The Gold, the Gold; the Glory, the Glory:
Overcome by Colour in the 1870s and the 1980s

Rebecca M Brown

I adore that pink; it’s the navy blue of India.¹
I thought I would also have a most beautiful and marvelous jade, a shrimp pink, a shell pink, and a sunset pink. Also, I think the green should be wonderfully shaded from pale through a bit stronger through to really strong jades, because green is such a difficult color to get. I also think any swatch fabric – anything – such as lavenders, orchids, moonlit violets, etc., that we can use that has been created in the light of India is so much more valuable than any other way of getting a color.²

In the 1985 exhibition at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met), ‘The Costumes of Royal India’, Diana Vreeland’s famous aphorism, ‘I adore that pink; it’s the navy blue of India’, took physical form.³ Each gallery had walls pulsating with a different colour. Vreeland’s letter to her consultant Martand Singh in India, quoted above, articulated her vibrant vision: moonlit violet and shrimp pink, among other colours, covered the walls, ceilings and sometimes floors of the exhibition spaces, joined by platforms wrapped in tiger prints, painted gold, draped in fabric or covered with rugs. The mannequins, as was typical of Vreeland’s installation style, interacted with one another and with a range of furnishings, from nineteenth-century palanquins to an enormous pair of eighteenth-century copper naqqāra (also nagāra, kettledrums). A life-sized elephant on its knees and elbows centered in one gallery, topped by a nineteenth-century houdā, draped with twentieth-century trappings and decoratively painted on its white ‘skin’, including a bold peacock painted over its tail. Groupings of gold-painted mannequins posed together in vignettes arranged around selected oil paintings of Indian royalty, from Bernard Boutet de Monvel’s portrait of Maharaja Yeṣvant RaoHolkar of Indore, which can be seen framed in the installation view of the tent, to Tilly Kettle’s 1772 portrait of Shujah-ud-Dowlah of Oudh. Mannequins gestured dramatically in poses reminiscent of those used in Vreeland’s earlier career as editor at both Harper’s Bazaar and Vogue, while a selection of

¹ Diana Vreeland, quoted in Carrie Donovan, ‘Diana Vreeland, Dynamic Fashion Figure, Joins Vogue’, The New York Times, 28 March 1962, p 30, and again in an unattributed article, ‘The Vreeland Vogue’, Time, vol 81, no 19, 10 April 1963, p 77. The original context and precise wording for this aphorism varies; see below.
² Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute Records, Accession 2010.A.021, Box 18, ‘Singh, Martand Correspondence’ folder, letter dated 22 April 1985 from Diana Vreeland to Martand Singh
³ The exhibition at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art (20 December 1985 – 31 August 1986) was part of the Festival of India that took place in the US in 1985–86. Festivals were staged in four other countries: Britain in 1982, France (like the US) in 1985–86, the USSR in 1987, and Japan in 1988. The US Festival was the largest in scale, with over 250 events staged in cities and towns across the country, on the coasts and in the centre, in small town halls and monumental museums. Of these events, over seventy were exhibitions, many of which were landmark shows that changed the face of research and thinking on India’s many arenas of visual culture. See Rebecca M Brown, Displaying Time: The Many Temporalities of the Festival of India, University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2017; Pupul Jayakar, Festival of India in the United States, 1985–1986, HN Abrams, New York, 1985.

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music ranging from Zakir Hussain performing the raga ‘Kaushi Kanada’ to Edward Elgar’s ‘March of the Mughal Emperors’ played in the galleries. After practical concerns about clogging the air ducts and damaging the textiles prevented the use of sandalwood oil as a scent, Vreeland suggested Guerlain’s Taj Mahal-inspired Shalimar as a substitute. Thus the shrimp pink of the walls represented but one element among many designed to capture the imagination, transport visitors to a romanticised India and saturate the senses with texture, colour, scent and sumptuousness.


As with all of Vreeland’s exhibitions, the enveloping experience of an imagined place or period – here an imagined India – overwhelmed historical accuracy, or even the communication of any kind of historical sense. Unlike Stuart Cary Welch’s ‘India! Art and Culture’ exhibition that was also at the Met in 1985, no section exploring the British presence


5. The archives are unclear as to whether this plan was in fact pursued, but press coverage of the exhibition does mention scent in the galleries. See, for example, Jane Maulfair, ‘The Fabric of Royalty: Costumes of India Reflect a Tapestry of Royal Life’, The Morning Call (Allentown, PA), 29 December 1985, p E1. Concerns related to the sandalwood oil are noted in the Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute Records, Accession 2010.A.021, Box 18, ‘Singh, Martand Correspondence’ folder, letter dated 22 April 1985 from Diana Vreeland to Martand Singh; a 19 July 1985 telex from Vreeland to Singh in the same folder suggests Shalimar as a replacement.

6. Associates reminisce about this issue in Lisa Immordino Vreeland et al, Diana Vreeland: The Eye Has to Travel, feature-length documentary, USA, 2011; see also Debora Silverman, Selling Culture: Bloomingdale’s, Diana Vreeland, and the New Aristocracy of Taste in Reagan’s America, Pantheon Books, New York, 1986
in South Asia appeared here, such that the adaptations fashion made in the face of British pressure on India’s princely courts do not come into play. Instead, oil paintings, primarily done by European artists and largely portraits of named Indian royalty, courtly scenes, or occasionally British-Indian courtly interaction, simultaneously underwrite a feeling of authenticity – visitors saw kings wearing clothing similar to that on the gold mannequins in the gallery – while also providing an idealised, romanticised vision of Indian court life and its colonial interactions, one that centres on the personage of the rana or rami and exists in a time of near life-size oil portraiture, the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. An Orientalist, ahistorical fantasy of India thus emerges through the show’s inclusion of European two-dimensional representations alongside its emphasis on the presumption of the timeless and unchanging courtly clothing of India.

Vreeland, in close collaboration with the textile specialist Martand Singh, staged a spectacular, multi-sensory, all-encompassing experience on the lower floor of the Met. This spectacle participates in prevailing Orientalist presumptions and visions of India, an aspect of Vreeland’s approach that has limited the avenues for analysis. This is unfortunate, because the exhibition, in hindsight, participates in an early movement to legitimise the study of fashion writ large, and marks (and illustrates) a fraught transition from earlier exhibitions that focused on costume for ethnographic reasons, or as spectacular explorations of visual form, to scholarly, historically grounded costume exhibitions. Vreeland was perhaps ahead of her time – or perhaps the costume and fashion worlds, alongside those working in exhibition design, were more cognisant than those in the ivory tower of the need to engage museum audiences through all of the senses and to use colour centrally and boldly as a material element of exhibitions. ‘The Costumes of Royal India’ shows us ‘India’ as imagined in the mid-1980s, and that imaginary is, unsurprisingly, shot through with the prevailing nostalgia for the Raj in that decade. Vreeland very pointedly and obsessively used colour to forward her ideas about India and the clothing on display, creating an experience in which she, and she hoped the visitors also, would be overcome by the show. In doing so, she unwittingly but tellingly repeated precise tropes from the descriptions of the 1877 and 1903 Imperial Durbars in Delhi that struggled to grapple with the overwhelming, exhausting and destabilising colour of those events. In thinking the 1985 exhibition with these colonial spectacles, I propose that the show is not Raj nostalgia so much as a replaying of late nineteenth-century tensions between British imperial actors and Indian royalty, restaged at another conjunction of racial and multicultural

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7 Stuart Cary Welch, India: Art and Culture, 1300–1900, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1985
9 For more on Singh’s role and background, see Claire Wintle, ‘India on Display’, Third Text, vol 31, nos 2–3, 2017, pp 301–320, especially 316–318
10 Scholars have begun to acknowledge the import of this exhibition, as Wintle’s article (ibid) addressing cosmopolitan and transnational relationships in the show aptly demonstrates
tension in the United States of the 1980s. And, following scholars whose work acknowledges the intertwining of Orientalist tropes with homoeroticism and gay culture, I situate ‘Costumes of Royal India’ within the orbit of 1980s queer fashion culture in New York, acknowledging the relation between camp and Orientalism as seen in Vreeland’s exhibition. For me, these interconnections develop from the exhibition’s intensive obsession with colour.

Pink is, for Vreeland, the navy blue of India, a phrase she is said to have uttered in 1962, perhaps in conjunction with Jacqueline Kennedy’s trip to India in that same year. The phrase, again according to legend, is said to have inspired the fashion refrain ‘X is the new black’, a phrase that emerged somewhat later in fashion history. Thus the wide range of pinks Vreeland demands in her note to her collaborator on the show, Martand Singh: shrimp pink, shell pink, sunset pink. Shrimp pink stands out as a particularly evocative shade, one that did indeed appear on the walls and in the costumes. As a colour, and like sunset pink, it embeds


within it a temporal and physical transformation – shrimp vary quite a bit in the wild as they
shift into a wide range of colours and patterns for camouflage purposes, or, with some varieties,
gradually turn pink as they age. But the pink colour Vreeland likely refers to emerges most
prominently when cooking the most common varieties of shrimp found in dishes such as
shrimp cocktail. The colour thus also evokes taste – the taste of the shrimp, yes, but also for
particular kinds of restaurants, appetisers and foods popular among the high society of New
York from the 1960s through the 1980s. Thus, pink, already thoroughly associated with India
by Vreeland in the 1960s, here takes on additional sensory valence in its transformation
through cooking and its delectation on white tablecloths in elite hotel restaurants.

This is undoubtedly Vreeland’s imagination of these colours. We have no record of whether
Singh went out at night in India to identify a moonlit violet, or whether Vreeland’s assistant
snuck a shrimp cocktail prawn into a napkin to take back to the Met for colour matching.
Probably not. Simon Doonan, one of the designers for the show, notes that they had to repaint
the pink walls several times to get the shade Vreeland communicated only through metaphor.14
The naming of colours is evocative and seductive, something Roland Barthes admitted in his
autobiography:

The name of the color (Indian yellow, Persian red, celadon green) outlines a kind of
generic region within which the exact, special effect of the color is unforeseeable; the
name is then the promise of a pleasure, the program of an operation. [The name transports
us] because of the notion that I am going to do something with it.15

Thus, we can see several things in operation here in Vreeland’s evocations of colour – a multi-
sensory layering of sight, touch, smell, taste and time (moonlit violet), a continuation of a
centuries-long European fascination with the presumptively brighter, bolder and varied palette
of places to the South and East (on the Mediterranean and elsewhere), and a vocabulary of
descriptors that evoke not only the exotic but also aristocratic tastes, in line with Barthes’
colonially located adjectives.16 These rich pinks and violets of the exhibition’s walls, ceilings
and platforms are intertwined with a crucial colour–material: gold.

In the Met archives, gold appears again and again – as a colour describing a sari, as a
material in discussions about jewellery, and as an exclamation pepperling Vreeland’s note to
Pupul Jayakar, chairman of the Indian Advisory Committee for the Festival:

At last all the wonders from India have been set up, with one more parcel to come. On
Monday I went to see all these magnificent, exquisite and fantastic series of
unbelievability, and when I went into our backroom shelves, I became quite overcome.

14 Simon Doonan, Confessions of a Window Dresser, op cit, p 48
15 Roland Barthes, Roland Barthes, Hill and Wang, New York, 1977, p 129, as quoted in Michael Taussig, ‘What Color is the Sacred?’, Critical
Inquiry 33, Autumn 2006, p 49
16 David Batchelor has unpacked this chromophobia in (northern) European modernism; see David Batchelor Chromophobia, Reaktion, London, 2000
The gold, the gold; the glory, the glory; exquisite colors and workmanship; the jewels and embroidery...

I am overcome – Mapu [Martand Singh] has done a most wonderful job and it was a huge job. We are all very happy.

I wanted you to know this at once. This is the first time we have seen everything together – from shoes to turbans – and it’s gold to my eyes.

What a fantastic country you have!17

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The gold, the gold, the glory, the glory: it’s gold to my eyes. Gold certainly dominated as a primary colour in this exhibition. A majority of the clothes and jewels featured gold as a material, and, adding even more to the shimmer, the mannequins throughout the exhibition were painted gold. The mannequins had been made in Switzerland for the Met’s 1983 Yves Saint Laurent show; they needed to be repainted in what Martand Singh called a ‘suitable’ colour, and their torso, arms and legs shortened to accommodate what Vreeland determined (in consultation with the consul general of India in New York) was the average height in India: five feet and four inches.18 Gold is a tone that can work with a range of different costume

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17 Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute Records, Accession 2010.A.021, Box 18, Jayakar, Pupul Corresp. folder, note from Vreeland to Pupul Jayakar dated 10 July 1985; note that Jayakar’s title was ‘chairman’ despite her gender

18 Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute Records, Accession 2010.A.021, Box 18, Singh, Martand Corresp. folder, notes on the exhibition dated 5 November 1984 and Memos Diana Vreeland, Katell le Bourhis folder, memo from Vreeland to Jean Druesedow, Katell le Bourhis and Stephen Jamail dated 28 January 1985. This discussion of ‘average stature’ indicates the longevity of ethnographic understandings of
colours, and in the case of the India show, gold clearly came to the fore in Vreeland’s mind when considering the textiles. One of the documents in the archives lists the sixty-nine textiles loaned to Bloomingdale’s department store for their exhibition that was also in conjunction with the Festival of India. The list includes very short descriptions of each object:

4. Mauve and gold fine stripe and chevron border on white (cos/14/7)
5. Peach and gold translucent (sites/28/4)
6. Blue, green ‘changée’ with gold patterns & stripes (cos9-8)
7. White translucent with wide woven gold stripe

Only two of the listed objects lack gold – it clearly permeated every element of the exhibition, even among those objects deemed less important and thus loaned out to the department store. The choice, then, to use it as a unifying element in the mannequins underscores its ubiquity both in the objects themselves and in Vreeland’s conception of the show. But gold operates on a number of levels art-historically, in mannequin history, and in relation to skin colour and race; these elements all intersect in the choice of gold for the mannequins in this show.

Gold’s connection to wealth and to money certainly comes into play for most patrons and viewers – a symbol of luxury and royalty, an association also made because of the difficulty of working with gold as paint, fabricating gold leaf or twisting gold thread. Gold’s materiality reminds us of the materiality of all colour, making the shrimp pinks and moonlit violets physical presences alongside the shimmer of the mannequins’ bodies. It also reminds us of colour’s violence and poisonous potential – in the mining of gold and other ores in unsafe and often slave-like conditions, in the use of materials like lead and arsenic to achieve matte, flat, perfect whites, or in the destruction of thousands of sea snails required to produce Tyrian purple. The gold mannequins resonate as well with the tragic story of Midas turning his daughter into inert gold through touch. The gold shell evokes the suffocating power of pigment and mineral, forever fixing the figures in the exhibition even as they strike dynamic poses and shimmer in the lighting.

Both suffocating and vibrant, gold also enables the exhibition to side-step the question of epidermal colour. Here, the exhibition might be read as part of a larger context of shifting

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race and the human body, as it echoes J H Lamprey’s 1869 note on the proper use of his photographic grid to compare ‘the anatomical structure of a good academy figure or model of six feet’ with ‘a Malay of four feet eight in height’. Asian bodies, in 1869 and in 1985, were measured against the norm of the white ‘academy’ body; see J H Lamprey, ‘On a Method of Measuring the Human Form, for the use of Students in Ethnology’, The Journal of the Ethnological Society of London, vol 1, no 1, 1869, p 85. See also Elspeth H Brown, Work: A Queer History of Modeling, Duke University Press, Durham, 2019, p 20; and for the establishment of the white academic body as normal, see Julian Carter, Heart of Whiteness, Duke University Press, Durham, 2009, pp 1–41. Carter notes that the ‘academic’ descriptor for the white bodily norm comes from the fact that it is indeed based on athletic Ivy League students.

A discussion about the propriety of loaning any objects at all to Bloomingdale’s took place among administrators at the Met; the decision was made to loan only from among the objects that had been newly made for the exhibition, Metropolitan Museum Costume Institute Records, Accession 2010.A.021, Box 18, Bloomingdales India Promotion folder, letter from Stephen Jamail to Jean Druesedow dated 27 December 1985

Julian Carter deploys the powerful phrase ‘race-evasive codes’ to describe the kind of norming that the gold skinned, ostensibly ‘generic’ but very much Caucasian-featured mannequin exhibits; see Carter, Heart of Whiteness, op cit, p 2
and ambiguous legal and cultural understandings of ‘colour’ and race in relation to South Asian bodies in the United States. In the Jim Crow era, legal battles over whether South Asian immigrants and American citizens were ‘coloured’ or ‘Caucasian’ culminated in a 1923 Supreme Court decision that classified Indian Americans as coloured, not white, in line with the wider political drive to enforce segregation and enact discriminatory laws restricting the rights of African Americans. This legal and social history was reinforced by the continued Hollywood stereotyping of South Asians and the very prominent use of European and Middle Eastern actors to portray South Asian characters in popular film and television in the 1980s. Skin colour and colourism also played a role in India’s popular culture, often signalling class, caste, religion and region. Advertisements for products that could lighten the skin, particularly for women, were common in magazines and on hoardings in cities. Fair and Lovely TM, a skin-lightening cream created by Unilever, launched India-wide in 1978 and became a major presence in women’s cosmetics advertisements throughout the following decades.

These histories of racism and colourism were not explicit in archival discussions related to the colour of the mannequins in the ‘Costumes’ exhibition. Nor is there discussion of changing or adapting the facial features of the Yves Saint Laurent mannequins to appear more Indian and less white. Instead, the show uses mannequins that incorporate slightly abstracted Caucasian facial features, coated in gold paint and adjusted for height. The choice of gold also participates in the twentieth-century history of mannequin design, a history that itself sidesteps the race of the mannequin in a search for a ‘universal’ or ‘generic’ colour and form. Gold, white, black, silver, red, and other colours distant from any particular skin tone, had long been used on fashion, museum and store window mannequins precisely to refuse naturalistic verisimilitude. While early mannequin production in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century focused on realism, extending to offering a variety of racial physiognomies and wigs, later shop window mannequins focused on the erasure of specificity of the body beneath the

21 South Asian immigrants and their descendants were considered foreign, ‘coloured’, ‘caucasian’ and ‘white’ in various court cases in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In 1923, the Supreme Court ruled in US v Thind that Indian Americans were coloured, not white. This stripped previously naturalised citizens born in Asia of their citizenship, barred existing immigrants from becoming citizens and shored up state land ownership exclusions for Indian Americans. For discussion of the early court history, see Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, Little, Brown and Co, New York, 1989, pp 294–314; for a discussion of the relation between Jim Crow and Asian American racial categorisation, see Leslie Bow, Partly Colored: Asian Americans and Racial Anomaly in the American South, NYU Press, New York, 2010

22 In The Far Pavilions (1984), for example, HBO’s first mini-series, the white American actress Amy Irving plays the Anglo-Indian Anjuli, one of two wives of an Indian prince, in brown face, and the Egyptian actor Omar Sharif plays Koda Dad, who tends the prince’s stables and becomes a father figure for the British hero of the story, Ashton Pelham-Martyn (played by the white actor Ben Cross). Salman Rushdie famously called the mini-series a ‘blackface minstrel-show’ (Rushdie, ‘The Raj Revival’, op cit).


clothing, choosing materials, shapes and colours for the mannequins that foregrounded the fashion rather than the manufactured model. By the 1920s, slim, abstracted female forms, often in silver or gold, were seen as the epitome of modern stylishness, distinct from what were now seen as the grotesque wax dummies of the earlier era.

Gold, therefore, operates on a number of levels: it brings the materiality of the colour throughout the show to the surface; it signals wealth and the elite status of the clothes draped over the mannequins; it enables visitors to project a range of images onto the figures wearing the clothes; it focuses attention on the clothing rather than on the bodies underneath; and it enables the curators and designers to evade the question of skin colour and race. And this race-evasion is also an erasure, in conversation with the lack of historical sense in the exhibition. These are YSL mannequins in metallic masks, posing dramatically in narrative vignettes as if playacting in a fantastic vision of princely India.


25 See Jane Munro, Silent Partners: Artist and Mannequin from Function to Fetish, Yale University Press, New Haven, 2014, pp 167–188
This playacting was foreshadowed by the coloured or tinted photographs along the stairway down to the Costume Institute exhibition. The descent into the show served as a venue for a group of portraits of India’s kings, photographed and then painted, tinted or coloured, in the common global practice of the nineteenth century.27 These objects read as secondary, transitional, almost afterthoughts in the installation, and indeed no discussion of the photographs appears in the archives. Even in the published exhibition checklist they are simply listed by the name of the sitter and an approximate date – no photography studio, museum collection, or even dimensions are included. And they are listed as simply ‘photographs’ – not painted or tinted photographs.

The painted photographs in the ‘Costumes’ exhibition play with colour, just as the show itself did, and they evoke the materiality of colour in referencing a long history of photographic manipulations of the seemingly indexical image. These photographs are, however, like the gold YSL mannequins, just playacting. They are all the same size. Their frames are, like the mannequins, thin and painted in gold. The colour palette and its distribution across the surface

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27 See Deepali Dewan and Olga Zotova, Embellished Reality: Indian Painted Photographs: Towards a Transcultural History of Photography, Royal Ontario Museum Press, Toronto, 2012. The authors provide an in-depth study of the global reach of the manipulation of photographs from photography’s beginnings, along with an analysis of the many types of colouration employed in the oversimplified category of ‘painted photographs’. Their research shows that the variation within this genre ranges from photographs with paint applied over top to light colour tinting to paintings from photographs, with no photography beneath the paint at all.
are consistent across the set of photographs. These are, in fact, reproductions – most of them taken from the portraits commissioned during the 1877 Imperial Assemblage, when photographs couldn’t be easily made this large. The photographs were not colour tinted or painted in 1877, such that even the colour here is an addition by the 1985 curators and designers at the Met. Thus, these images are playacting in line with the YSL gold mannequins: these are 1980s colourised enlargements of 1870s photographs, made uniform and digestible as decoration to set the mood for what comes next. What’s more, the 1877 Imperial Assemblage was itself a costume show of sorts, staged in celebration of Queen Victoria assuming the new title of Empress of India or Kaisar-i-hind.

8 Bourne & Shepherd studio, H H The Begum of Bhopal, GCSI, 1877, Woodburytype, 19.2 x 12.2 cm, 84.XB.1355.13, The J Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, image courtesy of the Getty’s Open Content Program

9 Bourne & Shepherd studio, Imperial Assemblage, Delhi, 1877, albumen print, 20.9 x 30.3 cm, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019 (RCIN 2917574)
Rulers from across the subcontinent were invited to appear for this 1877 event, where they were awarded medals and a particular number of gun salutes depending on their status, itself derived from both their wealth and their loyalty to the British. They were invited, with a strong sense of obligation, to wear their traditional costumes and to participate in a ceremonial exchange of gifts with Viceroy Lord Lytton, as the representative of the Queen-now-Empress. The demands on the princes, along with the sheer expense of the event, took place against a backdrop of the Great Famine of 1876–78 that the Viceroy had done little to ameliorate. Criticism from the English-language and vernacular-language press at the time drew out the problematic timing, the vacuousness of the event and the contrast between photographs of starving children and those documenting the pomp of the Delhi celebration.

The photography studio of Bourne and Shepherd took photographs of many of the individual rulers in their regalia; they had already done photographic portraits of many of the princes during the 1875–76 tour of India by the Prince of Wales. In addition to a

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commendation album of the tour, these photographs also became part of the visual record of the Imperial Assemblage in James Talboys Wheeler’s commemorative history. Over a century later, in 1985, they came to grace the staircase entrance to the Met’s ‘Costumes of Royal India’ exhibition.

These tinted, cropped, resized and uniformly framed photographs thus linked the exhibition to earlier historical costume shows: events in which Indian royalty were asked – under political, economic and military duress – to present themselves at ceremonies designed to legitimise a unified and harmonious vision of British India. This coerced, passive participation in an invented ceremony foreshadows the constructed scenes prepared for the ‘Costumes’ exhibition. The added colouration on the photographs hints at the dramatic and material colours to come in the rooms below. This, too, brings the historical record in direct dialogue with the 1980s show, as in both the 1877 Assemblage and its successor, the 1903 Durbar, colour, and its ability to overwhelm, was a major factor in the proceedings. Val Prinsep’s 27-foot-long painting of the Assemblage was criticised precisely because of its riotous, clashing and inharmonious colours.

These ‘tumultuous chromatics’, as Sean Willcock evocatively calls them, were seen to undermine the harmony of empire at a time when painting style and political truth were

11 Val Prinsep, The Imperial Assemblage, 1 January 1877, 1880, oil on canvas, 300 x 302 cm, Royal Collection Trust © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019 (RCIN 407181)

30 James Talboys Wheeler, The History of the Imperial Assemblage at Delhi, Held on the 1st January 1877 to Celebrate the Assumption of the Title of Empress of India by Her Majesty the Queen:...: Including Historical Sketches of India and Her Princes Past and Present, Longmans, Green, Reader & Dyer, London, 1877
31 Not all of the photographs at the Met were from the 1877 Imperial Assemblage volume, but most of them did come from that event and they all share in the aesthetic of the princely portrait photograph as developed, in part, at the Assemblage
32 For a discussion of the political spectacle and its relation to the construction of an image of harmonious empire, see Trevithick, ‘Some Structural and Sequential Aspects of the British Imperial Assemblages at Delhi: 1877–1911’, op cit
33 For in-depth discussion of the passivity of the scene at the 1877 event, see Sean Wilcock, ‘Composing the Spectacle: Colonial Portraiture and the Coronation Durbars of British India, 1877–1911’, Art History, vol 40, no 1, February 2017, p 136
expected to be in synchrony with one another. In 1903, the painter Mortimer Menpes lamented the difficulty of capturing the colours of the event, echoing Val Prinsep’s frustration from 1877. Menpes describes his sense of colour overload in his 1903 *The Durbar*:

> I gloated over each magnificent combination and each harmony, the emerald greens, the carmines, the violets, the golds, and the vermiliions; and the result was that, before I had passed more than half the glittering throng, my sense of colour was exhausted. I was satiated: I had seen too much. Then I realised that here in India, to avoid the danger of becoming colour-blind, one should nurse one’s eyes, not stare and exhaust oneself in colour, but always keep some strength in reserve.

It’s gold to my eyes: Vreeland’s dramatic flair in her correspondence, with her embrace of the overwhelming quality of the colour of these textiles and her desire for walls of shrimp pink and the choice of shiny gold for the mannequins – these gestures reinvigorate and celebrate the ‘tumultuous chromatics’ of 1877 and the exhausting parade of colour of 1903 in an attempt to transport visitors not to India but to the vision of India produced in these late nineteenth-century princely portraits and the Imperial Assemblage that produced them. Willcock reads Prinsep’s massive painting as an awkward acknowledgement of the underlying political tension of the Assemblage and the later 1903 and 1911 Durbars: these were events staged to create harmony but they often instead articulated a clear hierarchy, sowed division and provided opportunities for the ostensibly passive princes to exercise their resistance to British rule. By drawing on these events from the British Raj and celebrating them, Vreeland replayed those tensions amidst the mid-1980s surge of Orientalist fantasy. The exhibition paints moonlight violet hues over the economic asymmetries of the global north and the global south and the struggle to acknowledge people of colour and what was then called the multiculturalism of the United States. Just as the 1877 Assemblage turned a blind eye to the concurrent famine, the ‘Costumes’ show staged an escape from the current political reality by seeking out earlier instances of similar erasure, when colour and ceremony attempted to elide political conflict.

These historical moments were entwined with Vreeland’s show through the substance and overwhelming effect of colour: colour as both a vehicle of exoticisation and a mode of resistance. This works because fashion itself is imbued with the idea of challenging and disrupting norms, embracing the overwhelming, over-the-top statement and encouraging its viewers toward fantasy. It works because the Costume Institute in the 1970s and 1980s took up the bottom rung and the basement floor of the academic ivory tower that is the Met, and so

34 See ibid, pp 133–134
challenged the white marble monochrome of the floors above with its shrimp pinks and moonlit violets. It works because of the intertwining of queer camp culture, with its resistance to the staid norms of mainstream society, and the history of fashion and its museum and department store display.

The show was, of course, Orientalist, but it is also a challenge to those who wish to dismiss fashion, colour, scent and sound as frivolity. The exhibition thus takes overwhelming colour, gold mannequins, lavish jewellery, a painted elephant, a white peacock, a parade of restaged photographs, a scented room with piped in music and proclaims their fundamental substance. This challenge to the chromophobic norm occurs, and perhaps can only occur, in a creative space dominated by queer bodies: the world of fashion. Fashion has long been dominated by gay men, and its participation in and appropriation of queer performance practice was perhaps at its height in the mid-1980s, when voguing and posing were in intimate dialogue with runway modelling and store window display.38 Indeed, the use of peacocks in the exhibition, while certainly an evocation of India, served as a double entendre for those aware of the Peacock Revolution in men’s fashion during the 1960s, when velvets, shimmering synthetics and patterns took over the counter-culture aesthetic, driven by gay streetwear and designers from London.39 The Costume Institute exhibitions at the Met were directly shaped by this dynamic and by the many gay fashion and set designers who worked with Vreeland. Barneys window dresser Simon Doonan, prior to his time at the department store, worked as a display designer for the ‘Costumes’ show.40 Notably, his stint at the Met was orchestrated by several friends who felt that he needed the job as a way to work through the trauma of losing his ex-boyfriend, Mondo Meza, to AIDS. Doonan marks the ‘blizzard’ of friends who died during the 1980s with a paragraph that closes by noting his inability to write about this period, even years later. Instead, Doonan details his relationship with Vreeland, her eccentricities, the struggle to get the right pink for the walls, Bill Cunningham’s white peacocks, and his adventures attending the Met gala. The ‘twinkling extravaganza’ of Vreeland’s show enabled him to memorialise his former lover and the others silenced by AIDS by throwing himself into the over-the-top drama of the ‘Royal India’ exhibition. Thus, the ‘Costumes’ show must be situated not only within the broader aesthetic of gay camp and vogue subculture in the 1980s, but also within the massive, traumatic decimation of the gay community by AIDS in the same decade. The show reads, in this light, as a bulwark against the contemporary reality of horror and loss: an escape to an earlier historical time and a geographically distant place.

40 Doonan, Confessions of a Window Dresser, op cit, pp 47–51
Camp, Susan Sontag tells us, is a sensibility that finds its home in certain forms of art, ‘often decorative art, emphasizing texture, sensuous surface, and style at the expense of content’.\(^\text{41}\) Content and substance are still there, even ‘political-moral’ content, but it is blocked out by the lens of camp – camp holds within it this duality of ‘the thing as meaning something, anything, and the thing as pure style’.\(^\text{42}\) Camp also relies on an underlying earnestness and innocence, a distancing from moral judgement and embrace of playful, aesthetic experience.\(^\text{43}\) Vreeland’s exhibitions at the Met – the ‘Costumes of Royal India’ show among them – dealt in camp, a camp that took itself seriously and was embraced in its playfulness by the many gay men she worked with and who helped her achieve her vision. And camp and Orientalism often go hand-in-hand, as one of Sontag’s central examples shows:

19. The pure examples of Camp are unintentional; they are dead serious. The Art Nouveau craftsman who makes a lamp with a snake coiled around it is not kidding, nor is he trying to be charming; he is saying, in all earnestness: Voilà! the Orient!\(^\text{44}\)

Vreeland seems to be saying the same thing – in all earnestness – to us via the ‘Costumes’ show as well. That the particular version of camp found in the ‘Costumes’ show performed through Orientalist aesthetics and recapitulated an imagined, sensual, colourful India means that we cannot take Vreeland’s reading of these objects as historically engaged. Nor can we learn from the exhibition about the imperial histories of British India or even the courtly cultures of various princely states as they existed in the nineteenth century. Instead, the show tells us about the operation of colour as a disruptive, powerful, material substance in both the nineteenth-century Raj and the mid-1980s fashion community of New York. Colour is substance and substantive: it shakes up colonial empires and erupts from the basement of the Met. Pink comes forth to proclaim the presence of gay men in the face of the erasure of AIDS. Pink is, for Vreeland, also the navy blue of India – and she invites us to wrap ourselves in that pink as a challenge to the chromophobic whiteness and exclusions of the 1980s museum. Camp is generous, despite its moral blindness, and it allows us to celebrate and play so that we might face down the violence, poverty and death that brown and gay bodies faced in the 1870s and the 1980s.


\(^\text{42}\) Ibid, p 520

\(^\text{43}\) Ibid

\(^\text{44}\) Ibid, p 521
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Image Descriptions

1. This view of a deep royal blue gallery shows three mannequins – two adult men and a boy – facing a huge parabolic drum. They wear shimmering red and gold robes and red turbans. To the right hangs a large oil painting of a group gathered in front of an imposing building draped with red cloth. A blue and gold textile shares the foreground with another enormous drum at the right edge of the photo.

2. A life-sized sculpture of an elephant dominates this gallery. Posed lying on its stomach with its front legs pointing forward, it rests on animal-print rugs and its white skin is painted with colourful vegetal designs. Gold mesh covers its forehead, matching the large gold seat on its back and the gold fabric falling down the sides of its body. Beyond the elephant, mannequins dressed in gold and grey robes stand in a pool of light against a deep pink wall.

3. A gold mannequin, dressed in a stunning white robe with a green and gold textile falling from his waist, stands boldly, with his feet wide and hand on his hip, in front of a frothy pink-canopied space. The canopy is tied open to reveal a chandelier hanging from the ceiling and shiny gold pillows scattered across a rug. On the far wall hangs a painting of a figure also dressed in white.

4. Against an orange-pink wall, three gold female mannequins gaze at one another as they strike dramatic poses in their multi-coloured saris: one in black, one in green with a red border, and one in saffron with red and gold stripes. A gold-framed nineteenth-century oil painting of three Indian women hangs at left.

5. Three gold mannequins sit on a dark pink platform against a mottled deep purple wall. The two women face us and sit on the floor, their gold, red and blue skirts pooling around them, while a male mannequin reclines on a suspended square swing, leaning against a pillow and holding the pipe of a silver hookah. He is dressed entirely in gold with red shoes and headwear.

6. A stairway descends into a gallery below. Coloured photographs line the neutral-toned walls going down and a painting of an Indian king faces the viewer on a deep purple wall. The title of the exhibition graces the wall above the painting.

7. A detail of two coloured photographs along the staircase: at left an image of a boy prince with an attendant, and at right a portrait of the Begum of Bhopal. The colours in both are light, pastel tones of green, pink and yellow, with backgrounds and carpets in deeper hues.
In this sepia-toned photograph, the Begum looks directly and boldly at the camera, her jewelled turban set at an angle across her forehead. She wears a shiny cloak that flows to the floor and out of the frame, enhancing the drama of the image. On the cloak, she wears several large sunflower-like metal medallions and a huge ceremonial rope sash. The cloak is draped to show that under it she is wearing a decorated skirt over close-cut, striped trousers, an Indian garment common in the region where she rules.

At left, three soldiers on horseback face a large, bright and flat open space where an enormous temporary pavilion has been erected. Rows of soldiers in formation occupy the middle right ground, with other groups of indistinct people gathered closer to the pavilion. At left, and closer to the viewer, spectators gather in the shade of a temporary grandstand.

The image presents a faded, sepia-coloured page in a small book with a single, centred photograph of four skeletal people suffering from starvation. A man with his ribs protruding through his skin sits on a makeshift stool and leans against a thin bamboo pole, while on the ground beneath his feet a woman lies on her side next to two children, one entirely naked and echoing the pose of the woman, and one leaning against a crooked wooden tent support. Behind them, the darkness of the tent interior occasionally reveals additional indistinct human forms. The title is handwritten below the image.

This painting presents an almost panoramic view of hundreds of Indian and British dignitaries in a wide variety of colourful finery seated on a low curved platform under a high canopy with a row of vertical cloth banners serving almost as a wall behind them. They face a higher, cream platform at left where, in shade and thus in darker tones, a group of standing figures crowd behind the Viceroy, who sits dressed in shiny sea-blue, facing a man in red who approaches on the stairs. Below the canopy and above the banners the horizon peeks through, and one notices a row of caparisoned elephants standing at attention just outside the gathering.