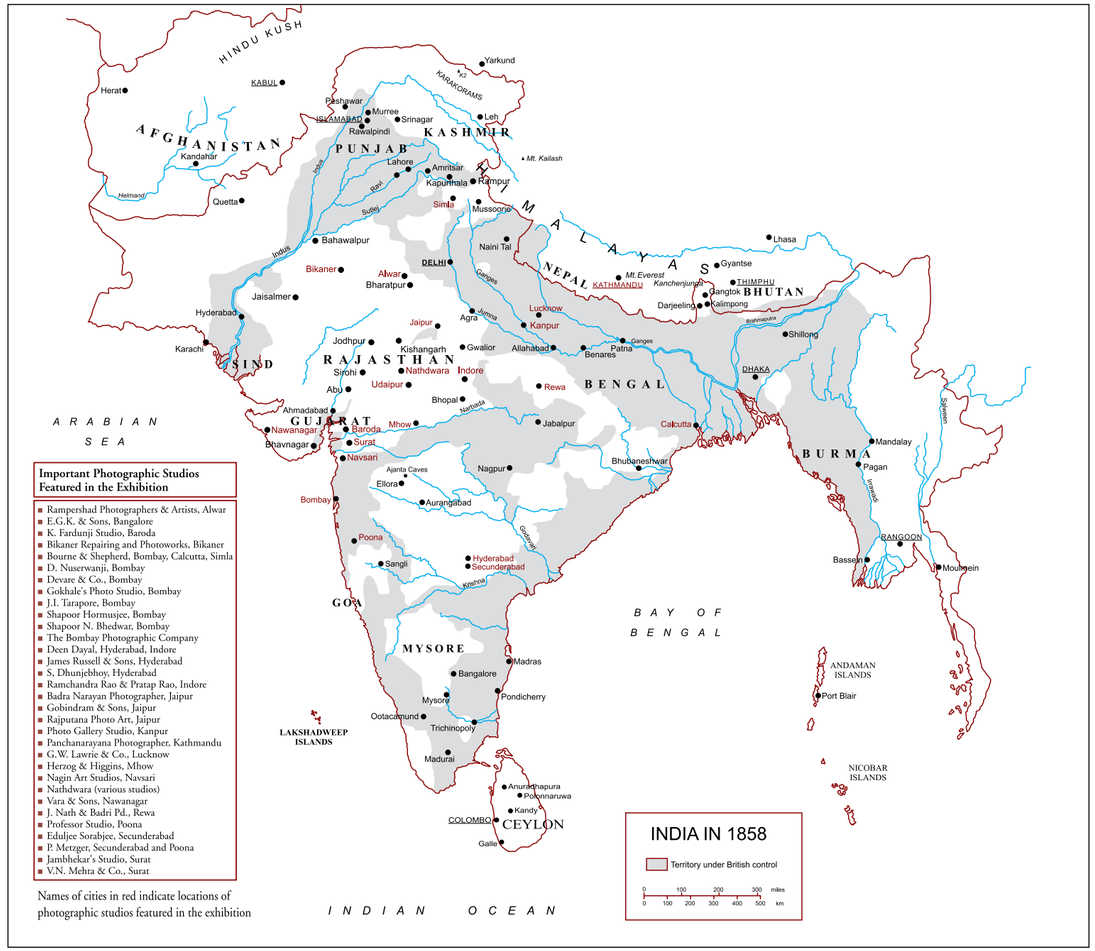
1. page 2 | **UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER & ARTIST (UDAIPUR)**
Seated Lady, Gelatin Silver Print and Watercolour,
c.1920–40, 176 x 123 mm, ACP: D2003.10.0003



2. opposite | UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER & ARTIST Maharani of Nepal, Gelatin Silver Print and Watercolour, c.1900, 300 x 251 mm, ACP:2000.14.0076

FOREWORD

PHOTOGRAPHY: ART AND RITUAL

E. ALKAZI

The Indian subcontinent, sun-drenched for the greater part of the year, stretches its vast contours northwards just above the equator. The torrid light of the sun throws out a challenge and demands equivalent response. In India, that response is through the very stuff of life: colour as the essence of the lifestyle of the people, their rites, ceremonies and traditions.

Sun-yellow of the rays of the emblem of Surya, the Sun god, is represented by turmeric, a healing herb used to anoint both deity and devotee in the daily worship at sunrise. Brides wear red, signifying blood, passion, warmth and love. Patterns in tender leaf-green and celestial blue entwine in geometric designs to adorn the garments of princes as well as the common people of India, designating class, caste, clan and domicile.

In the 1840s, photography, invented by the ingenious '*firangi*' (foreigner), soon found its way to India via its use by the armed forces of the East India Company. The new medium was welcomed with enthusiasm and taken up by native rulers and the elite, as patrons and practitioners. Photography matured into a thriving profession. Well-equipped studios began operating in the major cities, catering to middle- and upper-middle-class clientele, while in the 'native' bazaars enterprising itinerant photographers set up portable booths with a range of vivid backdrops.

The black-and-white image was, and still is, the pristine preference of the Western photographer, scholar, critic and connoisseur. However, for the 'native' Indian, this remarkable invention of the 'Company Bahadur' was true to life only when enhanced by the bewitching touch of colour.

Indian photographic studios developed their own *karkhanas* (artists' ateliers and workshops) much in the manner of the traditional Mughal and regional 'schools' of painting. They adopted particular styles and devised distinctive provincial traits and palettes. Some catered to royal patrons whose custom set them distinctly apart; others found a steady lucrative business in serving the needs of the burgeoning and prosperous mercantile and professional classes. With its fantastic painted backdrops of verdant landscapes, royal gardens, rearing stallions, tempestuous oceans and secret boudoirs, this unique mode of photography passed into the accepted aesthetic traditions of Indian life and has survived as one of its most delightful rituals.

3. opposite | UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER; CHITRAKAR JUJIRAM GOPILAL NATHDWARA (MEWAR) Priest and Donor before Srinathji, Gelatin Silver Print and Oil Paint, c.1890, 450 x 325 mm, ACP: 98.83.0239

A BOLD FUSION

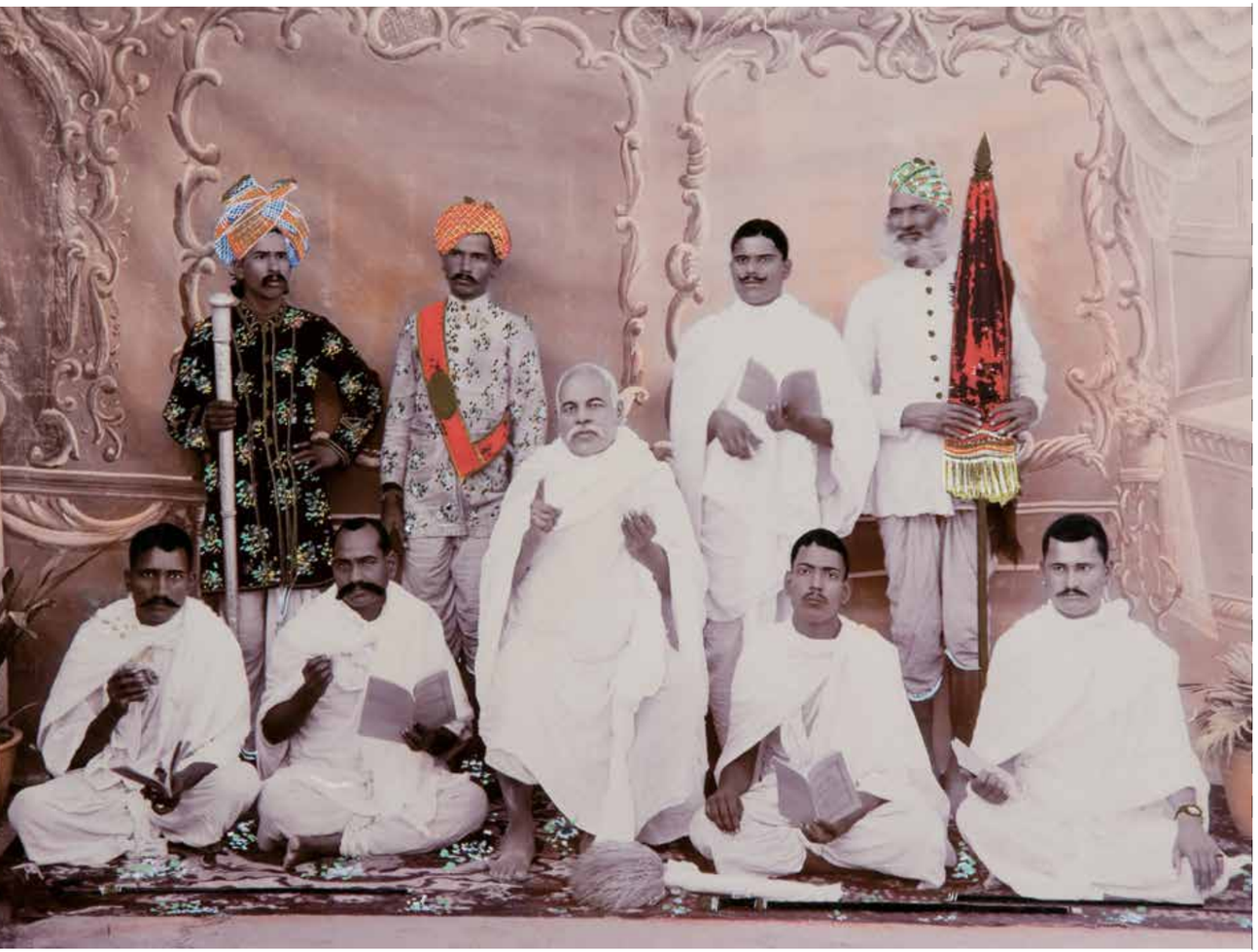
REALISM AND THE ARTIST IN PHOTOGRAPHY

RAHAAB ALLANA

Through fine brushwork and a vibrant palette, the 'photographer-artists' of nineteenth-century in India carefully transmitted their creative vision to the surface of an image, and by that very act challenged whether photographs were glimpses of the real. In essence, their alluring compositions represent an inter-pictorial approach to reality, a unique mode of simulation embedded within and nourished by ongoing cross-cultural and sociological transformations. At a more informal level, the persistent cultivation of individual skill and personal intuition after years of close aesthetic engagement signalled the collective identity of a group: the patron, his photographer *and* the artist.

My contention in this introductory piece is that painted photographs mark a crucial chapter in the history of Indian photography by abetting the notion of modernism in visual practice at the turn of the nineteenth century. This pictorial trajectory drew upon existent traditions of illumination in painting, slowly emerging as a self-sustaining genre, a hybrid of scientific documentation and artistic convention. With recurrent exposure to myriad art forms, both indigenous and European, the 'native' artist in photography steadily developed an idealised and formal 'photo-canvas', a monochromatic ground that simultaneously resists and yields to a layered impasto of colour. Further, the dissemination of carefully staged and embellished photographs gradually initiated a new visual paradigm by fostering a mode of hyperrealism in both photography and art.

A broad geographic division based on mannerism and technique has been attempted here, in order to accommodate the various strains of practice revealed in this exhibition. The majority are from Rajasthan and, alternately, from commercial studios in Bombay and Calcutta. Location is an important factor in any analysis of the painted photograph, since the genre grew from a meld of local styles and exchanges between smaller towns, traditional ateliers and emerging studios. Additionally, through the example of a single identified painter, Pannalal Parasram Gaud (c.1880–1950) from Mewar, we witness how the artist's affiliation with painterly custom is brought to bear on photography, as well as his engagement with new media (photos printed in publications). Pannalal's example foregrounds the existence of a courtly style evident in the photographs of Indian nobility, and their abiding patronage of the emerging arts. This period in the history of photography in India represents a break with tradition through a sophisticated



24. opposite | **UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER & ARTIST** Jain Monks and Their Attendants, Gelatin Silver Print and Watercolour, c.1920–40, 212 x 271 mm, ACP: 98.83.0044

THE EVOLVING MODERN, 1850–1950

INDIAN COSTUMES AS SEEN THROUGH PAINTED PHOTOGRAPHS

PRAMOD KUMAR K.G.

> In the case of costumes... nothing, absolutely nothing, succeeds in capturing the world of colour and shape and ornament and fabric that belongs to the world of Indian dresses. These dresses have to be seen worn and used for one to be able to take in their magic, for then alone do they begin to breathe a life of their own... or one has to enter the silent but vibrant world of paintings of the past. It is there that dresses come to life, and become part of the pageant that is virtually without compare.[1]

A new medium and a close cousin to painting, the painted photograph offers a remarkable view of the rapid change of Indian fashion in the century preceding India's Independence. The advent of photography in Europe in 1839, and its almost immediate appearance in India by 1840 significantly captured the imagination of the public. Photography now offered another means to accurately catalogue and map life in India – both for the colonial administration, obsessed with modes of cartography, taxonomy and genealogy (and including the demanding ethnographic project of categorising the various types of 'native'), and for the large section of Indians who immediately took to this new, technologically enabled art form.

The advent of photography in India occurred at a time of intense social upheaval and transformation. The colonial encounter, along with the slow germination of a nascent modernity, forced a rush of new sartorial trends in India. Several examples seen here will clearly demonstrate the creation of a strange new fashion, a part-Indian, part-Western amalgam of heterogeneous components yoked together, neither putting the wearer at complete ease nor invoking a confident articulation of subjectivity, identity and personhood.

In their evidentiary and mimetic dimensions, painted photographs provide a unique perspective on colonial hybridity as manifested in garments of daily wear as well as formal costume. Moreover, some of the symbolism traditionally associated with colour in India comes alive through the skilful painting of these images. Today, when we take colour photography as a given, we significantly miss out on the value associated with tinted photographs in an earlier time. This study focuses primarily on men's fashion because women, especially in the princely courts, observed strict *purdah* (practice of sequestering women) and thus were rarely photographed. In the few instances where we do see them in photographs, there is less confusion in their attire