Unveiling India. The Early Lensmen (1850-1910)

06.12.2013 > 09.03.2014

John Murray, 'Taj Mahal', Waxed Paper Negative, c. 1958-62, 400 x 443 mm
Alkazi Collection of Photography: 99.17.0047

Exhibition brief

Photography first arrived in India at the ports as early as 1840, followed by the establishment of photographic societies in Calcutta (present day Kolkata), Bombay (present day Mumbai) and Madras (present day Chennai). With rising commerce and trade, the need for sophisticated studios steadily increased in order to pander to the shifting tastes of those who wished to be captured by the lens. The 1860s in India saw the likes of entrepreneurs such as Samuel Bourne and Charles Shepherd setting up the famous Bourne and Shepherd Studio as a commercial venture in metropolitan cities. Here the transaction with photography as art grew to an immeasurable extent, wherein India through images began to circulate to international markets, further expanded through the circulation of printed postcards.

Photography was a useful medium to render the technological and commercial developments of a country, and also to visualize its cultural variety. Some of the earliest photographers in India were explorers of the country, and they claimed its vast architectural repositories as well as the landscape as part of a unified vision, one that saw order and serenity in a benevolent colony. Though with time, this form of documentary began to show the fragility at the core of the Raj, seen through the innumerable photographs of the Uprising of 1857 (also known as the first war of Independence), it was also a means by which aspects of restoration came to play a pivotal role in the heritage conservation of the modern nation.

Drawn from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, this exhibition forms part of the Europalia India festival and aims to showcase some vintage and rare works through a display of early wax paper negatives, albumen prints and postcards. Looking primarily at the distinct aspects of architecture, landscape, and people, the exhibition brings forth the syncretic culture of India through some of its earliest surviving photographic images. Divided into three main sections, the exhibition commences with the work of Alexander Greenlaw. When faced with architectural subject matter, Greenlaw is often dramatic with his compositions, filling the frame and lowering the camera to increase the grandeur and stature of the building. Stationed at the British cantonment in the town of Bellary close to Hampi from 1853, Alexander Greenlaw took the first photographs of the Vijayanagara site to date. His aesthetic lies in a keen understanding of architecture as part of the landscape.

To balance the works of Greenlaw in South India, the exhibition showcases a series of photos taken by John Murray, a Scottish-born doctor who was introduced to photography around 1849. Stationed
near Agra in the northern state of Uttar Pradesh, he evidently developed a considerable interest in the Mughal architecture of the region. Throughout the forty-year period that Murray lived and worked in India, he systematically recorded many famous buildings in and around Agra. His images today are recognized as the first-ever photographs of the Taj Mahal, imbued with the picturesque aesthetic that had been adopted from earlier landscape painters.

In continuation, the exhibition features a series of cityscapes and portraits that highlights the life of people in their socio-cultural settings, and illustrates how the cultural history of India was deeply aligned with the representation of its people. Images drawn from the Oriental Races and Tribes (1863–66), which William Johnson produced as an ethnographic series, are on view together with the People of India series (1868–75), a total of eight albums commissioned by the Governor General, Lord Canning.

In its entirety, the exhibition primarily approaches these topics in relation to the social and cultural contexts and histories from which they emerged, but there is also an indication of the important questions they raise about the so-called democratizing aspect of photography. Did the photos of ethnic groups and castes not contribute to the reinforcement of the hierarchical organization of the Indian society? And what was the role of the European imperial powers in this matter?

This exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue.

On the collection displayed

The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts is a registered charitable trust, dedicated to the preservation of the cultural history of India through extensive research on photography. Housed in the foundation is the private collection of Ebrahim Alkazi, known as the Alkazi Collection of Photography, which comprises works in the form of photographic albums, single prints, paper negatives and glass-plate negatives, painted photographs, and photo-postcards. The collection is particularly strong in areas such as archaeology, architectural history, the urban development of colonial cities, military studies, anthropological studies and topography. For more information: www.acarchives.com

This exhibition is presented in collaboration with the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts; as a part of the Europalia.India festival it owes to the partnership with Europalia International and with the Indian Council for Cultural Relations.

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