SESSION 02 · UNIT 1 — LIGHT & OBJECT · Sept 29, 2026

# Julia Margaret Cameron & Anna Atkins

*Cameron 1815–1879 · British, born India — Atkins 1799–1871 · British*

*Two of photography's earliest women — interpretation versus record*



*Sir John Herschel · Cameron, 1867*

*"I longed to arrest all beauty that came before me, and at length the longing has been satisfied."*

— Julia Margaret Cameron, Annals of My Glass House, 1874

## KEY WORKS

- Sir John Herschel, 1867 — soft-focus portrait of the astronomer and inventor of the cyanotype process (Cameron)
- Whisper of the Muse, 1865 — allegorical portrait of G.F. Watts (Cameron)
- Dictyota dichotoma, in the young state and in fruit, 1843 — cyanotype algae plate (Atkins)
- Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions, 1843 — the first book ever illustrated with photographic images (Atkins)

## CONTEXT

Julia Margaret Cameron and Anna Atkins were near-exact contemporaries — Cameron born in Calcutta in 1815, Atkins in Kent in 1799 — and both were among the earliest women to make photography their life's work, at a moment when the medium had almost no women in it at all. Their approaches could not have been more different. Cameron, who did not pick up a camera until she was 48, deliberately threw her portraits out of sharp focus, chasing likeness and feeling over technical polish; her sitters included family, servants, and the most famous men of her age — Tennyson, Darwin, Herschel — rendered as if seen through memory rather than a lens. Atkins, a trained botanist and the daughter of a scientist, used the cyanotype process invented by Sir John Herschel — the same Herschel who sat for one of Cameron's most famous portraits — to produce exact, scientifically rigorous silhouettes of algae and ferns. In 1843 she assembled these into Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions, widely considered the first book ever illustrated with photographic images. Cameron interpreted; Atkins recorded. Between the two of them, they cover nearly the entire emotional range photography is capable of.

## WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

*Two of the earliest women in photography, working in almost opposite registers — Cameron's soft-focus, emotionally charged portraiture against Atkins's exact, scientific cyanotypes. As you meet the studio and the egg for the first time, that's the range worth holding in mind: light can describe a fact, or it can describe a feeling. Today you start deciding which one you're chasing.*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Cameron threw her portraits out of focus on purpose, at a time when sharp focus was the entire selling point of photography. Atkins used the same light-sensitive chemistry to be as exact as possible. Is one of them more “true” to what a photograph is supposed to do than the other?
2. Atkins's book predates Talbot's Pencil of Nature by about a year, yet Talbot is almost always taught as photography's first author. What does it take for a woman working in a quiet, “scientific” genre — cyanotypes of seaweed — to be remembered as an artist, and not just a documentarian?

## MORE IMAGES



*Whisper of the Muse · Cameron, 1865*



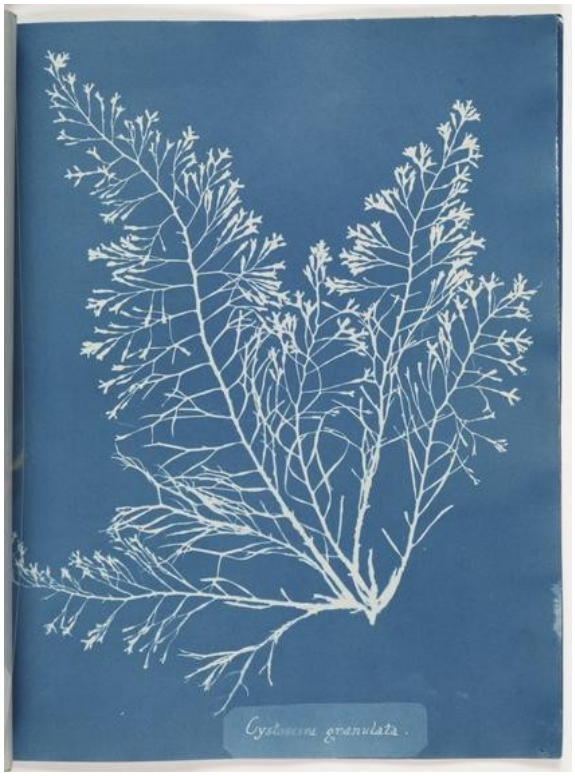
*Annie · Cameron, 1864*



*Alfred Lord Tennyson · Cameron, 1866*




*Dictyota dichotoma · Atkins, 1843*




*Cystoseira granulata · Atkins*



*A fern plate, Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants and Ferns · Atkins*