



# Unveiling India

THE EARLY LENS MEN 1850—1910

*Rahaab Allana • Davy Depelchin*



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The Alkazi Collection of Photography



Indian Council for Cultural Relations

international arts festival  
**europalia.india**

Royal Museums  
of Fine Arts of Belgium





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*Front cover*  
John Murray  
**View of Taj Mahal from the East, Agra**  
(See p. 23)

*Page 2–3*  
Nicholas & Co., Madras  
**Hindu Festival, Kumbhakonam: People  
waiting to bathe in a sacred pool on an  
auspicious day**  
Albumen Prints, 1860–1880, 203 x 821 mm  
ACP: 2000.05.0028, 29 & 30

*Page 4–5*  
John Murray  
**3-Part Panorama of the Taj Mahal from  
the Gateway**  
Albumen Prints, January–March 1864,  
387 x 446, 351 x 450 and 389 x 447 mm  
(respectively)  
ACP: 2008.02.0008(a, b & c)

*Page 6*  
William Johnson [Attribution]  
**‘Maráthí Women of Bombay’ from The  
Oriental Races and Tribes, Residents and  
Visitors of Bombay (Vol. II)**  
Albumen Print, 1866, 229 x 177 mm  
ACP: D2005.67.0001(33)

*Back cover*  
Samuel Bourne  
**Great Eastern Hotel and Old Court  
House Street, Calcutta**  
Albumen Print, 1867, 183 x 235 mm  
ACP: 94.94.0022

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**07** MESSAGE  
*Dr. Karan Singh*

President, Indian Council for Cultural Relations  
General Commissioner, europalia.india

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MESSAGE  
**09** Cultural Encounters with India  
*Baron Philippe Vlerick*  
General Commissioner, europalia.india

---

FOREWORD  
**11** Photography and Legacy  
*E. Alkazi*  
Chairman, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

---

INTRODUCTION  
**13** India Unveiled  
*Michel Draguet*  
Director General of the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium

---

---

**14** Early Landscape Photography  
in India  
*Rahaab Allana*

---

---

**44** Pioneering Photography in India:  
The Continuation of a Pictorial Tradition  
*Davy Depelchin*

---

---

**58** The Early Lensmen’s Legacy

---

---

**100** europalia.india

---

---

**102** Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

---





MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT  
RAJYA SABHA  
(UPPER HOUSE OF PARLIAMENT)

Dr. Karan Singh



PRESIDENT  
INDIAN COUNCIL FOR  
CULTURAL RELATIONS  
(ICCR)

### Message

Photography was introduced in India in 1840, soon after being patented in Europe in 1839. The pioneers of photography in India were employees of the English East India Company, whose chief functionaries understood that this could be an efficient tool for documenting geographical and topographical information, previously rendered through drawings and watercolours. These pioneers also used photography as a medium to create an ethnographical record which documented the ever changing panorama of life in India and would serve as a basis for furthering the 19th century penchant for “scientific” inquiry, as well as a historical record which has proved invaluable to those engaged in reconstructing the past.

This exhibition focuses on the relationship between early photographs of Indian architecture and how India was perceived by those behind the camera. It includes rare Wax Paper Negatives by Dr. John Murray and Alexander Greenlaw which not only provide an insight into the early processes of picture making, but take the viewer on a journey through time with the development of landscape photography. The exhibition also provides a glimpse into the beginnings of professional photography in India, showcasing the works of Nicholas & Co., Samuel Bourne and Raja Deen Dayal & Sons as examples of early commercial studios in the three presidencies of colonial India—Calcutta, Bombay and Madras.

I feel that this exhibition will provide the viewer with unique insights into an India poised on the cusp of change between the ancient and the modern, as perceived by foreign visitors who not only recorded their surroundings but were themselves also agents of change. On behalf of the ICCR, I take this opportunity to thank all those involved in conceiving and implementing this project.

(Dr. Karan Singh)  
General Commissioner,  
europalia.india 2013-14

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## MESSAGE

*Baron Philippe Vlerick*

General Commissioner, europalia.india

### Cultural Encounters with India

The theme of Encounters’ is the common thread running through the europalia.india Festival. Explored in exhibitions, concerts, dance and theatre performances, literary events and conferences, it offers an opportunity and a pretext to entice the European public to discover India.

India has shaped itself over time and continues to transform, enriched by many encounters with other cultures, while at the same time, shaping and transforming those impregnated by its culture. Confrontation, exchange, assimilation, discovery, resistance, the source of progress or misfortune, but also love... the encounter is a beautiful metaphor for India and allows us to approach this country in all its complexity and cultural richness.

To realize this ambitious project, Europalia International has partnered with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Numerous European and Indian experts have assisted and collaborated to develop—in consultation with Belgian and European festival partners—an artistic programme of the highest quality.

The exhibition “Unveiling India: The Early Lensmen (1850–1910)” will shine a light on pioneering photography in India through a selection of photos and negatives never before exhibited in Europe. Presented at the Royal Museums of Fine Arts, this exhibition offers a unique glimpse of the magnificent collection of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs from the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, itself dedicated to the exploration and study of Indian cultural history.

This exhibition, like all the events on the europalia.india programme, would not have been possible without the vital and generous support of our partners, to whom I wish to express our deep gratitude.



Unknown Photographer & Publisher  
**‘Moombadevi Road, Bombay’**  
Tinted Phototype Postcard, 1907,  
86 x 137 mm  
ACP: 2001.15.0255





John Murray  
**Taj Mahal with Ruins in the  
foreground, Agra**  
Waxed-Paper Negative, 1858–1862,  
378 x 457 mm  
ACP: 99.17.0122

## Photography and Legacy

Deep in the plains of Northern India, a British photographer rises to the call for prayer at sunrise. Soon, he strains to carry his equipment: a tent, various chemicals and a bulky Gandolfi camera through a misty morning with his retinue of armed labourers. They settle on the banks of a river, the Yamuna, recently fed by the autumn showers and take a moment’s respite. Looking from the shore to the west, clearing from the haze of light, what captures their imagination—is a citadel. It is at once a place of worship, and a tomb, fused into a single structure; in equal measure—mesmeric—it gradually appears in the reflection of water from the river.

The photographer John Murray is captivated by the majesty of the Taj Mahal and looks upon it as a sight to behold. His engagement over several hours and days that lead into weeks, months and eventually years speaks of his commitment and passion for achieving a sense of perfection in capturing the monument in its glory—a demand made upon himself so as to present to the world an edifice as he sees it through his own eyes, and with the same measure of affection as his own sight.

The building of an art collection, and in this case a photography archive, has similar intent. It is the ability to return to people what they have rightly shared with the world. The archive is about *giving*, *adapting* and *persevering* through time and throughout a period of change and evolution. While in the 19<sup>th</sup> century this may be imagined through the vast repositories of material objects, the photograph too was a communicator of perspectives, a challenger of norms that led to a shifting understanding of trend, and of aesthetic taste. It allowed people to take their bearings from life but also recast life on the terms they saw the world, and indeed what they desired from the world.

In trying to piece the world together, this archive, which is meant for the public, will grow only *through* and *with* the public. It is through our collective memories that a repository such as this will be able to reach out and connect with the past as much as it may envision the future, and the emerging domains of new media. The future of any visual archive therefore lies in its ability to speak without words, to communicate across social strata and to sustain the belief that our past as well as our present is in a constant state of transformation that must be documented, researched and studied with the keenness, clarity and depth as that of an actual *image* of the world. In such a manner, does that archive become part of a living legacy and a force that must allow us to take our bearings from what we *can* see?

Murray was one such unique force in the history of photography in India, as through these first extant images of the Taj, we now know that timelessness and agelessness constitute the true nature of art in India, and one that draws its breath of fresh air from life itself.



## India Unveiled

India is looked at from Europe with increasing fascination. The interest shown by Westerners for this part of the world is deeply rooted in history. Already in the 5<sup>th</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century BC, India was described by Herodotus and Ctesias. Not impeded by their total lack of knowledge of the country in the East, both Greeks populated it with the most improbably fantastic flora and fauna. India became a continent that spoke to the imagination, filled with creatures that sprang from Western imagination. Although the image created then of an enchanted India would survive for centuries in European popular culture, the general increase in knowledge would ensure that an image was created that answered to reality. The expeditions of Alexander the Great certainly had a share in this process. Nevertheless, it would be necessary to wait until the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries before there was direct contact between Europe and India. Enchanted India would systematically make way for eyewitness reports, but this did not mean India's attraction would decrease. Its rich history, its cultural, religious, and ethnic diversity, and its capacity for unleashing countless sensory impressions still appeal to the contemporary mind. Only this no longer rests on what Europeans think of India—fortunately!—but on what India essentially is.

It is my conviction that the Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium (RMFAB) may not remain on the sidelines when an institutional ally organizes a multidisciplinary cultural festival with a guest country such as India. Cooperation with Europalia International is always a pleasure, and with that I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to Baron Philippe Vlerick, General Commissioner of europalia.india, as well as Europalia General Manager Kristine De Mulder and her team for this new partnership. However, the project *Unveiling India* would never have come about without additional organizational support from the Indian side. Our particular thanks goes out to the President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, Dr. Karan Singh and the ICCR team, as well as the Embassy of India in Brussels and the Ambassador, His Excellency Mr. Dinkar Khullar.

If it has been possible to show a careful selection of photographic negatives and positives with Indian subjects in Brussels, then this is in the first place thanks to Ebrahim Alkazi, founder and chairman of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts (AFA), New Delhi. The RMFAB are also particularly grateful that a broad selection of works from the Alkazi Collection of Photography (ACP) has been given in loan in the context of the europalia.india festival and that Curator Rahaab Allana was prepared to lead the project for the AFA. The extraordinary quality of the ACP and the team of young, dynamic researchers who work there make the AFA a centre of expertise for Indian photography to be reckoned with.

In addition, I would also like to thank the Federal Public Service Foreign Affairs, under the direction of His Excellency Minister Didier Reynders, for their organizational and logistic support of this project; in particular, I am also grateful to the Belgian Embassy in New Delhi and its ambassador, His Excellency Mr. Pierre Vaesen.

Finally, I would like to thank Mr. Bipin Shah, Publisher and Managing Director at Mapin Publishing, for the highly effective approach that has produced this catalogue.



Unknown Photographer  
**Parsi Gymnasts**  
Albumen Print, 1860–1890,  
142 x 99 mm  
ACP: 94.91.0001





## Early Landscape Photography in India

*Rahaab Allana*



A haunting sequence in a documentary film by Nishtha Jain titled *Calcutta: City of Photos* (2005) depicts a photograph of the famine-stricken subjects of Madras in 1876–78 by W. W. Hooper (1837–1912), digitally morphed in front of a modern-day painted backdrop of the Taj.<sup>1</sup> For me, this metaphor presents a potent message about the history of ‘seeing’ a colony through the eyes of an ‘outsider’, a satire in the most macabre sense of the word wherein the ground reality of India and the Victorian imagination create a surface friction that sheds light on the complexity of deconstructing of the era even today (Fig. 1).

The history of photography in India is tied to colonialism and conquest from its earliest days, arriving at the port city of Calcutta (present-day Kolkata) in 1840, known to be one of the richest Presidency states at the time and later the Capital of British India.<sup>2</sup> Early documentary photography was a tool used to visualize space that was inhabited or controlled by the English East India Company, and is now often viewed as a two-dimensional embodiment of distant lands and faraway territories in an absorbable format—one that communicated both fascination and power<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 2). Accordingly, by physically turning the camera from a vertical to a horizontal position, the photographer broadened his or her field of vision from a portrait to a landscape view, *capturing* more and more of what lay in front of the lens. This also indicates, that some of the earliest factors that conditioned how and what the West saw of the East, were based on painterly manners drawn directly from the West, and adopted by practitioners in India.



**Fig. 1** W.W. Hooper  
**Madras Famine Coolies**  
Albumen Print, 1876–1878,  
165 x 216 mm  
ACP: 94.107.0060

*Previous pages*  
**Fig. 25** Unknown Photographer  
**Rampart Row (From Watson’s  
Hotel)—Bombay**  
Albumen Print, 1860–1890,  
188 x 235 mm  
ACP: 94.92.0023

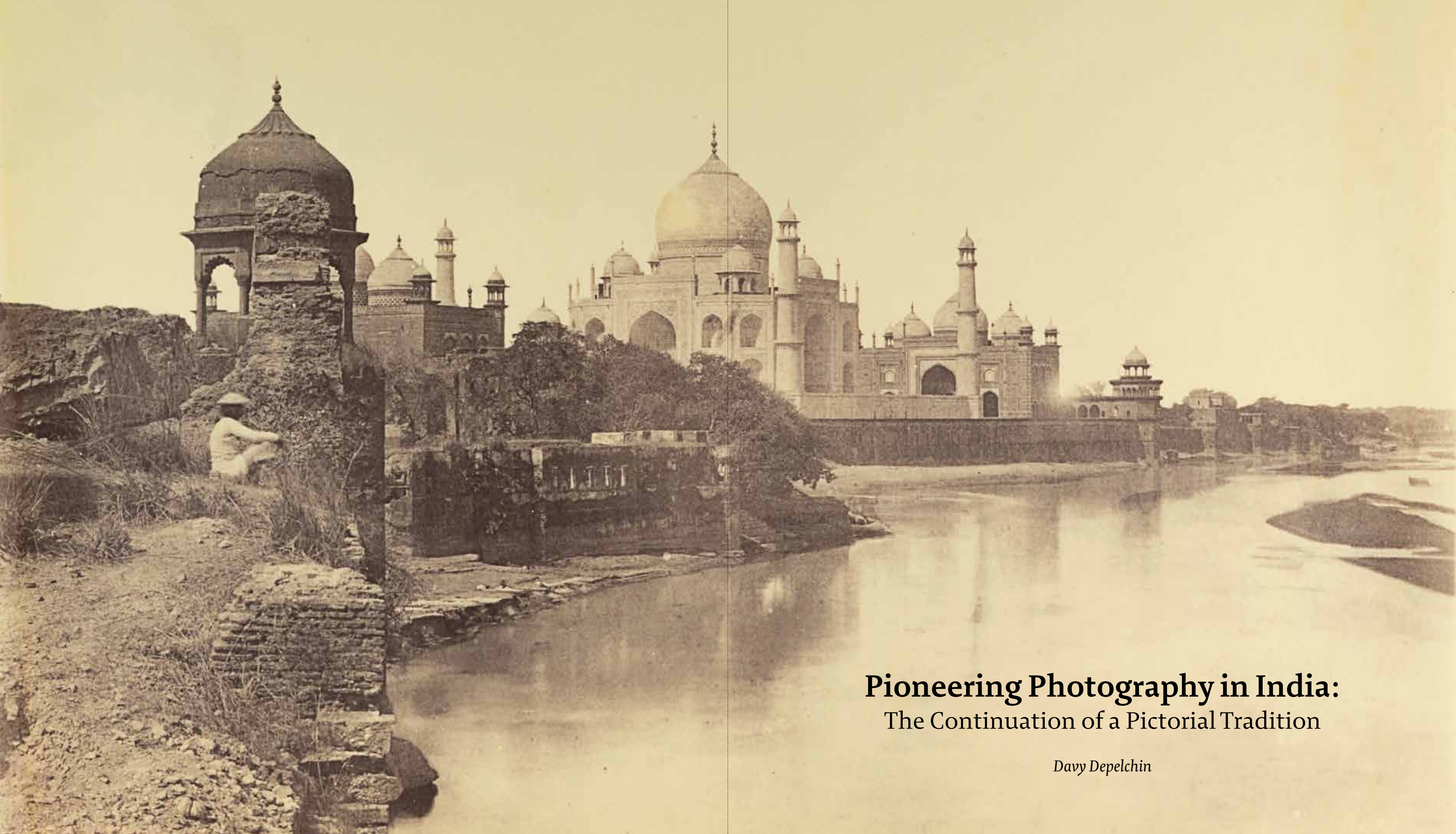


**Fig. 2** Samuel Bourne  
**Great Eastern Hotel and Old Court  
House Street, Calcutta**  
Albumen Print, Photographer’s  
Ref. 1740, 1867, 188 x 320 mm  
ACP: 94.120.0027

The first portion of this article ponders how landscape painting had lasting consequences on the photographer’s eye, and how the camera subsequently mediates, enhances, or distorts the subject’s as well as the viewer’s perception. Looking at the work of John Murray (1809–1898) and Alexander Greenlaw (1818–1870), two of the earliest photographers in India who produced landscape and architectural work in the north and south, illustrates how the visualization of ruins and the approaches to landscape were conditioned by the Picturesque School of Painting. At the same time, there is a keen notice given to the political clime, namely pre and post-Mutiny, as the yearning for an idealized view of the colony that inevitably gets disturbed allows for the entry point for more recent study on the ideological practices of the *aesthetics of conflict*.<sup>4</sup> To illustrate this point further, the article looks at the work of Samuel Bourne (1843–1912) and Raja Deen Dayal (1844–1905), as two of the most significant survey and landscape practitioners in India whose oeuvre receives critical acclaim at the time.

From antiquated land and the mystifying qualities of the pastoral, we move to the swiftly changing cityscape. The second section of the article, then considers images of cityscapes, and the photographic representations of Madras, Calcutta and Bombay between the 1860s and the 1920s which were facilitated through favourable circumstances—the emergence of photographic societies, the colonial mission of inventorying India’s monuments and its people, advancements in photographic technology and the booming of amateur photographic practices. These developments led to the creation of rich legacies that trace a layered and nuanced evolution of the ‘modern Indian metropolis’ through visuals. Through





## Pioneering Photography in India: The Continuation of a Pictorial Tradition

*Davy Depelchin*



The 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by the ethics of premeditation at a visual level. In spite of our familiarity with the manipulation to which photographic images are subjected before they appear in public space, the photographic medium still has an enormous power to seduce us into believing that they are objective depictions of a given subject or a given moment in time. We may not forget, however, that not only does the choice of subject and its framing imply a subjective contribution—i.e. the photographer’s indelible imprint—but that the precise moment of registration and the shutter speed also determine the end result. Not to mention the camera angle, the technical characteristics of the device, apertures, method of film development, and pictorial techniques borrowed from other disciplines. When looking at a photographic image we must always be aware that what we are looking at is a constructed image of reality. The historical moment in which the photo was created scarcely alters this fact. Historical photographs incorporate just as great a degree of subjectivity as their contemporary counterparts. Yet this does little to diminish their potential value as documents of their time. On the contrary, recognizing the inherent subjectivity involved in the creation of such images only increases their rich stratification as documentary sources.

## Images of the Past

Two of India’s earliest practitioners bear witness to the development of photography as part of a long-standing visual tradition. John Murray’s (1809–1898) photographic series on the monuments in and around Agra and the Vijayanagara series that Alexander Greenlaw (1818–1870) captured on light-sensitive paper allow the viewer to form an image of how both sites must have looked around the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Although archaeological and monumental sites may seem to be stationary objects, the contemporary gaze is one that is filtered by actions and events from the past. When seen in a historical perspective, objects that are ostensibly immobile become dynamic entities. Since the photos were taken 150 years ago, the sites have undergone transformations that have altered their appearance. However well-meaning some of these interventions may have been at the moment of their conception and execution, the results did not necessarily further a correct interpretation of the site in question. Historical photos taken before such far-reaching interventions can therefore possess enormous documentary value. When Greenlaw was working on his photographic inventory of Vijayanagara, for example, there was no question of coordinated repair and restoration campaigns aimed at preserving the monuments’ (Fig. 27). For conservation purposes and for eventual restoration, such photos serve as important reference material. In other cases, as with Murray’s series on the Taj Mahal in Agra, the photos reveal structures that have since vanished (Fig. 28). This brings researchers even closer to a true-to-life theoretical reconstruction of the site.

Both Murray’s and Greenlaw’s series of images are of immense archaeological and historical value. Reducing their respective oeuvres to “documentary interest,” however, is to do the photographers an injustice. The negatives produced by these two British subjects bear witness to their artistic talent and to their technical mastery of the medium. Both used a variant of the calotype process developed by William Henry Fox Talbot in the 1830s that was

*Previous pages*

**Fig. 26** John Murray  
**View of the Taj Mahal from the bank of River Yamuna, Agra**  
Albumen Print, 1858–1862,  
412 x 446 mm  
ACP: 99.17.0045



**Fig. 27** Alexander Greenlaw  
**Vitthala Temple, Mahamandapa and Chariot-shrine, Vijayanagara**  
Waxed-Paper Negative,  
Photographer’s Ref. 32–56, 1856,  
305 x 380 mm  
ACP: 99.01.0015



**Fig. 28** John Murray  
**Taj Mahal from the East with Ruins in the Foreground, Agra**  
[possibly Dr. John Murray can be seen in the bottom right]  
Waxed-Paper Negative,  
1858–1862, 364 x 460 mm  
ACP: 99.17.0127





The Early Lensmen's Legacy

Bowme  
2043



The archive of images from India revealed in this publication constitutes a fraction of what actually survives. The itinerant photographers who made India their home for a period, inadvertently created a legacy for the public today that marks both their meticulous documentation and artistic expertise. We therefore reproduce on the following pages a selection from the rich hoard of photographs left behind by the early lensmen. Obsessed as they were, Murray with the Taj Mahal and Greenlaw with Vijayanagara, they pursued their profession with fanatic zeal, often under trying circumstances. Murray, by photographing the Taj again and again, could create a ghostly landscape of the tomb and the ruins with the determined effort to approach the monument step-by-step, quite different from a single study of the structure isolated from its surroundings. Greenlaw, too, by shooting Hampi's Vitthala Temple and Chariot shrine, achieved results that would alter and expand the scope of architectural study for posterity.

At first, India was revealed through the lens bearing a romantic pursuit of discovery of an Oriental culture as well as a scientific quest to unearth its histories. And so the photographers not only found its built structures of interest but also the inhabitants—that bewildering complexity of caste, community and tribe—a group of Goans in their Western suits, Bhatias in conical headgear, tribal Kharavas, and swashbuckling Rajputs. And never having seen or perhaps experienced such dense masses of humanity, the cameramen were drawn to such places as the docks, the railway stations, the temples and sacred tanks where crowds gather.

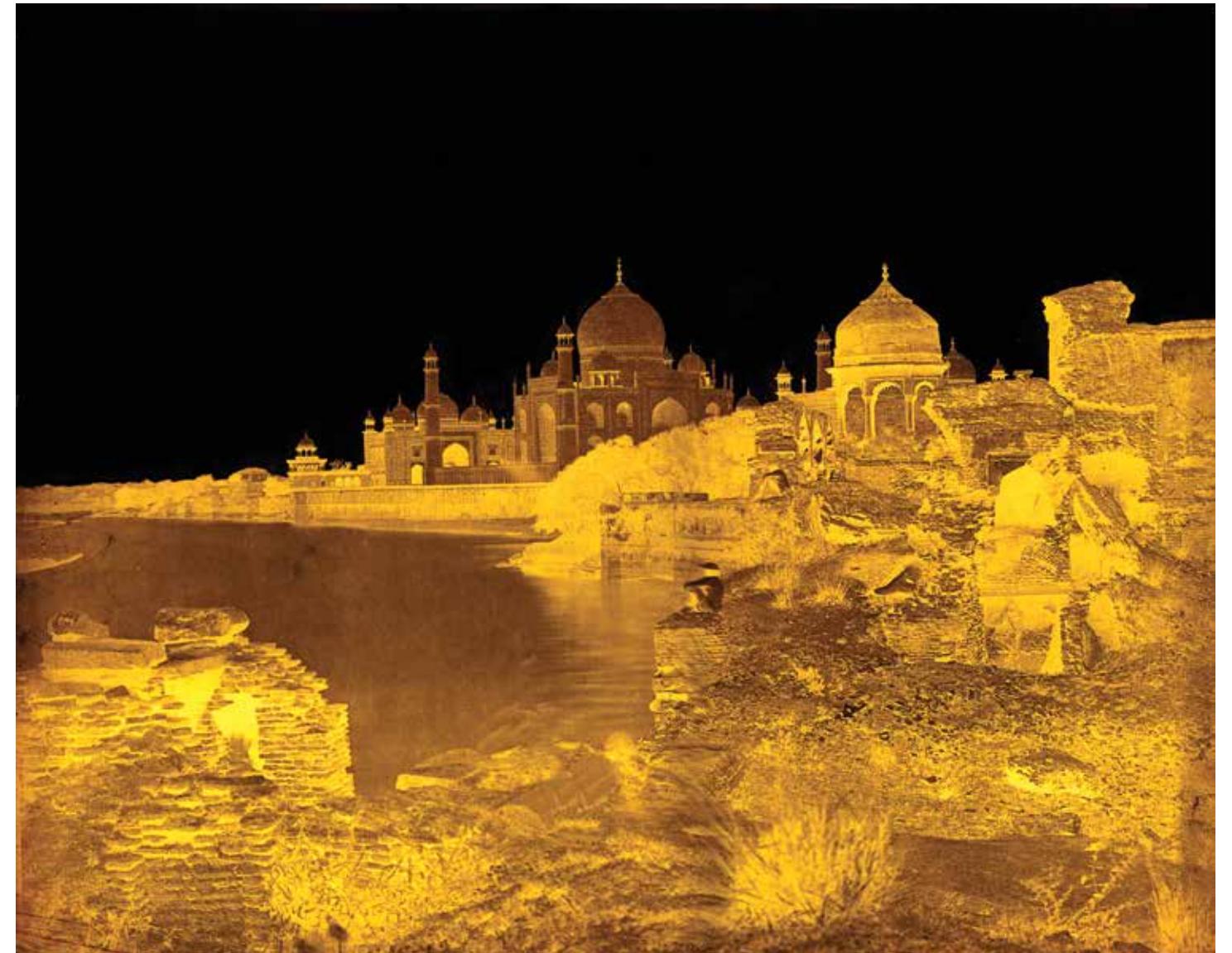
Given the technological difficulties of capturing action on the ground, the land, i.e., the countryside presented a serene departure for the avid practitioner, as much as it did a dedicated pursuit – carrying heavy equipment, chemicals and tents with a retinue of several labourers. We know that the early photographs were carefully composed, that several plates were exposed in order to achieve the final result, but at the same time the examples here almost follow a formula or an aesthetic: There is a backdrop of gently rolling hills which descends to greenery interspersed with dwellings, which in turn gives way to a water body, smooth as glass with scarcely a ripple.

The city, though, is another matter. Here the photographers are attracted by areas of high activity—Kali Ghat and Burra Bazaar in Calcutta, Colaba Causeway and Null Bazaar in Bombay. There are signs too of the town morphing into the city of the future, when the Bombay Club and the buildings on Rampart Row come up and the Great Eastern Hotel appears in Calcutta. The pictures of the early cities are a reminder of a less frenzied age, yet an era of socio-cultural transformation, and the birth of a modern tool for representing reality – the photograph.

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**Note on Greenlaw and Murray images**

*This is to clarify that as Alexander Greenlaw had signed on his negatives, they were to be viewed with the same orientation as the positives. On the other hand, Dr. John Murray had coated only one side of his paper negatives, making them viewable to the naked eye only in the laterally reversed form. Hence they have been reproduced in that form in this publication.*



John Murray  
**View of the Taj Mahal from the  
 bank of River Yamuna, Agra**  
 Waxed-Paper Negative,  
 1858–1862, 385 x 483 mm  
 ACP: 99.17.0113

*Previous pages*  
 Samuel Bourne  
**Tanjore, View showing the Old  
 Street Moat & Ramparts of Tanjore**  
 Albumen Print,  
 Photographer's Ref. 2043,  
 c. 1863–1869, 181 x 312 mm  
 ACP: 94.128.0015