A steady flow of customers enters the compound of Plâté, Limited, set back from the bustle of Galle Road, the main thoroughfare in Colombo, Sri Lanka. Some have come to mark a special occasion such as a wedding, a graduation, or a confirmation by posing for a formal photographic portrait in the ground-floor studio. Some are here to purchase sari textiles, Asian antiques, art supplies or perhaps modern paintings that are housed and sold in the building. But some climb the stairs or take the elevator to the photography department that occupies an entire upper floor. As they arrive, they are faced with walls covered with framed historical photographs of Ceylon, as the country was known until 1972. Down the center of the room is a long row of open bins, with cabinets beneath, that contain many photographs of the people and places of Ceylon. These bins and storage cabinets, however, represent just a small fraction of the archive of Plâté’s visual record of the country. Stored on the floor above are glass plates from earlier photographic processes, as well as massive camera equipment used in the past. On shelves in the private section, on the ground floor, are albums of postcards, one of the most commercially prevalent aspects of the Plâté firm and photography in Ceylon throughout the beginning of the twentieth century.

Fig. 1. Photograph by the author. The Plâté Limited Compound, 2012.
These various components combine to form a collection claimed to hold between twelve and fifteen thousand historical images of Ceylon, taken from the late nineteenth century through the first decades of the twentieth. When Plâté & Co. opened for business in 1890, it vied as a commercial enterprise against an array of established photography firms, headed by resident colonials or by local entrepreneurs. The intense competition forced even many of the largest and most prolific out of business; now Plâté is the sole continuing nineteenth-century photography company. Its extensive historical holdings sets it apart as well, as the firm has been deliberately adding to its collection in an attempt to amass a Sri Lankan archive of photographs of Ceylon.

**Historical Context: Photography in Ceylon**

Ceylon was fully conquered by the British in 1815 and remained a colony until its independence, in 1948. During this period the photographic record compares favorably with that found elsewhere in Britain’s colonies. In the earliest years of photography daguerreotypists of the mid-1840s captured landscapes and portraits, but little documentation exists because of the fragility of the results of the technique. However, salt prints by Frederick Fiebig, who visited Ceylon in the early 1850s, now held in the British Library, remain as visual testimony of early photography on the island.

As photographic technology became more widespread, opportunities for its use expanded. Attempts were made, beginning in the late 1850s, to document the rich archaeological legacy found throughout the island, particularly at the ancient capital sites of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. By the mid-1860s, Joseph Lawton, now highly regarded for his photographs of ruins, had established a photographic studio in the hill town of Kandy.

Photographers were drawn to the visual complexity of Ceylon’s cultural diversity. Its numerous ethnic groups, each with distinctive clothing, provided one viable commercial approach that produced portraits in a broad array. Indeed, the Skeens, a major photographic and printing presence through several iterations of family and firm, advertised that one of their specialties was “native types.” Beyond the Hindu, Buddhist and Moor communities, photographers found a ready market for portraits of the Veddas, indigenous people who wore few clothes, and the lower-caste Rodiya women, who left their breasts uncovered. The Plâté firm also participated in this exploitive commercial market, posing bare-breasted women seductively for its postcards.

*Fig. 2. Plâté & Co. Singhalese Girl, Carrying Water Chatty on Head.*

Photo courtesy of the collection of Dr. Helga Wall-Apelt, TR2007.2823.178, Sarasota, Florida.
Other popular subjects for photographers were modes of transport, the developing urban scene, the rural landscape and the local flora and fauna. Elephants were a favorite, as were the tropical species in the Peradeniya Royal Botanic Gardens. As commerce expanded, so did those entering the photography business, paving the way for local inhabitants such as the Andrée family to start their own enterprises.

The company founded by Charles T. Scowen produced a copious photographic output from the mid-1870s into the 1890s, but eventually succumbed to the intense competition among businesses that had sprung up in response to the rapidly increasing demand. Scowen & Co. was not able to survive in this environment, and its stock was acquired by the Colombo Apothecaries Company, the business that first employed A. W. A. Plâté. This eclectic enterprise succeeded in producing photographs for a time at least partly because of its broad commercial base, a model that was embraced when the Plâtés established their own firm.

The Existing Photographic Record of Ceylon

Although there are large collections of Ceylon's photographic record distributed around the world, the humid tropical climate of the island, among other factors, has precluded extensive holdings in Sri Lanka. Some government collections exist, such as those belonging to the National Archives and National Museum, but most of the finest late-nineteenth-century photograph collections on the island are in private hands. The government has had competing priorities that absorbed attention and resources, leaving the preservation of the photographic record to concerned individuals. There has been, however, a recent spate of efforts to remedy the relative lack of public attention to the country's visual history. For example, the National Trust Sri Lanka is conducting a project to preserve early photographs of the country's ancient sites that have been stored by the Department of Archaeology.

For sheer quantity, though, Plâté has the most extensive holdings of the colonial era. Other private collections are specific to the interests or opportunities of the collectors; Plâté attempts to be somewhat wide-ranging, and has been adding to its collection whenever possible. Its direction now is to solidify its own legacy, purchasing postcards and negatives to amass a definitive archive of the firm’s work, paying only peripheral attention to the output of other photographers. Thus, there are few images of botanical specimens and ruins, prevalent in the early decades in the work of such photographers as Skeen, Scowen and Lawton; rather, there are many images of busy city streets.

The firm uses its collection of more than five thousand negatives to create affordable (but not inexpensive) copies on request. A record of these images is maintained in a computerized database. There is also a collection of more than a thousand glass plates, in three sizes. Documentation of the content of these is not currently available. Although the motivation for this collecting and reproduction is commercial, its benefit has a broader impact. Realizing its preeminent position, the company makes an effort to search for specific imagery in response to requests.

The present owners also collect postcards of some of the other, now defunct firms. Of the more than six thousand postcards in their possession, from all the companies that produced them, a computerized file exists for only a small portion. The postcards frequently arrive in bulk and thus present a cumbersome data-entry task. Staff resources are not sufficient to keep up with this part of the ever-growing collection. As a consequence, it is not clear how many of these postcard images duplicate those in the negative and glass-plate collections.

Plâté, Limited

In more than a hundred and twenty years, Plâté & Co. has had barely a handful of owners. From the original Plâtés, A. W. A. and his wife, Clara, who were in control of the company from its 1890 founding until 1917, the business was transferred to Clara's brother, H. H. Heinemann, and later to his widow. She sold the firm to Arthur P. Fonseka in 1961, and it is now run by Arthur’s children. Despite its emphasis on photography, both historical and current, it continues to be diversified, most likely the consequence of a time when such diversity was essential for economic success.

Housed in a compound that was formerly the Fonseka family home, photography services occupy much of the main building. The structure set farther back off the street contains the equipment and materials used to create reproductions of the historic photographs, employing the original negatives when possible. Because these negatives have been used for so many years, not all are in good condition, in which case digital reproductions are made, so quality is inconsistent. Although in the past the firm had studios in the island’s important commercial centers, now all services are provided from the Colombo location.
The display bins at Plâté represent a simplified approach to categorizing the photographs, both for its walk-in customers and as a system to maintain and organize the collection. Recordkeeping is computerized but somewhat haphazard. A manual notebook log of new acquisitions is maintained; thereafter, the photographs are listed in a searchable database. The postcard albums, however, are waiting for sufficient staff to take on the burden of organizing and entering the information. Because they are kept as they are acquired and only provided with sequential numbers, searching for a specific postcard would require patience and a keen eye. However, some of the postcards duplicate photographs recorded in the database, so computerized searches can often yield a selection of images.

The basic categories for the photographs available to view are most often determined by geographic location: for example, harbors of the southern coast, colonial buildings of Colombo, the Buddhist center of Kandy. Farther upland, plantations generated much photography because of the need for their owners to document their processes and progress, important for borrowing funds from distant English banks. Among other categories in between and connecting these various regions are local industries and the variety of Ceylon’s inhabitants, with an emphasis on the distinctive dress of diverse ethnic groups and professions.

Certain popular subjects—hotels and clubs, elephants, for instance—have their own categories as well. There are also bins of maps, lithographs, recent photographs and Catholic religious imagery, reflecting the interests of the owners. Within the major categories are subsets such as the various neighborhoods of Colombo and the sequential steps in processing tea for export. Since the photographs were taken over several decades, they provide a visual record of the changes that took place, such as the transition from bullock carts to trolleys and automobiles.
The Plâté firm also was instrumental in popularizing photography on the island (fig. 4). At one time it was the sole agent for Kodak in Ceylon. In 1916 the company offered a monetary prize for the best amateur photograph developed in its studios. This kind of support of amateur photographers not only expanded the market for the company’s services, but also created an acceptance of photography, particularly portraits, as an integral aspect of life on the island.

Photographs and Beyond

In addition to producing and marketing individual photographs, the Plâté company made efforts to publicize its work to the wider world through exhibitions and publications in order to enhance its business endeavors. It mounted exhibits at the 1893 World’s Fair in Chicago, at the Paris International Exhibition of 1900, and at the 1904 World’s Fair in St. Louis, Missouri, an indication of its global awareness. Other major photography firms exhibited as well, to demonstrate the wide range of the island’s commercial interests. Plâté’s photographs of Ceylon’s sights were included in the official handbook that served as a guide to the 1904 exhibition building, as well as in other local publications of the period.

Plâté & Co. also published its own books of photographs, with multiple printings over the course of the first several decades of the twentieth century. Copies of one of the company’s most reprinted books, *One Hundred Best Views of Ceylon*, can still be found for sale by specialty antique-book purveyors. This book, after a brief introduction, consists solely of photographs and captions, in contrast to more extensive guides for tourists to Ceylon (with photographs) put out by others of the island’s photography firms.
Fig. 5. Plâté & Co. Veddas. Photo courtesy of the collection of Dr. Helga Wall-Apelt, TR2007.2823.70, Sarasota, Florida.
Fig. 6. Plâté & Co. “Veddahs or Wild Men: They are very few in number, and are confined to the most outlying districts,” One Hundred Best Views of Ceylon.

Although the illustrations in the book generally represent the original photographs, the page on the Veddahs (fig. 6) removes the indigenous people from their forest context (fig. 5) and places their image awkwardly on a blank background. No rationale for this is provided, but it has the effect of treating the Veddahs as anthropological specimens rather than realistically in some semblance of their natural environment. Other images in the volume are studio portraits of individuals set against a white or minimal background. It is possible that this adaptation was an attempt to create a “studio-like” portrait of the Veddahs, but it is not successful. Its inelegance is apparent, especially with respect to the hair.

The firm still has original albums entitled Tea Industry Pictures, produced in the 1890s, which document the various processes involved in the production of tea (picking, drying, sorting, packing), and views of the research laboratories and various other buildings on the extensive tea estates. Several additional versions of compilations of photographs were published, including one commemorating the visit of the Prince of Wales to Ceylon in 1922. Plâté also published books containing its photographs of India, possibly designed to compete with those taken by the Skeen firm.

Although a focus of its print output was the packaging of its own photographs, the company produced other publications as well. For example, the handbook of the Royal Botanic Gardens in Peradeniya was illustrated mostly with photographs by others. In contrast, the photographs in Ceylon: Its History, People, Commerce, Industries and Resources, compiled and published by Plâté Limited in 1924 (but “produced” by The Colombo Apothecaries Company Limited Press) were mainly those by Plâté. These photographs accompanied essays from local experts on aspects of life in Ceylon, with more attention paid to “The Rubber Industry” (nineteen pages of text and charts, with eleven photographs) than to “Ceylon’s Historic Ruins” (five pages of text, two photographs). The company also published an alphabet book for children with rhymes of stereotypical attitudes toward Ceylon’s various ethnic groups, and another of fairy tales and legends.

It was reported that the firm intended to produce motion pictures about Ceylon but there is no evidence that these efforts came to fruition. Plâté also kept a circulating library for the planter community. Although these activities are, in some cases, only peripherally related to photography, most of them are concerned with documenting the culture and heritage of Ceylon, consistent with Plâté’s photographic products.
Plâté’s Postcards

The most extensive result of Plâté & Co.’s photographic efforts was postcards, a popular trend that soared at the very end of the nineteenth century. The timing of its founding, in 1890, was serendipitous for its continuity, as it was able to build much of its business model on postcard production. Even though other companies had been producing large quantities of photographs for several decades, the Plâtés were able to capture a new market, one based on this rising demand for postcards. In this regard, the Plâté firm was the most prolific. By 1907 it was producing half a million postcards annually. This was a time when postcards were fashionable in Europe and its colonies, due to low postage rates and an increase in tourism tied to the peak of the imperial system. These combined forces prompted the sending and collecting of postcards not only by visitors to the island but also by military personnel, civil servants, missionaries, and armchair travelers throughout various countries.

Unfortunately, nothing is known of the photographers who took the postcard images, but the geographic scope of their work stretched across the island, from Jaffna in the north to Galle in the south. Portraits, landscapes, cityscapes: All were dispersed as postcards throughout the British Empire and elsewhere. Specific dates are for the most part unknown, but the postcards themselves provide some evidence in their postmarks and written messages.

Fig. 7. Plâté & Co. Devil Dancers, Ceylon. Photo courtesy of the collection of Dr. Helga Wall-Apelt, TR2007.2823.294, Sarasota, Florida.
This lack of specific information about the taking of the photographs for postcards is particularly problematic with regard to the authenticity of the scenes. For example, Plâté issued several different views (both photographs and postcards) of what are commonly referred to as “devil dancers,” appearing as if performing religious ceremonies. The styles of dance, however, presented in two views (figs. 7 and 8) by dancers wearing elaborate attire, were associated with different rituals, different religious purposes, and even different parts of the country. Yet, for these two types of dancers, represented in one image with masks (labeled as being from Colombo; fig. 8) and in the other without (fig. 7; associated at this time with the highland region of Kandy [21]), we see the same individuals as drummers, though in different poses, and we see—through close examination of the bamboolike trunk and the fallen limb behind the drummer on the left—that the location is exactly the same. Given the strong similarity in background leaf configurations, we can conclude that the photographs were taken not only in the same location, but probably at the same time as well. (The slanting ground indicates that these are most likely not studio portraits.) Because of the masks, it cannot be known whether the dancers are also the same individuals, but it seems probable that these scenes were posed for the purpose of taking such photographs, and may not represent authentic ritual specialists.

This also raises questions regarding the titles that were applied to the postcards, whether on their front or on their back, to assist in identifying the otherwise largely unknown locations and cultural phenomena. The use of this same site for two disparate dance traditions makes the identification of Colombo as the location for this image (fig. 8) problematic. The inattention to distinctions between dance forms was doubtless not noticed by the casual tourist, who would have purchased the postcards for their unique visual qualities, not for the specifics of the religious rites they ostensibly portrayed.

The dating of these photographs and postcards is also fraught with complexities, as even the Plâté dating of its reproductions is approximate. While it is impossible to document the specifics of the performers and locations in these images (figs. 7 and 8), by an examination of the printed materials in which these images appeared, we can make some general assumptions, at least regarding dating. The photograph of the masked devil dancers appeared in the April 20, 1898 issue of The Sketch, a London illustrated newspaper. A drawing of these dancers and drummers, with some artistic license and no background, was reproduced in the New York Recorder issue of March 29, 1896. Another Plâté photograph of dancers in apparently the same location, with one of the same drummers and possibly taken at the same time, was published in the May 20, 1896 issue of The Sketch. [22] Thus, we may tentatively conclude that these photographs were taken between the founding of the firm in 1890, and the 1896 news editions, perhaps even by 1895 (certainly by 1898 at the latest) in order to have time for the images to appear in print with accompanying texts. Other images do not enjoy such external confirmation, which leaves their dating to the inspection of postmarks on multiple postcards, to other forms of research, or to estimation.
Given the demand for postcards, there is considerable variety in their styling. Some are hand-colored, reflecting a more commercial version of the original black-and-white scenes. Some have a glossy finish, others have a matte finish; most have a legend on the front, others provide the explanation on the back; some specify where they were printed, others do not.

Europe had the best reproduction and printing technology to fulfill the postcard demand at the turn of the twentieth century, so Plâté’s stock of negatives was sent to the Continent, and the postcards were then shipped back to Ceylon. The reverse side of the postcard in fig. 10 says, “PRINTED IN SAXONY.” This was good business practice at the time, but it had unfortunate long-term consequences, as the original negatives were not returned and many have since been lost. Shamalica Fonseka, one of the present owners, has been making a concerted effort to document the firm’s early production, and to buy back its original negatives and as complete a set of postcards as she can find. It is a painstaking process, one hampered by insufficient software and human resources.

Conclusion

The imagery produced by the Plâté firm provided a view into a thriving colony with unique cultural characteristics. Where earlier photographers and companies focused on the "exotic" elements of Ceylon, the output of Plâté during
a period of considerable development presents quite a different impression. Photographs of snake charmers, “devil
dancers,” and half-naked men and women were still taken and sold, but the company also documented developing
economic forces, particularly the thriving tea industry. Still other photographs showed changes to Ceylon’s
landscapes and cityscapes resulting from British rule, such as new golf courses and busy Colombo streets with
wide avenues and architecturally significant buildings.

Missing are several crucial pieces of information to fully understand the individual photographs of the Plâté firm
and the combined legacy they created. Even though the Plâté output seems to stretch from the 1890s at least until
the 1930s, there is not much definitive dating of the photographs, postcards or publications to provide an exact
chronology of its scenes without external references. There is also no record of the specific business practices that
could explain its commercial viability that resulted in such longevity, other than the timing of its founding, its
diversified retail model, and its international reach. For example, there is little documentation of the effects of the
labor issues that affected the company at least once in its long history. Aside from some images of beggars,
Plâté’s photographs do not directly address the social inequities that plagued Ceylon as a colonial society, except
as can be inferred from such clues as differences in clothing and settings.

There is virtually no information on the specific Plâté photographers, nor on how they were employed by the
business. This raises questions about the authenticity of the content of the photographs, as explored earlier in the
“devil dancers” discussion. There are many scenic views but it seems that, overall, the photographers employed by
Plâté did not have the compositional skills and sensitivity of the earlier generation of photographers, such as
Joseph Lawton and Charles T. Scowen. Additionally, the photographic and postcard subject matter in the Plâté
oeuvre covers a less expansive content than that produced by the earlier firms: There are few photographs of
archaeological sites and botanical specimens, two important content areas in the Ceylon visual record that were
peripheral to Plâté’s focus, and possibly less commercially viable. Also, there is a limited chronological period
represented in the collection; most of its archive consists of photographs taken during the time of Plâté’s existence
beginning in 1890, so there is little inclusion of early photography in Ceylon.

Despite this lack of range and specificity, however, Plâté provides an important testimony to the development of
colonial Ceylon during a crucial period of many changes, and a substantive repository that provides a visual
archive to support further historical research.

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Sri Lankan Studies, www.aisls.org, documenting collections of photographs of Ceylon, 1850-1915, which included
a research trip to Sri Lanka.
Ceylon Photography Sources:


Notes


8. See, for example, http://threeblindmen.photoshelter.com/gallery-collection/Ceylon/C0000ho.zxgezp.w.

9. Raheem and Thomè, 49.


[5] Beyond the Hindu, Buddhist and Moor communities, photographers found a ready market for portraits of the Veddahs, indigenous people who wore few clothes, and the lower-caste Rodiya women, who left their Maintaining the Photographic Legacy of Ceylon. Skip other details (including permanent urfs, DOI, citation information). Volume 4, Issue 1: Archives, Fall 2013. Permalink: http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7977573.0004.105. Permissions: This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 3.0 License. Please contact mpub-help@umich.edu to use this work in a way not covered by the license. For more information, read Michigan Publishing's access and usage policy. ERROR: DIV1 without a HEAD[@REND="TOC"].