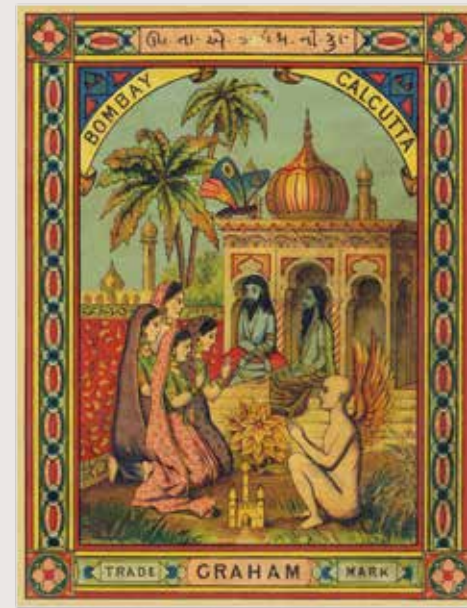


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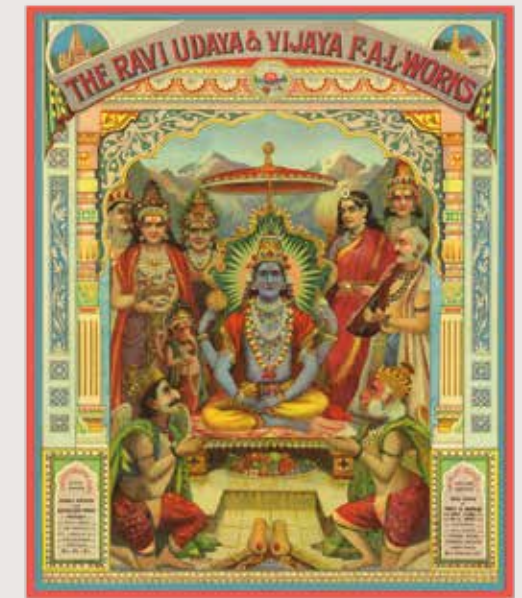
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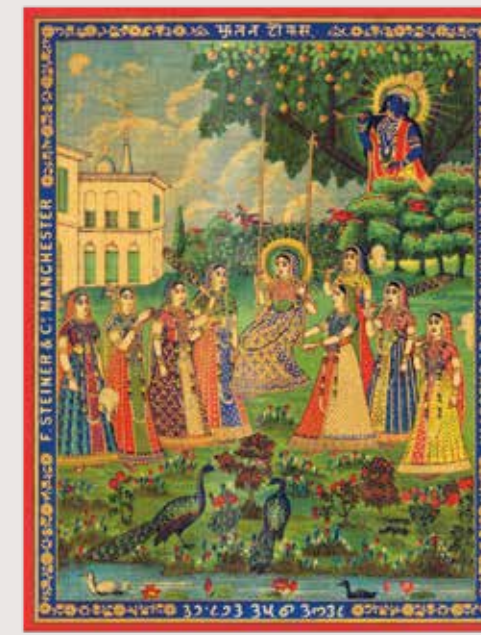
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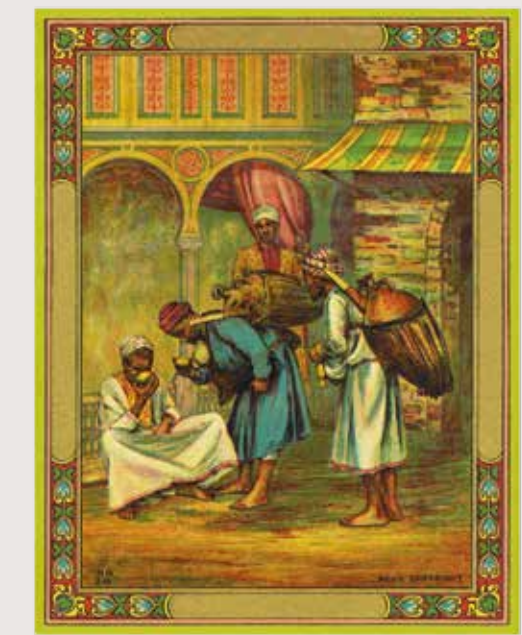
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1 Radha-Krishna by the Yamuna River textile label, ca. 1920s

2 Battle between Krishna and Indra textile label, ca. 1900

3 Sadhus and Devotees textile label, ca. 1900

4 Boy with Parrot and Monkey textile label, ca. 1910

5 Burmese Acrobats textile label, ca. 1900

6 Maharaja and Family textile label, ca. 1900

7 Seraglio Entertainment textile label, ca. 1900

8 The Ravi Udaya & Vijaya F.A.L. Works textile label, ca. 1915

9 Jhulan Ticket textile label, ca. 1900

10 Water Carriers textile label, ca. 1910-1922

Paper trail

A new book by Susan Meller opens up a fresh route into the study of Indian cotton textiles and their surrounding culture, through their dazzling, evocative and fragile paper labels. **Thomas Cole** delights in the discoveries

Little did I realise what would come out of a visit I once paid to Susan Meller to offer older cotton textiles recently purchased in India. As I introduced a variety of things, what caught her attention was an innocuous book containing ‘samples’ of commercial cloths: the label on the cover rather than the textiles within. Unfamiliar with India, Meller was initially mystified by the figures depicted: e.g. a blue man, Shiva, astride a holy white bull with his beautiful consort, the mother-goddess Parvati. She was, however, irrevocably smitten. From there she embarked on an eight-year journey to produce a prodigious volume titled *Labels of Empire*.

In the days of the Raj it was essential to have these stunningly visual labels to promote the sales of cloths to a largely illiterate population. To this day in India, advertising for all products functions in a similar manner. Even modern political parties identify themselves with easily remembered symbols.

In essence a book documenting the art of those labels once attached to commercial bolts of cloth, Meller’s work first deals with the history of the cloth trade and the mills that produced it, the production of dyes and the chromolithography printing process of the paper labels. The rise and fall of Manchester, a renowned centre of cloth production for export to India, was affected by the ebbs and flows of supply determined by world events



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11 Roller-printed cotton cloth (detail), Manchester, late 19th century

12 Ahmedabad Ginning & Manufacturing Co., Ltd. textile label, ca. 1920s-1930s

13 Lute Player textile label, ca. 1900



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such as the American Civil War, First World War, the ascent of Gandhi and the Independence (or Swardeshi) movement. These fluctuations encouraged homespun khadi cotton textiles.

As many of these somewhat fragile paper labels were printed long ago in India, they rarely, if ever, are found in the perfect condition as pictured. The author has found it necessary to digitally restore these tattered, worm-eaten and discoloured scraps to their original state—an enormous undertaking. The consequent, dazzlingly complete presentation is rather astonishing.

The Hindu religion has literally thousands of colourful deities. With the full pantheon illustrated and chronicled, these labels seemingly depict every scene from the ancient Vedic texts—the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. This complex saga was once the basis for a 1980s television series, a nationwide event appearing once a week, when practically the entire Indian population remained transfixed before glowing television screens in both private homes and public venues.



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The gods and goddesses were also depicted in stunning detail on labels, calendar adverts and more, printed in England. Whereas the Indian labels were the work of unknown artists from Bombay or Calcutta, Manchester-based companies often used their own artists to design the English labels. Some were copied from the artwork of others, including the French Impressionist Pierre Adolphe Valette and one of India's foremost artists, Raja Ravi Varma.

The book is virtually a complete reference source for serious students of Hindu mythology. The stories depicted are so fantastic that some imaginative commentators have claimed that they recount age-old visitations from extra-terrestrial beings, as entire armies traversed the skies of ancient India in epic battles with demigods and demons. The costumes of the gods, goddesses, kings and attendants are well illustrated by the labels. While the Manchester cloths or Bombay roller print patterns for which the labels were made seldom resemble the elaborate dress, ornate animal trappings or patterned floor covers, the wealth of visuals is informative in the way the study of antique miniature paintings has been.

Daily life, too, is satisfyingly depicted, with villagers tanning leather, water bearers making their rounds through the bazaar, and other rural and urban scenes coming into graphic focus. The mundane details of the cloth trade are revealed. In an idyllic rural setting, an overladen oxcart bears neatly stacked bales of cotton to market; an immaculately clean cloth manufacturer works a length of cotton on the loom as traders sit nearby bargaining over bolts of finished material.

Games and popular entertainment patronised by the local population are featured, from chess boards and kite flying to the more exclusive

entertainment offered by the dancing *nautch* girls, primarily of north India. Exotic animal acts feature monkeys, birds and elephants and itinerant acrobatic acts—the Indian taste for the exotic knew no boundaries.

Local gurus are celebrated, including Guru Nanak, the revered founder of the Sikh faith from the Punjab. The parade would not be complete without the ubiquitous *sadhus* or holy men who wander the subcontinent to this day, having renounced worldly possessions while accepting alms, in search of enlightenment and more.

The names of renowned trading companies, well-to-do cloth merchants and more are preserved for posterity, as is the vision of a culturally diverse and complex land. The Raj and royalty are depicted in ways that few Indians today would view with much enthusiasm. Royal pageantry is accurately portrayed in amazing detail. The world has changed immensely since a colonial power felt comfortable ruling a distant land with such a long history.

As antique textiles provide a tangible window into the past, so does the commercial art inspired by trade with and within the subcontinent. 'The wonder that was India' appears in all its variegated splendour. The vision is clearly an idealised one—the disarray and dirt of India is nowhere to be seen—but the India of yesteryear is revealed after scraping away sedimentary layers of modernity.

Remarkable on many levels, like the India it portrays, Meller's book will probably never be rivalled by a competing text, unlike rug and textile publications. Seldom does one have the opportunity to behold the first truly accessible, yet final, word on any subject; but that is what we have with *Label of Empire*. ♣