

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART



ALKAZI FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS
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EXHIBITION EXPLORES STYLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF PORTRAIT PHOTOGRAPHY IN INDIA, BURMA, SRI LANKA, AND NEPAL

**ORGANIZED BY THE RUBIN AND ALKAZI FOUNDATION, *ALLEGORY AND ILLUSION*
FEATURES RARE PHOTOGRAPHS, ALBUMS, AND NEGATIVES AND HIGHLIGHTS THE
DISTINCT AESTHETICS OF THE REGION**

EXHIBITION INCLUDES OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE PORTRAITS WITH AUTHENTIC REGIONAL BACKDROPS

New York, NY, July 1, 2013 –The Rubin Museum of Art will examine the rich tradition of portrait photography in India, Burma, Sri Lanka, and Nepal from the mid-19th to early 20th centuries in its upcoming exhibition, *Allegory and Illusion: Early Portrait Photography from South Asia*. Featuring approximately 120 photographs, a selection of albums, glass plate negatives, and other related paraphernalia, the exhibition emphasizes photography's democratizing quality as it spread in popularity among both the royal and middle classes. On view October 15, 2013 through February 10, 2014, *Allegory and Illusion* reveals the history of India's transition between Mughal culture and British rule through the images of its people and captures the subsequent creation of a new visual vocabulary distinct to South Asia.

Organized by the Rubin in collaboration with the Alkazi Foundation for the Arts in New Delhi, the exhibition will highlight photographic styles that were particularly well-accepted throughout and distinct to each country, including the unusual painted photograph from India and Nepal which articulated the development of a new aesthetic that integrated aspects of painting and photography in one image. Also featured are images that use ornate, vivid backdrops that reference the region's vast textile and painting traditions; cartes de visite, cabinet cards, and post cards, a favored format through which photographic images circulated worldwide; and royal court portraiture. In addition, some tropes of 'Oriental Photography', as seen in studio practices, will be on display to show how images emanating in the east were also a result of western fascination with peoples and places in the colonies. Drawn exclusively from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, the featured photographs illustrate how South Asian photographers took this western medium and adapted it to reflect South Asia's vibrant culture.

Creating a full immersion into the photographic experience of the time, the Rubin will encourage audiences to take their own portraits in the galleries in front of authentic backdrops from the region. Visitors will be able to upload their portraits to an interactive page on the Rubin's web site and see groupings of other visitors' photographs. The exhibition also provides an opportunity to use a stereoscopic viewer.

“Shortly after India was introduced to photography in the 19th century, it moved to the forefront of the medium's development with photographers experimenting with its aesthetic capabilities and creating new

styles that combined traditions from the east and west,” said Beth Citron, the Rubin Museum’s Assistant Curator. “We are pleased to be working with the Alkazi Foundation once again to bring South Asia’s significant contributions to photography to light for our audiences and to fully engage them in this artistic practice. The Rubin previously collaborated with the Foundation on an exhibition of photography by Homai Vyarawalla, which highlighted the work of the pioneering female photojournalist and revealed another little known aspect of photography’s history.”

“As our second collaboration with the Rubin Museum, we are happy for a deeper and long-standing engagement at an institutional level so as to consolidate the scholarly as well as the imaginative potential of works contained in the visual archive,” said Rahaab Allana of the Alkazi Foundation and the exhibition’s co-curator. “The exhibition is about engaging with broad and expansive fields of photography practice in South Asia, and at a conceptual level, the meaning of a portrait is explored as an object that can and does shift its intended focus in the 19th and early 20th century, in order to provide a more varied notion of identity and gender-related issues.

Prior to the introduction of photography, painting had long been the preferred style of documenting rulers and everyday life in India. While sepia-toned photographs allowed for precise documentation of subjects, they didn’t convey the vivid tonalities of the textiles and external environment of the region. Painters began collaborating with photographers, which led to a prolific and highly regarded art technique that captured the colorful splendor and symbolism of Indian textiles, the clothing and context of the sitter as well as elite culture and the influence of taste. As a result, photographers and their artists were able to convey the ostentatious and often fictional manner in which a patron or subject sought to view himself or herself. Regional distinctions in portrait photography across South Asia were characterized by the ways in which allegory, reality, and illusion were presented.

Highlights from the exhibition include:

- A rare, tinted daguerreotype of a central Indian noble from the 1850s, together with glass plate negatives that depict the people of Ceylon, now Sri Lanka, many of whom were employed in the coffee and tea business, musicians, as well as chiefs and servants, daily life, and the land.
- Of the same period are albumen prints by Felice Beato, ca. 1889, of people of Burma, now Myanmar, many in elaborate dress. One reclining “Burmese lady” is posed in an Odalisque-style.
- A photograph of a Nepalese royal wedding party, notable for its solemn expressions of everyone in the group. It was customary that Nepalese royalty did not smile for photographs.
- Albums including the historically- important ethnographic series “People of India.” A facsimile of this album and four others will be available for visitors to look through.
- A hand-painted portrait photograph of a young woman who is hand painting an oil on canvas portrait.
- A memorial portrait of a prominent merchant family of the late Rai Bahadur Seth Tikam Chand Soni, who is seen in the framed image, posthumously, with other members of the family.

EXHIBITION CATALOG:

A publication featuring 80 images from the exhibition and essays by eminent photography scholar Christopher Pinney, and co-curators Rahaab Allana Curator of the Alkazi Foundation and Beth Citron, Assistant Curator of the Rubin Museum, will also complement the exhibition.

ABOUT THE RUBIN MUSEUM:

The Rubin Museum of Art's immersive environment stimulates learning, promotes understanding, and inspires personal connections to the ideas, cultures, and art of Himalayan Asia. The only museum in the U.S. dedicated to the Himalayan region, the Rubin has welcomed more than one million visitors since its founding in 2004. Its outstanding collections of Tibetan, Chinese, Indian, Afghan, Bhutanese, Mongolian, Nepalese, and Pakistani art, which include photography, are complemented by a diverse array of films, on-stage conversations, concerts, and special events. The Museum's education, community, and access programming is dedicated to providing audiences of all ages and backgrounds with multidimensional experiences that foster dialogue and active engagement with the traditions and cultures of the Himalayas. The Rubin Museum's Café Serai and shop are also inspired by the region and serve as a natural extension of the gallery and programming experience.

THE ALKAZI FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS:

The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts, www.acparchives.com, 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 a private collection of Mr. E. Alkazi called 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, Princely India, anthropological studies, portraiture of the people of South Asia, as well as landscape and topographical views. At the same time, photographers whose contribution to the history of photography in these areas has been significant are well represented, including Dr. John Murray, Felice Beato, Samuel Bourne, Lala Deen Dayal, and others.

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