

Presentation by Kathy Matthes

Julia Margaret Cameron

(1815-1879) British



Photographer: Henry Herschel Hay Cameron
1870, Albumen silver print from glass negative

"My aspirations are to ennoble
Photography and to secure for
it the character and uses of
High Art by combining the real
& Ideal & sacrificing nothing of
Truth by all possible devotion
to poetry and beauty."

Julia Margaret Cameron to Sir John Herschel, 31 December
1864 (as cited in Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019. p. 1)



Julia Margaret Cameron
Photographer: Charles Somers-Cocks, c. 1860

Biographical Information

- “Born to a prosperous family stationed in Calcutta [in 1815], Julia Margaret Pattle was educated in England and France.
- She was married in 1838 to Charles Hay Cameron and had six children. The family settled in 1860 on the Isle of Wight, neighboring the estate of their friend the poet laureate Alfred, Lord Tennyson.
- Cameron's practice of photography began relatively late in her life, at age forty-eight, when her daughter gave her a sliding wooden box camera” (International Center for Photography, 2019, p. 1).
- “In 1864, she became a member of the Photographic Society of London and of Scotland, and prepared photographs for exhibition and sale through the London print dealers P. and D. Colnaghi” (International Center for Photography, 2019, p. 1).
- In 1868, she was granted the use of two rooms as a portrait studio as the first artist-in-residence at the Victorian & Albert Museum” (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019, p. 1).

“From the first moment, I handled my lens with a tender ardour . . . and it has become to me as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigour” (MET, 2019).

Influences

- “In 1836, she met the British astronomer Sir John Herschel who . . . introduced her to photography. He remained a life-long friend and correspondent on photographic matters” (Victoria and Albert Museum, 2019, p. 1).
- “Photography became Cameron’s link to the writers, artists, and scientists who were her spiritual and artistic advisors, friends, neighbors, and intellectual correspondents” (MET, 2019, p.1).
- “In 1848, Cameron became involved with the Little Holland House group . . . a Salon run by Cameron's sister, Sarah Prinsep, and the setting that introduced Cameron to the aesthetic hub of London, and especially to her life long friend, the painter George Frederic Watts” (The Art Story Foundation, 2019a, p. 1).
- “Cameron was part of a social circle that included the Pre-Raphaelite artists Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Michael Rossetti, and Edward Burne-Jones, all of whom were early supporters of her photographic style. Her work reflected their influence” (The Art Story, 2019b, p. 1).

“I began with no knowledge of the art I did not know where to place my dark box, how to focus my sitter, and my first picture I effaced to my consternation by rubbing my hand over the filmy side of the glass” (MET, 2019, p. 1).

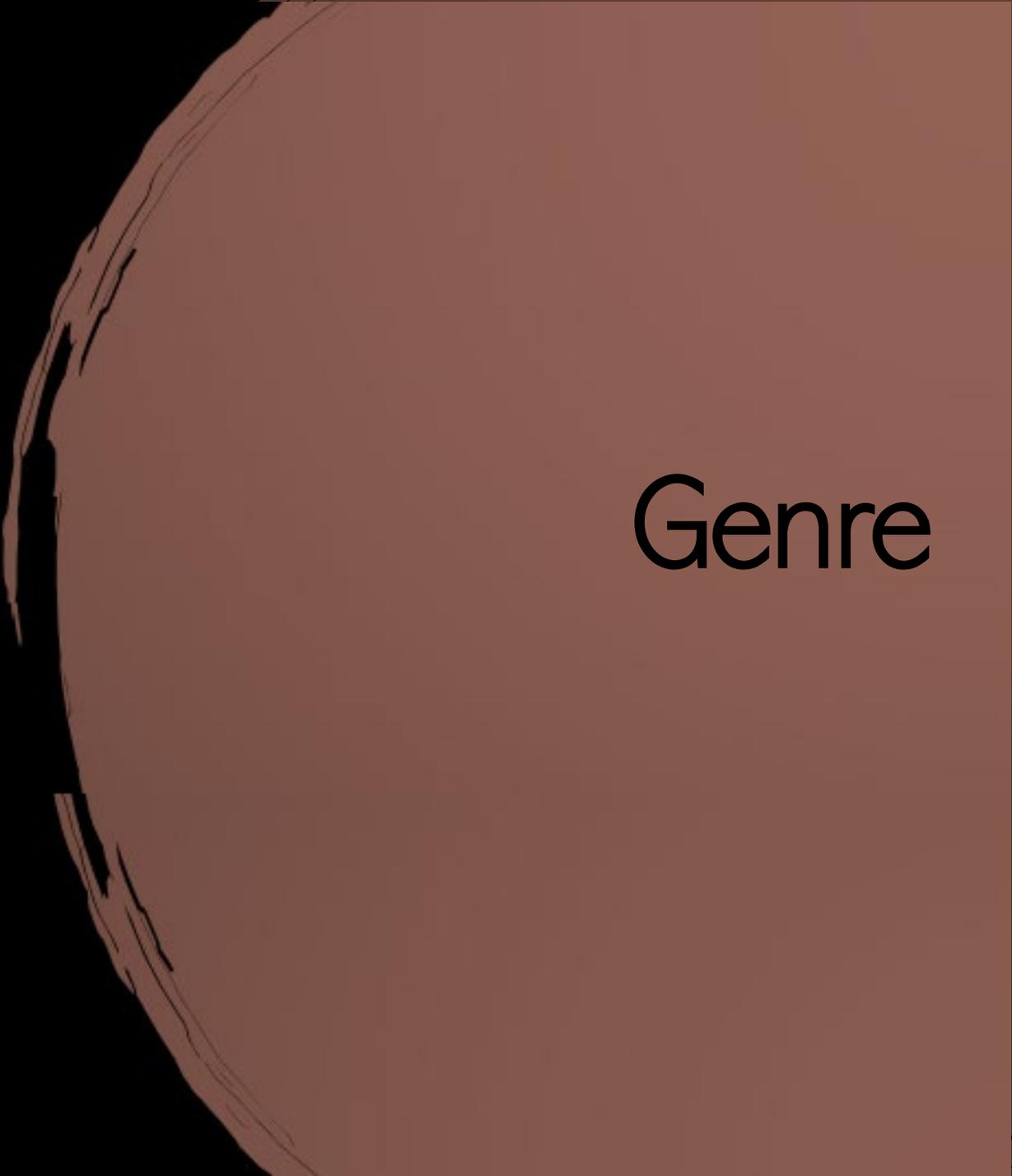


Julia Jackson

1867, Albumen silver print from glass negative
27.4 x 20.6 cm

<https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/1996.99.2/>

- “Cameron practiced fine art photography and focused entirely on non-commercial portrait art—a genre which she imbued with a deeply spiritual sensibility, and a Pre-Raphaelite aesthetic” (Encyclopedia of Photograph Arts, n.d., p.1).
- “Cameron's oeuvre, some 3,000 photographs, falls into two categories: portraits, and religious and allegorical tableaux vivants” (International Center of Photography, 2019, p. 1).
- “They share a stylistic consistency, characterized by soft focus, dramatic chiaroscuro lighting reminiscent of Rembrandt, and technical imperfections” (International Center of Photography, 2019, p. 1).
- “Early photographers such as Julia Margaret Cameron, David Octavius Hill, and Robert Adamson greatly influenced the development of Pictorialism” (The Art Story, 2019b, p. 1).
- Pictorialists produced “images that allowed them to express their creativity, utilizing it to tell stories, replicate mythological or biblical scenes, and to produce dream-like landscapes” (The Art Story, 2019b, p. 1).
- The Julia Jackson photograph is non-commercial portrait art and pictorialism.



Genre

England in the 1840s

- 1830s onward – “a series of Factory Acts progressively limited the number of hours that women and children could be expected to work” (English Heritage, n.d., p. 1).
- 1840s onwards – railway and steamship networks and the electric telegraph underpinned Britain’s economic success” (English Heritage, n.d., p. 1).
- Sept. 1845 – Irish Potato Famine begins (BBC, 2019, p. 1).
- 1836-1846 – Chartists Movement “to gain political rights and influence for the working classes” (The National Archives, n.d., p. 1).
- 1848 Revolutions – a “series of republican revolts against European monarchies” Britain was not involved. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019, p. 1).
- 1849 - Important artists establish the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (BBC, 2019, p. 1).
- “Theatres, music halls, libraries, museums and art galleries were built in every major town” (English Heritage, n.d., p. 1).



Context



Frame

- The photograph has an oval-shaped frame of a black background. The edges are a lighter color, almost like smoke or spiritualism/ghostly ectoplasm.
- The black framing draws the attention to the lit side of her face.
- She seems like a disembodied spirit, so there is nothing beyond the edges of the picture—a spiritual abyss.



Vantage Point

- “Julia Jackson is sat frontally, starting starkly into the camera, with a frenzied, determined, and powerful look” (The Art Story, 2019, p. 1).
- Cameron’s vantage point is straight in front of Julia Jackson.



Detail

- Only half of her face shows details.
- Her hair has a wisp of bangs on the forehead and a curly clump of her hair on the right side.
- Her eye is in the deep shadow of her eyelid.
- Her nose is angular. Her lips are small and closed. Her cheek is a bit flushed.
- Her neck is long but graceful.



Lighting

- The photo uses dramatic chiaroscuro lighting reminiscent of Rembrandt (International Center of Photography, 2019, p. 1).
- Half of her face is covered in shadow, the other is lit dramatically--creating a sense of conflict within the personality. Her hooded eyelids are defined against the whiteness of her eyes” (The Art Story, 2019, p. 1).



Focus

- “Cameron's soft focus works effectively to create a spirit-like ethereal portrait removed from the material world and any literary or cultural framework” (The Art Story, 2019, p. 1).
- The central focus is on Julia’s face and neck and, peripherally, her dark hair on the right side of her face.



Light & Shadow

- The light seems natural and soft.
- The light comes from the right and illuminates the right side of her face and neck.
- She is engulfed in shadow, which creates a strong contrast between light and dark.
- Shadow also occurs in her eyelid area, which gives only a hint of the white of her eye.



Balance

- The photograph is balanced vertically—left side is black and right side is light.
- Her face occurs directly in the center of the photograph. There is equal black on both sides of her.
- The light splits her face evenly in half, so that is also balanced.



Space

- The space seems deep. The black background and lack of frame create the sense of endlessness behind Julia. There is no sense of what is beyond or around her.
- There is somewhat of a rule of thirds. Her collar and shoulder create a bit of a horizon line. There is the black space above her head, then her head area, and then the area below her shoulder.



- There are rectangular shapes of black on all four sides of Julia.
- Her mass of dark, curly hair has an oblong shape—narrower at the top and larger at the bottom.
- Her neck is a thick vertical line.
- Her face is a long oval.
- The corners also have triangular shapes of wispy white.

Shape



- The eye first goes to her eye, which is roughly in the center of the image and dark contrast against her light face.
- Next, the eye goes to the nose because it is a white line a bit brighter than the rest of her face.
- Next, the eye goes to the outside of her face and follows the light down her face and neck.
- The mass of hair with bits of light draws the eye next. Then the black around her and the lighter color in the four corners.

Dominance



Meaning

- Cameron was a religious woman, so she would probably not be involved in spiritualism, but it was a prevalent philosophy in the 1840s.
- However, the photograph makes Julia Jackson seem like a disembodied spirit—ethereal, floating and untethered.
- Her direct gaze and emotionless face show strength and urgency.



Meaning

- Cameron usually portrayed Julia as an archetype of Victorian purity, beauty, and elegance, as well as a strong, reflective, individual woman.
- “She never portrayed Julia as a sibyl or a saint but rather as a natural embodiment of purity, beauty and grace” (The MET, 2019, p. 1).
- However, this portrait does not portray her that way. Perhaps it is showing a Victorian woman who does not fit the mold, who is free, mysterious and mystical.

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