Exhibitions

Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850–1900
Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal
14 May–14 September 2003

Yale Center for British Art, New Haven
16 October 2003–11 January 2004

UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, Los Angeles
7 March–3 July 2004

Few countries can lay claim to an architectural heritage spanning several millennia and offering a wide range of types, from sacred to secular, from monumental to vernacular, in a dazzling profusion of styles and materials. Geographical India—along with China, Indonesia, and Italy—is certainly among them. From the astonishing sophistication of the third to second millennium cities at Mohenjodaro and Harappa to the nobility of the earliest Buddhist stupa at Sanchi (third century b.c.e.), the rock-cut caves at Ellora and Ajanta, sixth-century Badami, the majesty of thirteenth-century Konarak and fifteenth-century Vijayanagara, the refinement of Akbar’s Fatehpur-Sikri, the imperial legacy of the British and the lively inventiveness of contemporary architects, India’s architectural patrimony is inexhaustible. The excruciatingly selective list above excludes so much, for example, the carved wood treasures of the vernacular haveli courtyard houses and Kerala churches, the extravagant fantasies of the Rajasthan princes’ palaces, and that ultimate icon, the Taj Mahal.

The ease of modern travel puts these wonders within reach, yet their profusion and enormous territorial scope mandate a dedication of time and money beyond most enthusiasts. In earlier times, only a few could hope to visit India; European knowledge of the country evolved in colonial times and depended on sketches and paintings to supplement verbal accounts. It was not until the invention of photography in 1839 that widespread awareness of the country became possible. Intense interest in the most important of all British colonies guaranteed a wide readership for publications of photographic records of the Indian landscape, population, religions, architecture, and crafts. The necessity to document the vast territory they sought to control—a territory whose needs were perceived to include conservation of its architecture—stimulated British record keeping of all sorts, and by the mid-nineteenth century there was official recognition that photography could play an important role in this endeavor. From painstaking triumphs with challenging early techniques and materials in the 1850s by such photographers as Frederick Fiebig, Thomas Biggs, Linnaeus Tripe, and John Murray, whose paper-negative images of the Moti Masjid in the Agra Fort (ca. 1858–65) are among the most dramatic photographs in the exhibition, production expanded to include a large body of work by East India Company or Raj officers, professional photographers, and also amateurs who kept abreast of new developments through active photographic societies in the major cities. These included not just British but also talented Indian photographers such as Lala Deen Dayal and Shivshankar Narayan.

The current growing interest in colonial-era photography is reflected not only in auction values but also in the proliferation of exhibitions such as Through Indian Eyes (at the International Center of Photography in New York, 1982), India Through the Lens (at the Arthur Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., 2000), and India: Pioneering Photographers (at the Brunei Gallery, School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 2001), to name just three. The serious research presented in their accompanying catalogues, by Judith Mara Gutman, Vidya Deheja, and John Falconer, respectively, establishes the complexity and multiple ramifications of the photographic arts. While those exhibitions included many architectural images, the comprehensive coverage of India’s built heritage in Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, curated by Maria Antonella Pelizzari, offered the architectural historian unprecedented riches. More than two hundred photographs were accompanied by aquatints, engravings, drawings, rare books, maps, posters, postcards, and stamps that gave insight into a wide range of Buddhist, Brahmanistic, and Islamic monuments and into sites of historic importance.

The aesthetic of landscape deriving from the picturesque style of William Hodges, and of the uncle-and-nephew pair Thomas and William Daniell, who painted in India between 1786 and 1793, was strikingly evident in the work of Felice Beato, among others. Juxtaposed with these romantic images were the more documentary creations of army officers like Linnaeus Tripe, Robert Gill, and Henry Dixon, who were commissioned to record India’s monuments. At the other end of the scale, popular views of noted tourist destinations were cap-
tured by travelers’ snapshots and by commercial producers of postcards. Remarkable beauty of texture and tone in the paper negative productions of Baron Alexis de La Grange and John Murray contrasted technically and artistically with mass-production photoengraving, with hand-colored prints, and with poster photomontage. Special sections of the exhibition explored the sites associated with the Mutiny of 1857–58, the evolution of international exhibitions and the values they promulgated, and the use of photographic icons in education and publicity in post-independence India.

The stylish installation in Louis Kahn’s handsome Center for British Art was rather congested, possibly reflecting a transfer from roomier premises in Montreal. Lighting levels, necessarily subdued to protect works on paper, made many of the labels, often on dark backgrounds, virtually impossible to read in the horizontal cases. The impact of the exhibition as a whole was some-

what diminished by the difficulties of translating into cogent visual units the guiding theme: that the politics of representation, dictated by colonial imperatives, had determined the creation and content of the photographs. It was suggested that the poignancy of an 1854 view of a crumbling temple in Halebid, South India, by Tripe, for example, was intended as a comment on the decay of Indian civilization rather than an appreciation of the skills of its twelfth-century creators. Similarly, a view by Joseph Lawton of a railway track and engine on Sensation Rock in Ceylon in 1870–71 attempted to impress the viewer with the marvels of British engineering rather than the majesty of the towering escarpment and the distant mountains. Perhaps the most convincing evidence that manipulation of the scene did, at least sometimes, occur can be found in Beato’s image Ruins of the Sikandar Bagh Palace, Lucknow, Showing the Skeletal Remains of Sepoy Rebels in the Foreground (1858). Beato arrived in India a year after the event depicted, and to achieve the desired effect of horror at the treachery perceived in the Mutiny of 1857 the skeletons had to be disinterred and replaced in front of the building where they had originally been felled.

The photographs assembled for the exhibition were of extraordinary quality and variety, the interpretation stimulating, but the chosen presentation meant that the reward for the architectural historian was almost inadvertent. The display emphasized the propaganda

Felice Beato, Ruins of the Sikandar Bagh Palace, Lucknow, Showing the Skeletal Remains of Sepoy Rebels in the Foreground, 1858. Courtesy Centre Canadien d’Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal

inherent in the depictions rather than the intrinsic qualities of the subjects. Buddhist, Brahmanistic, Jain, and Islamic monuments were analyzed only for the ways in which they offered a medium for the colonial need to manipulate perception. The intentions of the organizers were made clear in the extensive coverage afforded in the accompanying book of the same title. The case it made for the underlying ambitions of the photographers and those who commissioned them, and for the pervasive politicization of the colonial attitude to architecture, was persuasive. But the architectural historian tends to hanker as well for due respect to the buildings themselves. There was scant information about the dates of the monuments or even of the religion they served; in effect, they merely served as material for the polemic. No catalogue, strictly speaking, was offered, not even an object list. Considering the wealth of fascinating material presented in the show, this was a serious archival deprivation. Unlike the ephemeral exhibition, the book is protected from obsolescence and particularity, up to a point, but it would have been helpful to offer thumbnail images and identifications in an appendix.

Blessed by such a plentitude of images and techniques, it is perhaps unreasonable to long for more, but the question could be posed about the lack of prominence of one of the more visible signs of the colonial presence and its efforts to project authority, namely, the official architecture of the East India Company and of the Raj itself, with its insistent qualities of imperial grandeur and permanence. In a nearby gallery at the YCBA, an excellent related exhibition, Company Culture, was mounted from the resources of the Center’s own rich collections, which to some extent made up for this lack. It presented Company urban scenes in Calcutta, Madras, and Bombay and featured some of the notable figures in Anglo-Indian history, such as Robert Clive, the stubbornly resistant Nawab of Awadh, and Warren Hastings, in paintings, prints, drawings, and rare books.

Together the two exhibitions offered unprecedented insights into selected aspects of the architectural glories of India. It is a pity that the results of the CCA’s extensive scholarly work were shown at only three venues, and one hopes that other institutions will later seek to mount the display.

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Art Gallery of New South Wales
Art and Exhibition Hall of the Federal Republic of Germany, Bonn

Publication related to the exhibition:

Note

Henry Lacoste. Un Imaginaire Art déco
Fondation pour l’Architecture/Musée d’Architecture. La Loge, Brussels
5 November 2003–21 March 2004

By collecting documents, publishing books, and organizing exhibitions, the Archives d’Architecture Moderne (AAM) has made a major contribution to the recognition of modern architecture in Belgium since the institution was founded in 1969. In the past, prominent architects such as Renaat Braem, Louis Herman De Koninck, Paul Hankar, and Victor Horta were spotlighted, while in recent years the AAM, in addition to putting up more thematic shows, focused also on lesser-known figures like Jos Bascourt, Antoine Courtens, Alfred Hardy, and Robert Schuiten. With a major exhibition on Henry Lacoste (1885–1968), the AAM added yet another important page to the history of twentieth-century Belgian architecture. Indeed, while several scholars have been studying parts of Lacoste’s œuvre for a few years now, and though the architect was given a prominent place in the survey Art Deco and Modernism in Belgium: Architecture between the Two World Wars by Jos Vandenberghe and France Vanlaethem (Tielt, 1996), no comprehensive overview of his complete work was available until now. Considering his compelling and highly imaginative architecture, which provides one of the most striking examples of Art Deco in Belgium, an overview of the work of this gifted architect and influential teacher was long overdue.

Monographic in nature, the exhibition was arranged in a logical but conventional manner. It opened with a section on the architect’s education at the Académie des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles/Académie voor Schone Kunsten van Brussel from 1904 to 1908 and the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris from 1909 to 1913, where he studied under Henri Deglane. The second section gave a summary overview of his entire career. Starting with his involvement in the mission Dhuique, which documented the built environment in Western Flanders threatened by World War I, and continuing with his subsequent reconstruction project for the city of Bléharies, the display of the interwar projects was organized according to typology: houses and cabarets, funerary architecture, medical projects, and exhibition pavilions—the latter being a genre in which Lacoste excelled, as it allowed him to fully draw on his imaginative reinterpretation of past and foreign civilizations. Such an approach was already present in his private residence of 1926, where in a fascinating way the interior combined Assyrian, Egyptian, and Greek references with elements taken from the Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and his own time.

The presentation of Lacoste’s postwar work was built up around a few major projects, including the RTT home in Oostduinkerke (1948) and a competi-