

The Peacock Dress and the Spectacle of Empire

Image no: 1

Caption: The Peacock Dress; Jean-Philippe Worth; Paris, France; c. 1900–1902; Gold and silver Zardozi embroidery with applied green beetle wing covers (elytra) on silk taffeta, lining of Indian cotton muslin, lace net, rhinestones, white silk roses. National Trust Collections, UK.

Link: <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/107881>

Image no: 2

Caption: General view of the Great Darbar at Dehli; Bourne and Shepherd; 1877; Albumen print mounted on card; 15.24 x 24.38 cm. StoryLTD.

Link: <https://www.storyltd.com/auction/item.aspx?eid=4307&lotno=31>

Image no: 3

Caption: Delhi Durbar; 1903. LIFE Photo Collection, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_\(12\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_(12).jpg)

Image no: 4

Caption: Governor-General making the imperial announcements; Ernest Brooks; Delhi, India; 1911. Published in “The Historical Record of the Imperial Visit to India 1911”, 1914. Wikimedia Commons.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Governor-General_making_the_Imperial_Announcements.jpg

Image no: 5

IMAGE CREDITS

Caption: Delhi Durbar; 1911. World History Encyclopedia.

Link: <https://www.worldhistory.org/image/16609/delhi-durbar-1911/>

Image no: 6

Caption: The coronation ceremony, from the album 'The Coronation Durbar Delhi 1903'; Bourne and Shepherd; 1903; Platinum print on paper, mounted on paper; 22.09 x 27.17 cm. DAG.

Link: <https://dagworld.com/the-durbar-from-the-album-the-coronation-durbar-delhi-1903.html>

Image no: 7

Caption: Investiture of the Star of India, Delhi, 14 December 1911; George Percy Jacomb-Hood; 1914; Oil on canvas; 78.0 x 130.1 cm. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

Link: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/407144/investiture-of-the-star-of-india-delhi-14-december-1911>

Image no: 8

Caption: An official state entry procession, 1911; Silver gelatin print on paper, mounted on card. DAG.

Link: <https://dagworld.com/an-imperial-spectacle-the-delhi-durbars-and-its-ceremonies.html>

Image no: 9

Caption: The English royal couple, King George V and his wife Queen Mary; Cairo, Egypt; 1911. Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:In_1911_brengt_het_Engelse_Koningspaar,_Koning_George_V_en_zijn_echtgenote_Koningin_Mary_\(Mary_van,_SFA022001910.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:In_1911_brengt_het_Engelse_Koningspaar,_Koning_George_V_en_zijn_echtgenote_Koningin_Mary_(Mary_van,_SFA022001910.jpg)

IMAGE CREDITS

Image no: 10

Caption: Queen Victoria in coronation robes; Franz Xaver Winterhalter; London, UK; 1859; Oil on canvas; 241.9 x 157.5 cm. Royal Collection Trust, London, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Victoria_-_Winterhalter_1859.jpg

Image no: 11

Caption: Mary of Teck (1867–1953) Queen Consort of King George V; William Llewellyn; 1912–1935; Oil on canvas; 186 x 121 cm. Government Art Collection, UK.

Link: <https://artcollection.dcms.gov.uk/artwork/0-684/>

Image no: 12

Caption: Queen Alexandra (1844–1925); Sir Samuel Luke Fildes; 1905; Oil on canvas; 265.3 x 170.6 cm. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

Link: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/404554/queen-alexandra-1844-1925>

Image no: 13

Caption: Delhi Durbar; 1903; LIFE Photo Collection, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_\(9\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_(9).jpg)

Image no: 14

Caption: Viceroy Lord Curzon and Lady Curzon (C) making their state entry on an elephant to Delhi Durbar; 1903; B/W Print. LIFE Photo Collection, and Google Arts & Culture.

IMAGE CREDITS

Link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/3QGgIFxOcgRB5w>

Image no: 15

Caption: Delhi Durbar; 1903; LIFE Photo Collection, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_\(4\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_(4).jpg)

Image no: 16

Caption: Delhi Durbar; 1903; LIFE Photo Collection, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_\(8\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_(8).jpg)

Image no: 17

Caption: Delhi Durbar; 1903; LIFE Photo Collection, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_\(2\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Delhi_Durbar_of_1903_-_LIFE_(2).jpg)

Image no: 18

Caption: Mary Victoria (née Leiter), Lady Curzon of Kedleston; Albert Edward Jeakins; Delhi, India; 1903; Bromide postcard print; 11.5 x 8 cm. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Link:
<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw217021/Mary-Victoria-ne-Leiter-Lady-Curzon-of-Kedleston>

Image no: 19

Caption: Posthumous portrait of Lady Mary Curzon wearing the peacock dress; William Logsdail;

IMAGE CREDITS

England; 1909; Oil on canvas; 269.2 x 144.8 cm. National Trust Collections, UK, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mary_Leiter,_Lady_Curzon,_wearing_a_1903_gown_by_Jean-Philippe_Worth_-_William_Logsdail_1909_portrait.jpg

Image no: 20

Caption: The bodice of the peacock dress. Published in “Our work caring for Lady Mary Curzon’s peacock dress”, *National Trust*. © National Trust Images/Gavin Repton.

Link:

<https://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/visit/peak-district-derbyshire/kedleston-hall/our-work-caring-for-lady-mary-curzons-peacock-dress>

Image no: 21

Caption: Detail of metal thread embroidery on the Peacock Dress. Published in Kris Manty, “You Cannot Conceive What a Dream She Looked”, *Kovels Antique Trader*, March 12, 2021. © National Trust.

Link: <https://www.antiquetrader.com/collectibles/lady-curzons-peacock-dress>

Image no: 22

Caption: The Peacock Dress (detail of skirt); Jean-Philippe Worth; Paris, France; c. 1900–1902; Gold and silver Zardozi embroidery with applied green beetle wing covers (elytra) on silk taffeta, lining of Indian cotton muslin, lace net, rhinestones, white silk roses. National Trust Collections, UK.

Link: <https://www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/107881>

Image no: 23

Caption: Portrait of Jean-Philippe Worth; Carlos Baca-Flor; 1908. Published in “Jean-Philippe

IMAGE CREDITS

Worth, mécène et ami de Dagnan-Bouveret”, *Société de l’Histoire de l’Art Français (SHAF)*, June 6, 2025. Archives de la Haute-Saône.

Link: <https://shaf.hypotheses.org/7339>

Image no: 24

Caption: *Natives making the Durbar dresses and elephant-trappings at the principal embroidery factory where coronation robes were made for Queen Alexandra*; Published in *The Illustrated London News*, January 17, 1903. The Craftsmanship Initiative.

Link: <https://craftsmanship.net/historical-clothings-comeback/>

Image no: 25

Caption: Detail of green beetlewing embellishments on the Peacock Dress. Published in Kris Manty, “You Cannot Conceive What a Dream She Looked”, *Kovels Antique Trader*, March 12, 2021. © National Trust.

Link: <https://www.antiquetrader.com/collectibles/lady-curzons-peacock-dress>

Image no: 26

Caption: Embroidered muslin; Attributed to Hobart School for Mussulman Girls; Chennai, India; c. 1880; Embroidery with gold thread and pieces of beetle-wing on net; 117 x 48 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Link: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O164867/textile-hobart-school-for/#object-details>

Image no: 27

Caption: Sari; Ahmedabad, India; 1855; Silk, gold thread, gold wrapped thread, woven, embroidered with beetle wings and other metal; 267 x 110 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Link: <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O477831/sari-unknown/>

IMAGE CREDITS

Image no: 28

Caption: Portrait of Shah Jahan on the peacock throne; India; 19th century; Ink, opaque watercolor, and gold on paper; 16.5 x 12.7 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/446587>

Image no: 29

Caption: Diwan-i-Khas, Red Fort, Delhi; 1905. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

Link: <https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/64/collection/2302424/diwan-i-khas-red-fort-delhi>

Image no: 30

Caption: *The Palace, Delhi, Interior of Dewan-i-Kass*, from the album 'Views of India'; Samuel Bourne; 1863–1869; Photograph mounted on cardboard sheet; 36 x 43 cm. Department of Image Collections, National Gallery of Art Library, Washington DC.

Link: https://library.nga.gov/discovery/fulldisplay?context=L&vid=01NGA_INST:NGA&search_scope=MainLibrary&tab=MainLibrary&docid=alma991734193504896

Image no: 31

Caption: Diwan-i-Khas, Red Fort, Delhi, India; Narain Dass; 1870s; Albumen print; 21 x 26.7 cm. Artsy.

Link: <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/narain-dass-diwan-i-khas-red-fort-delhi-india-1>

Image no: 32

Caption: *Dewan-i-Kass, Delhi*; Clifton and Co; c. 1905. Leiden University Libraries Digital

IMAGE CREDITS

Collections, Netherlands.

Link: <http://hdl.handle.net/1887.1/item:924248>

Image no: 33

Caption: Detail of the Peacock Dress. Published in “The Peacock Dress”, *A Journal of Historian*, April 15, 2020.

Link: <https://ajournalofhistorian.home.blog/2020/04/15/the-peacock-dress/>

Image no: 34

Caption: Imperial Delhi Durbar; c. 1911; Oleograph on paper. DAG.

Link: <https://dagworld.com/an-imperial-spectacle-the-delhi-durbars-and-its-ceremonies.html>

Image no: 35

Caption: Durbar of Emperor Akbar Shah II; India; 1820–30; Opaque colour and gold on paper; 75.2 x 61.8 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/825637>

Image no: 36

Caption: A corner of the Pettah Kitchen in Bangalore (over 3000 people waiting for feeding time); Albert Thomas Watson Penn; South India; 1877. Environment and Society Portal.

Link: <https://www.environmentandsociety.org/exhibitions/famines-india/government-response>

Image no: 37

IMAGE CREDITS

Caption: Famine in Mysore, India: six emaciated men wearing loin cloths, five sitting and one lying on a mat; Willoughby Wallace Hooper; 1876; Albumen print; 15.7 x 21 cm. Wellcome Collection, London.

Link: <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/gx2pxszw>

Image no: 38

Caption: *Famine People Receiving Wages*, from the album '[Scenes of the Plague in Bombay, 1896–97, and the Indian Famine, 1899–1900]'; Shivshanker Narayen; 1896–1900; Albumen silver prints from glass negatives and gelatin silver prints; 27.7 x 36.3 cm. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Link: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/287308>

Image no: 39

Caption: *Gold Embroiders*; 1873. Published in Alina Cohen, "India's Sumptuously Beautiful Textiles Reveal Painful Histories", *Artsy*, September 13, 2018.

Link: <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-indias-sumptuously-beautiful-textiles-reveal-painful-histories>

Image no: 40

Caption: Gold and silver tape beater at work; Shivashanker Narayen; 1873. Wikimedia Commons.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Gold_and_silver_tape_beater_at_work_-_1873.jpg

Image no: 41

Caption: A man operating a silk loom at Ghotal in Medinipur, Bengal; West Bengal, India; 1873. Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

IMAGE CREDITS

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:A_man_operating_a_silk_loom_at_Ghotal_in_Medinipur,_Bengal_-_1873.jpg

Image no: 42

Caption: Interior of Magnolia Cotton Mills spinning room; Lewis Hine; Magnolia, Mississippi, United States; 1911. US National Archives and Records Administration, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Interior_of_Magnolia_Cotton_Mills_spinning_room._See_the_little_ones_scattered_through_the_mill._All_work._Magnolia..._-_NARA_-_523307.jpg

Image no: 43

Caption: Lady Curzon's peacock gown – Chicago Tribune; 1903. Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lady_Curzon%27s_peacock_gown_-_Chicago_Tribune_27_September_1903.jpg

Image no: 44

Caption: A British Indian Army ceremony. Published in “Viewpoint: The myth of 'strong' British rule in India”, *BBC*, September 7, 2016.

Link: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-37094519>

Image no: 45

Caption: Queen Alexandra (1844–1925) when Princess of Wales; Franz Xaver Winterhalter; England; 1864; Oil on canvas; 162.6 x 114.1 cm. Royal Collection Trust, London, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:ALexandra_of_Denmark_Princess_of_Wales.jpg

IMAGE CREDITS

Image no: 46

Caption: Empress Elisabeth of Austria in courtly gala dress with diamond stars; Franz Xaver Winterhalter; Vienna, Austria; 1865; Oil on canvas; 255 x 133 cm. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Elisabeth_of_Austria_by_Franz_Xaver_Winterhalter.jpg

Image no: 47

Caption: A watercolour copy of a 1939 portrait photograph of Queen Elizabeth; Mabel Emily Lee Hankey; 1940. Royal Collection Trust, London, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_Elizabeth_1940_Watercolour_by_Mabel_Emily_Lee_Hankey.jpg

Image no: 48

Caption: Woman's cage crinoline; England; c. 1865; Cotton-braid-covered steel, cotton twill and plain-weave double-cloth tape, cane, and metal; 92.71 x 97.79 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, California, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Woman%27s_Cage_Crinoline_LACMA_M.2007.211.380.jpg

Image no: 49

Caption: Princess Alice (1843–78), later Grand Duchess of Hesse; Franz Xaver Winterhalter; 1859; Oil on canvas; 50.8 x 40.7 cm. Royal Collection Trust, London, and Wikimedia Commons.

Link:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franz_Xaver_Winterhalter_\(1805-73\)_-Princess_Alice_\(1843-78\),_later_Grand_Duchess_of_Hesse_-_RCIN_400807_-_Royal_Collection.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Franz_Xaver_Winterhalter_(1805-73)_-Princess_Alice_(1843-78),_later_Grand_Duchess_of_Hesse_-_RCIN_400807_-_Royal_Collection.jpg)

IMAGE CREDITS

Image no: 50

Caption: HM King George V and Queen Mary at the Red Fort during the Delhi Durbar; London News Agency Photos Ltd; Delhi, India; 1911; Gelatin silver print; 16.6 x 21.5 cm. © Royal Collection Enterprises Limited 2026 | Royal Collection Trust.

Link:

<https://www.rct.uk/collection/search#/31/collection/2925852/hm-king-george-v-and-queen-mary-at-the-red-fort-during-the-delhi-durbar>

Image no: 51

Caption: Her Majesty Queen Mary, Queen Alexandra & His Majesty King George V walking w. rest of the Royal party across lawn of Buckingham Palace to view the celebrations on Victory Day; London, UK; 1919; B/W print. LIFE Photo Collection, and Google Arts & Culture.

Link: <https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/YAHiyGdjXNLimQ>

What can a gilded gown reveal about the optics of empire?

Around the turn of the 20th century, the British administration held a series of three events known as the Delhi Durbars — in 1877, 1903, and 1911. These were grand ceremonies proclaiming the monarch of England as the Sovereign of India, and were designed to project the power, wealth and splendour of the empire. As we see in this painting, most of the attendees — like the British officials, Indian maharajas and princes, chiefs and nawabs — were men.

This isn't a surprising sight. As British historian Philippa Levine once remarked, "The British empire always seems a very masculine enterprise, a series of far-flung sites, dominated by white men dressed stiffly in sporting and hunting clothes, or ornate official regalia." While this may be true, there was another, subtler and embodied form of displaying authority. Women's imperial fashion — which often used fabrics, techniques and designs from the subcontinent's colonies — also played a significant role in projecting the British Empire's narratives of power and glory.

This phenomenon was on full view at the 1903 Delhi Durbar, particularly at the Coronation Ball that marked the finale of the two-week affair. At the ball, Lady Mary Curzon, the then-Vicereine of India, wore the Peacock Dress: an imperial spectacle designed to inspire awe at the empire's massive holdings.

Cloth of Gold

The shimmering gown is made up of two pieces: the first is a bodice with a lace-panelled neckline; the second, an embroidered, champagne-coloured silk-taffeta skirt. The skirt has a cotton muslin lining, and is hemmed by white silk flowers. The gown, which weighs four and a half kilos, was created by the French designer Jean-Philippe Worth at his atelier in Paris.

TRANSCRIPT

However, the highlight of the dress — the profuse, intricate gold-and-silver thread embroidery called zardozi — was crafted in Delhi, by artisans at the workshop of Kishan Chand. Each ‘feather’ is delicately hand-stitched with coiled metal threads, while its ‘eye’ is denoted by iridescent beetlewings. This combination of techniques was popular in the 19th century, as we see in these samples of other textiles from the period. The hybrid design, which incorporates Indian textile within a western silhouette, draws from the subcontinent’s culture and history.

The motifs resemble the feathers of a peacock — could this be a reference to Mughal emperor Shah Jahan’s famous ‘Peacock Throne’? As we see here, the throne was crowned by two golden, jewel-studded peacocks. It once stood at the Diwan-i-Khaas or ‘audience chamber’ in the former residence of Mughal royalty: the Red Fort. Incidentally, this chamber was also the venue for the Coronation Ball where Lady Curzon wore the Peacock Dress.

Moreover, the embroidery technique used to recreate the feathers was one favoured by the Mughals. In this way, the gown subtly evoked the faded empire — at an event that itself borrowed from the Mughal court’s ceremonial framework of the ‘darbar’.

Optics of Empire

The opulence displayed in objects like the Peacock Dress contrasted starkly with life in India under British rule. One glaring contradiction was the frequent occurrence of widespread famines in the decades intervening the Delhi Darbars. Also, although the gown showcased patronage of Indian craft, the colonial administration’s oppressive policies had delivered a significant blow to India’s textile sector. This included supplanting handwoven and handmade textiles with British mill-made cloth and mass-produced imitations, especially in the domestic market.

TRANSCRIPT

Through its visual and material association with wealth and status, the Peacock Dress captivated the world press and embodied Britain's social and political control over the subcontinent. Speaking about imperial paintings of royal European women, British art historian Lynda Nead suggests: "The image of floating, ethereal mists of chiffon and tulle articulate[s] something much more concrete and substantial; like the steel hoops of the crinoline itself, the economic and political power of European monarchy and empire is what supports the dreamlike layers of expensive fabric."

In this and other instances, imperial glamour became a political tool. By wielding it, women of the British empire too became actively involved in cementing colonial rule, and perpetuating fantasies of power and control.

Postscript

The Peacock Dress has been housed at Kedleston Hall in Derbyshire, England — the Curzon family's ancestral home — ever since it was gifted to the UK government by Lady Mary Curzon's daughter, in 1997. The dress was removed from display in January 2022, to undergo conservation.

Zardozi — now used as a generic term for many types of metallic surface embroidery — and beetlewing embellishments were popular in the Mughal court and in Europe, especially during the Victorian era. They saw a decline in the 20th century, as royal patronage and elite fashion began to favour comparatively minimal designs over opulence. Today, zardozi techniques are popularly used for bridal and designer wear, though precious metals and stones have widely been replaced with cheaper alternatives. Beetlewing embroidery is rarely seen on contemporary Indian textiles.

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