



IN MEMORY OF

Martine Franck

(1938–2012)

PHOTOGRAPHER AND WIFE
OF HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON





MASTERING THE LENS

BEFORE AND AFTER CARTIER-BRESSON IN PONDICHERRY

INTRODUCTIONS BY

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MAPIN PUBLISHING IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE ALKAZI COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHY
SUPPORTED BY THE EMBASSY OF FRANCE, INDIA, AND ALLIANCE FRANÇAISE DE DELHI

First published in India in 2012 by
Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd and
The Alkazi Collection of Photography

With the support of **Institut Français en Inde/
French Embassy in India** and **Alliance Française
de Delhi**.

Simultaneously published in the
United States of America in 2012 by
Grantha Corporation
E: mapin@mapinpub.com
and

The Alkazi Collection of Photography
United Kingdom:
London • stephanie.roy@btinternet.com
India: New Delhi • rahaab@acparchives.com

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Distributed in North America by
Antique Collectors' Club
T: 1 800 252 5231 • F: 413 529 0862
E: info@antiquecc.com
www.antiquecollectorsclub.com

Distributed in United Kingdom and Europe by
Gazelle Book Services Ltd.
T: 44 1524-68765 • F: 44 1524-63232
E: sales@gazellebooks.co.uk
www.gazellebookservices.co.uk

Distributed in Southeast Asia by
Paragon Asia Co. Ltd
T: 66 2877 7755 • F: 66 2468 9636
E: info@paragonasia.com

Distributed in the rest of the world by
Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd
706 Kaivanna, Panchvati,
Ellisbridge, Ahmedabad 380006 INDIA
T: 91 79 4022 8228 • F: 91 79 4022 8201
E: mapin@mapinpub.com • www.mapinpub.com

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Photography, except the following by permission
of Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation, Paris and
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry:
Photographs on pp. 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34,
35, 36, 37, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 75 and 76.

ISBN: 978-81-89995-73-7 (Mapin)
ISBN: 978-1-935677-28-4 (Grantha)
LCCN: 2012947789

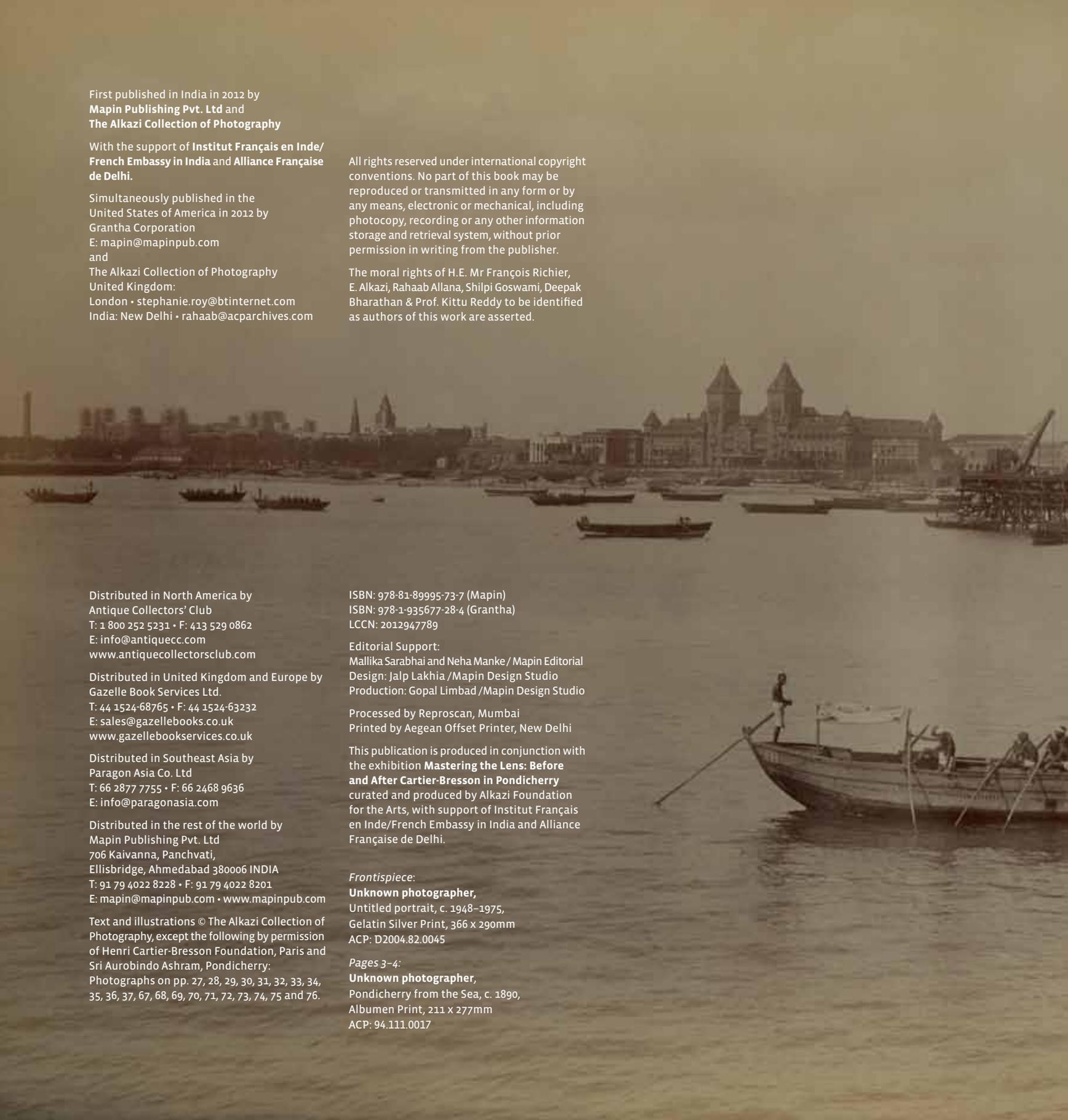
Editorial Support:
Mallika Sarabhai and Neha Manke / Mapin Editorial
Design: Jalp Lakhia / Mapin Design Studio
Production: Gopal Limbad / Mapin Design Studio

Processed by Reproscan, Mumbai
Printed by Aegean Offset Printer, New Delhi

This publication is produced in conjunction with
the exhibition **Mastering the Lens: Before
and After Cartier-Bresson in Pondicherry**
curated and produced by Alkazi Foundation
for the Arts, with support of Institut Français
en Inde/French Embassy in India and Alliance
Française de Delhi.

Frontispiece:
Unknown photographer,
Untitled portrait, c. 1948–1975,
Gelatin Silver Print, 366 x 290mm
ACP: D2004.82.0045

Pages 3–4:
Unknown photographer,
Pondicherry from the Sea, c. 1890,
Albumen Print, 211 x 277mm
ACP: 94.111.0017



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RENEWING TIES

LINKING INDIA AND FRANCE THROUGH THE ART OF PHOTOGRAPHY

H.E. Mr François Richier

THE FRENCH AMBASSADOR TO INDIA

India and France have a shared history of mutual fascination and reciprocal influences through commercial and cultural exchanges dating back to the 17th century. It started with the first meeting between French explorers and Indian maharajahs; and was to continue in the 20th century with the friendship forged between André Malraux, the French Minister of Culture, and Jawaharlal Nehru.

The exchange of ideas is most evident in Pondicherry, where the first French merchants had set foot, producing a unique cultural melting pot, which includes original architecture, a deep-rooted attachment to French language and many other legacies within the framework of arts. More than any other place, Pondicherry has always been a gateway to new perspectives of self-development, artistic fulfilment and intellectual enrichment, particularly for French people who are attracted to Indian culture, philosophy and spirituality.

An epitome of this tradition was the meeting of famous French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson and one of India's most important philosophers of the 20th century, Sri Aurobindo together with his companion, Mirra Alfassa—"the Mother". Cartier-Bresson had just founded Magnum Photos agency, with other great French photographers such as Robert Capa and David Seymour, and soon achieved international recognition. In the aftermath of the World War II, he had become the leader of a photography movement that replaced the old tradition of over-sophisticated and over-posed images—by shooting vivid glimpses of real life, be they historical events or day-to-day occupations, transcending the boundaries between art and journalism.

His quest for new challenges and self-improvement led him to India several times, where he even met Mahatma Gandhi in 1947. In 1950, thanks to the Mother's intervention, he was able to visit Aurobindo Ashram, where he took some of the photographs presented in this publication, a few months before Sri Aurobindo's death.

For too long, these pictures had remained unheralded. But thanks to the work of the Alkazi Foundation, they are now available to an enlarging audience. Over the last 30 years, Mr E. Alkazi has privately gathered pictures from the 19th and 20th centuries, revealing lesser-known aspects of Indian socio-economic, political or cultural history, not only to scholars but also, through various exhibitions to a larger public. France is honoured and pleased to have now brought to light, through Cartier-Bresson's eye and earlier works from the archive, the ambivalent poetic spell of Pondicherry's old times.

At a time when the world is undergoing a major transformation, where globalisation through cultural exchanges is reaching an unprecedented level, these pictures of Cartier-Bresson are a beautiful meditation on what France and India, two different and ancient cultures, can learn from each other—primarily the universality of art and spirituality. That was certainly what Emperor Ashoka thought when he wrote, more than 2000 years ago: "I am proud of my humanity every time I appreciate poets and artists from other countries than mine".

THE ENDURING IMAGE

E. Alkazi

CHAIRMAN, ALKAZI FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

The history of photography in India is fundamentally linked to the French invention of the medium in the 19th century, and the pioneering discovery of Sir Nicéphore Niépce (1765-1833) who simply produced a 'view' through his window in 1826 by use of a *camera obscura*. Less than two decades hence, the medium gradually establishes itself in India exposing the vast expanse of her territories and the diversity of its people as part of a continuing visual tradition. At an art historical level, the production of small format, easily portable photographs are also reminiscent of the Mughal miniature paintings that revealed the lyrical intensity of a patron's enduring image on paper. Both occurrences, painting and then photography, though separated by the continuum of time, manner and perhaps intent, mark a cultural collision that has evolved into the present state of photography as a cultural tool and an incisive form of expression.

Some of the early French photographers in India include Alex de la Grange (born 1825), and Oscar Rejlander (1829-1905) who captured not only architectural splendours but the humanity that steered India from a colony to an independent nation. It is with homage to them and their contemporaries that an archive of images from the 19th century becomes part of our collective legacy and heritage. At a more conceptual level, photography developed two adjacent lives: the first as a testament to reality, and the other as an abiding practice of the arts. Both lives were equally viable and deeply in tune with the modern demands of photography: to challenge reality and to explore the abstractions of human imagination.

Romanticism as an aesthetic position was introduced and then transgressed by some of the leading French photographers of their time: Henri le Sec and Jean Paul Gaude, the portraiture of Nadar and the urban modernism of Eugene Atget. This later evolves into the social documentary photograph, a leading practitioner of which is Henri Cartier Bresson (1908-2004). Though his time in India has been well documented, the events that transpired in Pondicherry, namely at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the 1950s remain an obscure part of photo-histories. Reproduced in this catalogue for the first time the images here were collaborative, as Bresson envisioned them with the guidance of the Mother, and the consent of Sri Aurobindo himself.

The 1960s mark the coming of age of modern photography in India with an unprecedented number of practitioners, often anonymous, who were near contemporaries of Bresson. Once again, the Aurobindo Ashram comes to the fore highlighting a forgotten period of experimentation and practice. Varied initiatives of photography begin to emerge, taking from pictorial traditions in fine art and re-examining them with the lens. The unique blend of French and Indian sensibilities allows for a more expanded understanding of the influence of photography at a practical and discursive level.

The world of photography thus enters an enlarged arena of artistic influences, forged as part of its global initiative: its ability, today, to draw in people and spaces from different cultures into a common purview and engender a creative response. This exhibition is then an exploration of lesser-known, but extremely illuminating works from the visual archives of the Alkazi Collection, with which we envisage new frontiers of research, and renewed ways of linking photographers and artists to their times, as well as to the present. We are therefore grateful to the Embassy of France, India, as well as the Alliance Française de Delhi for collaborating with us at an institutional level and consolidating alliances for the future of our two nations.



Venkatesh Shirodkar

Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, c. 1948–1975,
Illusion, Gelatin Silver Print, 245 x 291 mm,
Rolleiflex Automat—Tessar F.3,5;1/2 Sec. at F.8. Dev. in D.K. 20;
Enlarged on Bromesko
ACP: D2004.82.0008

I really believe there are things nobody would see
if I didn't photograph them.

Diane Arbus



SILENT AS AN APPARITION

A HIDDEN LEGACY OF PHOTOGRAPHY

Rahaab Allana

Bresson may have uttered the same words with reference to his rare, self-commissioned album featuring 119 images emerging from Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. Instead, his careful observations about the Ashram as well as the city, generously provided by the Henri Cartier-Bresson Foundation in Paris brings forth a hidden reserve of photo-history, untouched by the scholarly world or viewed by practitioners. Bresson meticulously pens his thoughts, occasionally jotting down segments of his conversations with the French-born leader of Auroville, commonly known as ‘The Mother’, who meanders in and out of his frames, ‘silent as an apparition’. Her ‘strong, kind and fascinating eyes’ prompt a personal, if not biographical, perspective on photography history.

At approximately the same time in India, photographers like Margaret Bourke White were traveling with (the late) Sunil Janah, while others like Shambu Saha were developing a form of Industrial photography. However, upon further investigation, we have discovered that Pondicherry too underwent a visual ‘worlding’ that marks a crucial moment in the development of photography here. The Ashram harboured young talent by providing state of the art equipment, and in the form of an annual Salon Festival for almost 25 years (c.1955-80). The kinds of photos that were submitted and selected explored a dialogue on

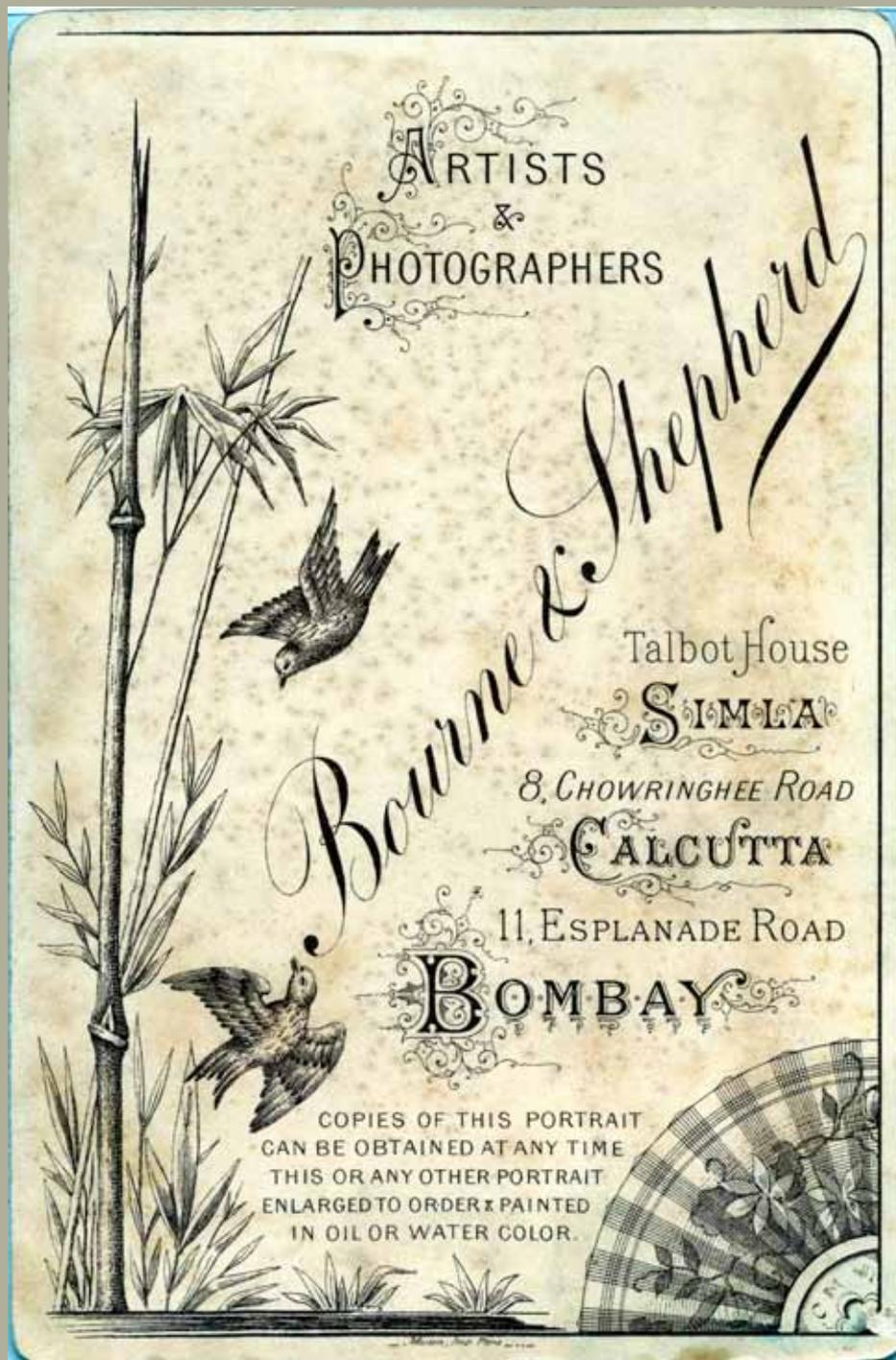
artistic intent and reception, with evidence of a continuing aesthetic of ‘pictorial’ photography—a predominant form tied to the formal aspects of fine art.

This was a curatorial route into the past, through ‘media’ and the conceptual linking of mannerisms and tropes. The geographical region itself had been visited by visual artists from the 17th century, who documented it’s serene vistas—brought to life as an amalgamation of Christian and local elements in architecture and urban sprawl. The use of antiquarian maps from the 18th and 19th century reveals an intricately Europeanised town, though structurally segregated, featuring a shared use of motifs and style. The arrival of commercial photographers Bourne and Shepherd, or indeed mysterious French photographer, Charles Moyne uncovers an expansive city of citadels and churches.

The unearthing of archival material is balanced by a few surviving photographers from the 1960s, some of whom have been recently interviewed. As with vintage photographs, modern landscape photographers in the Aurobindo Ashram carry on the legacy of image-making into the 20th century. The temporal jump from the 19th to the 20th century is exemplified through extraordinary images of Indian practitioners such as Tara Jauhar and Sri Venkatesh at Aurobindo Ashram. The photographers though distinct in their technique, express how personal

narratives were encouraged as part of project-based shoots. However the presentation of an album by Bresson in conjunction with this work can be considered a notional extension, showcasing his more ‘amateur’ experiments at a time when photographers were playfully tempering light and contrast; a form of ‘artistic darkness’ for instance that Bresson was asked to consider upon instruction from the Mother while shooting Sri Aurobindo during *darshan*.

This exhibition addresses how photographers changed the course of photography with stylistic ‘departures’ during the 1950s and 60s, whilst using images from the 19th century to examine a sense of lineage. The archive is positioned to support the coming of modernity, by way of an iconographic association. The forces at play at a compositional level as well as those of patronage and practice manage to fulfill the claims made on photography by amateur photographers trying relentlessly to infuse a subjective manner in their practices. Though such ventures stand in contrast to more mainstream journalistic forays, which Bresson is acclaimed for, we witness an intended ‘shift’ in temperament and focus from the 19th century: an abounding personal commentary, largely devoid of commercial intent—which inadvertently influences the known legacies of photography in India.



Bourne & Shepherd

11, Esplanade Road, Bombay, c. 1880-1890

Verso of Cabinet Card, 165 x 110 mm,

ACP: 94.75.0004