



3. opposite | UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER;
CHITRAKAR JUJIRAM GOPILAL
NATHDWARA (MEWAR) Priest and
Donor before Srinathji, Gelatin Silver
Print and Oil Paint, c.1890, 450 x 325 mm,
ACP: 98.83.0239

A BOLD FUSION

REALISM AND THE ARTIST IN PHOTOGRAPHY

RAHAAB ALLANA

Through fine brushwork and a vibrant palette, the ‘photographer-artists’ of nineteenth-century in India carefully transmitted their creative vision to the surface of an image, and by that very act challenged whether photographs were glimpses of the real. In essence, their alluring compositions represent an inter-pictorial approach to reality, a unique mode of simulation embedded within and nourished by ongoing cross-cultural and sociological transformations. At a more informal level, the persistent cultivation of individual skill and personal intuition after years of close aesthetic engagement signalled the collective identity of a group: the patron, his photographer *and* the artist.

My contention in this introductory piece is that painted photographs mark a crucial chapter in the history of Indian photography by abetting the notion of modernism in visual practice at the turn of the nineteenth century. This pictorial trajectory drew upon existent traditions of illumination in painting, slowly emerging as a self-sustaining genre, a hybrid of scientific documentation and artistic convention. With recurrent exposure to myriad art forms, both indigenous and European, the ‘native’ artist in photography steadily developed an idealised and formal ‘photo-canvas’, a monochromatic ground that simultaneously resists and yields to a layered impasto of colour. Further, the dissemination of carefully staged and embellished photographs gradually initiated a new visual paradigm by fostering a mode of hyperrealism in both photography and art.

A broad geographic division based on mannerism and technique has been attempted here, in order to accommodate the various strains of practice revealed in this exhibition. The majority are from Rajasthan and, alternately, from commercial studios in Bombay and Calcutta. Location is an important factor in any analysis of the painted photograph, since the genre grew from a meld of local styles and exchanges between smaller towns, traditional ateliers and emerging studios. Additionally, through the example of a single identified painter, Pannalal Parasram Gaud (c.1880–1950) from Mewar, we witness how the artist’s affiliation with painterly custom is brought to bear on photography, as well as his engagement with new media (photos printed in publications). Pannalal’s example foregrounds the existence of a courtly style evident in the photographs of Indian nobility, and their abiding patronage of the emerging arts. This period in the history of photography in India represents a break with tradition through a sophisticated

photographer-artist T. Murray.⁵ Ram Singh himself is known for his illustrious *tasveer khana* (picture gallery) located in the Madho Niwas Palace. In time, and with his consent, a photographic division was initiated at the Maharaja School of Art in 1870. After Ram Singh's death in 1883, Thomas Holbein Hendley (1847–1917), Administrative Medical Officer and Secretary of the Jaipur Museum, organised a photography show in his memory at this site.⁶

Almost two centuries after the growth of miniature art in and around north India, the evolution of the visual arts from the mid-nineteenth century onwards almost without exception integrated photography as a viable means of documentation and depiction. The colonial project of mapping the subjects of the Empire, and the foregrounding of anthropology and ethnography as disciplines to which photography was extremely well suited, allowed for the propagation of the medium, and a deep interest in the subject of native rulers. Consequently, in order to popularise the use of photographs in books, accompanying publications were produced in large numbers and made available as convenient handbooks, many heavily illustrated with actual photographs. One such publication, Hendley's *The Rulers of India and the Chiefs of Rajputana (1550–1897)*, offers, perhaps incidentally, some clues about the development of the painted photograph and its overt connection with the history of portraiture in India.⁷ In his Preface, dated 21 April 1897, the author declares:

[...] it occurred to me that no work would be more interesting than one on themselves [the Rajput rulers], in which it would be seen what manner of men they now are; and what their ancestors, who ruled or carved out states for themselves in the past, were.⁸

Almost in passing, the author goes on to accredit a few individuals by name:

I also take this opportunity of thanking Mr. Griggs, my publisher; and my Indian assistants, Pandit Braj Balabh, Baseernath Chaube, **Pana Lal**, and Samandar Karan, for much faithful work they have done for me.⁹

The plates in Hendley's publication ingeniously convey the progression of multiple iconographies (fig. 5). In the section titled "Meywar, Udaipur", a list of twenty-one rulers, starting from "Uday Singh (1541)" to "Maharana Fateh Singh, GCSI (1884)" are depicted in oval thumbnails, concluding in the centre where the first and last ruler are strategically positioned next to each other.¹⁰ 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. First, the uniformity in colour schemes – green backgrounds, cream vestments and coloured turbans – perhaps suggests the hand of a single artist, or alternately, a group of artists assigned on the basis of skill relating to

5. opposite | THOMAS HOLBEIN HENDLEY
"Meywar, Udaipur", Plate 20 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)

6. page 14 | 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)

7. page 15 | UNKNOWN PHOTOGRAPHER;
PANNALAL PARASRAM GAUR Maharana Swarup Singh of Udaipur (1815–61), Albumen Print and Watercolour, c.1860, 282 x 217 mm, ACP: 98.60.0062



