



National Museum,
New Delhi



ALKAZI FOUNDATION FOR THE ARTS

IMAGING THE ISLE ACROSS
Vintage Photography from Ceylon



Opening: 26 September 2015

Venue: National Museum,
Janpath, New Delhi

Curation: Rahaab Allana,
Curator, The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

Exhibition:

Archaeological Survey of India and National Museum in collaboration with Alkazi Foundation for the Arts is organizing an exhibition titled '*Imaging the Isle Across: Vintage Photography from Ceylon*'. Drawn exclusively from the Alkazi Collection of Photography, this exhibition is a collateral event of the Delhi Photo Festival, 2015; and will also be one of the events commemorating the 90th year of the art collector, Ebrahim Alkazi. The exhibition will showcase an overview of the early imagery from Sri Lanka for the very first time as part of an eclectic exhibition, showcasing vintage images from the late 19th century.



European travellers viewed Ceylon as a “repository of oriental wealth”, and its strategic position at the centre of the spice and trade routes was the primary reason for initial naval investigations and forays. In 1815 it came under British rule and remained a colony until Independence in 1948. The civic and administrative development of roads and railways led to a boom in the island’s plantation economy bringing along with it, an influx of Europeans as planters and tourists. These new settlers formed the main clientele for commercial photographers.



The history of photography in South Asia is a story of itinerant practitioners, seeking to expand the eye of the lens by exposure to the farthest corners of the world. It followed the maritime expansion of the Portuguese, the Dutch, Danes and the French – the first of which identified it in their sea-charts as *Zeilon*, from which the modern name Ceylon was derived and maintained till 1972.

The upsurge of industrialisation in the nineteenth century framed the country as a repository of natural resources, and its people as natives in an antique land. The documentation of the cities of Kandy and Colombo, the architecture of Anuradhapura, and the portraiture of a predominantly Buddhist community therefore mark a preliminary survey of the hinterland. However, upon keener review of the images, the passageway of traders, troops and priests fuses Ceylon with a composite identity, which enabled commercial photo firms such as Plate & Co., Skeen & Co. and Scowen & Co, to resounding success.

These traces remain foundational in generating a visual canon that etched the life of a swiftly transforming country, as did the coming of a modern visual language instituted by Lionel Wendt, the art photographer and patron. Wendt, some of whose experimental works are included here from the Sansoni Collection, shifts a linear reading of colonial imagery by volunteering a unique cultural imagery in



the early 20th century. Hence this initiative is a tribute to the assorted histories of visualisation predominant in the isle across, further reframing India's own relationship to the frontiers through surviving visual archives.

Images Exhibited:

The images showcased in the exhibition will feature views on-

- Archaeology
- Colonial Life and Buildings
- Landscapes, Cityscapes, Engineering and Harbour
- Local Life, Occupations and Industry
- Flora
- Portraits

Alongside, the exhibition also features works of Lionel Wendt- a Sri Lankan pianist, photographer, literature collector, critic, and cinematographer from the Dominic Sansoni Collection, Sri Lanka and Anoli Parera, a contemporary artist from Sri Lanka.

Publication:

This exhibition will be accompanied by a catalogue (with the same title) produced by the Alkazi Collection of Photography and National Museum with support of the Archeological Survey of India and the Indo-Sri Lanka Foundation. The publication features the following essays:

1. *Imaging the Isle Across: Early Photographers of Ceylon (1840-1920)* by Ismeth Raheem, a scholar on early photography in Sri Lanka.
2. *A Landscape of Desire* by Jennifer Chowdhry Biswas from the Alkazi Foundation.
3. *Lens Upon Islanders* by Ayesha Matthan from the Alkazi Foundation.
4. *The Ascent of (Wo)Man: Visual Priming in Early Photographs and Films of Ceylon, 1880s-1930s* by Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes from Cambridge University.

About Archaeological Survey of India

The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI), under the Ministry of Culture, is the premier organization for archaeological research and protection of cultural heritage of the nation. Maintenance of ancient monuments and archaeological sites and remains of national importance is the prime concern of ASI. Besides it regulates all archaeological activities in the country as per the provisions of the Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1958. It also regulates Antiquities and Art Treasure Act, 1972.

For the maintenance of ancient monuments, archaeological sites and remains of national importance, entire country is divided into 24 Circles. The organization has a large work force of trained archaeologists, conservators, epigraphist, architects and scientists for conducting archaeological research projects through its Circles, Museums, Excavation Branches, Prehistory Branch, Epigraphy Branches, Science Branch, Horticulture Branch, Building Survey Project, Temple Survey Projects and Underwater Archaeology Wing.

About National Museum

National Museum, New Delhi is the premier museum of India. It houses an impressive collection of artefacts from across the country and the world. The genesis of National Museum collection is truly remarkable. In 1947-48 an exhibition of Indian antiquities, sponsored by the Royal Academy of Arts, London was held at Burlington House, London. On return, the objects were exhibited in the state rooms of Rashtrapati Bhawan (India's President's House in New Delhi) in 1948. On 15th August 1949, National Museum was formally inaugurated by the Governor General of India, Shri R.C. Rajagopalachari, and it was announced that till the permanent building for housing the collections was constructed, the Museum would continue to function in the Rashtrapati Bhawan. Many of the participants of the London exhibition donated their artefacts to the new museum, and this formed the nucleus of the collection of National Museum. The collections continued to grow through gifts and the consistent efforts of its Art Purchase Committee. Shri Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, laid the foundation stone for the Museum building on 12th May 1955 and the new building was opened on 18th December 1960.

Today, National Museum has over 2,10,000 art objects representing 5,000 years of Indian art and craftsmanship. The collection includes sculptures in stone, bronze, terracotta and wood, a large collection of miniature paintings and manuscripts, coins, arms and armour, jewellery, textile, costumes and anthropological objects. Antiquities from Central Asia and Pre-Columbian artefacts form the two non- Indian collections in the Museum.

The Museum is the custodian of the treasure trove of India's multilayered history and multicultural heritage. The Museum continuously evolves its galleries and presents new collections to visitors. However some of the key galleries and their collections are always of display.

About Alkazi Foundation for the Arts:

The Alkazi Foundation for the Arts is a Registered Charitable Trust in New Delhi (India), dedicated to the preservation of the cultural history of India through extensive research on photography. The private collection of Mr. E. Alkazi is housed in the Foundation, called the Alkazi Collection of Photography, which includes 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.

These vintage prints document the progress of socio-political life in the sub-continent through the inter-disciplinary fields of architecture, anthropology, topography and archaeology, starting from 1840s to the rise of modern India. In addition, the collection holds images that reflect India's cross-border relations with Nepal, Burma, Ceylon and the rest of South East and East Asia. The proliferation of images highlights the early development of commercial photographic studios and the expansion of official photography under British administration. Some of the prominent photographers featured in the collection include Felice Beato, Linnaeus Tripe, Alexander Greenlaw, Samuel Bourne, John Edward Sache and Lala Deen Dayal among others.

This year we celebrate Mr. E. Alkazi's 90 years and this exhibition is the first endeavor towards a year long festival of exhibitions and events to honour his contribution towards various fields of art.

Exhibition on view till 10 November 2015.

For further information, kindly contact:

Alkazi Foundation for the Arts

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