Photograph - Charles Darwin

Object: Photograph

Place of origin: Isle of Wight (photographed)

Date: 1868 (photographed)
1875 (printed)

Artist/Maker: Cameron, Julia Margaret, born 1815 - died 1879 (photographer)

Materials and Techniques: Carbon print from copy negative

Credit Line: Given by Mrs Ida S. Perrin, 1939

Museum number: 14-1939

Gallery location: Prints & Drawings Study Room, level H, case 311, shelf T

Public access description

When Julia Margaret Cameron photographed her intellectual heroes such as Alfred Tennyson, Sir John Herschel and Henry Taylor, her aim was to record 'the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man.' Another motive was to earn money from prints of the photographs, since her family’s finances were precarious. Within her first year as a photographer she began exhibiting and selling through the London gallery Colnaghi’s. She used autographs to increase the value of some portraits.

The naturalist Charles Darwin and his family rented a cottage on the Isle of Wight from the Camerons in the summer of 1868. By 27 July, Colnaghi’s was advertising, 'We are glad to observe her gallery of great men enriched by a very fine portrait of Charles Darwin'. Due to the sitter’s celebrity, Cameron later had this portrait reprinted as a more stable carbon print.

Descriptive line
Photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron, 'Charles Darwin', carbon print, 1868, printed 1875

Physical description
A photograph of a bearded man (Charles Darwin) taken in profile from the shoulders up.

Dimensions
Height: 260 mm image, Width: 210 mm image, Height: 335 mm mount, Width: 280 mm mount, Height: 580 mm mount, Width: 380 mm mount

Museum number
14-1939

Object history note

Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) was one of the most important and innovative photographers of the 19th century. Her photographs were rule-breaking: purposely out of focus, and often including scratches, smudges and other traces of the artist’s process. Best known for her powerful portraits, she also posed her sitters – friends, family and servants – as characters from biblical, historical or allegorical stories.

Born in Calcutta on 11 June 1815, the fourth of seven sisters, her father was an East India Company official and her mother descended from French aristocracy. Educated mainly in France, Cameron returned to India in 1834.

In 1842, the British astronomer Sir John Herschel (1792 – 1871) introduced Cameron to photography, sending her examples of the new invention. They had met in 1836 while Cameron was convalescing from an illness in the Cape of Good Hope, South Africa. He remained a lifelong friend and correspondent on technical photographic matters. That same year she met Charles Hay Cameron (1795–1880), 20 years her senior, a reformer of Indian law and education. They married in Calcutta in 1838 and she became a prominent hostess in colonial society. A decade later, the Camerons moved to England. By then they had four children; two more were born in England. Several of Cameron’s sisters were already living there, and had established literary, artistic and social connections. The Camerons eventually settled in Freshwater, on the Isle of Wight.

At the age of 48 Cameron received a camera as a gift from her daughter and son-in-law. It was accompanied by the words, ‘It may amuse you, Mother, to try to photograph during your solitude at Freshwater.’ Cameron had compiled albums and even printed photographs before, but her work as a photographer now began in earnest.

The Camerons lived at Freshwater until 1875, when they moved to Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) where Charles Cameron had purchased coffee and rubber plantations, managed under difficult agricultural and financial conditions by three of their sons. Cameron continued her photographic practice at her new home yet her output decreased significantly and only a small body of photographs from this time remains. After moving to Ceylon the Camerons made only one more visit to England in May 1878. Julia Margaret Cameron died after a brief illness in Ceylon in 1879.

Cameron’s relationship with the Victoria and Albert Museum dates to the earliest years of her photographic career. The first museum
exhibition of Cameron’s work was held in 1865 at the South Kensington Museum, London (now the V&A). The South Kensington Museum was not only the sole museum to exhibit Cameron’s work in her lifetime, but also the institution that collected her photographs most extensively in her day. In 1868 the Museum gave Cameron the use of two rooms as a portrait studio, perhaps qualifying her as its first artist-in-residence. Today the V&A’s Cameron collection includes photographs acquired directly from the artist, others collected later from various sources, and five letters from Cameron to Sir Henry Cole (1808–82), the Museum’s founding director and an early supporter of photography.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1098326/charles-darwin-photograph-cameron-julia-margaret/