



“From the untrodden snows of the Himalayas to the burning shores of Madras, the camera is now a familiar object,” wrote an enthusiastic Samuel Bourne in 1863. He was recording his early impressions of the photographic scene soon after his arrival in India. For Bourne, who was to carve out a reputation as the most distinguished landscape photographer in the subcontinent, India offered inspiring subject matter and potentially lucrative opportunities. By the time of his arrival, more than two decades of photographic activity had established the medium in India. The Gujral Collection, containing magnificent examples of the work of many of the seminal figures in this story, offers an extraordinary glimpse into life during the Raj. It also represents one of the most important collections of photographs to be sold at Bonhams.

In India, photography inherited a tradition of topographical and architectural documentation instigated

by late 18th and early 19th century artists such as William Hodges, Thomas and William Daniell and their successors, who had supplied their countrymen with picturesque views of the scenic splendours of the land over which they ruled.

But while photography reached India swiftly, surprisingly few images survive from the first decade of the medium.

However by the 1850s, photographic societies were flourishing in the Presidency capitals of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras. Further encouragement was offered by the East India Company, which commissioned a number of its officers, among them Thomas Biggs and Linneaus Tripe, to undertake

photographic documentation of Indian architecture.

But it is the work of Dr John Murray, an officer in the Bengal Medical Service, that offers perhaps the most outstanding example of this efflorescence of amateur activity. Murray’s finest work displays a minutely attentive concentration on the Mughal architecture of Northern

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Imperial vision

The Gujral Collection of Indian photographs offers an extraordinary glimpse of life during the Raj, says John Falconer

John Murray

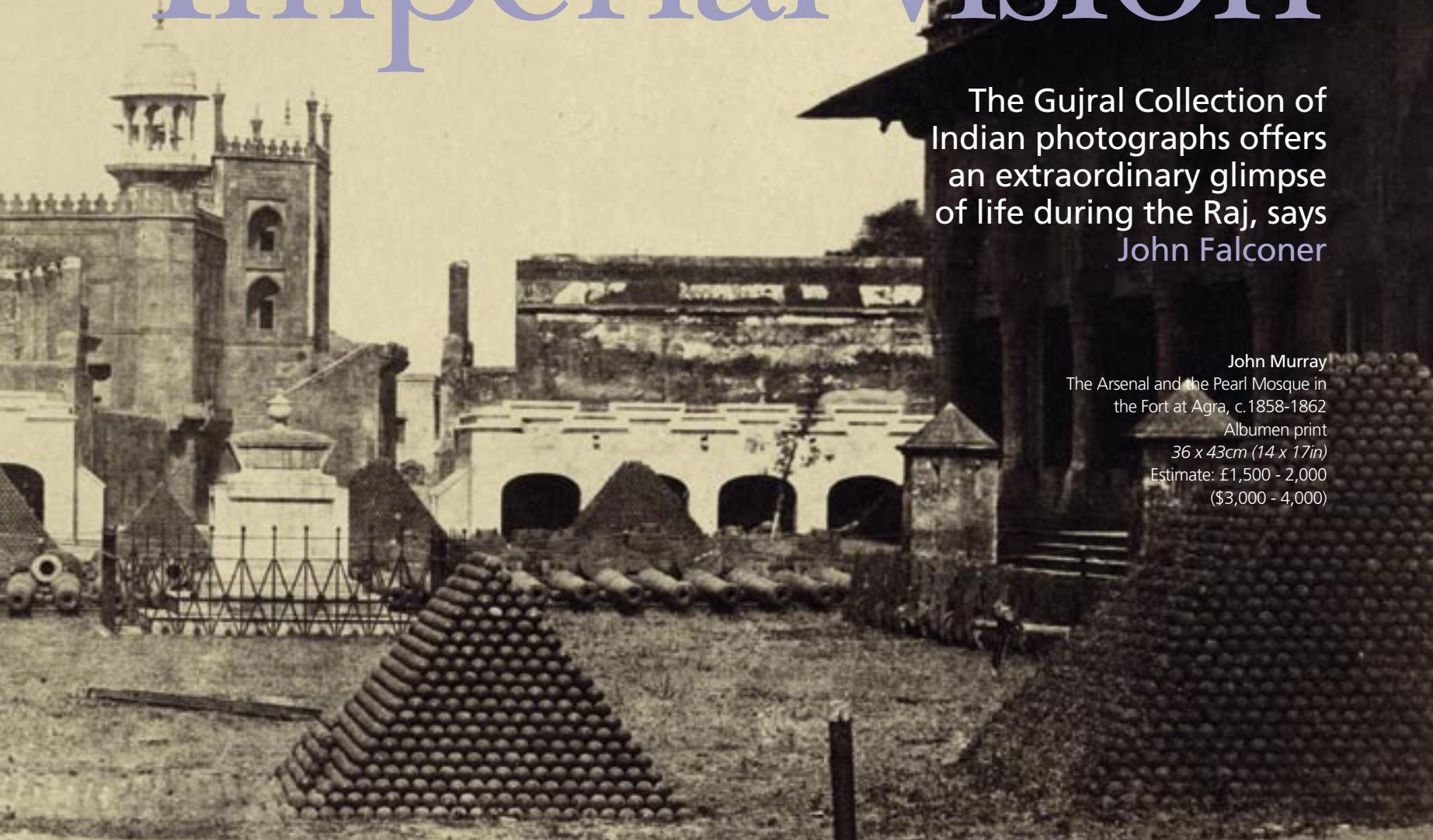
The Arsenal and the Pearl Mosque in the Fort at Agra, c.1858-1862

Albumen print

36 x 43cm (14 x 17in)

Estimate: £1,500 - 2,000

(\$3,000 - 4,000)



India, returning time and again to capture great monuments such as the Taj Mahal from varying viewpoints and in varying light. These glowing images resulted in prints of great tonal delicacy. Other buildings in Agra were also comprehensively detailed – in several cases shortly after the Mutiny of 1857-58 – so that in one view of the interior of the palace, we see cannonballs still stacked in front of the Hall of Audience. Many of these single views were also joined to form panoramic perspectives of his subjects, the most impressive in this collection being the richly toned three-part view of the Jami Masjid at Agra.

The cataclysmic events of the Mutiny, or Uprising, of 1857-58 brought fundamental changes to Britain's relationship with its greatest overseas possession, as the administration was wrested from the hands of the East India Company and transferred to the Crown. The reverberations of these events, and their forceful reminder of the fragility of colonial rule, were no less a watershed in the development of photography in the subcontinent. The "deep and growing interest now felt in Europe in every thing Indian", which had

been noted by a member of the Photographic Society of Bengal in 1856, was further stimulated by the military campaigns of the following years, and photographers were swift to capitalise on the ready market for views of scenes and characters associated with these unfolding events.

This fascination is most vividly illustrated in the extensive series of views produced by Felice Beato, perhaps the single most famous 19th century war photographer. Beato, who was to hover vulture-like over a series of colonial campaigns in South and East Asia for three decades, arrived in India in early 1858, too late to witness the actual course of the campaign, but he was in time to create a unique and compelling record of the destruction of the urban fabric of Lucknow and Delhi left in its wake. His detailed series of views of buildings associated with the campaign in these cities now form a unique record of an astonishing architectural style which the events of the mutiny itself, deliberate destruction, subsequent decay and urban development have largely destroyed. In addition to photographing the specific sites of military activity, Beato



Left: Attributed to Lala Deen Dayal
Native acrobats, circa 1890
gelatin silver print
12 x 8cm (5 x 3in)
Estimate: £200 - 400
(\$400 - 800)

Right: Parade during the 1903 Delhi Durbar
platinum print
20 x 28cm (8 x 11in)
Estimate: £150 - 300
(\$300 - 600)

Above: John Burke and William Baker
Bridge near Srinagar, from Lord Lansdowne's
album of views in Kashmir, 1860s-1870s
albumen print
23 x 28.5cm (9 x 11in)
Estimate: £10,000 - 20,000
(\$20,000 - 40,000)

Lower right: Bourne and Shepherd
HH The Gaekwar of Baroda, 1877
albumen print
14 x 10cm (5½ x 4in)
Estimate: £300 - 500
(\$600 - 1,000)

produced general architectural views for commercial sale: his study of a building in Chandni Chowk, for instance, provides an intriguing image of the architectural eclecticism of old Delhi. Even in the mid-19th century, this was – as it is today – a busy shopping street, but the eccentric elegance of its buildings is now entirely submerged and unrecoverable in the uncontrolled accretions of the succeeding 150 years that have transformed the area.

Beato was followed in the 1860s by professional photographers eager to tap an expanding Indian market. The prolific output of these firms was geared to satisfying the demands of a largely expatriate clientele eager for souvenirs of their Indian life, and presents a determinedly European vision of India. This picturesque repository of architecture, landscape grandeur and exotic princely rulers comprised an almost limitless range of photographic subjects. The commercial success of Samuel Bourne's views of North India – particularly the landscapes gathered during arduous expeditions to Kashmir and the Himalayas – defined the subject matter and viewpoint of a host of imitators. While few of these matched his technical skill, compositional facility or physical energy, Bourne's own prominence has tended to overshadow the

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achievement of several equally proficient photographers who followed, sometimes literally, in his footsteps.

Among the most distinguished of these was John Burke who, in partnership with William Baker, maintained flourishing studios in Murree and Peshawar from the 1860s.

Burke was best known for his documentation of the 1879-80 Afghan War, but a remarkable album in the Gujral Collection that once belonged to Lord Lansdowne provides ample evidence of his skills as a landscape photographer. While owing much to Bourne in the choice of subjects, these landscapes of Kashmir and the Sind

Valley paint a wonderfully evocative vision of the unspoiled splendour of these mountains and valleys, and the picturesque appeal of the gardens, winding waterways and canals of Srinagar, a peace now shattered by the recent violent history of the state.

If photography in India so often served to reflect the ideals of an imperial ruling class, nowhere was its overtly propagandist function put to fuller use than in the great celebration and validation of British rule masterminded by the Viceroy Lord Curzon in 1902. The solemn pageantry of the Delhi Durbar, with its military reviews, ceremonial



parades and splendid elephant processions, attracted photographers from all over India, as well as from abroad. To Curzon, who understood the emotional and political resonance of such displays, the huge photographic record of his most extravagant public spectacle must have provided satisfying affirmation of the permanence of British rule in India. But within 50 years, India had become an independent nation: the captains and the kings had departed and the site of the Durbar amphitheatre now provides little more than an overgrown store for the relegated statues of imperial grandees, visited only by those with a taste for the ironies of history.

As well as being significant documents in the history of the medium, perhaps one of the most captivating aspects of many of these prints and negatives lies in the evocation of a largely vanished world. Both a celebratory and an elegiac medium, photography recreates the past at a specific instant, but also underlines its evanescence.

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