

JULIA MARGARET CAMERON'S MATERIAL WORLD:  
TRACING RECURRING OBJECTS  
IN PHOTOGRAPHIC WORKS OF ART

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In spring 2020, when people were first confined to their homes due to the COVID-19 pandemic, results of “The Getty Museum Challenge” began circulating through social media. It became commonplace to see Frida Kahlo’s self-portrait remade with green plastic bottles of cleaning products standing in for parrots and Dutch portraits remade with rolls of toilet paper making up ruffled collars (“Famous Paintings”; Goldstein). Though this practice may have seemed novel at the time, it recalls an earlier moment in the history of photography, when nineteenth-century photographers intent on demonstrating the medium’s capacity to produce works of art recreated recognizable paintings in photographs. William Henry Fox Talbot’s *The Open Door* based on Dutch seventeenth-century genre scenes, Oscar Rejlander’s *Two Ways of Life* based on Raphael’s *School of Athens*, and Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs recalling Pre-Raphaelite paintings and Rembrandt portraits come to mind (Howard 15-17; Ford 69-70). While the contexts, purposes, and photographic technologies of these nineteenth and twenty-first-century practices differ dramatically, I propose here that an engagement with twenty-first-century photographic recreations can help us think anew the material cultures that nineteenth-century photographs captured on sensitized paper.

In examples of twenty-first-century recreations, the props sourced from people’s households play a significant role in the meaning and even the pleasure of the photographs, and these material objects (such as cleaning products and toilet paper) have much to tell us about one particular moment in history. Taking this point about twenty-first-century material culture as a starting point, I examine material objects included as costumes and props in nineteenth-century photographs to develop new insights into nineteenth-century material culture.<sup>1</sup> Julia Margaret Cameron’s photographs are rich subjects for this inquiry due to Cameron’s reliance on an array of costumes and props, many of which recur across multiple photographs with different sitters. Cos-