

Midwest Book Review

Labels of Empire: Textile Trademarks. Windows into India in the time of the Raj

Susan Meller

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Labels of Empire: Textile Trademarks Windows into India in the time of the Raj demonstrates that artistic investigations and cultural history are intrinsically linked by gathering (into a work of art in itself) a collection of powerful images of India in the time of the Raj.

This was a period of time in which the British Empire and its textile industry was the most prosperous. The linking of these two comes to light in a special history that focuses on British textile manufacturing and its use of paper labels influenced by and adapted from Indian culture. Susan Meller uses striking examples of textile labels and bazaar prints to illustrate the events that linked and drove Eastern and Western interests and culture.

Enough can't be said about the high quality and diversity of these colorful images, which power the eye and story with representations of village life, royalty, flora and fauna, and religious beliefs in India.

Having an image-driven story lends to its accessibility and enlightening attraction to a wider audience, whether it be students of Indian culture and history, those interested in the British Empire or its business interests abroad, or students of art and textiles. Each will find thoroughly absorbing and scholarly the footnoted references of Susan Meller's history as it explores the trademarks that offer keys to understanding India's past:

"...textile labels ([known in the trade as] shipper's tickets were a company's trademark. An integral part of every piece of export cloth, they helped to distinguish a firm's fabrics from those of its competitors. With amendments to the original Trade Marks Act of 1875, the Trade Marks Act of 1888 enabled...tickets to be carefully registered at the registrar's office in Manchester."

The importance and appearance of these labels allows for a wide-ranging survey unparalleled in art or history literature. Meller spent years researching, categorizing, and meticulously digitally restoring some of the 1,285 full-color labels and prints in the 544 pages of her rich hardcover book. That's why there's nothing like it in print, and why Labels of Empire proves so compelling to such a wide audience—even those not normally interested in history or perhaps even art and textiles.

The excellence and authoritative references of this title cannot be emphasized enough, but it's rare to see such a production promise equal attraction to general-interest audiences.

All these strengths make Labels of Empire a unique standout whether libraries are seeking histories, art surveys, or an emphasis on Indian culture. Ideally, its magnetism will make it a display item worthy of wide attention, equally attractive to book club discussion groups seeking vivid reads that exceed any expectation of a narrow topic through its vibrant representations of India's colorful Raj era.