



The Rosebud Garden of Girls (1868), photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron
International Museum of Photography/George Eastman House

Victorian Photographer

by Gail Leggio

From the beginning, the camera served a variety of purposes: a scientist's instrument, a dilettante's toy, a painter's often unacknowledged sketching machine. In the hands of someone quick to recognize its unique properties, the camera could become a magic mirror, capturing qualities the restless human eye too often missed.

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) was 48 years old when a daughter and son-in-law, Julia and Charles Norman, presented her with a camera, intended as a diversion. During the next decade, Cameron made hundreds of photographs, using wet-collodian glass negatives and printing on albumen paper, a common but cumbersome process.¹ Her fingers were perennially stained with nitrate, and she described how “in all freezing weather I have poured nine cans of water fresh from the well over each

photograph.”² In the beginning Cameron used 9-by-11-inch plates and a short focal lens that tended to diffuse the image. She moved on to a larger camera in 1866, with 15-by-12-inch plates and a more flexible long focal lens. She had, by then, settled on her distinctive style, with soft focus as part of the aesthetic.³ Cameron sold prints, won medals, and illustrated—at the author’s request—Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. Yet like many early photographers, she remained, in the best sense of the word, an *amateur*, a lover of the art.

Born in Calcutta, Julia Margaret Cameron was the most talented, if the least beautiful, of the celebrated Pattle sisters. She married Charles Hay Cameron, a jurist twenty years her senior, in 1838. Her social circle included a host of Victorian luminaries including Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809–92), Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828–82), George Frederic Watts (1817–1904), Lewis Carroll (Charles Dodgson, 1832–98), and the astronomer Sir John Herschel (1792–1871). Herschel, who is credited with the first use of the word *photography*, from the Greek meaning “writing with light,” was a friend of Henry Fox Talbot, who invented the camera in 1839.⁴ Cameron’s 1867 photograph of Herschel, taken when he was 75 years old, is one of her most famous images. She asked the sage to wash his hair before he posed; his frizzed-out hair, dramatically lighted, gives him an electric halo that simultaneously suggests science and sanctity. Julia Cameron’s sister Sarah Prinsep kept a salon at Little Holland House. Julia herself settled in Freshwater, on the Isle of Wight, in 1860, when her husband retired. They were neighbors of the Tennysons. The sheer biographical richness of this set can be overwhelming. One of Cameron’s favorite models was her niece Julia Jackson, the future mother of Vanessa Bell and Virginia Woolf. Woolf would write about her great-aunt in an affectionate farce, *Freshwater* (1923), and in a biographical essay for the Hogarth Press, *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women* by Julia Margaret Cameron (1926).

The famous men have been excluded from the exhibition “Julia Margaret Cameron’s Women,” organized by Sylvia Wolf, an associate curator at The Art Institute of Chicago. She has gathered a fascinating gallery of young women’s portraits, most in superb prints. Both the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue present as much biographical information as possible on the relatives, neighbors, adopted children and servants Cameron lured into her “glass house,” the converted chicken coop where she discovered her genius. This detective work yields some delightful stories. Mary Ryan was a beggar girl Cameron took on as a housemaid-model. When a photograph of Mary was exhibited in the Colnaghi Gallery in London, Henry Cotton, a member of the Indian Civil Service, fell in love. Just before Henry and Mary married, Cameron posed the couple as characters from Robert Browning’s *Sordello*.⁵

Yet Cameron did her best to pry her sitters loose from the sociological ritual of the formal portrait. One of her strategies was to give many of the women she photographed alter egos, names culled from literature, myth, and the Bible. Not all of Cameron’s images of women are fancifully titled. A remarkable series of the young woman who would become Virginia Woolf’s mother identifies her simply as Julia Jackson or Mrs. Herbert Duckworth (her first husband). Julia Jackson also posed for Sir Edward Burne-Jones (1833–98), as the willowy Virgin of *The Annunciation* (1876–79).⁶ But Cameron’s close-ups capture something more, the intelligence behind the heavy lidded eyes and perfect oval face.

The titles Cameron more often gave her portraits of women—*Ophelia*, *Christabel*, *The Angel at the Tomb*, *Mariana*—send some critics combing through texts for interpretative clues. There was nothing arcane, however, about Cameron’s references. For the Victorians, classical nymphs, literary heroines, and biblical subjects were part of



Left: *Beatrice* (1865) Right: *The Angel at the Tomb* (1870) photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron.
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common parlance. This level of cultural literacy left the artist free to, in Dante Gabriel Rossetti's phrase, "allegorize on one's own hook."⁷ Rossetti had been asked, along with other members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, to provide illustrations for an edition of Tennyson's poems. In his design for "The Palace of Art" Rossetti depicted a Saint Cecilia with luxuriant hair swooning in the arms of an amorous angel. The Moxon Tennyson (1857) also included first-rate engravings by John Everett Millais (1829–96) and William Holman Hunt's (1827–1910) "Lady of Shalott," entangled like Arachne in her own web. Tennyson found the Pre-Raphaelites too free-wheeling for his taste, but Rossetti and friends had made a strong case for the autonomy of the visual artist.⁸

Despite the literary flourishes of her titles, Cameron's photographs are independent works of art. To assess Cameron's formal achievement, you need only look at the era's most popular photo-portrait genre, the *carte-de-viste*. Mounted on cardboard, these 3 1/2-by-2 1/4 inch albumen prints presented the subject full figure, at a distance, usually against a painted backdrop and dressed in contemporary finery. Cameron's friend Anne Isabella Thackeray wrote: "People like clear hard outlines, and have a fancy to see themselves and their friends as if through opera-glasses, all complete, with the buttons, etc., nicely defined."⁹ Cameron's own portrait style was different. She confronts her subject close up. Soft focus dissolves hard edges into chiaroscuro and misty luminescence. Tacky studio decor and contemporary fashion are avoided. Cameron's taste in clothes derives partly from the Pre-Raphaelites; aesthetic women wore flowing unstructured gowns (corsets were banished) and loose hair. She instinctively realized that, by simplifying, she could concentrate on the face and achieve a timeless quality.

Cameron's approach blurred class distinctions. In her essentially "egalitarian" attitude, Janet Malcolm remarks, "the intensity of the photographer-subject relationship was no less in the case of the servant than in that of the great man."¹⁰ For angels and madonnas Cameron's preferred model was Mary Hillier, one of her housemaids. To achieve the halo effect for her religious images, Cameron employed the same technique

she used with Herschel—freshly washed hair spread out to catch the light. The photographs of Hillier—*The Angel at the Sepulchre*, *The Dream*, *The Kiss of Peace* (all 1869), *The Angel at the Tomb* (1870)—all take advantage of the model's cameo-clear profile outlined in light. Cameron drapes white around Hillier's shoulders in *The Angel at the Tomb*; in *The Angel at the Sepulchre*, dark drapery merges into the bituminous *sfumato* of the background with only the face and a few slightly out-of-focus lillies gleaming.

Cameron's titles are evocative, not explanatory. Sylvia Wolf notes that the artist "appears to have sometimes had a title in mind when she began photographing, and at other times titled a work later in response to the way a picture looked."¹¹ Something in a sitter's face set off a chain of associations. Remove the title, and the face is still haunting, enigmatic, like the face of Garbo or Lillian Gish. Foreshadowing D.W. Griffith, Cameron realized the dramatic potential of the close-up, and she had a genius for finding faces that could carry a rich burden of meaning in response. Describing an actress she admired, she wrote: "I very much appreciate...reserve of power in everything—in painting, in poetry, in acting."¹²

Cameron's women never look vapid or docile. Photographic technique in the mid-nineteenth century required the sitter to hold still for a very long time. With Cameron's camera, exposures could take up to ten minutes. While the snapshot reflex smile is impossible in these circumstances, there is more than resignation or resentment in the faces of Cameron's models. Alice Liddell—once Lewis Carroll's muse—posed for *Pomona* in 1872, and the young woman projected a very strong sense of individuality and self-confidence. Formally, *Pomona* builds on an established Pre-Raphaelite compositional strategy, placing the figure in a shallow space established by an ivy-covered exterior or tapestried interior wall. The half-length figure of Pomona is set against a prickly mass of leaves, flowers and berries. The foliage is in sharp focus around her face and blurs at the edges of the frame. On the right, a spray of leaves falls in front of her white sleeve, creating a delicate shadowplay. The natural setting—different from the poetic nowhere Cameron often favors—is appropriate to the Roman goddess of fruit trees. At the same time, Alice Liddell's simple white dress and direct gaze give the image a timeless modernity far removed from the modest coquettes in fancy-dress togas of Alma-Tadema. Cameron also uses hedge as a backdrop in a dynamic group portrait, *The Rosebud Garden of Girls* (1868), based on Tennyson's *Maud*. Arranging her sitters in a graceful arc, Cameron leaves a lunette of leaves and flowers at the top of the composition. The pale, expectant faces of the young women—with their unbound hair and loose white gowns—are turned in different direction; only one looks out at us.

Cameron's images of women, like Rossetti's, entail complex negotiations between mythic feminine archetypes and real women, models drawn from an intimate circle of friends (and, in Rossetti's case, lovers). In an essay for a recent exhibition, Andrew Wilton remarks that "Rossetti's sirens of the 1860s turn traditional portrait painting on its head, or rather inside-out, to express the inner world of the artist."¹³ These images cannot be reduced to biographical data, anymore than they can be dismissed as illustration. One way for artists to divest themselves of the burden of narrative is to choose characters whose stories have already been told. When Rossetti paints an icon of Beatrice, Lilith or Proserpine, the narrative that once contained her dissolves to a psychological aura. As a painter, Rossetti had resources denied to photographers, notably color. In one notable instance, however, he may have borrowed an effect from Cameron. *Beata Beatrix* (1864–70) is a portrait of Rossetti's wife, Elizabeth Siddal, as Dante's beloved. Her eyes closed in trance, she is surrounded by an ectoplasmic nimbus. Alastair Grieve has suggested that

"the blurred effect of the background and radiation around the head may have been influenced by the idealized 'soft focus' photographs of Julia Margaret Cameron... which Rossetti greatly admired."¹⁴

Like many painters of the period, Rossetti used photography as a tool, to record preliminary poses and drapery, a substitute for sketching. An 1865 series of photographs of Jane Morris—posed by Rossetti and shot by John R. Parsons—can be directly related to finished paintings.¹⁵ Rossetti never explored photography as a medium, however. The relationship between painting and photography is particularly intriguing in the case of Pre-Raphaelitism. In its early stages, the movement was known for recording the facts of nature with scrupulous attention. For Ruskin, and some of the Pre-Raphaelites, science and art were synergetic modes of access to nature. Ruskin used photographs to record architectural details, but he remained ambivalent about the process.¹⁶ Rossetti's personal version of Pre-Raphaelitism had always been about creating poetic dream worlds, albeit with hallucinatory vivid details. Pre-Raphaelite photographers were to be found in both camps, among the "earnest, leaf-counting" observers and the Rossettian aesthetes.¹⁷ Like Rossetti, Cameron was moving toward a Symbolist style, although her personal beliefs and tastes were grounded in mid-Victorian Christianity and literature.

Cameron's self-described "fancy-subject pictures," which include her illustrations for Tennyson's *Idylls*, flirt with chainmail and wimples, the paraphernalia of the *tableau vivant*. But more often she arrives at a radical distillation of a literary theme. See, for example, two 1866 portraits of May Prinsep. In *Beatrice* May impersonates the doomed heroine of Shelley's poetic drama *The Cenci* (1819). Raped by her father, Beatrice Cenci plotted his death and was executed. There is no allusion to these horrific events in the close-up portrait of May, with her tilted head and sidelong glance. There is only thoughtfulness and a mysterious hint of sorrow. Aside from the title, the only clue to her identity is the shawl wrapped around May's head, in imitation of the famous portrait of Beatrice Cenci, attributed to Guido Reni, at the Palazzo Barberini in Rome.¹⁸ The visual possibilities of the turbaned head seem to be as important an inspiration for Cameron as the tragic aura of the old tale.

May appears as another literary heroine in *Christabel*, based on Coleridge's unfinished poem. The medieval ballad trappings of Coleridge's vampire romance have been eliminated in Cameron's deceptively simple photograph. May wears a plain dark dress; her hair is loose, almost disheveled. She looks straight ahead, but her eyes are half-shut, as if she were awakening from a disturbing dream. In the upper left of the slightly off-center composition hovers a white mist, a ghostly presence. Sylvia Wolf suggests that May Prinsep's "lack of decorum and her drowsy gaze imply a kind of post-coital languor."¹⁹ Such language is too clinical for Cameron, but the feeling is there, in the photograph, as it is in Coleridge's poem. This is an example of Cameron at her most direct, without countryhouse theatrical props or medievalizing accessories. The image radiates drama and magic. Today, when our world is saturated with images, image making too often seems a banal, mechanical process. Early photographs carry a magical charge, a residual trace of the maker's wonder and delight. Like alchemy, photography is both a science and an art. Cameron's photographs are not mere documents in the history of a medium; they are testaments to the power of the artist's eye.

Originating last year at The Art Institute of Chicago and continuing to The Museum of Modern Art in New York, "Julia Margaret Cameron's Women" travels to the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, August 27–November 30, 1999.

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Notes

1. Sylvia Wolf (with contributions by Stephanie Lipscomb, Debra N. Mancoff, and Phyllis Rose), *Julia Margaret Cameron's Women* (The Art Institute of Chicago; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), p. 33.
2. Graham Ovenden, editor, *A Victorian Album: Julia Margaret Cameron and Her Circle* (New York: Da Capo, 1975), p. 9.
3. Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
7. Cited in Forrest Reid, *Illustrators of the Eighteen Sixties: An Illustrated Survey of 58 British Artists*, first published 1928 (New York: Dover, 1975), pp. 31–32.
8. Tennyson was more comfortable with Cameron's photographs for his *Idylls*. Her own gift albums reproduce only brief extracts from the poems. See Debra N. Mancoff, "Legend 'From Life': Cameron's Illustrations to Tennyson's 'Idylls of the King,'" in Wolf.
9. Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 32.
10. Janet Malcolm, "The Genius of the Glass House," *The New York Review of Books* (Feb. 4, 1999), p. 14.
11. Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
12. Cited in Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
13. Andrew Wilton and Robert Upstone, editors (with contributions by Barbara Bryant, Christopher Newall, Mary Anne Stevens and Simon Wilson), *The Age of Rossetti, Burne-Jones & Watts: Symbolism in Britain 1860–1910* (London: Tate Gallery, 1997), p. 19.
14. *The Pre-Raphaelites* (London: Tate Gallery, Penguin Books, 1984), p. 209. The Cameron photo that best matches *Beatra Beatrix* is *Call, I follow, I follow—let me die* (1867).
15. Michael Bartram, *The Pre-Raphaelite Camera: Aspects of Victorian Photography* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company; A New York Graphic Society Book, 1985), pp. 136–138.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 118.
18. Cameron made five studies of Beatrice Cenci, three with May as the model and two with ten-year-old Katie Keown.
19. Wolf, *op. cit.*, p. 65.