



### **Adventures in Photography**

“Adventures in Photography: Gifts from Harvey S. Shipley Miller,” a 2015 exhibition at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, testified to the particular allure of the artform, both for individual collectors and for encyclopedic museums. The origins of most arts are lost in the dim reaches of the past. We have evidence of masters as far back as the Ice Age bone carvers and the cave painters at Lascaux and Chauvet. But photography is less than two centuries old, well-documented and recognizably modern. The early practitioners demonstrate the enthusiasm and the self-doubt of inventors and pioneers; the works are, in many cases, aesthetically pleasing and culturally resonant.

The curators, Peter Barbie, of the museum’s Alfred Stieglitz Center, and curatorial fellow Nathan Goldstein, selected works that showcased issues in photography that helped shape our ideas about image categories.



Walery, *Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Mistress Clarkson in L'Étrangère*, c. 1876

PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART,  
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Today, picture-taking is ubiquitous, casual and often scarcely more purposeful than gum-chewing or channel-surfing. In the nineteenth century, photography was an adventure: the equipment was cumbersome, the chemicals were messy and dangerous, exposure times exhausting. Debates raged about the fledgling medium: was the camera most like a

scientific instrument, a documentary research tool or an artist's brush?

Those who insisted photography should be considered an artform frequently disagreed about how it should be practiced. Two widely recognized photographic artists, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) and Peter Henry Emerson (1856–1936), held decidedly different views on aesthetics and technique, although they both sought beauty and believed that subject matter was important.

Cameron was a society hostess who took up photography as a hobby and discovered an aesthetic passion. Her circle included intellectuals and artists, among them Alfred Tennyson and Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and her portraits of Victorian worthies are justly famous. She dabbled in literary tableaux vivants, notably a series based on Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*, but many of her images are essentially portraits of young women (friends, relatives and servants served as models), with titles that draw on myth and literature. *Hypatia* (c. 1868) is a portrait of Marie Spartali (1843–1927), the daughter of a Greek-born diplomat, a model for Pre-Raphaelite artists and a painter in her own right. She married William James Stillman, an American follower of John Ruskin who worked as a journalist and photographer. Stillman's *Eastern Portico of the Parthenon* (1869), in this exhibition, demonstrates both the art historical uses of the new medium and the potential to evoke the spirit of the place.

Cameron's choice of title is intriguing. Hypatia (350–415) was one of the most renowned women of late antiquity: a Neoplatonic philosopher, astronomer and mathematician, who was murdered by a mob of Christian zealots. She was the subject of Charles Kingsley's sensationalist historical novel *Hypatia* (1853), and more recently has been taken up as a feminist icon (see *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* and the 2009 film *Agora*, with Rachel Weisz as Hypatia). For Cameron, the Mediterranean beauty and introspective quality Marie Spartali brought to the role probably sufficed. Cameron puts her models in fancy dress, although she eschews archaeological reconstructions. Marie Spartali wears something vaguely Renaissance, distancing her from contemporary fashion. Cameron blurs out everything around the figure, which makes her seem timeless. Irregular focus was often denounced by photography critics, but the penumbra effect was one of Cameron's signature gambits.

Peter Henry Emerson approached photography from a very different angle. Beginning as a physician and scientist, he started taking photographs at age 26. His earliest successes were albums of views of rural life, such as *Life and Landscapes of the Norfolk Broads* (1886). He considered himself a naturalist and condemned the staged tableaux favored by Cameron and others. He proudly photographed the country people in their habitat: his sociological perspective tends to be conservative and nostalgic. Henry Peach Robinson, a contemporary fond of similar subjects, drew his ire by buying old clothes from country people and putting them on professional models for studio shoots.

Emerson did, however, consider himself an artist, rather than a documentarian, and Alfred Stieglitz deemed him a precursor of the Photo-Secessionists. A few figures appear in Emerson's *A Winter's Morning* (1887), but the photographer does not feature them. At first glance, they could be shrubs, part of the plants fringing the icy pond at the center of the composition. Emerson juxtaposes the oval of the pond against the diagonal of a precariously leaning tree, its filigreed bare branches silhouetted against the sky. Despite his rejection of retouching and other forms of manipulation, Emerson loved the picturesque and accepted blurring as a natural phenomenon of vision. (For more, see Jennifer M. Green, "'The Right Thing in the Right Place': P.H. Emerson and the Picturesque Photograph" in *Victorian Literature and the Victorian Visual Imagination*, University of California Press, 1995.) Cameron's blurring served another purpose, isolating her subjects from the present time and place and surrounding them with a legendary aura.

Much nineteenth-century photography served more mundane social and commercial purposes. The mania for photographic self-promotion is still a familiar phenomenon in the twenty-first century, even as it was in the early days of the medium. A photograph quickly became a way of identifying oneself, literally a calling card in the case of the pocket-sized *carte de visite*. Examples in the exhibition ranged from Pierre Petit's *Portrait of a Man* (c. 1859), capturing an anonymous, confident bourgeois, to various sorts of celeb-



rity photographs. The noted photographer Nadar endows *Victor Hugo on His Death Bed* (1885) with a kind of sanctity through remarkable lighting. *Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Mistress Clarkson in l'Etangere* (c. 1876) is both glamour shot and theater memento, feeding the cult of personality that stretches into the movie magazines of the twentieth century and the Internet manias of today. The photographer, Walery, specialized in show biz icons; his subjects included Mata Hari, Josephine Baker and Ruth St. Denis. He also did a lively trade in risqué material, like Ziegfeld Follies girls and outright erotica.

A number of photographers combined aesthetic excellence with social concerns. Adam Clark Vroman (1856–1914) documented the lives of Hopi, Zuni and Pueblo Indians, as in *Building the Sand Painting and Altar in the Mishongnovi Antelope Kiva* (1894–1905). Consuelo Kanaga (1894–1978) is best known for her sensitive photographs of African Americans, but she brought luminous sensitivity to more purely aesthetic images, such as *Camellia in Water* (1927–28).

Many of these artists made a smooth transition from one century to another, in part because their medium was in the vanguard of modernism. But some special qualities characterize early photography, notably clarity of vision—those long exposures, however inconvenient, had aesthetic advantages—and a palpable excitement at the chance to observe and preserve forms so precisely. Frederick H. Evans (1853–1943) made some landscapes and portraits (including a striking *Aubrey Beardsley*, in profile, c. 1894), but he is most admired as an architectural photographer. His platinum prints of French and English cathedral interiors (and the attics of William Morris's Kelmscott Manor, from 1896) glow with tonal light. Church interiors challenge photographers; many lose the sense of ambient space in attempting to fix the architectural structure. Caroline Rose's *Churches of Rome* (1997) and *Notre-Dame de Paris* (1999) are exceptional books that echo, albeit in color, Evans's reverent attention to sacred space.

Evans also documented the exteriors of medieval buildings, in cool, tonal greys that convey the texture of the stone and the intricate decoration of the façades. In *Sculpture, Bourg-en-Bresse* (c. 1899–1907), he depicts the three-dimensional statue of an elegantly dressed woman in an ornate niche. This Burgundian lady, with her elaborate headpiece and heavy, crisply carved drapery, probably had some iconographic function as a religious character or allegorical figure, but Evans does not explore that avenue of meaning. He is artist paying homage to another artist, over the gulf of five centuries and in a new medium. This important collection of photographs enriches the Philadelphia Museum of Art, in particular, and more generally, the ongoing dialogue between artforms so important in the encyclopedic museum.

—Gail Leggio