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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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# PAPER CUTS

**ART, BUREAUCRACY,  
& SILENCED HISTORIES  
IN COLONIAL INDIA**



**PELTZ**  
GALLERY

**25 April – 12 July 2024**

**Weekdays 10am – 8pm**

**[bbk.ac.uk/peltz-gallery](http://bbk.ac.uk/peltz-gallery)**

## Who gets remembered, and who forgotten?

The British governed India by paper as much as by force. Reams of it circulated in the form of records, contracts, and trade receipts. Taxation and other methods of extracting wealth likewise relied on paper.

Paper also created a visual record. In 1851 Scottish engineer George Turnbull arrived in India tasked with building its first long-distance railway. While there, Turnbull collected drawings and watercolours by his colleagues, creating an archive that depicts the region from the perspective of the British engineers building the railway. *Paper Cuts* is the first time these images have been publicly displayed.

Like many colonial archives, the Turnbull Collection foregrounds the British while silencing the stories of the Indian people portrayed. How can we remember what has been forgotten? This exhibition invites two Indian artists, Ravista Mehra and Divya Sharma, to intervene through contemporary artworks. Combining past and present, we can create a more equitable future.

*"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."*

— Divya Sharma

*"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

**Divya Sharma** has a BA (Hons) in Fine Art from University of the Arts London and a master's in Sculpture from the Royal College of Art. She is a founding member of The Neulinge Collective and The Post Colonials Collective and is the host of the ARTiculate podcast. She has co-curated shows in London and Karachi, and was featured in New Contemporaries at South London Gallery (London), alongside exhibitions at ReKontakt (Ankara), the NAE Open (Nottingham), Stephen Lawrence Gallery (London), the CroydonBID project (London), Koppel Studios (London), and the Collect Art Fair at Somerset House (London). Divya received Arts Council Funding in 2023.

**Ravista Mehra** is a research-driven, multilingual visual storyteller and educator from New Delhi, India, based in London. She has a BFA in Graphic Design, Comparative Literature and Creative Writing from the Rhode Island School of Design, and a master's in Visual Communication from the Royal College of Art. Her practice lies in decolonising the human narrative through the interdisciplinary fields of graphic design, experiential design, and post-colonial history. In 2024, Design x Design selected Ravista as one of the top 20 designers in India under the age of 35, for her work in uplifting communities through respectful and human-conscious storytelling.

**George Turnbull** (1809–1889) is remembered as the first railway engineer of India. Born and raised in Scotland, he moved to London to train under civil engineer Thomas Telford. After being involved in major industrial projects across Britain, he was in 1850 appointed Chief Engineer of the East Indian Railway. He retired in 1863 and, after refusing a knighthood, spent the rest of his life in London and Hertfordshire.

*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.*



## EVENTS

Join us for an artists' talk, a panel discussion and a workshop with curators, artists and experts.

Booking and info: QR code or [bbk.ac.uk/peltz-gallery](http://bbk.ac.uk/peltz-gallery)

# PELTZ GALLERY

*Paper Cuts* is curated by Surya Bowyer.

**Surya Bowyer** is a curator and historian. He is working on *Collecting the Boundaries of Art in the Science Museum*, an AHRC-funded collaborative doctoral project between Science Museum Group and the School of Historical Studies at Birkbeck, University of London. Previously he was Curator of Collections at Queen Elizabeth's School, Barnet, where he led a digital programme and curated the permanent exhibition *Ties Through Time*. The British Art Network selected him as one of its Emerging Curators for 2023. He is currently working on the Science Museum's next major special exhibition, opening 12 December 2024.

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The Turnbull Collection was acquired in 2017 by the Science Museum Group, without whose support this exhibition would not have been possible.



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Cover image: Edward Braddon, *Portrait of Mr Gilbert Hickey's khansamah Madrasee*, 1856, pencil on paper. Science Museum Group, number 2017-7097.