

TEACHER GUIDE

STILL PERFORMING

COSTUME, GESTURE, & EXPRESSION
IN 19TH CENTURY EUROPEAN PHOTOGRAPHY

August 24, 2024—January 12, 2025



ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

Still Performing showcases the creativity and theatricality of early European photography through a selection of staged photographs taken in the mid to late 1800s. Filled with props, backdrops, elaborate costumes, and calculated poses, these images reference both longstanding artistic traditions and popular entertainments of the day. They represent a variety of impulses that characterize photographic pursuits as much today as they did in the 19th century: the desire to shape how someone is seen by others, to sell a particular version of reality, or to carve out an artistic niche for oneself and one's artform. In exploring the exhibition, students can consider the varied and complex ways photographers take advantage of their medium to create compelling staged images.

EXHIBITION CONTENTS

You will see 65 photographs by 36 photographers, including 31 photographs that have never before been displayed at the Nelson-Atkins.

Photographers featured in the exhibition include Julia Margaret Cameron, Charles Nègre, and Roger Fenton, along with many others from various European countries.

The photographic processes represented in the exhibition include albumen prints, daguerreotypes, and salt prints, among others.

GOOD TO KNOW

This exhibition is on view in the museum's photography galleries (Galleries L10 and L10.5). No exhibition tickets are required for entry. School group visits to the exhibition can be arranged by visiting nelson-atkins.org/tours.

Most of the photographs measure smaller than 8 x 10 inches, meaning close examination is possible for 2-3 people at a time.

The exhibition includes depictions of nudity and stereotypical presentations of non-European cultures that were prevalent in 19th-century Europe.

All the photographs included in the exhibition can be viewed online at: art.nelson-atkins.org/mycollections/6424/still-performing.

In addition to the exhibition, you may wish to visit the museum's other photography gallery (L11) to view an accompanying selection of contemporary photographs by Wendy Red Star, William Wegman, and more.

For each work featured in this guide, discussion questions are categorized as:

- **INQUIRING EYE** – focused on observation and the formal qualities of photographic images;
- **BEHIND THE CURTAIN** – consider how performance or theatricality shapes a photograph;
- **FORM & FUNCTION** – examine the photographer's intent in making an image.

BEFORE VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

Learn about photography in the 19th century through online articles and videos:

- Early Photography by Smarthistory: smarthistory.org/Europe-19th-century/early-photography
- “The Daguerreotype” and “The Albumen Print” from Photographic Processes by the George Eastman Museum: bit.ly/3XpQFEe

Take the quiz that was developed for this exhibition to discover which photographer persona fits you best: bit.ly/3MO28IR. Students can then use library or web resources to research their match.

Discuss the role of staged photographs in contemporary society. Of the photos that students see in their day-to-day lives, which ones are likely to have been staged? Which ones are not? Is it possible to know for sure?

FEATURED WORKS & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



Giraudon's Artist (French, active about 1875)

***Figure Study*, about 1872**

Inquiring Eye:

Light, focus, line, and shape are some of the attributes we can consider when looking at a photograph. How do those different elements help create a sense of balance in this image?

Behind the Curtain:

While it might appear that the photographer has captured a candid moment of rural life, this image likely features a model dressed and posed to look like a young peasant girl. Why might a photographer choose to stage a scene like this rather than going out and photographing the “real thing”?

Form & Function:

This photograph and others like it were sold as reference studies for painters, who could use them to produce idealized scenes of rural life that were popular in 19th-century Europe. Compare this photograph to William Adolphe Bouguereau's painting *Italian Woman at the Fountain* (shown at left and on view in Gallery 126). What similarities and differences do you see in how each artist depicts peasant life?



Camille Silvy (French, 1834–1910)

***Actress Rosa Csillag in the Role of Orpheus*, 1860**

Inquiring Eye:

Without reading the title of this photograph, what might you infer about the individual shown here? Consider setting, clothing, pose, and expression as clues to the figure's identity.

Behind the Curtain:

This photograph depicts an actress in character as Orpheus, a figure from Greek mythology who was featured in a popular opera. The windows and backdrop edges – which reveal the scene's location as a photographer's studio – would have been cut off before the final prints were sold. How might your understanding of this image be different if you were looking at a trimmed version instead of the full scene?

Form & Function:

Prints of popular 19th-century performers were sold as collectibles and handed out as a form of self-promotion. How do entertainers today use photography to promote their personal brand?



Pierre-Louis Pierson (French, 1822–1913)
The Countess de Castiglione, about 1856–1857

Inquiring Eye:

While true color photography was not a viable technique until the turn of the 19th century, artists could add color to prints by hand using paint or other pigments. What stands out to you about the use of color in this photograph?

Behind the Curtain:

The subject of this photograph, a famous beauty known as the Countess de Castiglione, worked with photographer Pierre-Louis Pierson on a series of staged portraits showing herself in various guises. Several examples are shown nearby. Seen together, what impression do these photographs give of the Countess?

Form & Function:

The Countess exercised creative control over many aspects of the image-making process for her portraits, from choosing her costumes and poses to dictating how prints should be colored. Why might a sitter want to have a say in the appearance of their portrait?



Oscar Gustav Rejlander (English, born Sweden, 1813–1875)
Come Along, about 1860

Julia Margaret Cameron (English, born India, 1815–1879)
Sappho (Mary Hillier), 1865

Inquiring Eye:

Both of these photographs depict female servants in well-to-do English homes. How are the images alike and different?

Behind the Curtain:

Oscar Rejlander and Julia Margaret Cameron drew on 19th-century painting conventions in their quest to solidify photography's status as a fine art. Rejlander's staged scene of a housemaid at work mimics English genre paintings. Cameron's model is shown in the guise of a historical figure, a similarly popular subject for painters. Do you think these photographs make a compelling case for photography as a fine art? Why or why not?



Form & Function:

Rejlander believed a photographer should find his subject matter “in his daily life.” Cameron said her goal was to combine “the real & Ideal” through “devotion to poetry and beauty.” How does each photograph reflect its creator’s intentions?

AFTER VIEWING THE EXHIBITION

Have students use the web, popular media, or books to find contemporary photographs that are staged or involve an element of performance. What connections can they find between these images and the photographs they saw in the exhibition?

Challenge students to take their own staged photographs, considering:

- How they will use the visual attributes of photography to achieve a desired effect;
 - How performance or theatricality will be incorporated into the image;
 - The photograph’s intended message or function.
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IMAGE CREDITS

Giraudon’s Artist (French, active about 1875). *Figure Study*, about 1875-1880. Albumen print, Image and sheet: 6 7/8 x 6 1/2 inches; Mount: 10 3/4 x 9 1/2 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2013.52.2.

William Adolphe Bouguereau (French, 1825-1905). *Italian Woman at the Fountain*, 1869. Oil on canvas, 39 3/4 x 31 7/8 inches. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. M.B. Nelson, F88-17.

Camille Silvy (French, 1834-1910). *Actress Rosa Csillag in the Role of Orpheus*, 1860. Albumen print, 9 3/16 x 7 5/8 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.50.37.

Pierre-Louis Pierson (French, 1822-1913). *The Countess de Castiglione*, about 1856-1857. Hand colored salt print, 10 11/16 x 10 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2015.67.44.

Oscar Gustav Rejlander (English, born Sweden, 1813-1875). *Come Along*, about 1860. Albumen print, Image and sheet: 8 5/8 x 6 5/16 inches; Mount: 13 3/4 x 10 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2017.44.12.

Julia Margaret Cameron (English, born India, 1815-1879). *Sappho (Mary Hiller)*, 1865. Albumen print, Image and sheet: 12 15/16 x 10 1/8 inches; Mount: 20 13/16 x 16 13/16 inches. Gift of the Hall Family Foundation, 2017.61.5.
