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Mehra, R. and Sharma, D. and Bowye, S. (2024) Paper cuts: art, bureaucracy, and silenced histories in colonial India. [Show/Exhibition]

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A note on pieces of paper:

The environmental conditions in Peltz Gallery are not suitable for the display of nineteenth-century works on paper. Paper Cuts displays reproductions of works from the Turnbull Collection. These have been created from high-resolution images printed onto archival Hahnemühle paper using the giclée process.

Why did the British build railways in India?

Railways will benefit “the commerce, government and military control of the country.” — Henry Hardinge, Governor-General of India, 1843. Railways “will in the end facilitate the spread of Christianity.” — Queen Victoria, 1854.

“The usually ... lethargic eastern has been aroused out of sleep, has learned ... to acquire the virtues of punctuality, under the uncompromising and imperious tuition of the locomotive whistle.” — G. W. MacGeorge, consulting engineer, 1894.

Show me the money

This map, created shortly after the formation of the East Indian Railway Company, shows a proposed route running north-west from Calcutta. The line would connect the capital of British India with Delhi, the capital under the previously dominant Mughal rulers. The railway company used this detailed map to attract investment, almost all of it from England. They raised £4 million, about £386 million in today's money. Under the terms of the investment shareholders were guaranteed a return, regardless of how the company performed.

Map of the East Indian Railway's proposed line, 1846. Lithograph. Reproduction.

Courtesy Science Museum Group.

India's first railway engineer

Turnbull is remembered as the first railway engineer of India. Born in Scotland, he made his name as a civil engineer in England. After training under the eminent engineer Thomas Telford, Turnbull was involved in major industrial projects including Middlesbrough Dock and London's King's Cross Station. The East Indian Railway was a project on an entirely different scale: Calcutta and Delhi lay over 800 miles from each other. By comparison, the Great Northern Railway, which Turnbull also worked on, sought to connect London and York, cities fewer than 200 miles apart. After the East Indian Railway opened in 1863, Turnbull retired, left India, and spent the rest of his life in London and Hertfordshire.

Unrecorded artist, *Portrait of George Turnbull*, 1835.

Pencil on paper. Reproduction.

Private collection.

Travel pictures

By the mid-nineteenth century, views of India had become a popular genre. Often produced by amateur artists, these travel pictures held wide appeal to British audiences, transporting viewers to faraway lands from the comfort of an armchair at home. Architectural studies, such as these two showing buildings in Rajmahal, were particularly popular. Alfred Vaux was a resident engineer on the East Indian Railway. The Singhi Dalan palace (left), completed in the 17th century as the residence of Mughal prince Shuja, was used by the British in the 1850s as the railway district engineer's residence.

Left: Alfred Harris Vaux, *Singhi Dalan in Rajmahal*, 1856.
Ink and pencil on paper. Reproduction.
Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Above: Alfred Harris Vaux, *Akbari Mosque in Rajmahal*, around 1857.
Pen and ink on paper. Reproduction.
Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Local knowledge

This may seem like simply another travel picture. Yet this bridge was crucial in Turnbull's attempt to plot a route for the railway. The swamplands near Rajmahal made construction complicated. Turnbull followed existing roads, passing over old bridges. He believed this was key to finding a viable route, because "where they could make a road we could make a railway." The colonial railways are often understood as a British invention taken to India, but they also relied on existing local knowledge and technology. The old bridges were usually blanketed in overgrown vegetation, but some, like this one, stood uncovered — with their detailed Mughal designs fully visible.

George James Hervey Glinn, *Mughal bridge near Rajmahal*, 1857.
Watercolour on paper. Reproduction. Courtesy Science Museum Group.

To build a bridge

As Turnbull plotted the railway's route westward, he encountered a larger obstacle: the Sone River. He would need to design a bridge. On 17 February 1851 Turnbull visited the site of the crossing and calculated the distance required (see the page displayed on the far right). At over 1.6km it would be the longest river bridge in India, and the second longest in the world. Turnbull spent the following four years collecting bridge designs from the local area as inspiration, a selection of which are displayed here.

Selected pages from George Turnbull's notebooks, 1851–1855.

Pencil on paper. Reproductions.

Courtesy University of Cambridge South Asian Studies Library.

The Sone Bridge

Artists in 1840s Britain popularised pictures of railway construction. Building on that genre, this watercolour of the Sone Bridge was painted in 1860 by the project's lead engineer. The circular supporting blocks were Turnbull's innovation. Compared to rectangular designs, they are less likely to crack and sink into the ground. The image uses the vanishing point to emphasise the bridge's impressive span: it appears to carve forward into the landscape. The emphasis is on how the man-made structure is overcoming nature's hurdles. Construction on the bridge was disrupted in 1857 by the so-called Indian Mutiny, a widespread revolt against the British, in which rebelling Indians removed materials from the bridge.

Bernhard Schmidt, *Sone Bridge works from head of eastern incline*, 1860.

Watercolour on paper. Reproduction.
Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Nature and industry

Trees tower high in this old-growth forest. Woodlands of this type promote greater biodiversity and stabilise the Earth's climate. In this image, the extractive force of industry has arrived at this previously undisturbed environment, as workers collect construction materials for the railway. The huge, sinewy tree on the right epitomises the tension between nature and industry. Sacred in Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, this bodhi tree teeters dangerously close to the industrial work.

G. W. Archer, *Coolies and bullock hackeries collecting materials*, 1852. Watercolour on paper. Reproduction. Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Cogs in the machine

In the UK we are used to bricks being fired at high temperatures. But these Indian workers dig and mould the clay — and then simply wait. Soon the sun does its job, and the clay dries. This process of air-drying bricks has a long history, dating back perhaps as far as 9,000 BC. The picture's one-point perspective is built around the

bricks arranged in perfect lines. There is comparably little interest in the Indian workers, integral though they are to the brickmaking process. We are to understand them as efficient cogs in an industrial machine.

G. W. Archer, *Bengali brickmaking*, 1852.

Watercolour on paper.

Reproduction. Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Surveillance and servitude

The works manager, shielded from the sun by a servant, admonishes one of his workers. The residence from which he has just appeared is visible in the middle ground. Around him, anonymous Indian workers dig and carry dirt, the railway embankment stretching as far as the eye can see. This is a picture about surveillance, servitude, and productivity, revealing the power dynamics that pervaded the colonial industrial complex in India. Halfway up the image, water is visible. Konnagar is a wetland. The railway, in combination with other industrial development, blocked the area's natural drainage system, making annual epidemics worse. Those who could afford to moved away.

G. W. Archer, *Konnagar bungalow, showing also the railway embankment*, 1853.

Watercolour on paper. Reproduction.

Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Picnics and paperwork

Turnbull described Resident Engineer Walter Bourne as a “valuable” man. Yet this slapstick caricature portrays Bourne as a bumbling, work-shy bureaucrat. Finding humour in exaggeration, caricatures focus on identity and individual character – quite the opposite to the anonymised Indian workers depicted in the works to your right. Half-eaten picnic beside him, Bourne’s hat tumbles off as he hurriedly writes “receipts for houses pulled down” in nearby villages. The caricature alludes to the destruction wreaked by the railway on Indians’ lives. But the loss of peoples’ homes is reduced to mere paperwork — and played for laughs.

Unrecorded artist, *Resident Engineer Walter Bourne*, 1857.
Pencil, ink, and watercolour on paper. Reproduction.
Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Portraits without people

Who is this man? And where is he pointing? Turnbull recorded that a railway engineer, J. Slater, drew this portrait. But he did not record the sitter's identity. What is the point of a portrait without an identity? Why did Turnbull keep this man's image, but not his name? In the nineteenth century it was not unusual for British artists abroad to draw local people without recording their identities. Unlike portraits, these pictures were not interested in individuals. Instead, by recording clothing and appearance, they attempted to categorise people into broad "types". This was a central tenet of the burgeoning field of ethnography.

J. Slater, *Drawing of unnamed Indian man*, 1852.

Pastel on paper. Reproduction.

Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Divya Sharma, *The Shape of Identity*, 2022.

Tufted acrylic wool on found hemp fabric.

The Shape of Identity is about placemaking. It is a homage to forgotten peoples, their vanished homelands and ignored pasts. Sharma weaves abstract patterns to imagine lost histories. The tapestry's base fabric is hemp, an important crop in Indian culture. Ayurvedic medicine uses hemp as a palliative treatment for many diseases. The plant does not require much water and replenishes the soil's nutrients, so is often used as a rotational crop. In 1798 the British introduced a tax on hemp in India, hoping to reduce consumption "for the sake of the natives' good health and sanity". Nowadays, Western societies are increasingly turning to hemp as a fabric, medicine, and food source — uses that have a long history in the Indian subcontinent.

This label was written in collaboration with the artist.

Hear from the artist:

“My work reflects on my journey as an immigrant, splicing together autobiographical and fictional narratives that re-imagine what it means to belong. I aim to spark conversations around themes of diaspora, migration, and the continued legacies of colonialism. Faced with histories that have been silenced by imperial regimes, I use my work to envisage new stories. By working intuitively with material, colour, and composition, I allow my tapestries to evolve almost of their own accord. They become imaginary universes in themselves, offering fresh perspectives on our present while re-imagining our past and future.”

— Divya Sharma

Ravista Mehra, *Kusmi Tea, English Breakfast*, 2016.

Five paper collages on paper, with accompanying essay.

Installed with a recreation of Ravista Mehra's desk. *Kusmi Tea, English Breakfast* is an essay and series of collages that respond to the cultural separation Mehra felt after leaving India to study abroad. The collages are boldly coloured and fragmented, piecing together and celebrating stories across the subcontinent. Romanticism is usually a genre reserved for the West. Depictions of modern India, by contrast, often focus on the harsh realities of life. Mehra refuses these stereotypes by introducing a dreamlike quality to everyday moments of Indian life. The accompanying essay, displayed on a recreation of Mehra's desk, uses the metaphor of tea preparation to reflect on how Mehra felt her Indian identity being watered down by Western culture.

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Hear from the artist:

“In my design practice I believe in asking the right questions rather than promoting a ‘right answer’. This is why research is crucial to my practice. I strive to tell stories — small and large, individual and collective, of peoples and places — with respect and dignity, giving visibility to silenced histories. My work preserves and celebrates stories that have been overlooked, breathing complexity into our shared colonial past. I want to give voice to people of colour, who have too often been reduced to anonymous figures and statistics.

As a young Indian designer, a large portion of the work I do is aimed toward the West. My hope is to remove misconceptions about Indians, and about British colonial activity in South Asia. My role as a graphic designer is first and foremost the role of a facilitator, or translator, between different communities and subject matter. It’s not just the stories that matter, but who gets the power and privilege to tell them. I feel it’s my duty to ensure that the histories of my people are remembered. The history of India has so often been told from the perspective of the colonial powers that ruled it. It is time for a history of India formed out of the experiences of its people. We must uncover and share the stories of the colonised.”

— Ravista Mehra

The fun of the thing

Turnbull recorded the identity of this sitter, allowing us to link the portrait to the personal history of the man. Fox was one of three young men who travelled with Turnbull from London to India, “under some vague promise of employment” from the managing director of the East India Railway Company. He quickly became an assistant engineer. The year before this portrait was made, Fox was imprisoned for several weeks by French colonial authorities in India after getting into, in Turnbull’s words, “some squabble”. Yet even behind bars, Fox benefited from the privileges of the colonial class: “He had comfortable quarters, and seemed rather to enjoy the fun of the thing.”

Unrecorded artist, *Portrait of C. Fox, East Indian Railway Assistant Engineer*, 1852.

Ink on paper. Reproduction.

Courtesy Science Museum Group.

No one seems to have anything else to do

Escaping the heat in Calcutta, Turnbull and his family spent the summer of 1861 in Darjeeling, a Himalayan resort town. Turnbull recounts these months of leisure: "Tea parties, balls, theatricals ... no one seems to have anything else to do, so it is natural to get up amusements; among the latter may be included several marriages." One of those who "got up an amusement" was Constance Garstin, pictured in this portrait. On 30 July she married Major Francis Crossman. Turnbull and his family were among the wedding guests.

Colonel Henry Yule, Portrait of Constance Garstin in Darjeeling, 1861. Pencil on paper. Reproduction. Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Forty men

Like the other pastel drawing by Slater (hung to the right), this drawing does not record the sitter's individual identity. Instead, the Indian man is categorised into a broad "type" defined by his job: Turnbull's bearer. Bearers carried vehicles called palkis, consisting of a carriage supported on two horizontal poles. Palkis required lots of human labour. When Turnbull and his family of six took a trip to Darjeeling, 40 Indian men accompanied them as palki-bearers. Racialised labour hierarchies like this were common in colonial India. Turnbull's inscription reflects the power dynamic: did Turnbull even know this man's name?

J. Slater, *George Turnbull's bearer*, 1852.

Pastel on paper. Reproduction.

Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Good curry mem!

Turnbull's diary records that in December 1856 he stayed with Gilbert Hickey, a British engineer. This drawing, made during the stay, is of Hickey's khansamah Madrasee — his chief cook hailing from the southern city of Madras. Turnbull has written a message to his second cousin Francis below the drawing. Recalling a meal they ate at Hickey's residence, Turnbull quotes the khansamah: "Good curry mem!" Mem is a variant of ma'am common in nineteenth-century India. In his diaries and autobiography, Turnbull names the British people he meets, yet seldom names the Indian labourers and servants.

Edward Braddon, Portrait of Mr Gilbert Hickey's khansamah Madrasee, 1856.

Pencil on paper. Reproduction.

Courtesy Science Museum Group.

Ravista Mehra, *(Mis)infographics*, 2021.

Two giclée prints on paper and digital video.

A (mis)infographic, as defined by Mehra, is an exploration of the tension present in all information. On 13 April 1919, British troops massacred a crowd of unarmed Indian people at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar. Mehra uses this moment of atrocious colonial violence as a case study. She sees the massacre as the perfect example of how history is rooted in the control of information. Comparing two versions of the event — one from the British report, the other from India's Congress political party — Mehra reveals how far our understanding of the past is affected by who is doing the telling.

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Divya Sharma, You will always be with me, 2021.

Tufted acrylic on printed muslin fabric.

Sharma takes inspiration from a 2000-year-old Tamil rock inscription, among the Indian subcontinent's oldest surviving writing. Having first digitally printed the inscription onto muslin cloth, Sharma then embroiders the fabric, tracing the Tamil words with her needle — echoing the act of carving implemented by her ancestral peoples. Sharma has also needle punched the words You will always be with me into the cloth, reminiscent of modern graffiti on age-old rock. Just as ancient traditions are maintained through language and ritual, Sharma uses art as a ritual practice that connects people through time.

This label was written in collaboration with the artist.