1. **Title/name of collection & image(s):**

   India through the stereoscope: a journey through Hindustan / conducted by James Ricalton

   Citation: India through the stereoscope: a journey through Hindustan / conducted by James Ricalton c1907, Archive of Documentary Arts, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University

2. **Type of photograph(s):** (Silver Gelatin, 35mm slide, photo album, digital print)

   Stereographs – photoprints on stereocards.

3. **What type of camera was used to make the photograph(s)?**

   Silver gelatin photograph mounted on board.

4. **Date(s) created and/or modified:**

   Created 1907.

5. **Location of creation:**

   Underwood and Underwood, New York.

6. **Size and number of photographs:**

   100 photoprints on stereocards : stereograph ; 9 x 18 cm.

7. **Creator of the photograph:**

   Ricalton, James

8. **What do you know about the creator?**

   James Ricalton was born in 1844 in New York, and passed away in 1929. He was also a teacher and inventor in addition to being a photographer, and traveled the world extensively. Following his teaching post, he became a photographer and war correspondent, capturing images from the Spanish-American War of 1898, the Boxer Rebellion in China, and the Russo-Japanese War in addition to his images of India described here.


9. **Are there any documents or ephemera accompanying the photograph(s)? If yes, what kind?**

   There is a stereoscope (Holmes stereoscope) and an accompanying book to the photographs (did not view)
10. How does the photograph look and feel? (Describe its formal qualities such as color, texture, grain, tonality, any handwriting or stamped text, any damage or modifications?)

Photographs are black and white with a sepia tonality.

Images are glossy and in good condition. Photographs are mounted onto a cardboard backing; shape is square with rounded tops mounted onto a cardboard backing. Is slightly bent but otherwise very well-preserved, no apparent damage. Two identical photographs are mounted on each, side by side.


On the back of the card: most photographs have extensive text on the back; an extended caption describing more about the picture but often very interpretive with an opinionated commentary. This caption often contains references to suggested other readings e.g. Rudyard Kipling’s Jungle Stories and J.L. Kipling’s Beast and Man in India. The bottom of the back of the stereocards also features translations of the main caption on the front. Translations are in French, German, Spanish, Swedish, and Russian. (Suggestive of the intended audience)

There is a luxury item feeling to the overall piece. The box holding the stereocards is sturdy and quite heavy. When the box is closed it appears to be two leather-bound books stacked together.

11. Describe what you see. (What do you notice first? What people, place, or objects are depicted? How are they arranged? What if any word do you see? What is the photographer’s vantage point? Is there anything in the image that reveals the photographer’s relationship to the subject?)

In the majority of the photographs, the people seem to fade into the background. This effect is accentuated by the sepia tone of the photographs. There is generally more of a focus on place. When “common people” (as opposed to wealthy) are photographed, the photographer is generally at a significant distance (the faces of the people are usually not visible, or not captured in detail). There are no portrait-type close up shots of these “common people” – all these images are taken from somewhat of a distance. There are close up portraits of Indian royals and officials.

The other photographs are either of landscapes or visually striking sights and architecture – this seems to make up the majority of the collection.

The photographs do generate a perception that the photographer is more of a tourist than a native.

12. For what audience was the photograph(s) created and for what purpose? What evidence contained in the photograph(s) helps you to know this?

This set of stereocards appears to be created for the European wealthy. As mentioned, the bound-book container has a luxury appearance. There seems to be more of a focus on the perceived majesty of the Indian architecture, or the curiousness of certain customs, the novelty of life there; not to mention the references to assorted British wealthy who like to spend time in India; traveling on barges etc.

The subject matter of the images also suggests this. There appears to be a focus on two primary subjects: India’s exotic wealth, and India’s exotic strangeness of custom (and people). A good number of photographs also feature the travels of various English lords and ladies to Indian destinations.

The pictures of Indian people are all anonymous except for the ones of Indian wealthy. If there’s a group of people it’s often captured from a faraway vantage point. The photos seem to “generalize” – even if there are Indian people in the foreground, they are not even mentioned in the caption. They seem to be a less-interesting accessory to the wealth, the richness that Britain has won. The captions are particularly telling (some image examples embedded in the blog post).
13. What does the photograph tell you about technology of the time in which it was made and used?

The photographs suggest that technology of the time already allowed for some fairly versatile photographic applications. From background research I understand that the gelatin silver process was invented in 1871 (the gelatin emulsion, invented by Richard Maddox) with improvements by 1878, and is still used today. The earliest stereoscope was invented in 1838, and the Holmes stereoscope invented in 1861 (the handheld viewer that these cards would have been intended for). Stereoscopes are still in use as Viewmasters. Hence this set of stereocards was created with fairly well-established technology, with some derivatives of this technology still in use today.


14. What does the photograph tell you about life at the time and in the place where it was created?

From prior knowledge, I was able to recognize that these images were taken firmly in the middle of the period of British colonial rule in India (as the British Raj existed from 1858 – 1947). In doing some more research, I know that there is a lot of subject matter that isn’t captured. The photographs probably are not representative of life in India. For instance, India was ravaged by famines, post-1857. Famine relief and policy reforms weren’t adopted, out of a fear that it would cause workers to evade responsibilities. Britain’s economic exploitation of India had some undeniable consequences – this is also unseen in the images.

There is a focus on capturing the majestic, the large, the beautiful, the novel and exotic. It is mostly the wealthy cities and stunning sights that are featured. Indian wealthy and government officials (self-government in India began in the British Raj, in the early 1900s, when Indians began to be elected as officials, Viceroys, etc.) are photographed, in a more close up way – these people were likely considered more significant, worthy of documentation, than the common people.

There aren’t many images of the impoverished. In those images, the people are portrayed as happy and content – one notable caption read, for instance, “Shelling rice and gossiping with the neighbors—home life of contented citizens of Cashmere.” In contrast, my historical understanding is that Britain capitalized significantly on India’s natural resources, with this economic exploitation having severe consequences; people maintained to struggle their livelihoods. Again, this is not shown.

Source: newworldencyclopedia.org

15. What does the photograph tell you about cultural values of the time in which it was made and used?

In my opinion, the images are more telling of British cultural values than Indian – particularly, British cultural attitudes towards the Indian people and their relations. I have written out some of the captions below as examples.

There may be a sense of ownership to the photographs of India’s wealth.
- Grotesque fancy and patient skill of Hindu sculptors—pillars of the temple, Madura, India.
- Guardian of Hindu mysteries—S.W. to gateway and sculptured Temple-Tower, Tanjore, India.
- Most beautiful marble screen in the world, around imperial sarcophagi, Taj Mahal, Agra, India.
- Inconceivable elaboration and splendor of Madura’s Hindu temple—two of its nine pagodas—India.
- Marvels of richness and grandeur—the great Durbar procession.
- The fabulous wealth of India—native Princes in the grand State entry, Durbar, Delhi, India
- Seringham temple, Trichinopoly, India “where idols’ jewels are worth millions”
There is an attitude of “imagine that!” (particularly in the extended descriptions on the backs of the photographs) in reaction to traditional Indian customs (particularly religious customs). There’s also what seems to be … an attempt to amaze with the exotic.

- Tower of Silence, where vultures devour the Parsi dead.
- [Image of religious sacrifice; one more goat about to be slain as seven others have their heads on the ground already] Seven goats slain but Kali wants more—horrid sacrifice to the Hindu Goddess—Calcutta, India. (Some fairly judgmental undertones; it almost feels as though this picture is intended to shock).
- [Image of a tiger in a cage] Famous “man-eater” at Calcutta—devoured 200 men, women, and children before capture—India. From text on back “a single blow from one of those muscular, steel-trimmed paws was sufficient to transform…the most agile man nto a mere helpless piece of fresh meat for a jungle-feast!”
- On the sacred consideration of cows: “No Hindu, even if he were hurry to send an important telegram…or to take an examination for the A.B. degree, would ever kick one of these cows…it would be a horrid impiety, punishable by the gods with all sorts of personal misfortune. Familiarity with western science and civilization has very little bearing on such inherited ideas.”

Presumably, the British would want to feel their rule was justified.

- Humble shawl-weavers at Cashmere patiently creating wonderful harmonies of line and color.

There is a focus on the wealthy British and Indian people.

- Reading recommendations and references are all European in origin and viewpoint - Lady Dufferin’s Our Viceregal Life in India; Sir Edwin Arnold – India Revisited; Scidmore’s Winter India; Kipling’s Letters of Marque
- H.H. the Maharaja of Gwalior at home—one of the richest men in the world.
- Charming Naldera, favorite retreat of Lords Lytton and Curzon (Does this location draw its primary value from being a favored destination for wealthy Europeans?)
- H. H. the Maharaja of Tagore in Durbar costume, jewels worth $200,000—Calcutta.

There is a clearly British political slant and racial bias.

- Memorial at Cawnpore to British women and children, massacred by Nana Sahib, 1857, India
- Lucknow’s memorial to Sir Henry Lawrence and heroes who died in ’57 (view N.W.), India
- There’s also a tone of making Indians sound moneygrubbing – e.g. the photographer bribes the villagers to let him take pictures (a few pieces of silver enough to convince them), or “enterprising natives went into snake-breeding for its profits”
- Primitive native life of India—Hindu women grinding at the mills, Mt. Abu.

16. What questions does this recording bring up for you?

Several questions (which I would love to discuss in class) -

- How was James Ricalton able to take photographs of the royal subjects so close up? Did he have connections in India aiding him in his venture?
- How much did he pose his subjects?
- How does one create multiple copies of a stereoscope card set? Are they all hand-mounted? How much does one stereoscope set cost? Is it truly a luxury item?
- Was Mr. Ricalton commissioned for this particular trip, or did he travel independently? What was his particular interest?
- Who exactly wrote the captions, and who wrote the extended text on the back describing the photographs/their context/often providing some fairly opinionated or racially charged commentary? Was it someone working at Underwood & Underwood? This question came up because I noticed that one of the photographs was of James Ricalton himself, and the caption was written in the third person perspective.

17. Personal Response:

It was fascinating to examine a piece in which the materials used, presentation of the work, image vantage point, subject matter, and text were all so richly imbued with a strong cultural and historical
viewpoint. Considering the vantage point of the photographer seems to be a complex manner. To what extent is James Ricalton capturing what he truly believes are representative aspects of a Journey Through Hindustan – and is the intention even to create an accurate representation? How much would being commissioned, versus traveling to capture images on his own volition, influence Mr. Ricalton’s lens? This piece sparked me to further thinking about the factors that play into how a photographer chooses subject matter, and whether the photographer’s presence is noticeable in a work.

In viewing these photographs, I looked at the images first, then the text. The captions and descriptions on the back often surprised me. Where I would expect a description of the Indian people in the foreground, the caption would be describing whatever landmark they were in front of. It felt as though they were either there as a sort of token representation, or were simply “in the way” of the subject matter that the photographer found more important.

Still, I do not wish to discount the work of James Ricalton and the enormous undertaking this must have been. The artistry of the photographs is quite astonishing. It is indeed an illuminating glimpse into the time of colonialism in India, and the subject matter that is not captured is just as telling as the subject matter that is.

Adapted from Document Analysis Worksheets created by the Library of Congress and the National Archives