

Julia Margaret Cameron: Photographs to electrify you with delight and startle the world by Marta Weiss. London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2016. 188 pp. ISBN 9781910164297. £25.

In *Freshwater*, Virginia Woolf's madcap but always astute and genial satire of Julia Margaret Cameron and her circle, Cameron tries to transform Alfred Tennyson – too busy dandling the young Ellen Terry on his knee – into a photograph of “Poetry adoring the Muse.” In order to do so, Cameron needs a pair of wings. When a trunk full of props (“Towels, sheets, pajamas, trousers, dressing gowns, braces”) yields everything except the desired appendage, Cameron instructs her servant: “What d’you say, Mary. There are no wings! Then kill the turkey!” Quicker than Tennyson can charm Terry, Cameron returns, wings in hand. When the model protests, “I was so fond of that bird,” Cameron intones, “The turkey is happy, Ellen. The turkey has become part and parcel of my immortal art.” Woolf was clearly having fun with her great-aunt’s reputation for imperious behaviour and self-assurance, but the play as a whole implicitly asserts that Cameron was just as much an “artist” as the Poet Laureate or the painter George Frederick Watts. It is an assertion that informs and is confirmed by Marta Weiss’s superb volume, *Julia Margaret Cameron: Photographs to electrify you with delight and startle the world*. Originally the catalogue for a winter 2016 exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the book stands on its own as a trove of images and a substantial academic storehouse.

Ideally, one should have at least two different kinds of close encounters with this book: one, the pleasure of studying Cameron’s photographs, which are beautifully reproduced, and the other, to benefit from Weiss’s scholarship. This is an eminently resourceful volume: wide-ranging in its discussion of Cameron, her network of friends and cultural associates, and Victorian photography, but usefully concentrating on the “remarkable relationship between Cameron and the South Kensington Museum” (now the V&A). Given the antipathy to women in the arts in that era, it was quite exceptional that the museum’s founding director, Sir Henry Cole (1808-82), not only supported Cameron’s endeavours and encouraged the purchase of her images, but in 1868 arranged for the museum to provide the use of two rooms for making portraits. Weiss, curator of photographs at the V & A, has organized the exhibition, the book’s long introductory essay, and the plates according to themes “drawn from one of Cameron’s letters to Cole.” Consequently, the interplay between photographer and museum director, artist and patron, exhibitor and administrator is highlighted, and Cameron’s professional development as well as her aesthetic commitments are also highlighted. Even those familiar with Cameron’s *oeuvre* might be surprised to learn that the V & A collection

includes 67 photographs that once belonged to George Frederick Watts. (The brief story of their archival history is entertaining but also harrowing: “The photographs were donated to the Museum in 1941 but were not formally accessioned at the time. They reappeared in the Museum’s crypt in the late 1960s ... in a brown paper package marked ‘1941.’” The provenance of the prints was eventually established.)

How gender norms informed the reception of Cameron’s work – especially the negative responses from the photographic press – is a topic Weiss intelligently addresses. A reviewer for the *Pall Mall Gazette* (1868) was happy to acknowledge the “special beauties of her workmanship,” and enthusiasts such as Coventry Patmore and Annie Thackeray praised the singularities of her images, but contributors to *The Photographic News* and *The British Journal of Photography* derided the “the lavish praise which has been bestowed upon her productions in the non-photographic press.” Implicit in their criticism: a belief that a woman could not possibly master the “skilful manipulation and care in the selection of properly-adjusted optical instruments” that professional male photographers had attained (qtd in Weiss).

A Cameron photograph deserves at least three considerations. Once, to study the representation of the sitter (family members; servants, especially Mary Hillier; famous friends such as Tennyson, Robert Browning, Lady Adelaide Talbot, Joseph Hooker, Thomas Carlyle, John Herschel, G.F. Watts; Sir Henry Taylor, the prominent civil servant and literary figure, of whom Cameron made at least 32 portraits), and the tension captured in the albumen prints between the person’s personality and the archetype Cameron was striving to fashion. A second examination is needed to analyze the aesthetic composition achieved (Friar Laurence with Juliet, the Sibyl of Cumae, Prospero with Miranda, Sappho, Spring, scenes from *Idylls of the King*) and to consider Victorian visual modes of narrative representation. Weiss is astute in her comparisons of the staging in the photographs with that of Renaissance religious paintings. Cameron not only enjoyed such intertextual or intermedial dialogues, she very deliberately aspired to present photographs as “high art.” According to Cameron, the subjects she preferred were “Portraits,” “Fancy Subjects for Pictorial Effect,” and “Madonna groups.” Anyone wishing to reconsider how her “effects” compare with those of Dante Rossetti, Edward Burne-Jones, or John Millais will benefit greatly from the generous selection of plates in the volume, and the exceptional Appendix 1, which provides a “Complete List of Works” by Cameron in the V&A illustrated with 3 x 3.6 mm thumbnail images. During a third examination, one should study a Cameron picture to understand how her “arduous and exacting work that involved potentially hazardous materials” was accomplished, how she experimented with lighting, focus, and reproduction values to produce such distinctive –

and, at times, controversial – images. (“What is focus,” Cameron once demanded of Herschel, “and who has a right to say what focus is the legitimate focus?”)

Within twenty years of William Fox Talbot’s first experiments with a pinhole camera in 1835, commercial photography flourished in the Victorian era: everything from the popular *cartes-de-visite* one gave away and collected, and family photographs that seem especially wooden because of the long exposure times required for the camera lens, to deathbed memorials and travellers’ images of exceptional sites. From the early 1850s, Roger Fenton had demonstrated that photography could not only capture faces and landscapes, but it could also document war and current events. For four months beginning in March 1855, and with the sanction of Prince Albert, Fenton photographed the Crimean War. For the most part, however, he did so with Carlylean zest, producing battlefield tableaux and individual and group portraits that effectively endorsed the campaign.

As Weiss carefully documents, however, Cameron was always aiming for something else: not, as she explained to John Herschel in December 1864, “mere conventional topographic photography – map-making and skeleton rendering of feature and form,” but portraits, tableaux, and series that, she boasted to Henry Cole, “should electrify you with delight.” As Roger Fry would later insist, “Pre-Raphaelitism had leavened the cultured society of the day with an extraordinary passion for beauty,” and Cameron was “pre-eminently” a Pre-Raphaelite artist in the photographic medium (Fry, “Mrs. Cameron’s Photographs” 24).

Weiss highlights one type of photographic experiment with which Cameron is not usually associated: “combination printing, by which multiple negatives are printed to form a single image.” Following the example of Gustave Le Gray, Oscar Rejlander, and Henry Peach Robinson, Cameron created hybrid compositions such as *My Grandchild Archie son of Eugene Cameron R.A. aged 2 years & 3 months* and *Daughters of Jerusalem*. Unlike the men, however, who developed techniques to disguise the multiple sources of their composite images, Cameron seems to have enjoyed demonstrating, in the print itself, how the hybrid assemblage was made. In *Daughters of Jerusalem*, for example, the upper three-quarters of the image features three contemplative women of childbearing age; the bottom quarter, quite obviously from a different source, is a contentedly naked sleeping baby. (Interestingly, the structure of the composite, produced and exhibited in 1865, anticipates that of Rossetti’s *Blessed Damozel* by a decade.)

Cameron’s interest in photography pre-dated her first camera, a gift from her daughter and son-in-law in December 1863. After 1875, however, when she and her husband Charles (1795–1880) moved to Ceylon to be close to four

sons and their families (and the coffee plantations in which the Camerons had invested), her “photographic production slowed considerably.” One can only pause to appreciate the scope and aesthetic coherence of what Cameron produced in a dozen exceptional years.

Julia Margaret Cameron features an exemplary 48-page introductory essay, well-researched and thoroughly annotated; 95 pages of beautifully reproduced plates, including texts and photographs from *Illustrations to Tennyson’s Idylls of the King, and Other Poems*; a selected bibliography; Appendix 1, the “Complete List of Works” by Cameron in the V&A; and, in Appendix 2, digital facsimiles and transcriptions of five letters from Cameron to Cole. The volume does not have an index.

The arresting face on the front cover of the book is that of Julia Jackson – a preternaturally calm but haunting visage that almost seems to anticipate marriage to Herbert Duckworth, three children in three years, his death, marriage to Leslie Stephen, four more children (including Virginia Stephen Woolf), and death at 49. It is as if the right half of the sitter’s face is too much in focus, too realistic for the viewer’s comfort, an effect of the artful shadows encroaching upon the left side of the face, the sitter’s unadorned and sombre attire, and the Pre-Raphaelite abandon of her tresses. Thanks to Weiss’s excellent book, one can understand the labour and science involved in creating such chiaroscuro effects in albumen prints from wet collodion negatives, and appreciate the artistry informing this and every Cameron photograph.

Lesley Higgins

Painting with Light: Art and Photography from the Pre-Raphaelites to the Modern Age by Carol Jacobi and Hope Kingsley. London: Tate Publishing, 2016. 176 pp. + 120 colour plates. ISBN 9781849764025. £14.99; \$22.50.

The hugely successful Tate blockbuster *Pre-Raphaelites: Victorian Avant-Garde* (2012-13) sought to broaden public understanding of the Pre-Raphaelite movement by moving beyond painting to encompass the realms of art and design. The show included the work of the photographer Julia Margaret Cameron and commented on the creative potential of the interrelationship between painting and photography during the nineteenth century. *The Pre-Raphaelite Lens – British Photography and Painting, 1848-1875*, curated by Diane Waggoner at the National Gallery of Art in Washington (2010), was pioneering in its focus on this subject.