

The trailblazers

As a major exhibition celebrates Victorian greats, Rose Teanby ARPS reveals the role of female photographers in the Society's early years

THE NAME JULIA Margaret Cameron resonates with members of the Society – and across the world of photography. Her portraits of prominent Victorians from Darwin to Tennyson earned her a reputation as one of British photography's trailblazers. It is no surprise that she is among four photographers celebrated in a major exhibition, Victorian Giants, at the National Portrait Gallery.

A full decade before Cameron joined the Society in 1864, other pioneering women were among its founding members. In January 1853 women were given a revolutionary new opportunity – equal status with men with the formation of the Photographic Society.

Roger Fenton and his colleagues introduced 21 rules governing the new society, with No. 9 stipulating that 'Ladies shall be eligible as members of the Society'.

This was ground-breaking in its demonstration of equality towards Victorian women, and in its first year the Photographic Society attracted a membership of 203, including six women.



Lady Caroline Kerrison



PIONEERS Mountain Nymph, Sweet Liberty, left, by Julia Margaret Cameron, and Elizabeth Vignoles, pictured in 1861, right

The first female member, elected on 31 January 1853 at the inaugural meeting, was Elizabeth Vignoles née Hodge, wife of eminent civil engineer Charles Blacker Vignoles.

Fenton had photographed the construction of a suspension bridge in Kieff, designed by Vignoles for the emperor of Russia, and Elizabeth accompanied her husband on his commission. This was followed by the construction of a railway in Spain from Bilbao to Tudela, again accompanied by Mrs Vignoles. Unfortunately, no record has been located of her photographic work.

Five female photographers joined Elizabeth during 1853: Amelia Elizabeth Guppy (1808-1886), Mary Anne Boulton (1829-1912), Catherine Verschoyle (1802-1882), Lady Caroline Kerrison (died 1895) and Jesse Fergus (1794-1863).

The following year Queen Victoria became the patron, an active royal interest in photography continued by the current patron Queen Elizabeth II, and the Duchess of Cambridge, who was made an honorary member in 2017.

I am proud to be one of the 2,420 female UK members of our Society. The Society has given a platform to generations of female photographers over the past 165 years, demonstrating a refreshingly inclusive attitude far ahead of its time.

Victorian Giants is at the National Portrait Gallery, 1 March to 20 May. Teanby will lecture on five women who made their mark at the dawn of photography in 'Who Was Britain's First Female Photographer?', at the gallery on 3 May. Visit bit.ly/giants_lecture

NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY; JOHN VIGNOLES / PRIVATE FAMILY PAPERS



ONE TO WATCH

Eva O'Leary

The Chicago-born 28-year-old who learned about the world through art

Eva O'Leary graduated from Yale University with a masters in fine arts in 2016. She has been shortlisted for the 2018 Hyères Festival photographie grand prix, which will be announced in April.

When did you start seriously taking photographs? My parents are painters. I grew up in their studios and learned about the world through art. At 16 I was accepted on a Pennsylvania Governor's School summer programme for the arts – I chose photography. This experience was so important; kind of a green light for me.

What inspires your work?

Making work gives me an excuse to interact with the world in a way that feels meaningful and joyful. Photography lets me study the things that upset me, confuse me, terrify me, all in a really specific and incredible way. Making work gives me a tool to understand human behaviour and pain on a deeper level, and with that, selfishly, I get relief.

What are your plans? My main priority is to keep making work. Trying to self-fund projects and afford groceries is difficult, and I haven't quite figured it out yet. Now, I'm working on a few projects, and tentatively starting to put together a book.

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Korell, 2017