

Julia Margaret Cameron

The Complete Photographs

JULIAN COX & COLIN FORD

With Contributions by PHILIPPA WRIGHT & JOANNE LUKITSH

Getty Publications, \$150.00 cloth, ISBN 0-89236-681-8

Julia Margaret Cameron

A Critical Biography

COLIN FORD

Getty Publications, \$50.00 cloth, ISBN 0-89236-707-5

These two books give Julia Margaret Cameron her full due as one of the most important photographers of the 19th century. Mrs. Cameron, as she was known for most of photographic history, was a British photographer active from 1863 until 1879. *The Complete Photographs* is a catalogue raisonné that contains at least one example of all her extant photographs. *A Critical Biography* is just that: her life story put into social, historical, and artistic context with the goal of understanding both her life and her work.

Born in India in 1815, Cameron was educated in India and Europe and married a British civil servant in India. After Charles Hay Cameron's retirement, the family (now including six children) returned to England, although they maintained business interests in India and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). Julia Cameron soon gravitated to a social circle that included artists and scientists. As her children grew up and her husband traveled to tend the business in Asia, she needed an outlet for her boundless energy and curiosity. A Christmas gift of a camera in 1863 soon set her on her way. The collodion, wet-plate process of the 1860s was tedious and difficult, but as both books make clear, Mrs. Cameron (who may best be described as a force of nature) was not deterred. Although her technique was never truly professional, within months she had compiled an album, actually a *livre d'artiste*, of striking images and registered it for copyright. An amateur in the best sense, Cameron maintained a professional attitude and soon contracted with a publisher to make her images publicly available. She experimented tirelessly, expanded her technique, exhibited widely, won prizes, and embarked on publishing ventures before a move to Sri Lanka in 1875 slowed her output. She photographed on and around the family plantation in Sri Lanka until her death in 1879.

Cameron's mature style consisted of intense, carefully lit close-up portraits of her subjects, who ranged from the famous (Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the physicist J.F.W. Herschel, actress Ellen Terry) to family members and unknown neighbors and villagers. She also arranged numerous tableaux illustrating religious, literary, and mythic themes. Often the sets and costumes were improvised and inadequate, but the results still led to her acceptance as a major artist.

Critic Hilton Kramer has referred to her as "one of the finest portraitists of the nineteenth century—in any medium." Her best work focuses on the eyes of the subject, letting the rest of the image do what it will, and achieves a startling revelation of personality—of both Cameron and her subject. She overwhelmed her subjects, making art largely by force of her indomitable will.

While many artistic photographers (such as H.P. Robinson

and Gustave Rejlander, both known to Cameron) were compiling images from multiple negatives (think of a 19th-century version of PhotoShop), Cameron's technique was quite straight. She believed that by staging her setups with sincerity and photographic directness, she could make allegorical images that conveyed the desired ideal. She wrote,

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

Her capitalization of the preceding words is indicative of her seriousness and ambition. She was adamant that her public know that she was a perfectionist and did all of her work herself. In part to dispel the notion that she was a lowly housewife, amateur tinkerer Cameron defined her production as Art with a capital A. She accepted the notion that truth and beauty were hard to justify with each other but felt that her art was sufficient to the task. She photographed mothers and children to support her belief in the Victorian motherhood. She did not photograph her sisters, who were known as intellectual beauties of their day (Cameron was Virginia Woolf's great aunt), nor did she photograph the wives of the great men who sat before her. Perhaps her relationship with these women did not allow the level of domination she required to do her best work. Or perhaps dominating the men was just more fun.

Cameron was one of the first artists not to let the literalness of photography inhibit her creativity. As *The Complete Photographs* makes clear, she tried ideas over and over until she exhausted them. In addition to the images, with captions, the book includes capsule biographies of her subjects, a listing of the likely sources of her inspirations, an exhibition listing, documentation on copyrights and studio markings, a summary of her album production, and a list of collections holding her work. This is a formidable book that does justice to its formidable subject. Coauthor Julian Cox is the assistant curator of photographs at the Getty Museum.

A Critical Biography uses relationships as a key to understanding Cameron's work. Family, friends, and society (artistic and at-large) are examined to measure the value and importance of her photographs. The place of a woman in the Victorian era is presented as complex and subtle. A selection of beautifully reproduced plates round out the volume. The author, Colin Ford, is the founding head of Britain's National Museum of Photography, Film and Television.

Julia Margaret Cameron: The Complete Photographs and *Julia Margaret Cameron: A Critical Biography*, published in conjunction with a major traveling exhibition, demonstrate the artist's singular achievements and importance. She was a woman who saw no reason not to succeed, who refused to recognize limitations, and who demonstrated the power of the camera to explore themes and motifs considered the exclusive arena of painting, all without compromising herself or her medium. These books are important contributions to the literature of art history. ■

REVIEWER: **R.K. Dickson** teaches art and art history in Pennsylvania.