

Marcella Sirhandi. 2009. *Royal Nepal through the Lens of Richard Gordon Matzene*. Chicago: Serindia Publications.

Rummaging through the attic of a historic mansion in Ponca City Oklahoma (in the southwestern United States) workers in search of misplaced Native American artifacts opened up several dusty boxes. Inside were hundreds of old portrait photographs including many of exotically-dressed but unidentified Asian-looking aristocrats. Consigned to a local library, the photos came to the attention of art historian Marcella Sirhandi who eventually identified the subjects as Nepali royalty from the 1930s and the photographer as Richard Gordon Matzene.

Written as a catalog to accompany an exhibition, Sirhandi's book *Royal Nepal Through the Lens of Richard Gordon Matzene* was released in 2009 by Serindia Publications (Chicago), an important publisher of Asian art and art history books. At a little over one hundred pages the book is not a major work but it includes dozens of high quality reproductions of photos taken by Matzene and others.

Sirhandi claims two main objectives for the book: to explore Matzene's "enigmatic life" (p. 13) and to provide "biographical commentary of Nepalese royalty in photographs taken by Matzene during the 1930s" (p. 11). Most of the book is devoted to the second goal, providing rather detailed discussions of individual Matzene photographs ranging from individual portraits to large group photographs. Sirhandi's aim is clearly to make these photos and their subjects intelligible to viewers who know nothing about Nepal.

While it succeeds in providing a general introduction to Rana Nepal, the book's contributions to that scholarship are limited. Sirhandi draws on published accounts to provide basic biographical and background information on people in the photos. As John Whelpton notes in his brief foreword, what makes the book unusual are not the photos themselves but the fact that Sirhandi went to considerable lengths to actually identify their subjects. Through Whelpton Sirhandi met key figures in Nepal such as Kiran Chitrakar, Dina Bangdel, and several descendants of the people actually in the historic photos including Gautam SJB Rana, Sangeeta Thapa, Himalaya SJB Rana, and Rukmini Rana Thapa. With their help, Sirhandi is able to provide lists of names of people depicted even in large group photos. For example, the photo taken by Matzene in 1930 of Prime Minister Bhim Shamsher and his family—twenty-six people in all—has almost every person identified (including eighteen women and children) along with their genealogical relations with Bhim. Unlike comparable books of historic Rana photos, it is this concern for identifying the people actually depicted (including the relatively minor figures) that sets this work apart. Unfortunately some confusion remains as several people are inconsistently identified in different parts of the text. For instance, Princess Laxmi Rajya Laxmi Devi is described as Kaiser Shamsher's wife (p. 51) but the caption under her 1930 portrait by Matzene (p. 53) describes her as Princess Shingha (i.e., wife of Kaiser's brother Shingha). Sirhandi also confuses other details of Rana history. For instance, Mohan Shamsher was not the next prime minister after Joodha Shamsher (p. 107). Padma Shamsher ruled for three years (1945–1948) between the two.

Sirhandi's Rana collaborators also helped fill in a few pieces of the puzzle that is Richard Gordon Matzene's life and it is this story that is probably the book's most valuable contribution. Although very little is known about Matzene's life, the details that Sirhandi is able to provide regarding his travels and relationships with Rana elites are fascinating glimpses of the rarified cosmopolitan world that the Ranas circulated in during early twentieth century.

Born in Denmark around 1880, Matzene's family immigrated to New York City when he was a boy. How he took up photography is unknown but by nineteen-teens Matzene had portrait studios in New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles where he became known as a high-society photographer, catering to Broadway and Hollywood stars, and wealthy elites. By the 1920s Matzene had changed his name (and declared bankruptcy) several times, claimed to be a Danish Count, lived an

extravagant lifestyle, and was on his way to becoming “one of the most significant early twentieth-century American portrait photographers” (p. 17). From entertainment stars like Mary Pickford, Charlie Chaplin, and Enrico Caruso, to billionaire families such as the Armours, McCormicks, and Hearsts, to US politicians, to European royalty, Matzene photographed a virtual “who’s who” of early twentieth-century elites. Self portraits of the time show Matzene to be a dashing and sophisticated figure who, with his own (bogus) royal credentials, could claim the kind of pedigree that helped offset his rather lowly (and financially insecure) status as a photographer.

Circulating between his photo studies in the US and encountering world royalty seems to have given Matzene the idea of taking his talents in portraiture “on the road,” especially when failed business enterprises (and looming creditors) made leaving the country expedient. In the 1920s Matzene sailed for Asia, opening studios in Shanghai, China, and Simla in British India where he “earned a widespread reputation as photographer of Indian royalty” (p. 21). There he also encountered Nepali elites who invited him to Kathmandu for a visit in 1930—making Matzene “the 27th outsider ever to receive such an invitation” (p. 33). He returned for a second visit in 1936.

Matzene seems to have had cordial and even close friendly relations with numerous Rana elites. In his papers are personalized greeting cards sent to his Ponca City address by two Rana Prime Ministers and other top officials. His art collection (bequeathed to the Ponca City Library and the University of Oklahoma) includes Nepali items said to be gifts from Nepali elites. He appears to have been invited to a Tarai hunting expedition, an honor usually reserved for visiting high dignitaries (p. 33). Matzene seems to have been especially close to Kaiser SJB Rana. The two carried on an extensive correspondence, Kaiser visited Matzene in the US while on a world tour in the late 1930s, and a signed portrait of Matzene hangs in the Kaiser library to this day (p. 51). Upon his death in 1950 Rana elites sent “numerous cards of condolence” to Matzene’s home (p. 114), only months before their own dynastic demise.

Like elites everywhere (and throughout time) the Ranas were fixated on representations of themselves, images that would both record and confirm their own elite pretensions. Portraiture in all forms—statuary, painting, photography—was a conspicuous part of Rana décor from Jung Bahadur forward. Marcella Sirhandi’s book catalogues some of these elite practices of self-presentation and representation but, perhaps more importantly, also casts light on the shadowy world of early twentieth-

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century elite photo-portraiture. It was in this anxious world of precarious status, where feudal elites tried to forestall their inevitable demise, that Rana elites and Richard Gordon Matzene (each with dubious claims to royalty) met and fed on each other's dreams of two-dimensional distinction. Matzene will never be more than a footnote in Nepali history but without this book he would be not even that.

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