

The Photographer's Playbook

307 Assignments and Ideas

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aperture

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On Close Inspection

Choose a photograph and spend some time with it. Too often we mistake the habit of reading wall labels and breezing past a row of framed pictures for the deeper pleasure of experiencing a work of art. Photography is particularly susceptible to this conflation of object and image. Don't just look at the photo you choose framed on a wall, but sit down, clear your mind, and see what you can see. This is easier than you might think. Museums have study centers that are open to the public; auction houses gladly remove works from their frames, and galleries have scores of great photographs in their plan files. Wash your hands (wear gloves if someone insists), open the mat (if there is one), and start noticing the details: is the print trimmed to the image edge or is there a border? What kind of paper is it printed on? Is it mounted? Are there interesting marks, inscriptions, stamps, or retouching? What does its condition tell you about where it's been? Take notes if you don't trust your memory.

It is, of course, a treat to behold a Julia Margaret Cameron portrait on its original mount, with or without a venerable Colnaghi blind stamp. Her elegant lettering in a pen freshly dipped in ink, or the thin gilded border that perfectly complements the deep purplish tones of her albumen silver prints signifies that you are in the presence of Art, or at least something deserving your special attention. But one can also delight in the unique characteristics of a found snapshot, where the thin glossy paper speaks of practical standards, where the shape of the image and its border are often telltale signs of a particular era and camera, or where a hastily inscribed caption serves to remind us of what we don't know. If you look closely enough at anything, even small differences begin to suggest meaning. I pride myself in being able to read Eugène Atget's loopy-penciled inscriptions, which allows me to determine a likely sequence for a group of them. Even a single photograph can

teach us something of itself. The jumble of stamps and printed captions on the back of prints from a daily newspaper's files can confirm or complicate our understanding of a picture. Subtle clues (a hand-trimmed edge, a peculiar number, a surface texture, a mounting technique) can also do the same. And these details can reveal something about an artist's intent and an object's history in endlessly gratifying ways if we take time and pay attention.