

Street Scenes of Algiers and Calcutta

At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century, Americans learned about foreign lands by reading books and looking at photographs. This viewing experience was greatly enhanced when stereoscopes became common in the American household. By looking at cards with side-by-side photographs, known as stereographs or stereoviews, through a stereoscope, the image became more real, appearing to be three-dimensional. The publishing of these cards became big business, as consumers wanted to keep collections of stereographs in their house for education and entertainment. It is estimated that more than five million stereographs were printed in the United States alone, primarily during their heyday after the Civil War to the 1920s.¹ One of the greatest publishers in the industry, Underwood and Underwood Publishing, originated in Ottawa, Kansas, expanding to offices in New York, London, and Ontario. The company published over 30,000 different titles, and by 1901, was publishing 25,000 stereographs a day.²

Door-to-door salesmen sold most cards, especially in boxed sets. A set of 100 cards would be sold with a "travel guide" that included encyclopedia-like information about each city or country, as the viewer took a virtual tour across the globe. Even if one chose not to buy the supplemental guide and map, each card had information on the back. Underwood and Underwood published their information in English, French, German,

¹ Darrah, William C. *The World of Stereographs*. Nashville: Land Yacht Press, 1997, 6.

² *Ibid.*, 46-48.

Spanish, Russian, and Swedish to allow for their sale worldwide.³ In an Underwood publication, the company touts that any person can afford their “travel system,” which “makes it possible for one to see as if one were present in body –in fact to feel oneself present –and to know accurately famous scenes and places thousands of miles away without moving from his comfortable corner.”⁴ The pamphlet goes on to say, “Tourists ordinarily have to put up with some unsympathetic courier whose statements are parrot-like and inaccurate. The guides for these stereoscopic tours are men of broad culture.”⁵

Consumers had an ongoing fascination with Western European countries and the Holy Land, and images of these sites were readily available in stereographs. It did not take long for stereograph photographers to seek out new lands. Many went to countries colonized by Europeans. These countries were often in the news because of development, tourism, trade, missionary presence, and simply a fascination with the exotic.

For the sake of comparison, I chose to look at selections from Underwood and Underwood’s stereoviews of Calcutta, India (1903), and Algiers, Algeria (1909).⁶ Calcutta existed as a British colony, and the French ruled Algiers. Both sets of images seem to depict the cities as having modern, European-like infrastructures co-existent with indigenous peoples active in the city, especially as merchants. This idea of an “idealized city,” attempts to construct a collective urban identity, with many classes of people and social order, yet with its own mythology and exotic mysticism.⁷

³ Ibid., 48.

⁴ “Travel Within The Reach of All: The Underwood Travel System.” New York: Underwood and Underwood, 1908, 3.

⁵ Ibid., 10.

⁶ On the stereographs, Algeria is designated as being part of North Africa, and “Algeria” is not used.

⁷ See Preston, Catherine and Anton Rosenthal, “Correo Mítico: The Construction of a Civic Image in the Postcards of Montevideo, Uruguay, 1900-1930,” *Studies in Latin American Popular Culture* vol. 15, 1996, 231-259.

In the first stereograph, "Algiers, general view of city and busy quay, N. Africa,"⁸ the photograph is taken from a bridge over the railroad tracks. On the left side of the image are three officials wearing uniforms and hats. It could be assumed that they are railroad workers or policemen. There is a rather ornate cement railing that goes along the boardwalk, which appears to be quite sturdy and orderly. Streetlights line the area, and the buildings are approximately five stories tall. The city skyline of relatively tall buildings is expansive, and fades into the sky. While most of this image is quite metropolitan, it is surprising that a large pile of debris, primarily wood, is cluttered near the railroad tracks. On the back of the card, the geography section explains the viewpoint of the photographer, followed by a paragraph titled "City life –Civic Betterment." This section describes what a visitor sees and experiences as they arrive in Algiers, from the view outside the train station to commentary on the lax customs officials, the writer seems quite impressed with the European-like buildings and the logical layout of the streets.

The next image is in order with the last, titled, "Elegant buildings on leading street, Algiers, N. Africa."⁹ This image appears to be across the street from the last image. The same five-story buildings are shown closer up, with French style iron railings on the windows, and signs in French. All the men on the street appear to be wearing hats, and all the women appear to have various types of head coverings. While the streetlights and one car in the distance reflect a modern city, there is a woman on the curb bent over a

⁸ Underwood and Underwood, "Algiers, general view of city and busy quay, N. Africa," Stock #1181, 1909. All stereographs used in this paper are available at the Franklin County Historical Society Archives, Ottawa, Kansas.

⁹ Underwood and Underwood, "Elegant buildings on leading street, Algiers, N. Africa," Stock # 11182, 1909. Additionally, it should be noted that while these cards were published in 1909, Darrah remarks that negatives were often republished many times, years after they were taken.

basket, who appears to be a street seller or beggar. While the street and sidewalks appear busy with commerce and travel, they do not seem congested. People of all classes seem to be present, from the man in a suit to a man in robes burdened by a large crate on his shoulder. While the photograph depicts this "modern quarter," the back of the card is insightful into the class distinctions felt by colonizers and the visiting photographer:

People and Homes. –History –The older part of the city, populated by swarthy Arabs and Moors, is as picturesquely old-fashioned as can be imagined. Its streets are crooked and narrow to the last degree, lined with mysterious and unsanitary stone buildings, and in many places they climb steep hillsides by stone stairways where burdens are all carried on the heads of porters.¹⁰

The final image of Algiers shows a Moorish shop owner and customers.¹¹ The shop is a market stall with an awning. The merchant is selling canned goods, produce, and a hookah, but the interior of the shop is shadowed, so only items near the front can be seen. This likely indicates that the store had no electricity. The customers are two men, wearing white outfits with dark cummerbunds and dark fezzes. The exchange seems pretty casual, as one patron is leaning against the counter that separates the merchant's open-air stall from the street. The back of the card remarks that Algerian shop owners produce their own goods, and customers can watch as a shoemaker fashions slippers or as a seamstress embroiders cloth. This remark is quite telling as to the photographer's feeling of distance from a time when craftsmen made their own merchandise on site. The card goes on to explain the agriculture of Algeria and the way to distinguish between the uniforms of French soldiers, Zouaves (infantrymen), Jews, and Moors.

Compared to the overall theme of the Algerian photographs, which attempted to show all parts of the city, the photographs from Calcutta depict the city as less modern,

¹⁰ Ibid., reverse side.

¹¹ Underwood and Underwood, "Typical Moorish shop with proprietor and patrons, Algiers, North Africa," Stock # 11183, 1909.

focusing more on religious customs, traditions, and stereotypical scenes. Generally, the street itself is shown to be dirty, just as the ~~N~~Native citizens are reflected to be dirty by being surrounded by unsanitary conditions.

The first example shows men, women, and children in white or black body wraps moving toward the river. "Bathing in the Ganges during Lunar Eclipse, Calcutta, India,"¹² is a rather perplexing card, with only the title (in the six aforementioned languages) on the reverse side. Hindus have a bathing ritual that takes place during the eclipse, but the card offers no details about the tradition. Hundreds of people are shown on the riverbank, and a bridge crossing the river can be seen. A barge and a few small boats are present in the river.

The second Calcutta stereograph, "Street showmen exhibiting superbly handsome snakes before an admiring crowd –Calcutta, India,"¹³ caters to viewers' stereotypes about Indian culture. Two men with snakes on a rug are surrounded by a crowd of primarily men, with a couple of women and children. All onlookers seem to be Indian. The showmen are wearing turbans, as are a few men in the crowd. Onlookers have dropped coins onto the performance rug. The back of the card explains the popularity of these street performances, and details the danger of the python and cobras being used. Interestingly, the reverse side explains that British authorities tried to end the practice of snake performances by offering a bounty for each dead cobra, but the plan seems to have failed as ~~Natives can~~ ^{could} profit greatly from snake breeding.

¹² Underwood and Underwood, "Bathing in the Ganges during Lunar Eclipse, Calcutta, India," 1903.

¹³ Underwood and Underwood, "Street showmen exhibiting superbly handsome snakes before an admiring crowd –Calcutta, India," 1903.

The next card, "How Hindu cows enjoy life in Calcutta –sidewalk scene on Harrison St., looking W., India,"¹⁴ also caters to stereotypes and outsiders' fascination with the Hindu faith's praise of cattle. The angle of the camera shows a city block, lined with cattle walking and resting on the sidewalk. The architecture of the buildings seems quite European, and the buildings seem to stand at least four stories high. There is a pole, for telegraphs or electricity, and there are a few people walking in the streets, apparently forced off the sidewalks by the takeover of the cattle. The streets are terribly littered with garbage and mysterious puddles. Western arrogance is obvious in this excerpt from the reverse side of the card:

You have heard all your life that the cow is a sacred animal in India; here you see what actually happens on a city street where these mild-eyed beasts are deferentially allowed to do just as they please... the surliest shop-keeper who would beat a thievish street urchin soundly for snatching at his sugar-cane or little cakes, will patiently allow one of these meditative beasts to reach in from the sidewalk and freely sample his wares... Familiarity with western science and civilization has very little bearing on such inherited ideas.¹⁵

The fourth image of Calcutta is in contrast to the previous three, depicting the city as quite modern and orderly. "Clean and airy Chowringhee Road,"¹⁶ is a vast overhead view of a wide street, with massive buildings, and grown shade trees shadowing the sidewalks. A street car is shown, as well as about a dozen horse and buggies, which seem to be moving in a very orderly, single-file line. There are a few pedestrians crossing the street, but the area seems surprisingly empty, lacking commerce, with the exception of one pushcart peddler in the street, who seems to be passing through. One sign that is only partially visible is written in English block letters. This scene is understandable when one

¹⁴ Underwood and Underwood, "How Hindu cows enjoy life in Calcutta –sidewalk scene on Harrison St., looking W., India," 1903.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, reverse side.

¹⁶ Underwood and Underwood, "Clean and airy Chowringhee Road (Esplanade at left) looking N. over Calcutta, India," 1903.

reads the reverse side of the card that explains that this is the European section of town, where the Viceroy and government officials are housed, along with foreign consuls.

The final image shows the duties of Indians who are of the lower castes. These "Bheestis," or water carriers, deliver water to the homes of residents, or provide a city service by sprinkling the streets with water to keep the temperature down, as the card explains.¹⁷ The street appears rather clean, but is darkened by splatters from the water containers of the six Bheestis standing around each other. The men all wear turbans and wear far less clothing than any other people shown in Calcutta stereographs. The reverse side explains that the water is held in large goatskin bottles that are refilled at public tanks. This is the first image that shows a person looking straight at the camera, perhaps troubled by its presence. Streetlights are visible, but there aren't any other people in the image. This image, like the others of Calcutta, does not show anyone appearing to be of European ancestry on the street, unless they were protected inside a buggy.

Most compelling about these stereograph images is that they serve both as photographs of the city, "arresting" the viewer's attention¹⁸, as well as acting as something of a travel narrative, with commentary on the reverse side. Calcutta and Algiers, both as colonies and as commodities for tourism, have similar photographs that are chosen to depict their essence. As emerging markets for commerce and tourism, both show a balance of European refinement and local flavor and exoticism.

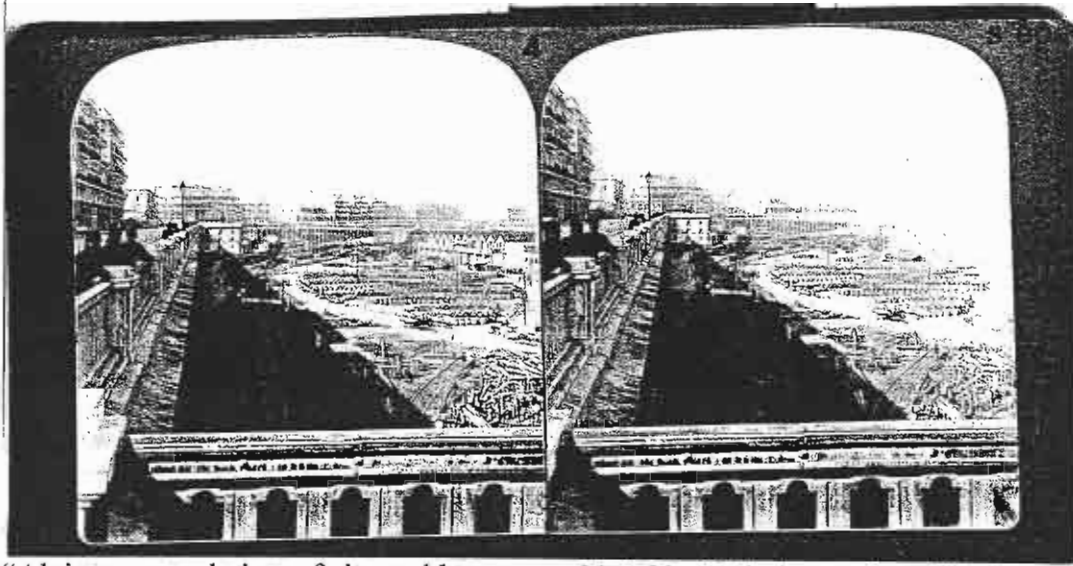
Very well researched and detailed account of the space of streets, Fine use of both sides of the cards. The comparison is not fully developed between the two locales, and more could have been done with some of the readings, such as Graham Clarke's chapter. It is well written. I encourage you to write something up on this archive for possible publication since it appears to be an interesting visual resource.

¹⁷ Underwood and Underwood, "Welcome fellows in thirsty India -Bheestis (water carriers) with their leather bottles -Calcutta," 1903.

¹⁸ The idea of a photograph as having the power to "arrest" is from Liggett, Helen, *Urban Encounters*. Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota, 2003.

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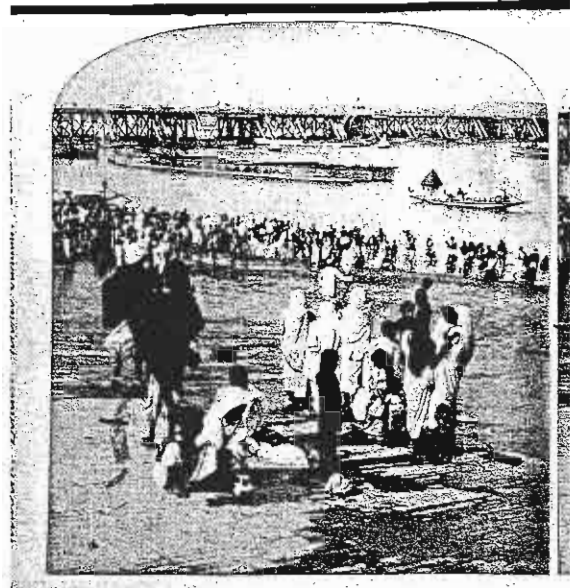
"Algiers, general view of city and busy quay, N. Africa." Underwood and Underwood Pub. 11181.



"Elegant buildings on leading street, Algiers, N. Africa" Underwood and Underwood Pub. 11182.



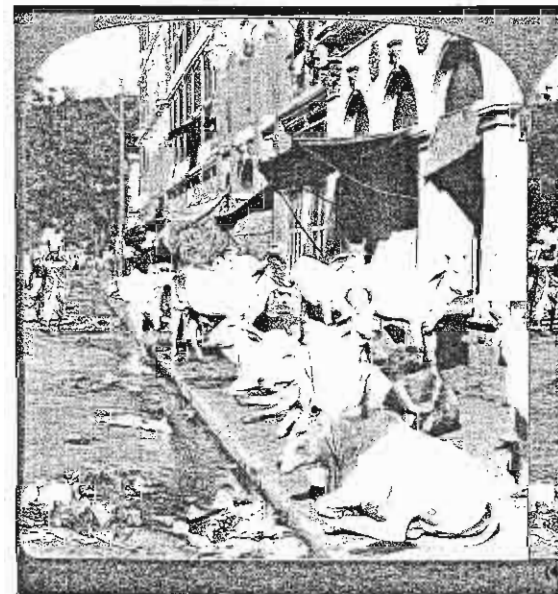
"Typical Moorish shop with proprietor and patrons, Algiers, North Africa" Underwood and Underwood Pub. 11183.



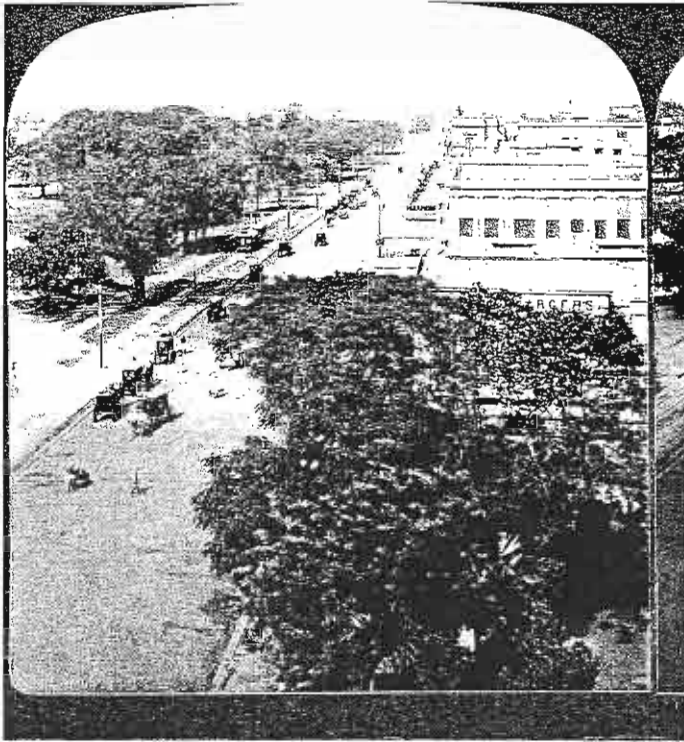
“Bathing in the Ganges during Lunar Eclipse, Calcutta, India” Underwood and Underwood Pub.



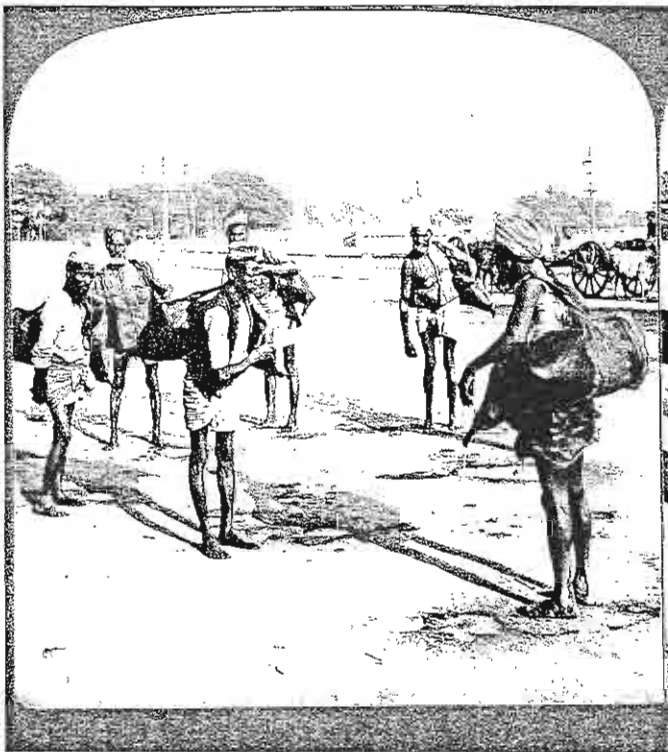
“Street showmen exhibiting superbly handsome snakes before an admiring crowd-Calcutta, India” Underwood and Underwood Pub.



“How Hindu cows enjoy life in Calcutta –sidewalk scene on Harrison St., looking W., India.” Underwood and Underwood Pub.



“Clean and airy Chowringhee Road (Esplanade at left) looking N. over Calcutta, India”
Underwood and Underwood Pub.



“Welcome fellows in thirsty India –Bheestis (water carriers) with their leather bottles –Calcutta”
Underwood and Underwood Pub.