

# The art of realism

Painted photographs from India

The emergence of the painted photograph marks a crucial chapter in the history of photography. By abetting the notion of 'modernism' in visual practice at the turn of the 19th century, these embellished images represent a crucial embodiment of cultural encounter, a new medium that successfully addressed existent traditions of illumination in painting, and slowly emerged as a self-sustaining convention, a meld of 'realistic' documentation and artistic manipulation. Rahaab Allana, Curator of the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in New Delhi, India, reveals the world of coloured portraiture in India.

Rahaab Allana



Fig. 1

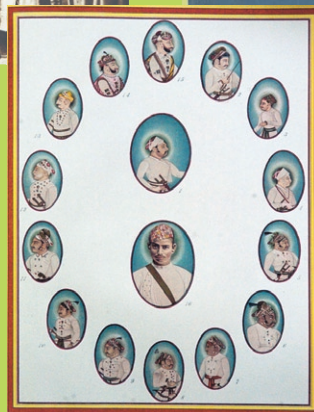


Fig. 2

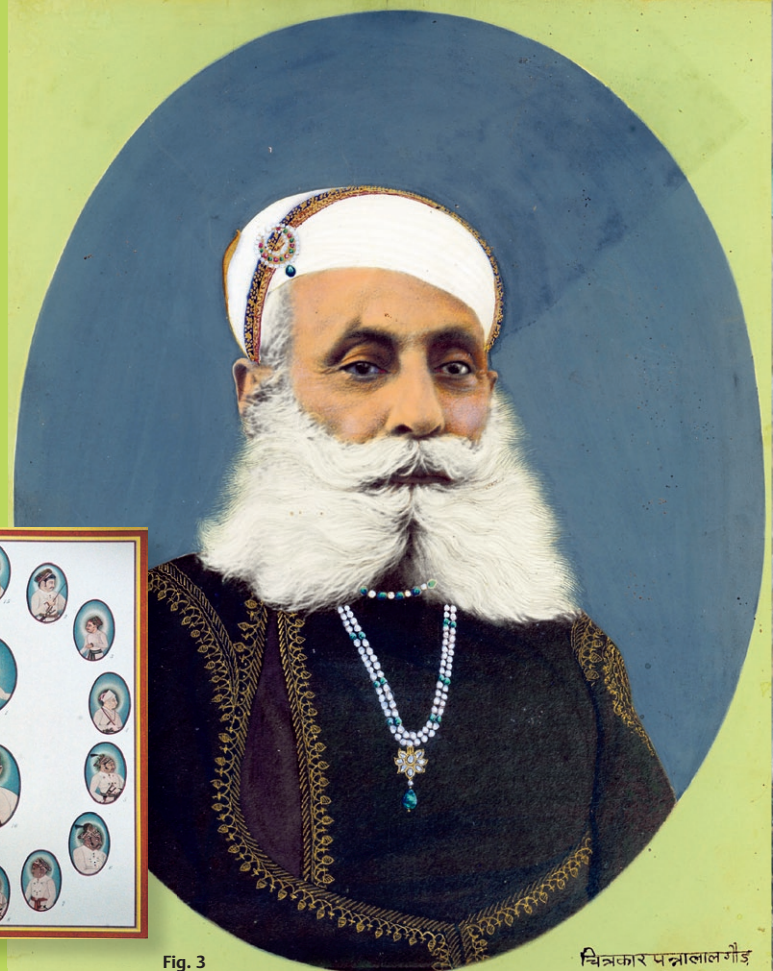


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

EVER SINCE ITS INVENTION, the camera's faithfulness to 'truth' has assisted in the validation of identity, the seamless construction (and erosion) of categories, and the forensic mastery of a world steeped in ground realities. The photograph moved upward in the market as a popular medium in the early 20th century, as much as it stirred across cultural frontiers. The cult of looking at an image of oneself, therefore, led to the shifting role of expectation, a hermeneutic stance that saw visual representation as a mode of fantasy, and equally, a reinforcement of position and class. And so, while early expeditionary photographers, such as Samuel Bourne (1834-1912) and Felice Beato (c.1834-1907), were revealing the exciting pace of the journeying eye, portraiture enabled this artefact as a social statement, representing that median position between actuality and art. That is to say, where the image is fixed in time, its meaning is not.

The early life of the painted photograph addresses the ambiguity about 'artists' and 'photographers', wherein the photographer assumes the role of a portrait artist, while the artist, that of a draftsman. The traditional format of portraiture seen in folk art, enmeshed with the photographic framing of it, slowly presents a compelling moment for photographers, who now invest their monochrome images with life-like and often hyper-real colours, and who further invite the participation of local and professional artists. As we shall see, this dissemination of carefully staged and coloured photographs gradually develops with exchanges between smaller towns, traditional ateliers and emerging city studios.

The uncertainty of this art, both conceptually and practically, is further intensified by the anonymity of the artist and, often, the photographer. I propose that through the investigation of a known artist, Pannalal Parasram Gaur (c.1880-1940), and some known photographers, we may gain a greater perspective on this 'genre' that became popular through its distinctive appeal, its fusing of compatible art forms at the turn of the last century.

## Rajasthan and the Nathdwara artist

"The Maharajah Ram Singh is a short man, 45 years of age, with an agreeable countenance and refined features, and of more than ordinary intelligence... He spoke to me with much kindness of the fatigue which I must have gone through during my travels, asked many questions about the courts I had already visited, and the manner in which we had been received... The conversation then turned on photography (he is not only an admirer of this art, but is himself a skilful photographer... of which we talked for a long time."<sup>1</sup>

The British administration assumed control of the regency council in 1839, incidentally also the year photography was patented, placing John Ludlow as resident from the mid-1840's, additionally in-charge of Ram Singh II's education.<sup>2</sup> The 'photographer-king' of Jaipur acquired his own camera in 1862, and was apparently eloquent with his ideas about it in the above brief description by French artist turned photographer, Louis Rousselet (1845-1929), who visited the king in 1866. His personal engagement with photography, through self-portraits and *zenana* (women's quarters) photos, further encouraged the king to become a life-member of the Bengal Photographic Society (fig.1). After his demise, the king was popularised to a great extent by Thomas Holbein Hendley (1847-1917), Administrative Medical Officer and Secretary of the Jaipur Museum. Following the installation of a hugely acclaimed exhibition at the Niwas Palace in Jaipur, as a tribute to Ram Singh II in 1883, Hendley extended his realm of influence all around Rajasthan, thus establishing the prominent role of photography in the region.

Hendley's publication entitled *The Rulers of India and the Chiefs of Rajputana (1550-1897)*, offers some clues about the development of the painted photograph and its overt connection with the history of portraiture in India. The rulers here are depicted in oval thumbnails, concluding in the centre where the first and last ruler are strategically positioned facing each other. This compilation is one of the most lucid representations of the development and refinement of the artist's vision through three centuries,

beginning with a representation in Pahari style and ending with a frontal, photographic *exposé* (fig.2). In his Preface, dated 21 April 1897, the author recalls the names of several artists, including 'Pana Lal'.<sup>3</sup> Pannalal Parasram Gaur proudly prefaces his signature with the Sanskrit *kalmi-chitrakar* (hand colour artist) in several images from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, as he does in the recently discovered Udaipur City Palace Museum Collection.

Tryna Lyons' compelling work on the artists of Nathdwara presents a gripping account of artisan families, including Pannalal, unearthed through several discussions with surviving family members.<sup>4</sup> And so, one of the only painters, as opposed to photographers, identified in this genre from the Alkazi Collection, is Pannalal Parasram Gaur from Mewar in Rajasthan. His engagement with varied forms of depiction, regal and religious, reinforces the benefaction of the court and addresses the inherent modernity in this period of photography in which members of the traditional ateliers change their mediums in order to confront the transforming aura of representation, namely through photography.

The Udaipur government archives notes that Pannalal was from the *adi gaur* caste, traditionally carpenters from Jaipur, who came to the site of Nathdwara in 1672, when the temple was established.<sup>5</sup> In the Udaipur court, artists were assigned by the *mukhiya* or Director of the temple from the *adi gaur* caste, or the other artisan sub-castes, the *jangir* or *mewara*, each distinct by virtue of its distance from the temple of Shri Nathji in Nathdwara. Pannalal very much headed the royal painting workshop under Maharana Fateh Singh (1849-1929), and still held this position in 1935 when Bhupal Singh (1884-1955), his adopted son, summoned the artists to the palace in Udaipur, where Pannalal oversaw the overall design programme of the Raj Mahal (fig. 3).

Maharana Fateh Singh was a dedicated patron of the arts and photography in the region. However, there were anxieties within his atelier as well. The British government was always trying to oust Fateh Singh, as he was allegedly

Fig. 1  
Maharaja Ram Singh II of Jaipur, Bourne & Shepherd, 1876, 140 x 98 mm, Albumen Print (Collection: The Alkazi Collection of Photography)

Fig. 2  
Thomas Holbein Hendley "Kotah", Plate 11 from *Rulers of India and the Chiefs of Rajputana (1550-1897)*; With 19 Full-Page Illustrations in Colour and 7 in Monochrome (London: W. Griggs, 1897. (Collection: The Alkazi Collection of Photography)

Fig. 3  
Maharana Fateh Singh of Udaipur (1849-1930), Unknown Photographer; Chitrakar Pannalal Gaur, Udaipur (Mewar), c.1920-30, 205 x 160 mm, Gelatin Silver Print and Watercolour (Collection: The Alkazi Collection of Photography)

Fig. 4  
Maharaj Kumar Bhupal Singh of Udaipur (1884-1955), Unknown Photographer and Artist, c.1900, 279 x 237 mm, Platinum Print, Watercolour and Gold (Collection: The Alkazi Collection of Photography)

opposed to modernising his state through civic improvements. It was believed that Bhupal Singh, his adopted heir, was eager to take over. Kundanlal, another artist funded by Fateh Singh to study at the Slade School in London between 1893-6, painted a portrait of the Mahanara as old and infirm, allegedly in order to further Bhupal Singh's ambitions, as a young, dynamic ruler (fig.4).<sup>6</sup> The artist was promptly banished by Fateh Singh from the court, without pay, for one year in 1920-1. If anything, this proves that the practice of art and particularly portraiture was a critical part of courtly life, one that had consequences within the political domain.

The style of painting from which the embellished image in India derives, namely *pahari* folk paintings and even Mughal miniatures, is, sadly, little-researched. If we do need to relate unique trends and understand their relation to one another, then perhaps one of the only means is through understanding their social history. This provides us a perspective that looks upon these images as part of a long-standing tradition, or sporadic occurrences along the path. I prefer, however, to adopt an alternative approach, one that is historical in perception, but also about the imagined lives of painted photographs – what happens to them when they network, freely, in a world of images?

## Entering the city

A gigantic leap into the realm of popular 'bazaar' photography in the city and its formal affiliate, 'studio' photography, was made once the medium expanded to and from the courtly domain, and began to cater to a more general society, in the early decades of the 20th century. Photographers were no longer viewed as the scientific originators of the camera and photography, but consumers of that technology as well. The science of the medium now permitted any individual with viable means to participate in the activity of taking images. This growing circle of photographers allowed for a complex melding of image forms, through the constant circulation of works.

The enlarging ambit of photographers gradually led to the appropriation and inclusion of the medium and its technologies by the other arts, primarily fine arts. One possible sociological reason could be the repercussions of intensified English control over India in the aftermath of the Uprising of 1857. The complete subjugation of several princely rulers led to a decline in courtly culture throughout northern India, especially in the rebel cities, creating a migrant community of provincial artisans and performers who moved to larger urban centres in search of patronage through commissions. This was very much the pattern followed by artists of the Company period (1775-1910), the *box-wallah* bazaar artists who steadily adapted to Western naturalistic conventions. They were, as scholar Tapati Guha-Thakurta remarks, artists with 'second-tier' jobs, those that pertained mainly to drawing – draftsmen, engravers, lithographers; and to which I would add, colourists.<sup>7</sup>

The theatre was another sphere which interjected the space of photography in its painted form by the use of the painted backdrop (fig.5). Theatrical performances were performed



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 5  
Painted Backdrop by V.V. Divkar (attrib.), Bombay, Early 20th Century (Courtesy: Nissar Allana)



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

extensively by Marathi Natya Sangeet, a performers collective. The point of the Natya Sangeet was to bind people to a demonstrable tradition, that had pan-Indian appeal, and could cut across language barriers to represent a common social identity. These were very much the latent ethics of photography. Theatre was not only a means of entertainment, but was often a space where political activity was negotiated, social reform communicated, including themes that challenged the traditional role of women in Maharastrian society. Performance in a theatre, like photography in studios, was a matter of control. The western notion of realism seen through the Grecian pillars and the Victorian style of furniture, were not only facets of the real but were provided to give a sense of actual perspective (fig.6).<sup>8</sup>

These multiple networks of themes and influences were enabled through a vast distribution scheme that allowed for the free-flow of images. This 'current of exchange' was induced by the commercial popularity of photography, no longer restricted to the agendas of the British administration. We therefore enter the world of circulating images and trends, facilitated also by the format of the photograph. We may therefore ask, how important was the *carte-de-visite* in India and did it vitiate the role of the artist as an independent practitioner? Was the world becoming a commonplace through these photographs? Any individual from the enlarging middle classes found that the world's notables were brought into a common purview, as he or she was able to step out of the quotidian round and enter a world populated by figures of beauty, fashion and high public distinction.

Images such as these (fig. 7), presented to the patron as an independent work and later appropriated within a comical narrative scheme of Medieval games and sport, presents a gentle satiric pleasure of 'topsy-turveydom'. This somewhat burlesque tradition fed naturally upon convention of taste and wider influx of European visual excesses into India. The scope of these photographs, rather than projecting merely social purposes, is therefore about kinds of interaction that the world of images was yielding, its effects. These images are about changing meanings by altering scenarios and also address the success of a global network of images whose ethics comprise aspects such as borrowing, adapting and giving. So much so that photographers such as D Nusserwanjee, Eduljee Sorabjee and Shapoor N. Bhedwar were making quite an impact, seen here (fig. 8) around an oval portrait of Queen Victoria as official photographers to the sovereign.

The growing regard and proliferation of such images and even photographers reinforces that the possibility of art in these images is not annulled by predetermination. What photography makes possible is transition within a visual practice, the occasional and discreet use of colour assures quality, and defies the laws of time by ensuring swift results. It makes it impossible to ignore its superior technology, its easy appropriation and calibration as a viable art-practice.

**Embellishment and the aesthetic of discretion**

An image from the Royal Collection in Windsor presents an essential notion about the thematic core of the painted

Fig. 6  
Performance of Play, *Satwapariksha*, 1915, Nagpur by Maharashtra Natak Mandali. (Courtesy: Nissar Allana)

Fig. 7  
Portrait of a Lady, The Bombay Photographic Company; Unknown Artist, Albumen Print and Watercolour inserted onto an album page with watercolour and pencil sketches, 1890s. (Collection: The Alkazi Collection of Photography)

Fig. 8  
Collage of Queen Victoria with Photographers and Noblemen, Unknown Photographer, c. 1890s, Silver Gelatin Print. (Collection: The Alkazi Collection of Photography)

Fig. 9  
The Duchess of Kent's Sitting Room, Frogmore House, Painted Albumen Print, 1861. RCIN 2101326. Credit: The Royal Collection (c) HM Queen Elizabeth II.

Fig. 10  
Inder Prakash Painting a Portrait, Rahaab Allana, Digital Print, 2007

photograph in India. The image is an interior at Frogmore House, on the grounds at Windsor, taken in 1861 by an official photographer from the court (fig.9). The colouring in this image provides a sense of the actual colour schemes within the castle, together with a distinct, reminiscent of paintings from the Victorian world. However, such kinds of hand-coloured images are highly uncommon in the visual culture of India. A majority of tinted images in India are occupied by individuals, not spaces alone. This is not to say that there aren't painted photos of individuals from England or Europe, but that the trope of spaces divested of human beings, is unusual in India.

It is very likely that the early development of the painted photograph arose from a traditional backdrop borne from the royal ateliers in Princely India. The preponderance of hereditary artists in India by the 19th century assumed a sense of originality and continuity, which allowed for various mannerisms and styles to enter and exit the domain of art. The embellished images of the Alkazi Collection are as much about the fantasies of artists and patrons, as they are about the circulation of images in various circles and contexts. An historical study of such images, therefore addresses its ability to cross inter-pictorial norms and enter a ground where a new visual ethics is articulated, perhaps outside historical contextualisation.

To gauge the life of the genre of the painted photograph, I will briefly address the role of a practitioner today and his interjection as an artist in a field that has its own overarching ideological structures. Inder's first encounter with retouching images occurred in mid-1960 in Lucknow. Once in Delhi, Inder joined the acclaimed Mahatta Studios in Connaught Place, working under the proprietor, Madan Mehta, who himself trained in the Negative-Positive Process in the 1950s in Surrey, England. Mahatta Studios is known for introducing colour printing to Delhi in 1954.

Today Inder works in an attic above his home, after over 25 long years of devotion to his art. In the solitude of his sunlit room, he gently clips corners from red, blue and green sheets of Fuji-colour paper and as we talk about his peripatetic early life, these immersed pieces are gradually thinned in small cups of water. With proper immersion, the liquid turns deep rust or emerald, derived from different tones. Soaked in this 'paint', a squirrel- or mongoose-hair brush gently dabs a black-and-white photograph. Pinned to a thick piece of cardboard, the print dries out in the sun. Six hours later, the result is an almost surreal image, a quiet yet stunning refraction of a black-and-white image (fig.10).

The presence of Inder and similar artists today compels us to ask why/when a mode of representation becomes obsolete, and whether its necessity and social function is in fact sufficiently strong motive for its continued existence. The eloquent transfer between media in the painted photograph, its insistent subversion of the prescribed logic of representation, the practice of tinting images on enlargements, and of using them as blueprints on parchment for canvas paintings, developed through both patrons and artists questioning the camera's ability to document and render with fidelity in colour.

The presence of individuals such as Inder highlights the spirit of the committed artist, a compelling remnant of our past, situated in the solitary mode of rendering. The space he occupies, though sequestered, is essential to understanding how the historicity of an image form always leaves traces, legible tracks, which lead us back to its early origins. Inder suggests, in an informal conversation about his work, that the application of colour, surreal backdrops, ornamentation etc. is a form of escapism; but perhaps this kind of romantic escapism is so permanent a human condition that at some level, it lies beyond historical explanation.<sup>9</sup>

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**Notes**

1. Rousset, Louis. 1878. *India and Its native Princes, Travels in Central India and in the Presidencies of Bombay and Bengal*. Bickers and Son. p. 229
2. Tillotson, Giles and Vibhuti Sachdev. 2008. *Jaipur: City Palace*. Lustre Press/Roli Books. p. 27
3. Holbein Hendley, Thomas. 1897. *Rulers of India and the Chiefs of Rajputana (1550-1897)*. London: W. Griggs. The author was Lieutenant-Colonel and Brigade Surgeon, Indian Medical Service.
4. Lyons, Tryna. 2004. *The Artists of Nathdwara: The Practice of Painting in Rajasthan*. Indiana University Press/Mapin Publishing.
5. *ibid.* pp. 250-1. Lyons' fieldwork reveals that the *adi gauris* live near the temple in a place called Chitron ki Gali while the *jangirs* live in an area known as Nayi Haveli. This traditional manner of differentiating caste is now slowly being dissolved with a series of intermarriages.
6. These chains of events are also indicated in Bhupal Singh's assumption of power as recounted by R.V Somani in *Later Mewar*, Current Law House, 1985. pp. 323-6.
7. Tapati, Guha-Thakurta. *The Making of a New Indian Art: Artists, Aesthetics and Nationalism in Bengal, 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 45-46.
8. Allana, Dr. Nissar, *Painted Sceneries: Backdrops of the 19th Century Marathi Natya Sangeet*, Theatre and Television Associates, 2008. Pg 7. This is an exhibition catalogue of painted backdrops, held in New Delhi in January 2008 at the Lalit Kala Academy.
9. The interactions with Inder Prakash were noted in February 2004, when I was making a short documentary on the artist, entitled '*Inder's Gift*.' As part of a fellowship provided by the organization, Sarai, based in New Delhi.