Imaging the Isle Across Vintage Photography from Ceylon

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The history of photography in South Asia is a story of many epiphanies, leading to a surge of the family of images, the genesis of the visual archives of the colonies, the unique visual language of colonial cultures, and the representation of a complex visual identity that marked the nascent photography of South Asia as a repository of natural resources. The Seascapes of South Asia were showcased in the 19th century, framed by a plantation economy as a repository of natural resources to be harnessed by colonial powers. The documentation of the eerie landscape and the identity of the Indian identity were intertwined with the proliferation of a new visual language. The Seascapes of South Asia were derived from the dance of light and shadow, as did the coming of a modern pictorial language in the 19th century framed the production of a new visual language. The Seascapes of South Asia were derived from the dance of light and shadow, as did the coming of a modern pictorial language in the 19th century framed the production of a new visual language.

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THE ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY
Foreword  Sanjiv Mittal  Director General, National Museum  6
A Survey of Histories  Dr. Rakesh Tewari  Director General, Archaeological Survey of India  7
Islanded and Connected  Rahaab Allana  9
Curator, Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

Imaging the Isle Across  30
Early Photographers of Ceylon, 1840-1920  Lorneth Rakeem

A Landscape of Desire  52
Jennifer Chowdury Biswas

Lens Upon Islanders  70
Ayesha Mathan

The Ascent of (Wo)Man  90
Visual Priming in Early Photographs and Films of Ceylon, 1880s-1930s  Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes

Select Bibliography  106
Alkazi Foundation for the Arts  107
Acknowledgements  108

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The exhibition is a partner event of the Delhi Photo Festival 2015.

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Captions:

(Cover) (page) Sponser & Co., A Young Tamil Hindu Girl, Albion Print, 1899, 201 x 250 mm, ACP 95 26.0036
Title page: T. Thomas Maurice Lopez, (Geographic Map) Print, Phoenix Print, 1801, Madrid, 278 x 383 x 34 mm, ACP 95 05.01 (46 & 49)
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Alkazi Foundation for the Arts  107
Acknowledgements  108
Foreword
Sanjiv Mittal
Director General, National Museum, New Delhi

National Museum has collaborated with the Archaeological Survey of India and The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts to present the exhibition, Imaging the Isle Across - Vintage Photography From Ceylon. The exhibition coincides with and is featured as part of the Delhi Photo Festival, India’s biggest international photography festival.

The early imagery of Sri Lanka – the South Asian island has been brought to the public in the form of an eclectic exhibition for the very first time in India. The exhibition showcases original photographic prints from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Photography in Sri Lanka began with the influx of European travellers and traders, after it came under British rule in 1815, and the plantation economy started thriving. The photographs of plantations hence offer insights into the visual and contextual histories such as the strategic employment of local labour to service this industry. The early documentation of ancient and ruined capitals, cityscapes, landscapes, coffee and tea industries, views of the railway, trading practices, botanical specimens and portraits of the natives was carried out by a number of photographers who had established themselves in Ceylon.

The section of the exhibition which focuses on landscapes and architecture gives a view of the country’s geography, archaeology, and culture. Views of churches and other structures from the Dutch era, railway and harbour sites, causeways, rural and urban scenes, bridges and waterfalls, buildings, cleared habitats and natural landscapes accompany this section. The exhibition also has a section on ethnographic portraits which reflect the cultural diversity of the island colony.

I would like to thank the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts for their initiative in conceiving this exhibition from their collection. I would like to acknowledge the support lent by Archaeological Survey of India at every step of production of the exhibition. I also wish to thank Mr. Ebrahim Alkazi, the esteemed collector, and the curator, Mr. Rahaab Allana and his team, for putting together the wonderful narrative of the exhibition which brings these photographs to life.

This catalogue features a majority of the photographs displayed in the exhibition with comprehensive descriptions of each. It is designed to augment the experience of the reader and take them a step closer to the rich culture of Sri Lanka.

A Survey of Histories
Dr. Rakesh Tewari
Director General, Archaeological Survey of India

Over the last decade, research and archival work on vintage photographs have contributed to the creation of social memories and national histories. An institutional investment in images also underscores the recreation of pasts through repositories that have been secured, not only in private hands, but also in government organisations such as the Archaeological Survey of India. As the landscape and the urbanscape changes around us rapidly, some of these collections remain the only traces of how spaces were originally conceived, and how the spread of nature dominated the current urban sprawl.

With a focus on Ceylon in this exhibition, we are once again brought to dwell on a previously unseen collection of images from the Alkazi Collection of Photography. Described as a ‘repository of oriental wealth’, Ceylon’s strategic location at the tip of the spice and trade routes was the primary reason for the immense attention it drew from commercial studio photographers. As one has observed in these images, civic and administrative development of roads and railways was a direct consequence of a boom in the island’s plantation economy bringing along with it, an influx of Europeans tourists. These new settlers formed the main clientele for commercial photographers, and today comprise a significant portion of its varied demographic.

As a tribute to the region, this publication, which has contributions from scholars in the region as well as from Cambridge University, provides a rare insight into the history of photo practices and as a consequence, the connection between South Asian countries through the work of itinerant practitioners – including those of early motion film as well. It features prominent early artists such as W.L. Skeen & Co., Plâté & Co., and Charles Thomas Scowen who also documented the ancient and ruined capitals, coffee and tea industries, trading practices, botanical specimens and portraits of the ‘natives’. In doing so, this exercise is a survey of the region through documents that are rarely explored, but allow us to constantly revise what we know of the region and its imaging practices.

The Archaeological Survey of India is honoured to be a part of this collaboration.
Photography in South Asia is attempted dialectically in this exhibition with a reference to one region: Ceylon. As the visual culture of the colonial period remains a challenging, exploratory domain in today’s media-dominated world, the inter-relations between the archives of the subcontinent may not readily strike the reader or viewer as collegial or drawn from a networked past. The nineteenth century presents an early encounter with the colonial environment, dominated by cultural change and travel as the state transformed into a modern entity through infrastructure and political expansion. The paradox of how the city developed and opened up to a global economy is bolstered by an imperial vision, an uncompromised worldview with regard to people from the subjugated nations, often leading to harsh and clinical pre-conceptions about a country’s resident population.

Within this exhibition, some attention has been paid to certain segregations that seem logical within the context of a photography archive – colonial buildings and cityscapes established in the nineteenth century, portraiture in the studio, landscape views and the urbanscape which captures the imagination of those drawn to it. However, through these frames, we also prominently foreground its people – the labour, economy, the religion and a growing urban class, which transforms the city into a cosmopolitan entity that negotiates hierarchies. The exhibition therefore begins with landscape images, as an entry into the region being explored for the first time through the camera. As the lens roams and settles upon its subjects – from the coast farther inwards – the world seems to enlarge capturing not a tribal population, but one close to the rhythms and sways of the sea and sand with refined sartorial conventions and religious ceremonies. The architecture and archaeology further manifest a deep cultural association with the subcontinent, traced in the antiquated remains of Hindu temples and Buddhist pagodas, if not the iconography.

Much like its neighbours, Sri Lanka has had a complex modern history. The civil war, which ended only recently, (2009) seems to be a point of engagement and departure in most perceptions of its current state. What these images cite is an important prehistory represented as an example, by the portrait of a Ceylonese lady on the opposite page – a mesh of encounters that predates the post-colonial and announces a return to the origins of public engagement by the lens. Though wars create a disjuncture, the cities of Colombo and Kandy today stand as thriving coastal towns, replete with modern architecture, art centres, as well as an art biennale, which heralds all forms of interdisciplinary dialogue around the role of the practitioner and the institution. And in this, photography maintains a significant presence seeking to address how documents of the past propel new media exchanges in the present. The Lionel Wendt Art Centre in Colombo for instance, is one such outgrowth of a heady modernism, connected even to Santiniketan through Harold Peiris, painter and secretary of the 43 Group, who settled there for two years – a time when both regions, Sri Lanka and India, stood on the precipice of Independence as one nation.
Sri Lanka is a little Island, a pendant, that nestles gently on the swelling bosom of the Indian Ocean. Caressed by warm waters, 770 miles of golden sand ring the Island. Within these sands is green, lush green, fertile land sculptured, towards the centre, into soaring mountains. An emerald, fringed by filigreed gold and set in aquamarine – truly a jewelled pendant.

Handbook for the Ceylon Traveller
The assorted views that the isle has to offer brings together several terrains onto one photographic plane. From scenic hill spots like Nuwara Eliya to the harbours abounding with native boats (dhoni), the images are representative of a transformation – physical changes in the environment and the projection of booming colonial commerce. In this, the natural landscape gives way to a burgeoning cityscape, underscoring widespread destruction and exploitation of the habitat and wildlife. The creation and division of the commercial capital, Colombo, gives us a glimpse into how photographs further document the segregation of zones, telling of alliances forged with local merchants in mobilising the workforce and creating a productive port.

Skeen & Co.  
'Lion Mouth Rock, Ceylon' from the  
Album Views of Ceylon  
Albumen Print, Photographer’s Ref.  
1417, 1870s, 267 x 208 mm  
ACP: 96.24.0001(3)
Clockwise from top
Scowen & Co.
‘View at Kaduganawa, on the high road from Colombo to Kandy: a sample of the difficulty of road-making in Ceylon. The Railway line may be seen under the big rock in the top left corner of the picture.’ Albumen Print, 1880s, 236 x 281 mm
ACP: 94.14.0097

Scowen & Co.
‘Kandy - Statue of Sir Henry Ward, Governor, 1855-1860’ Albumen Print, 1880s, 220 x 284 mm, ACP: 94.14.0098

Scowen & Co.
‘Aloowihare Estate, Matale, showing large cotton trees’ Albumen Print, 1880s, 232 x 287 mm, ACP: 94.14.0116

Colombo Apothecaries Company
‘Sensation Rock, Colombo and Kandy Line’ Albumen Print, 1890s, 277 x 205 mm
ACP: 94.25.0034
Facing page

Skeen & Co.
‘Rambodda Falls, Ceylon’
Albumen Print, 1880s,
277 x 225 mm
ACP: 94.19.0033

Scowen & Co.
‘Portmore’ Estate, Lindula;
coffee two years old’
Albumen Print, 1880s,
233 x 283 mm
ACP: 94.14.0121

Scowen & Co.
‘Brownlow Coffee Estate;
Adam’s Peak (height 7352 feet)
in the distance’
Albumen Print, 1880s,
229 x 287 mm
ACP: 94.14.0104