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Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographs as Paintings

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Julia Margaret Cameron did not have a camera until she was forty-eight, given to her by her daughter and son-in-law.[1] She did not have mechanical expertise, scientific knowledge, or practical experience in the arts. She was a wife of a philosopher and a mother of seven children.[2] Through her husband's society however, she was in contact with some of the preeminent Victorian thinkers and artists. Cultural influencers such as poet Alfred Tennyson, leading astronomer and experimental photographer Sir John Herschel, Symbolist painter George Frederic Watts, and the Pre-Raphalite Brotherhood were just few of those that she corresponded with.[3] What Cameron had instead was a wealth of experience in society life, motherhood, and the sustenance of poets, painters, and philosophers. Amateurishness was not a handicap, but a privilege to be free from the photographic conventions that had already been established, and were being established in the mid-1800s. She could approach photography without limitations; she was outside the confines of expected expertise. She could shape photography through viewpoints and aesthetics already cultivated in life, rather than shaping her viewpoints and aesthetics around the mechanics of operating a camera. She wrote that she wanted to elevate photography to "high art."[4]

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[1] Emily B. Collins, "Julia Margaret Cameron," *JAMA Facial Plastic Surgery* 15, no.4 (July/August 2013): 249.

[2] Ibid.

[3] Lucy Smith, "Creating narratives from the Victorian photographic archive: re-imaginings of Julia Margaret Cameron's work in Ulverton (1992) and The True and Splendid History of the Harristown Sisters (2014)," *Word & Image* 33, no. 2 (June 2017): 171.

[4] Graham Smith and Mike Weaver, "A Letter by Julia Margaret Cameron," *History of Photography* 27, no. 1 (January 2003): 66.

Free from these bounds of what photography should look like, or what purpose it should be used for, Cameron's approach was distinctly painterly.[5] Cameron corresponded often with Watts, seeking advice on composition, lighting, and even subject-matter,[6] and also drew influence from Renaissance paintings.[7] Many of her photographs were allegorical and did not conform to the notions of preciseness and sharpness believed necessary for mastery.[8] It is the aim of this paper to trace the influence of painting in her photographs, and to draw out the consequence of using what author and critic Susan Sontag calls a medium of "truth-telling" [9] to create narratives and fictional identities around her sitters. In particular, the use of painterly conventions countered the inherently patriarchal space of photography, and allowed her to create her own photographic narrative which transcended Victorian boundaries of gender and class.

<div align="center">Cameron's "Inexpertness"</div>

One of Cameron's portraits of her friend Alfred Tennyson was heavily denounced at the time by her contemporaries. Tennyson however, claimed the photograph taken in 1865 by Cameron, *Alfred Tennyson with book,* to be his second favorite portrait. (Fig. 1) The photograph is out of focus in many areas and the print itself is covered in what looks like dust particles, smudges, and chemical smears imparted during the printing process. Aside from the unskilled

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[5] Susan Sontag. *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 1973), 4, http://www.lab40 4.com/375/readings/sontag.pdf.

[6] Jeff Rosen, *Julia Margaret Cameron's 'fancy subjects:' Photographic Allegories of Victorian Identity and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 2.

[7] Lucy Smith, "Creating narratives from the Victorian photographic archive: re-imaginings of Julia Margaret Cameron's work in Ulverton (1992) and The True and Splendid History of the Harristown Sisters (2014)," *Word & Image* 33, no. 2 (June 2017): 172.

[8] Mirjam Brusius, "Impreciseness in Julia Margaret Cameron's Portrait Photographs," *History of Photography* 34, no. 4 (October 2010): 344.

[9] Susan Sontag. *On Photography,* 66.

look of the print itself, the portrait was heavily criticized for being poorly shot, staged, and even

of making Tennyson out like a ruffian.[10] All these criticisms stemming from an expectation of

photography to be "in focus," a term that was already in use at the time.[11] These criticisms might

also have come from the shock of seeing a high-society poet in such disarray (drooping eyes,

beard and hair unkempt, etc.) in a medium that was expected to be a recording of the universal

truth of someone's essential appearance (and in Victorian times, a person's appearance was held

as an accurate measure of a person's stature and character[12]).

　　　Cameron's decision to photograph her subjects out of focus (as influenced by English St.

John's Wood painter and photographer Wilkie Wynfield[13]), and to leave in dust particles and

fingerprint smudges, were in direct conflict with the "gendered" expectations of mechanical

mastery in an inherently patriarchal field.[14] The male photographers who criticized Cameron's

work had a strong distaste for what they saw as her "feminine" technical failures, and heavily

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[10] Natasha Aleksiuk, "'A Thousand Angles': Photographic Irony in the Work of Julia Margaret Cameron and Virginia Woolf," *Mosaic* 33, no. 2 (June 2000): 134.

[11] Mirjam Brusius, "Impreciseness in Julia Margaret Cameron's Portrait Photographs," *History of Photography* 34, no. 4 (October 2010): 344.

[12] Patricia Fara, "Born in 1809: Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographs," *Endeavor* 33, no. 1 (March 2009): 5.

[13] Mirjam Bursius, "Impreciseness in Julia Margaret Cameron's Portrait Photographs," 345.

[14] Carol Armstrong, an art critic and history professor at Yale, writes that one of the central ideas of the theory of photography as a gendered space has to do with the "intelligibility of its operation." According to her, "gendering was encoded into photography's very technique as a possession of mastery of the subject in precise, crisp focus." The language and mechanics of photography is heavily coded towards men, especially in the 1800s, when women did not readily have access to, and were discouraged from, knowledge of machinery or anything related to science. Cameron's choice of impreciseness and soft-focus was seen as a "hysterical" lack of control over technology.
Carol Armstrong, "Cupid's Pencil of Light: Julia Margaret Cameron and the Maternalization of Photography," *October* 76 (Spring 1996): 126-128.

criticized her allegorical portrayals of women as embarrassing and even immoderate.[15] Cameron was rejecting this exact necessity of the appearance of technical mastery in order to enact a more subjective visual language that gave her agency over the optical instrument. In rejecting the gendered language of photography, she was able to draw from other visual influences, and so to truly understand her work, one must look to these other influences rather than to the language of photography.

When looking at Tennyson's portrait (Fig. 1), one must also look to the strikingly similar *Portrait of an Old Man* by Rembrandt (1632). (Fig. 2) Of course, it is unclear whether Cameron was influenced directly by Rembrandt, but by analyzing the similarities between these two portraits it becomes clear how much closer Cameron is to classical painters than she is to her photographic contemporaries. Both sitters occupy almost the exact amount of space within the frame, and are sitting in almost the same positions relative to the viewer. Compositionally, the two portraits are almost an exact match. Both Tennyson and the Old Man have wavy, unkempt hair and beards, and drooping eyes looking away from the viewer. In fact, even their clothing looks eerily similar, and both have virtually the same color palette. The background in the Tennyson portrait is just a blank backdrop, which was Cameron's preferred method in most of her portraits; very little artifice or prop. The background in most of Rembrandt's portraits are likewise. This puts focus on the sitter, and the chiaroscuro employed in both pictorial portraits imparts a sense of gravitas. The unfocused edges of Tennyson and his hands especially recall the soft brush-strokes and fleshy style of Rembrandt's paintings, and are not dissimilar to the hazy

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15 Jeannene M. Przyblyski, "Julia Margaret Cameron's women, great men and others," *Afterimage* 27, no. 5 (March/April 2000): 7.

edges of other classical painters. Cameron's choice to shoot out of focus can be seen as a photographic parallel to Renaissance sfumato.

The difference between a photograph and a painting however, is that often there is no physical trace or memory of the photographer on a print in the same way as a painting for the painter. Photography is ultimately a mechanical process. While a painter's hands may flow over a painting and leave personal marks, or have a more intimate interaction with the creation of the product, it is not often the case of photography. Of course at the time Cameron was working, printing a photograph was still a labor-intensive process the required a personal touch, and in Cameron's photographs, the marks of her "ineptness" (finger prints, smudges, shadows, etc.) were really a record of her personal interaction with the photograph, like a painter's brushstrokes. When sending her prints to Watts for critique, they both loved the unfinished-ness these marks produced, and it is clear the choice to not worry too much about marking or marring the photographs while developing was deliberate.[16] In the Tennyson portrait, these shadows and smudges "refuse to erase the means of production"[17] and also records the presence of Cameron as the artist.

All these artistic choices, coupled with the decision of representing Tennyson in such a disheveled manner, was Cameron's way of portraying the interiority of Tennyson. Hala Beloff, Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Edinburg and author of *Camera Culture*, writes that photography frees the photographer from the "burden of having to achieve a

[16] Jeff Rosen, *Julia Margaret Cameron's 'fancy subjects:' Photographic Allegories of Victorian Identity and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 113.

[17] Alison Chapman, "'A Poet Never Sees a Ghost': Photography and Trance in Tennyson's Enoch Arden and Julia Margaret Cameron's Photography," *Victorian Poetry* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 63.

likeness," and "free from [this] problem of simulation, Cameron devoted herself to the presentation of vivid identities, to the presentation of personhood."[18] The exterior appearance of Tennyson is given to her freely through the mechanical process of photography, and so Cameron is able to work on conjuring the interiority of Tennyson's "personhood" by enacting her own "romantic vision" of what a poet, or a genius looks like (she even has him grasp a book, to create a visual reminder of his poetic prowess).[19] The result is a photograph that many deemed not socially acceptable, and was very different from other photographic representation of Tennyson. Herein lies the duality of her photographs: they represent the visual truth of someone, yet she also spins a narrative around them that does not necessarily coincide with how they appear in daily life. She is the writer of a story that photography then codifies into reality. By rejecting the strictures of those working in the gendered, mechanical scriptures of photography, she is able to wield power over the powerful men she shoots, independent of the mechanics of the machine-camera.

<div align="center">Irony of Fictional Narratives in Photography</div>

The fictional narratives she created in her photographs are more apparent in her pictures of women. She called her portrayals of women as classical, mythical, and biblical figures "fancy subjects," a term borrowed from an academic painting style practiced by Watts.[20] Most of her sitters were servants or other working-class women. Her photograph from 1867 of her maid

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[18] Halla Beloff, "Facing Julia Margaret Cameron," *History of Photography* 17, no. 1 (April 1993): 115.

[19] Patricia Fara, "Born in 1809: Julia Margaret Cameron's Photographs," *Endeavor* 33, no. 1 (March 2009): 6.

[20] Jeff Rosen, *Julia Margaret Cameron's 'fancy subjects:' Photographic Allegories of Victorian Identity and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 1.

Mary Hillier titled *Call, I Follow, I Follow, Let Me Die* casts Hillier as the tragic heroine Elaine,

opposite King Arthur (this photo was originally an illustration as part of Tennyson's *Idylls of the*

King).[21] (Fig. 3) The use of painterly techniques to photograph Hillier elevates her to beyond

what she is. There is a strong influence from the Pre-Raphaelites in the way Cameron has chosen

to style Hillier; her hair is wild and flows behind her, and the profile shot to emphasize Hillier's

nose and chin calls to mind many of the examples of feminine beauty Dante Gabriel Rossetti has

painted. But even more striking than the aura of Pre-Raphaelite beauty Cameron catches in

Hillier, is the moment of tension and action Cameron has photographed. Hillier looks as if she

could be cropped from a portion of Titian's *Bacchus and Ariadne (*1520-3). (Fig. 4) The wild hair

behind Hillier seems to suggest a flow of movement of her body to the right, and the slight tilt of

her head away from the viewer and the elongated, almost strained, neck mirrors that of *Bacchus*

in Titian's painting; suggesting tension during a jump that anticipates release. Even in this single,

up-close shot of Hillier's face, Cameron has managed to capture action and movement. Hillier

encapsulates the same drama, tension, and fantastic mysticism of Titian's *Bacchus*, and the

choice to frame in only Hillier's head, neck, and shoulders creates an illusion that the camera is

merely capturing part of a reality that exists beyond the borders of the photograph.

The result of all this is that Mary Hillier, a maid low on the social ladder of Victorian

society, is immortalized as a classical, mythical figure, on par with the likes of the prominent

characters painted by Titian or the beautiful women of Rossetti's paintings. The problem that

arises from using a model to depict a classical figure in photography versus in painting is as

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[21] "Call, I Follow, I Follow, Let Me Die," Victoria and Albert Museum Collections, accessed November 10, 2017, http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O77428/call-i-follow-i-follow-photograph-cameron-julia-margaret/.

Susan Sontag writes in *On Photography*; "photographs make a claim to be true that paintings never make. A fake painting (whose attribution is false) falsifies the history of art. A fake photograph (…whose caption is false) falsifies reality."[22] While Cameron is not faking a photograph in the exact sense Sontag is describing, she *is* creating a narrative fiction in her photographs at at time when photographs were seen as agents of truth-telling and instruments of science.[23] Models employed as reference for paintings are not seen in the final products; they are many layers removed and obscured and ultimately made invisible by the painter's own additions, revisions, and representations. There is no confusion as to whether Titian's *Bacchus* is a true likeness or indexical reference of the existence of a real Bacchus. (Fig. 4) Photography however, captures optical truth, and models cannot be separated from the final product, nor can there be any doubt as to whether the person captured in the photograph existed at that time in that manner. They are not simply a reference for a character; they inhabit the role of that character. In styling Mary Hillier as a figure from Arthurian legend, and labeling her as such, Cameron is irretrievably linking her to that identity, and since the knowledge of the true identity of the subject of *Call, I Follow, I Follow, Let Me Die* (Fig. 3) is not as readily available as the photographic itself, Cameron is at the very least *obscuring* reality.

Cameron's "fancy subjects" then, exist in a space between truth and fiction, and that space is where the real identities and the pictorial identities of her sitters dissolve and blur into one another. Her pictures are designed to be allegorical, yet it is difficult to distinguish between the allegoric representation of an Arthurian figure and the presence of Mary Hillier. Furthermore,

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[22] Susan Sontag. *On Photography* (New York: Rosetta Books, 1973), 66, http://www.lab40 4.com/375/readings/sontag.pdf.

[23] Ibid.

since there are no photographs of a "real" Elaine, Hillier as Elaine is even more profound and

authoritative and confusing. Hillier could very well be this mystical Arthurian figure for all

intents and purposes, since there is no other "documentation" for Elaine. Where does Hillier's

identity begin, and where does it end; how much does the role of Elaine cover over the

photographic presence of Hillier; and how much is Hillier an embodiment of Elaine? A painter

has complete control over the minute expressions, movements, and emotions of characters in

their work; the characters are truly designed creations. But a photographer only has control over

when and how a moment that already exists is captured; the nuances of expression and

movement are completely Hillier's; a photograph can never be completely by design (especially

in a time before post-production). In the end, this paradox created by Cameron's distinct,

painterly photographic style allows Hillier to be elevated in photography in ways she cant be in

life; in the photograph she exists beyond what she is allowed to be in Victorian society.

Conclusion: Great Men Versus "Fancy Subjects"

The narrative Cameron has spun around Mary Hillier is not so very different from the

narrative spun around her male sitters. An identity is created for Hillier as much as for Tennyson.

Tennyson is at once himself and also molded into a type imagined by Cameron (the genius,

romantic poet). (Fig. 1) Both inhabit a space of dual identities. Neither one looks in the

photographs as they would in daily life; both inhabit other roles yet the image captured is the

skin of their bodies.

The care to which Cameron has taken to photograph Hillier, and many of her other

female sitters, also shows a high degree of respect for them, or at least an assessment of equal

value between the work of photographing them versus notable men. So not only do Cameron's

"fancy subjects" allow her models to exist in a space beyond their social class, they also break away the distinctions between genders. This is even more evident when looking through her photographic album *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men & Fair Women*.[24] Portraits of women and children exist alongside those of Charles Darwin, Robert Browning, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to name a few. The album's arrangement creates a narrative framework of sameness and equality. The distance between the Famous Men and Fair Women is eliminated figuratively and literally, and it is because the portraits of women are shot with same painterly language as the men that there is not a clear gender distinction even as they are exhibited next to one another. The photographs are of the same artistic quality and integrity, and so Mary Hillier's visage can be shown with no irony or embarrassment in the same space as Darwin.

For many decades now, Cameron has been recognized as a pioneering figure in photography, even if her work was originally seen as immoderate or even slovenly. But "slovenliness" was simply the patriarchal interpretation of her refusal to be caged by the machinery of Victorian expectations. By analyzing her photographs in terms of classical painting, the true beauty and paradox inherent in her photographs can be teased out. The fantasy she spins around her sitters is complicated by her medium of choice, and the reverence she showed to her female sitters was no less than that for famous men. She wasn't just a pioneer in photography, but a woman who tramped upon the boundaries of propriety and patriarchy.

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[24] Julia Margaret Cameron, *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men & Fair Women* (The University of California, 20010), Google Books.

Image Appendix

Figure 1: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Alfred Tennyson with book*, 1865. Albumen print from wet collodion glass negative, 25.2 x 20.1 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.1143.1963.

Figure 2:Rembrandt Harmensz. van Rijn, *Portrait of an Old Man*, 1632. Oil on oak panel, 66.9 x 50.7 cm. Harvard Art Museums, Cambridge. 1930.191.

Figure 3: Julia Margaret Cameron, *Call, I Follow, I Follow, Let Me Die!*, 1867. Carbon print from copy negative, 35 x 26.7 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 15.1939.

Figure 4: Titian, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1520-3, oil on canvas, 176.5 x 191 cm, The National Gallery, London. NG35.

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