
Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs by curator Deepali Dewan, with contributions by conservator Olga Zotova accompanied an exhibition at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). This show and its complementary exhibit, Bollywood Cinema Showcards: Indian Film from the 1950s to the 1980s, explore historic images from South Asian art and culture.

Dewan’s essay meticulously defines a “painted photograph” and identifies six overlapping phases from 1840 to present day: photography and the artist workshop; memorials; enlargement technology; popularization of the studio portrait; impact of color photography; and painted photographs beyond portraiture. Her essay attempts to put this collection of seventy works, mostly dominated by portraiture, into the greater context of photographic manipulation with an obligatory nod to Roland Barthes, semiotics, and the linguistic concept of indexicality.

The essay by Olga Zotova examines the practice of painting on a photographic image, detailing the various methods and mediums used. For example, applying opaque color to a final print began as an attempt to compensate for non-panchromatic nineteenth-century photographic emulsion.

The most striking feature of this hardback book is the catalog section detailing the work in chronological order with generously-sized and lushly-colored reproductions. Dewan spent ten years, between 2003 and 2012, collecting these painted photographs from India for ROM’s collection (the largest in North America), and she supplements them with a few additional photographs from other public and private collections.

Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs is well researched and the “Works Cited” sections of both essays will be very helpful to researchers. The catalog provides a nuanced understanding of Indian painted photography and is recommended for academic or art libraries that collect material on South Asian visual culture, as well as libraries that serve scholars researching the transcultural history of photography or identity studies.

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