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Transforming the House: The Photography of Julia Margaret Cameron

Abstract: *This contribution seeks to explore a space and symbolic site that was of greatest importance to the Anglo-Indian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879): Dimbola, her home on the Isle of Wight from 1860–1874. It is there that Cameron took up photography, soon thereafter turning her home into a studio. Her maids acted as models and assistants while neighbours, friends, and family were persuaded to sit for her. How did Cameron come to be so focused on and fascinated by this setting? Given her transcultural biography and bourgeois status, it is likely that ideas of “home” and “identity” were essential components of her inquiry, both personally and as an artist. Why was photography chosen as the medium of this inquiry? Having earned a great deal of recognition for her portraits of “famous men and fair women”, the artist figured as a hostess to Victorian society — a significant female role model of domestic culture for the Anglo-Indian community in which she had previously lived.*

I turned my coal-house into my dark room, and a glazed fowl house I had given to my children became my glass house! The hens were liberated, I hope and believe not eaten. The profit of my boys upon new laid eggs was stopped, and all hands and hearts sympathised in my new labour, since the society of hens and chickens was soon changed for that of poets, prophets, painters and lovely maidens, who all in turn have immortalized the humble little farm erection.¹

When writing these lines in 1874, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879) was looking back on a most fertile period in her life: Her career as a photographer and artist, who had portrayed eminent Victorian faces and figures. As Cameron tells us, she converted her house into a studio by integrating the technical needs into her living environment. Demanding space for the exposure of the plates and the development of prints was only the first step: she involved almost everybody who was around and at hand. Among them her parlour maids, local children, family, and illustrious friends such as her neighbour, the poet Alfred Lord Tennyson (1809–1892) — and even guests were asked to pose or help her. Obviously, her

¹ Julia Margaret Cameron: Annals of my Glass House [1889], in: *The Photographic Journal* (July 1927), 296–301, 298. Cameron wrote down her memoirs in 1874, before moving to Ceylon (Sri Lanka). They were published posthumously in 1889. Also cited in full length by Helmut Gernsheim: *Julia Margaret Cameron. Her Life and Photographic Work*. New York 1975 [1948], 180–3.

home was a central space for Cameron's artistic work. How can we best understand Cameron's home as a resource for her photography? How did her images emerge from the setting of the Victorian household she lived in? From which social and cultural position did Cameron act as a female photographer? In order to analyze Cameron's house and photography, which seem to refer back to each other, I will investigate the setting of her work by bringing together aspects of cultural and social history. I will discuss how Cameron's domestic attitude was formed. Finally, we can see Cameron's working methods as profoundly symbolic acts, her photographs not only referring to the domestic setting in which they were taken, but also to the wider frame and notion of "home" in Victorian society and the concept of the nation.

The House as Original Site of Photography

Over the course of about fifteen years, Cameron took around 1,200 photographs, of which prints are held today mostly in museum collections in Great Britain and the United States of America. Hers is one of the rare and most remarkable bodies of work produced by a female amateur in the early Victorian period. Today, Cameron's former house *Dimbola Lodge* in Freshwater, Isle of Wight, is a museum and gallery that commemorates the photographer's work. Little remains of the period inside: None of her furniture or personal belongings are on display, only a selection of photographic prints on the walls. This presentation seems quite appropriate when we consider Cameron's photography, in which *Dimbola* and its surroundings barely appear. The focus lies on faces and figures that are sometimes shown in close-up, whereas the studio background is often left completely in the dark. This has the astonishing effect of revealing the powerful presence of many of the sitters: "She is absolutely alive and thrusting her head from the paper into the air",² wrote Cameron's close friend, the astronomer and researcher into photochemistry, Sir John Herschel (1792–1871), of *Mountain Nymph Sweet Liberty* (Figure 1) — a print of which is on display at *Dimbola*. In that picture, the face of a young woman emerges from the darkness, surrounded by her loose hair and draped clothes.³ The print measures about 360 x 281 mm (14 1/8 x 11 1/8 in.), and the head is nearly life-size or, to be more precise, the size the head would

² Herschel in a letter to Cameron in 1866 that she cites in Cameron, *Annals*, 301.

³ The sitter was Mrs. Keene (dates unknown), one of the rare professional models Cameron worked with. Julian Cox and Colin Ford: *Julia Margaret Cameron. The Complete Photographs*. Los Angeles 2003, Appendix E, 516.

appear when looking at a person in front of us. By focusing on the sitter's right eye, leaving the other parts slightly out of focus, Cameron created an effect of liveliness. The title refers to a poem by John Milton (1608–1674), *L'Allegro*: “Com, and trip it as ye go / On the light fantastick toe / And in thy right hand lead with thee / The mountain nymph, sweet liberty.”⁴ Since the effect of this promising figure is so strong, the background can be seen as an aesthetic basis or *sine qua non* of the picture. Can we take this as a metaphor, asking for an “unseen” basis of Cameron's photography? Indeed, many of her figures seem to emerge from a suggestive underground, an effect often enhanced by drapery, at the same time ensconcing and veiling the figure. Her depiction of *Mary Mother* (Figure 3) is typical for this aesthetic strategy. Looking at early works of British photography, the German philosopher Walter Benjamin found it characteristic how the depicted people were “at home” in the setting, seemingly growing into it during the minutes of exposure.⁵ The conditions of early photography seem to be recorded in its products, and as I will discuss in this article, this phenomenon has both an empirical basis and a symbolic dimension.

Though *Dimbola* seems to vanish in the photographs, Cameron vividly described it in her memoirs. This gap is a starting point for my analysis, in which I would like to shed light on the photographer's house and studio. Furthermore, there is the question what symbolic meanings of the house are articulated by Cameron's practice and in her works. Speaking ironically of the former inhabitants of her glass studio and the poultry her sons were tending to, Cameron refers to her home as a “breeding-place” — one in which photographs were developed, but which obviously also transformed its mistress into the hostess of a new and illustrious society. In fact, amateurs usually followed their passion from home, friends and relatives being their frequent motives.⁶ This practice also points to a privileged class: The bourgeois home, symbol of property, is also synonymous with spare time and liberty from hard work. Interestingly, all four inventors of photography, Henry Fox Talbot (1800–1877), Louis Daguerre (1787–1851), Nicéphore Niépce (1765–1833), and Hippolyte Bayard (1801–1887), were members of the bourgeoisie who pursued their experiments at home, as the art historian Wolfgang Kemp recently observed.⁷ According to Kemp, photography did not only respond to the contemporary need for representation, it also satisfied class-specific desires

4 Cited in Cox and Ford, *The Complete Photographs*, Appendix F, 525.

5 Walter Benjamin: *Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit. Drei Studien zur Kunstsoziologie*. Frankfurt a. M. 1977 [1936], 52.

6 See Grace Seiberling with Carolyn Bloore: *Amateurs, Photography, and the mid-Victorian Imagination*. Chicago 1986, 3.

7 Wolfgang Kemp: *Photography, a Home Birth*, in: *PhotoResearcher* 22 (2014), 10–21.

of appropriation: “[P]hotography developed as the function of a medium showing possession, and possession is simply the *raison d’être* and ground for production of the bourgeois class [...]”⁸ Not surprisingly, their homes or views from their homes were frequently pictured. An example for photography’s cultural and practical “embeddedness” in the home can be found in one of Fox Talbot’s note books: Among the names of correspondents, servants’ wages and bills, as well as details concerning the estate, notes on experiments in photography appear — obviously being part of daily household affairs.⁹



Figure 1: Julia Margaret Cameron: *The Mountain Nymph Sweet Liberty* (sitter: Mrs. Keene), 1866, Albumen print, 360 x 281 mm (14 $\frac{1}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{1}{8}$ in.), published in: Colin Ford (ed.): *Julia Margaret Cameron: 19th Century Photographer of Genius*. London 2003, 117.

⁸ Kemp, *Photography, a Home Birth*, 14.

⁹ See Henry Fox Talbot’s note book, ADD MS 88942/1/277 in the British Library, London.

What makes Cameron's case both typical and exceptional is not only that she was one of the few women in the field. Furthermore, the way she dealt with her home as a setting and inspiration seems to reflect a profound interest in the idea of home, from a bourgeois and yet individual, artistic perspective: In her memoirs, Cameron links the method of photography with the idea of the house as a starting point ("my new labour"). Thus she refers to an essential quality of which the French philosopher Emmanuel Lévinas later remarked that "[T]he privileged role of the home does not consist in being the end of human activity but in being its condition, and in this sense its commencement."¹⁰ In Lévinas' understanding, home is something we carry with us like a device or means by which we perceive the world.¹¹ Or, as Wolfgang Kemp puts it, in terms of early photography the home can be described as "a setting that is as formal as it is formative".¹²

Dimbola Lodge, an Anglo-Indian Home

Investigating the conditions of artistic creation often starts by examining the artist's milieu. So let us take a closer look on Cameron's bourgeois way of life that centred on her house. First of all, the name Cameron gave her home was characteristic: It was called "Dimbola", referring to the family's estate on the Island of Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon). The Camerons were Anglo-Indians, who had lived in Calcutta before they moved to England. For repatriates, it was not unusual "to exhibit their associations with India through the external modification and internal refurbishment of their newly acquired property".¹³ Julia's husband Charles Hay Cameron (1795–1880) was twenty years older than her and worked as a lawyer for the Council of Education for Bengal in the colonial administration. His position allowed him to acquire coffee and rubber plantations, the income from which was expected to finance a comfortable life in England upon retirement¹⁴ — the more so since the family's hopes that Charles would be offered a lucrative post as a governor were not fulfilled. Still, "coming home" was not easy after years abroad, as

10 Emmanuel Lévinas: *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority*, transl. by Alphonso Lingis. The Hague 1979, 152.

11 See *ibid.*, 153.

12 Kemp, *Photography, Home Birth*, 10.

13 Georgina Gowans: A Passage from India: Geographies and Experiences of Repatriation, 1858–1939, in: *Social & Cultural Geography* 3, no. 4 (2002), 403–423, 405.

14 For the political conditions under which Sri Lanka was colonized in that period see James S. Duncan: Embodying Colonialism? Domination and resistance in nineteenth-century Ceylonese coffee plantations, in: *Journal of Historical Geography* 28, no. 3 (2002), 317–338, esp. 320.

the geographer Georgina Gowans observes: “For those who had worked in India [...], fractures in existing class structures were particularly keenly felt and, having occupied positions of power based on rigid hierarchies of both class and race, [they] were required to re-negotiate their identities in multiple ways on return.”¹⁵ Spa towns and coastal resorts were preferred areas in which to settle down. Here, they were most likely to maintain a lifestyle they were accustomed to. In addition, the mild climate was suitable for those who were suffering from various diseases. It was not uncommon for repatriates again to form communities apart from the metropole when returning to England. This observation seems to bear out a central thesis of post-colonial theory, that “colony and metropole are terms which can be understood only in relation to each other, and that the identity of coloniser is a constitutive part of Englishness”,¹⁶ as the historian Catherine Hall puts it.

The Camerons were most typical in that respect: They lived with friends and relatives for some years, before they finally chose a seaside resort, the Isle of Wight, to settle down. It was a fashionable place then, since Queen Victoria’s (1837–1901) new summer residence, *Osborne House*, had been built there in 1851. This aristocratic lifestyle was copied by the middle classes, for whom spending time off in the countryside became a matter of distinction.¹⁷ Especially among writers, artists and intellectuals, the island became a fashionable spot during the summer months. Some of them became permanent residents, for instance the queen’s Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson, whose home *Farringford* was next door to Cameron’s, and the painter George Frederick Watts (1807–1904), who had built his house *The Briary* near Freshwater. Both of them were close friends with Julia Margaret, who discussed aesthetic and philosophical questions with them, as their correspondence shows.¹⁸

What kind of house was *Dimbola*? Initially there were two similar cottages, which were bought from a local sailor and were connected with a stair tower some years later. The Camerons had six children, of whom four had already left home. But their younger sons lived with them, as well as five orphaned relatives and a foster child. The family lived in the building bordering on the road. The other, *Sunnyside*, was let to summer guests or given to friends and relatives, many of

¹⁵ Gowans, *A passage from India*, 407.

¹⁶ Catherine Hall: *Civilising Subjects. Metropole and Colony in the English Imagination, 1830–1867*. Cambridge 2002, 12.

¹⁷ See Anne Martin-Fugier: *Riten der Bürgerlichkeit*, in: Michelle Perrot (ed.): *Geschichte des privaten Lebens*, vol. 4: *Von der Revolution zum Großen Krieg*. Frankfurt a. M. 1992, 201–265, 233–240. See also Gunilla-Friederike Budde: *Auf dem Weg ins Bürgerleben. Kindheit und Erziehung in deutschen und englischen Bürgerfamilien 1840–1914*. Göttingen 1994, 93–6.

¹⁸ Cameron’s letters are scattered over various archives. See for detailed information the catalogue raisonnée by Cox and Ford, *The Complete Photographs*, Appendix D, 508–510.

whom were invited for longer visits. For instance, the scientist Charles Darwin (1809–1882) came with his family in the summer of 1868, posing several times for his portrait.

It is not unlikely that the habit of a generous hospitality was culturally shaped by Cameron's socialization in colonial India, as the historian Elizabeth Collingham's research on that topic suggests:

Indeed, Anglo-Indians were said to be more domestic than their compatriots in Britain. [...] This policy of open house contrasted with visiting customs in Britain where visitors were usually formally invited and were expected to observe certain conventions governing the separation of host and guest at appropriate times of the day. Indian hospitality grew out of the fact that British official society in India was so small and homogeneous that Anglo-Indians could afford to open their houses to strangers without running the risk of being embarrassed by social inferiors abusing their kindness. In fact such generous hospitality was essential to the British in India as it helped to cultivate a sense of community.¹⁹

It is possible that this “policy of open house” made Cameron more relaxed in terms of etiquette, allowing her to invite people to pose for her quite informal. The huge number of her sitters, who were all not her clients, is remarkable and may have been an effect of Cameron's culturally conditioned sociability. Obviously, the house was a central space both in English and in Anglo-Indian circles, but slightly differently marked. We can trace this in the two photographs of herself that Cameron had taken in 1863 by Oscar Gustave Rejlander (1813–1875), whose visit might have inspired her to engage herself in photography. In her portrait, Cameron shows herself as having “come home”, resting on the doorstep of her house, as if washed ashore, completely absorbed in the book she is reading, her only possession (Figure 2). The themes of interiority and exteriority are also articulated in Rejlander's second photograph: With the camera outside, we see Cameron through an open door sitting at a piano, appearing as the typical female bourgeois dilettante.²⁰ It is interesting that these portraits carefully draw on the relationship between inside and outside, seeming to comment on Cameron's status in society. “Home” as an interior realm that is yet to be arrived at also refers to the romantic notion of the house allowing us to dream peacefully, as the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard put it.²¹

19 Elizabeth M. Collingham: *Imperial Bodies. The Physical Experience of the Raj, c. 1800–1947*. Cambridge 2001, 101–2.

20 See Oscar Gustave Rejlander: *Julia Margaret Cameron at Her Piano*, 1863, Albumen print, 155 x 110 mm (6 ¹/₁₆ x 4 ⁵/₁₆ in.), published in Cox and Ford, *The Complete Photographs*, 45.

21 See Gaston Bachelard: *Poetik des Raums*. Frankfurt a. M. 2007 [1957], 33.



Figure 2: Oscar Gustave Rejlander: *Julia Margaret Cameron*, 1863, Albumen print, 160 x 115 mm (6 ⁵/₁₆ x 4 ½ in.), published in: Cox and Ford, *The Complete Photographs*, 7.

Dreaming of a home and house was not only a bourgeois desire, it was also part of the imaginary geography Anglo-Indians had in their thoughts while abroad.²² As Georgina Gowans has shown, there was a shift in the status of the house from the so-called “nabobs” during the first period in British colonialism, and the following generation, the Anglo-Indians: It was no longer a symbol of wealth and influence, like the “nabob’s” newly acquired country seat, but instead signified the lost hopes of families living in “genteel poverty”.²³ The Camerons too were facing difficulties: Apart from the higher expenses, the family had further trouble because of a fungus that destroyed their coffee plants, ruining their financial basis. At the time Julia Margaret took up photography, the family was more or less bankrupt and dependent on the help of friends.²⁴ This seems to be of some importance, giving Cameron’s symbolic appropriation of her house through photography additional meaning.

In fact, Cameron initially had the idea of earning money, as she wrote to her friend John Herschel: “When I started Photography I hoped it might help me in the education of one of my Boys [...] I soon found that its outlay doubled its returns.”²⁵ Cameron did not open a studio for a simple reason: “If I could photograph professionally I should have a margin for the advancing of my Boys. & I am always resolving to do so but never have yet begun – fearing to lose my liberty in the choice of my sitters [...]”²⁶ Here, Cameron refers to her son Hardinge (1846–1911), who had to abandon his studies at Oxford for lack of money.²⁷

Mistress and Maid

Indeed, “liberty” is a cue, referring to Cameron’s status at home, which might have been shaped by her Anglo-Indian way of life: According to Elizabeth Collingham, in the colonies the mistress’s

freedom from household tasks meant that she had plenty of time to spend on herself, which gave her the hardness of the confident aristocrat. It was this figure, moulded by the

²² See Gowans: A passage from India, 407–9.

²³ *Ibid.*, 407.

²⁴ See Mike Weaver: Julia Margaret Cameron: The Stamp of Divinity, in id. (ed.): *British Photography in the Nineteenth Century. The Fine Art Tradition*. Cambridge 1989, 151–161, 154.

²⁵ Cameron to Herschel, January 28th, 1866. HS 5.162, Royal Society London.

²⁶ Cameron to Herschel, February 6th, 1870. HS 5.170, Royal Society London.

²⁷ See Helmut Gernsheim: *Julia Margaret Cameron. Her Life and Photographic Work*. New York 1975 [1948], 37.

requirements of prestige within the domestic sphere, with a superior distanced air and a hardened manner and body, which came to epitomize the memsahib.²⁸

Cameron's status was enhanced by the rank as official hostess she was given in order to fulfil the representational duties of the British governor's absent wife, who had remained in England. It is very likely that the family inhabited a *bungalow* in Garden Reach, a suburban area preferred by expatriates. Here, domestic life would have been quite different from the Victorian household:

The constant attendance of servants meant that not only the children, but also their domestics, had to be endured wandering about the house freely. [...] The layout of the Bungalow meant that children were inevitably more of a presence within the Anglo-Indian domestic space than they were in Britain, while the constant attendance of Indian servants allowed the security provided by spatial barriers to be replaced by people. The entire Anglo-Indian attitude towards children thus exhibited a laxity which would have been unthinkable among the metropolitan middle classes.²⁹

At *Dimbola*, the Camerons had fewer servants than in Calcutta. Their cottage was small and, unlike in the ideal Victorian household, the division of spheres between family and staff was not as differentiated: Throughout the nineteenth century, the bourgeois home was not only divided into different functions, but also architecturally divided into separate spheres for family and staff: "The idea which underlies all is simply this. The family constitute one community: the servants another",³⁰ as Robert Kerr wrote, architect and author of *The Gentleman's House*. Kerr's contemporary, the French architect Viollet-Le-Duc explained the division regarding the model of society: "[I]n a democratic condition, [...] each department in the dwelling must be distinct and definite, in proportion to the equality that exists before the law between masters and servants."³¹ Therefore, the two parties were to meet only in terms of service. Of course, there would have been thousands of trespasses. But this is not the point here: Possibly, Cameron's former way of life and the cramped conditions at *Dimbola* brought her into closer contact with her staff than it was usual for her class. Although many amateurs were helped by their staff, these maids and servants rarely appeared before the camera. And when they did, they were not likely to perform holy figures, myths, and allegories, as in Cameron's photographs. Clementina Maude, Viscountess

²⁸ Collingham, *Imperial Bodies*, 173.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁰ Robert Kerr: *The Gentleman's House, or, how to Plan English Residences from the Parsonage to the Palace*. London, 3rd Edition 1871 [1864], Reprint London 1972 [1864], 68.

³¹ Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-Le-Duc: *Discourses on Architecture*, vol. 2, transl. by Benjamin Bucknall. Boston 1875 [1863], 265.

Hawarden (1822–1865) for instance, a contemporary amateur, focused on her teenage daughters, who posed in costumes and draperies — whereas other family members and servants seldom appear. Cameron’s artistic credo “to arrest all beauty that came before me”³² was meant literally, her house being the immediate surrounding where she made the observations for her visionary transformation of the people in her everyday life into figures of art.



Figure 3: Julia Margaret Cameron: *Mary Mother* (sitter: Mary Hillier), 1867, Albumen print on gold-edged cabinet, image size 116 mm x 97 mm ($4 \frac{5}{8} \times 3 \frac{7}{8}$ in.) © National Portrait Gallery, London.

³² Cameron, *Annals*, 298.

Given the domestic rules in the Victorian period, Cameron's practice as mistress and artist was indeed quite unusual. Her three housemaids were among the figures she photographed most frequently: Mary Ryan (1848–1914), Mary Ann Hillier (1847–1936) and Mary Kellaway (born 1846) were depicted by Cameron as heroines from history or mythology, as the aforementioned *Mary Mother* for instance (Figure 3). This seems to be a crucial point: The photographic embodiment of a saint could only be convincing if the model was anonymous, as maids or servants were usually regarded.³³ Indeed, Cameron's maids never appear as *themselves*: They were not *portrayed* in the true sense of the word. Their status in the picture was objective, as it was in their representation of the family they were working for, and by whom they were commanded: The architectural separation discussed above did not prevent that servants were often patronized in a manner comparable to children.³⁴ Their subordinate status is reflected in photographic group portraits, which show servants always in the same bourgeois pose as their employers, wearing proper uniforms. An attempt towards empowerment through representation is the remarkable case of Hannah Cullwick (1833–1909), a London housemaid who allowed herself to be photographed at work in filthy clothes. By this embodiment, Cullwick claims the status of a more significant subject, the art historian Renate Lorenz argues.³⁵ Obviously, Cameron disregarded certain rules and expectations and did so quite openly, also taking her maids with her when she exhibited her works. Nevertheless, she affirmed the social hierarchy between mistress and maid, thus remaining within the ideological framework of her class.

A Victorian Hostess

Not only did photography, and especially Cameron's pictures, have a domestic basis due to certain structures it evolved. Home was also an important setting for its reception: Prints were collected in albums, where they had both a private and public character. As the sociologist Deborah Chambers states, it was also a gendered medium in families:

³³ Many thanks to Dagmar Bruss for our discussion of the maid-model's status in the representation.

³⁴ On this aspect see Pamela Horn: *The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Servant*. Stroud 1996 [1975], 129, as well as Leonore Davidoff et al. (eds.): *The Family Story. Blood, Contract and Intimacy, 1830–1960*. London 1999, 163.

³⁵ See Renate Lorenz: *Aufwändige Durchquerungen. Subjektivität als sexuelle Arbeit*. Bielefeld 2009, 117.

Public discourses of familial heritage are authenticated and celebrated through this cultural form not only as blood ties, continuity and connection, but also as intimacy, security and spatial belonging. [...] Significantly, the family photograph album has evolved as a predominantly feminine cultural form, as a visual medium for family genealogy and storytelling.³⁶

By giving prints as well as albums to friends and family members, filling them over the years, Julia Margaret followed the feminine role of “keeper of the past”.³⁷ Photography, assembled in albums, symbolically tied families together – and not only kin relations but also the nation as an imagined community: Apart from family and friends, images of admired celebrities and members of the British Royal Family were included in albums. Figure 3 shows that prints were mounted on cardboard and signed by Cameron, sometimes also by the sitter.

In the home, the album had the function of a symbolic aperture of the house, while certain domestic practices were circling around it, as Helmut Gernsheim states: “[T]he album [...] served as an illustrated book of genealogy and expressed a form of hero-worship. It was an excellent means of whiling away the awkward half-hour before dinner, indicating to visitors the tastes and prejudices of their host.”³⁸ These social and representative functions of the album can be compared with portrait galleries in stately homes,³⁹ where pictures referred to genealogy as an “inner” continuity as well as to more distant connections and relations.

By mentioning the *hero*, Gernsheim speaks of a central narrative of the nineteenth century most famously articulated by the Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle (1795–1881). Tracing back the course of history to great men’s lives, Carlyle was particularly interested in the *portraits* of his protagonists, and used them in his narration.⁴⁰ Remarkably, he was among the founders of the National Portrait Gallery in London, where eminent figures of British history were commemorated. There was a close link between this institution and the political state of affairs, as the art historian Marcia Pointon argues:

The national portrait gallery is a phenomenon exclusive to the industrialized west, to the English-speaking nations, and to the modern period commencing around the mid-nineteenth

36 Deborah Chambers: *Family as Place: Family Photograph Albums and the Domestication of Public and Private Space*, in: Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan (eds.): *Picturing Place. Photography and the Geographical Imagination*. London 2003, 96–114, 96–7.

37 *Ibid.*, 97.

38 Helmut Gernsheim: *Lewis Carroll: Photographer*. New York 1969, 8.

39 See Marcia Pointon: *Hanging the Head. Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*. New Haven 1993, esp. 13–24.

40 Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* was a lecture series before it was published in book form. It is not clear whether he used portraits in the course of the lectures, but they were included in the book that appeared in 1841.

century, a period characterized in Britain by increasing parliamentary power, constitutional debate and colonial expansion. Portrait galleries were founded as state-controlled enterprises [...], designed from its inception for mass public consumption.⁴¹

Photography was not yet a medium that was recognized by museums. Also, the National Portrait Gallery purchased portraits only ten years after the person passed away. So photography served the reception of contemporary figures in the everyday life, at home and in public space, where *carte de visite* photographs could be viewed in the showcases of professional studios.

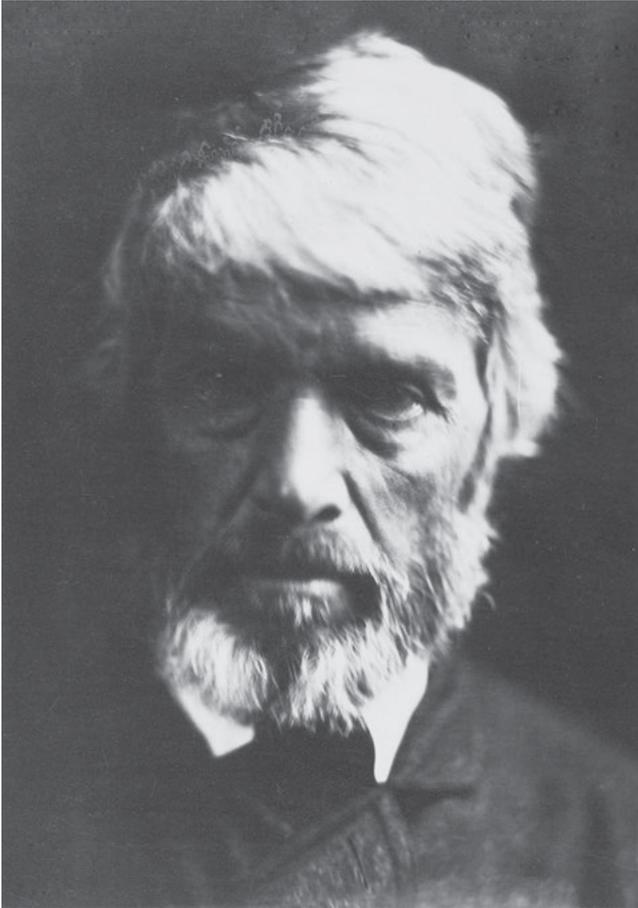


Figure 4: Julia Margaret Cameron: *[Thomas] Carlyle*, Albumen print, 1867, 364 x 258 mm (14 ⁵/₁₆ x 10 ¹/₈ in.). Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program.

⁴¹ Pointon, *Hanging the Head*, 228–9.

Julia Margaret Cameron took Carlyle's photograph in 1867, which counts among her most remarkable portraits (Figure 4). She inscribed a print from it on the reverse with the sentence "Carlyle like a rough block of Michelangelo's sculpture",⁴² and indeed his head seems to have a rocky surface, the visage carved out by means of light and shade. Cameron treated the outer features as a kind of raw material that was modeled by her with the camera. By representing Carlyle as an unfinished sculpture, Cameron suggests to carve out essential qualities of her sitter. This process is witnessed by the viewer, who sees Carlyle's inner and outer features seemingly oscillating on the surface: Cameron's technique of "out of focus" is explicitly at work, having a dynamizing effect. Pointing light at his head, Cameron shows Carlyle as an alert mind — but also as a person who is "rough around the edges", possibly commenting on his contested opinions.

In her work as a photographer of eminent figures, Julia Margaret Cameron in a way set up an imaginary "National Portrait Gallery". In doing so, she acted as a symbolic *hostess*, a role model that was central to Victorian femininity both in the colony and in the metropole: Wives acted as "gatekeepers", who were obliged to introduce newcomers into society and who, by pursuing their own interest and that of other family members, established contacts.⁴³ It can be taken as evidence of the fragility of that concept of society that the house as well as the idea of the house played such an important role, being one of the most powerful frames to integrate peoples' thoughts, beliefs, and dreams, as Gaston Bachelard remarked.⁴⁴ This was also true for Cameron, who had to close her Isle of Wight studio in 1875, when she and her husband were no longer able to finance a living in England. They returned to their estate in Sri Lanka, which was run by their older sons. There, Cameron occasionally took photographs of the landscape and groups of local people that have a more documentary character. Some of her studies of local girls and women are highly expressive, but different from the close-up portraits she took in England, Cameron kept her distance towards the models, which refers to a more remote position as a whole.

Conclusion

Looking at Cameron's studio practice and her portraiture, it is obvious that the artist transformed her home in many respects. First of all, Cameron demanded

⁴² Cited in Cox and Ford, *The Complete Photographs*, 313.

⁴³ See Leonore Davidoff: *The Best Circles. Society Etiquette and the Season*. London 1973, 41–4; as well as Catherine Hall: *Trautes Heim*, in: Perrot: *Geschichte des privaten Lebens*, vol. 4, 51–93, 86.

⁴⁴ Bachelard, *Poetik des Raums*, 33.

⁴⁵ Virginia Woolf: *A Room of One's Own*. London 2004 [1928].

physical space for her artistic aspirations, “a room of her own”⁴⁵ in the words of her grandniece Virginia Woolf.

In addition, she appropriated the home symbolically through photography by putting herself into a new and subjective relationship with her environment. As discussed above, her search for an empowering position was marked by her status as an Anglo-Indian repatriate. How to negotiate the appropriation of both physical and symbolic space was a central question for her. She reflected on this by referring to her own domestic sphere. Therefore, her house became the starting point but also a resource for her imagination.

The fact that the house as such remains invisible in most of the photographs indicates a suggestive status, which played an important role in the Anglo-Indian imaginations of homecoming. It is also telling in terms of the fragile economic conditions the Camerons lived in. Clearly, the house is given an imaginative status itself: In her portraiture of famous men, Cameron turned cultural and contemporary desires towards the idea of “home” into representations, assembling an imaginary gallery of national eminences. The way she worked with her staff, casting her maids as models, Cameron negotiated social, cultural and spatial boundaries. She challenged and affirmed, at the same time, the Victorian model of a society living in separate spheres. The highly expressive faces of young women Cameron depicted can be read as allegories of art: the “*Mountain Nymph*” (Figure 1) for instance, who seems to be “born” out of paper as Sir John Herschel wrote, symbolizes the life-giving power of art itself. This contemporary idea was articulated among others by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche: His *Zarathustra* praises the act of creation as giving birth, and the creator himself as being a new-born child in that process.⁴⁶ In Cameron’s artistic practice it becomes clear that this capacity does not evolve and unfold from a vacuum but in the very specific space of her living environment. In this respect, *Dimbola* can be regarded as an essential resource for Cameron’s artistic endowment of life with meaning.

46 “Schaffen — das ist die grosse Erlösung vom Leiden, und des Lebens Leichtwerden. Aber dass der Schaffende sei, dazu selber thut Leid noth und viel Verwandlung. Ja, viel bitteres Sterben muss in eurem Leben sein, ihr Schaffenden! Also seid ihr Fürsprecher und Rechtfertiger aller Vergänglichkeit. Dass der Schaffende selber das Kind sei, das neu geboren werde, dazu muss er auch die Gebäerin sein wollen und der Schmerz der Gebäerin.” Friedrich Nietzsche: Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen [1883], in: Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (eds.): *Kritische Studienausgabe*, vol. 4. Berlin 2005, 110. URL: <http://www.nietzschesource.org/eKGWB/Za-II/print> (3 June 2017). Many thanks to Corinna Schubert for pointing me to this passage. See also on this aspect Christian Begemann: Gebären, in: *Wörterbuch der philosophischen Metaphern*, ed. by Ralf Konersmann. Darmstadt 2007, 121–134, 131.