

# Background information about *Hidden Histories* exhibition

## The exhibition

*Hidden Histories of Exploration: Researching the RGS-IBG Collections* was an exhibition that took place at the RGS-IBG in 2009 and which was curated by Felix Driver and Lowri Jones. It was based on historical research in the RGS-IBG's collections, including manuscripts, books, maps and atlases, artefacts, artwork, photography and film.

The exhibition was designed to reveal the agency of Indigenous peoples and intermediaries in the history of exploration, as reflected especially in the recruitment of guides, interpreters, porters and pilots. By highlighting the role of such individuals, it sought to prompt questions about what is made visible and what is obscured in standard narratives of exploration, especially when seen from a metropolitan perspective. One important objective of the exhibition was to portray the business of exploration as fundamentally a collective experience of work, involving many different people in many different kinds of relationships.

European explorers in many different parts of the world relied heavily on the physical labour of porters, pilots, guides and translators, as well as various forms of indigenous knowledge, including but not confined to oral testimony. Yet in writing for a metropolitan audience, explorers often failed to acknowledge the extent of their dependence on others in print: all too often Indigenous agency was lost in translation. By looking carefully at the various different forms of evidence across the collections, the aim was to recover some aspects of these hidden histories.

## Structure of exhibition

The exhibition was arranged into three thematic sections:

1. *The work of exploration* - highlighting the dependence of European explorers on local support, local knowledge and key intermediaries including guides and interpreters;
2. *Images of exploration and encounter* - presenting aspects of a diverse visual archive of exploration and the presence of Indigenous people within it;
3. *Recognition and responsibility* - reflecting on the extent to which the role of locals and intermediaries was recognised by the Royal Geographical Society during the nineteenth century.

Within each section, materials were arranged in order to make more visible the role of Indigenous people and intermediaries in the history of exploration, using various different kinds of materials from the collections, including manuscript, print, artefact, map, photograph, artwork and film.

(Based on excerpt from Felix Driver's 2012 article *Hidden histories made visible? Reflections on a geographical exhibition*, published in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*)