

At the City Art Centre – Mary Cameron: Life in Paint

At a time when ‘nice’ women were expected to stay at home dabbling in watercolours, a Portobello artist was travelling across Europe, producing portraits of Spanish peasants and graphic studies of bullfights.

Mary Cameron (1865-1921) achieved great success in her lifetime, but she is virtually unknown today. A new exhibition *Mary Cameron: Life in Paint* curated by Dr Helen E Scott at the City Art Centre in Edinburgh, celebrates Cameron’s career whilst examining the reasons why she and many other female artists have been forgotten.



John Brown Abercromby, *Mary Cameron in her Studio*, 1899. Private Collection. (Photo: Eion Johnston)

Cameron was born in Portobello in 1865. Her father, who owned *The Oban Times* and was a partner in a well-known stationery firm, had invented the Waverley fountain pen nib. The family was comfortable and traditional, but her parents must have been more liberal than most as from the age of 17 Cameron was allowed to study art at the Trustees Drawing Academy (a

precursor of Edinburgh College of Art.)

Always a stickler for detail, when Cameron was denied life drawing and anatomy tuition at the Academy (these were seen as unsuitable for women), she persuaded the Royal Dick Veterinary School to let her attend their classes in equine anatomy. Horses remained a great interest throughout her life; she owned a thoroughbred and her first exhibit at the Royal Academy was a racing scene, *At the Starting Point*.

Cameron's father later financed her move to Paris, where she was allowed to attend mixed life drawing sessions; she studied at the Academie Colarossi and had private teaching from Lucien Pierre Sergent.

The exhibition opens with some strange little oil paintings, made at this time, of French soldiers, one fallen in battle. Historical military subjects were a lasting theme in Cameron's work, and to ensure accuracy she built up a collection of weapons and items of uniform.

One of the many fascinating photographs accompanying the exhibition shows Cameron and her brother Alfred among her artefacts, but few examples of her battle scene paintings seem to have survived.

Returning to Edinburgh, Cameron set up her own studio in Melville Place. She worked as a courtroom artist and also produced architectural scenes of the city; the clean lines of *The Interior*, *The Synagogue*, *Ross House*, and *Mary's Chapel*, *Burnet Close*, emphasise her love of precision.



General view, second gallery PHOTO John Preece

Cameron had painted portraits from a young age, mainly of her own family; an 1891 oil painting of her brother Waverley has him looking every inch the Victorian gentleman, with his blond hair and cream suit, and there are good portraits of her father Duncan, with his long white beard and horn rimmed spectacles, and of her American mother Mary. A charming watercolour of her father and brother in the garden of their seaside house at Gullane is more relaxed, perhaps reflecting their holiday mood – and this is also one of the first sightings of the family's beautiful Borzoi dogs.



General view, side gallery PHOTO John Preece

From 1893 Cameron was advertising for portrait commissions , but she continued to visit Paris, becoming a member of the Women's International Art Club, and also travelled in Norway and the Netherlands. She was fluent in several European languages. In 1900 she made her first, life-changing, visit to Spain, a country which was to influence her work for the rest of her career. The artists of the Golden Age of Spanish painting were very popular in the UK, and many British painters of the time went to the Prado Museum in Madrid to study 17th century techniques.

Here Cameron saw the work of Velasquez; as was the custom, she reproduced several of his paintings, and her copies of *Prince Baltasar Carlos on Horseback* and a rather odd-looking *Infanta Margarita Teresa in a Pink Dress* (above) are among those shown here. From then on Cameron brought Velasquez's use of formal poses, dramatic lighting and a restricted colour palette into her own work.

One of the most spectacular paintings in the exhibition, *Mrs Blair and her Borzois*, is of Mary's sister, Flora. Velasquez's influence is seen in Flora's formal, stately pose, mirrored in the slim, elegant Borzois at her side. The light falls on Flora's white fur jacket and the feathery coats of the dogs. This woman could have stepped straight out of *Downton Abbey*. *Portrait of Flora Baird (nee Cameron)*, however, shows a softer side to Flora; here she is surrounded by foliage, her head inclined to one side, in what feels like much more of a domestic scene.



'Mrs. Blair and her Borzois' – (1904) PHOTO John Preece
A smaller painting, *Portrait of a Woman* (possibly Margaret Cameron nee Lawson), also shows a restricted use of colour; the background and the sitter's fur coat are dark, but set off by brilliant red and white flowers. Margaret's expression is serene. A lovely portrait of Cameron's elderly aunt Margaret

Johnston also shows the influence of Velasquez; again the background, chair and dress are dark, with light falling only onto the old lady's hands and face.



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'Les Joueurs' – (c.1907) PHOTO John Preece

Cameron set up studios in Madrid and Seville. If Velasquez influenced her style, her friendship with the artist Ignacio Zuloaga and his wife Valentine helped her in her quest to see not only great art but also Spanish contemporary life and traditional customs. Zuloaga encouraged her to visit the ancient Castilian city of Segovia, her vast painting of which (top) forms part of this exhibition.



Unknown photographer, Mary Cameron and Ignacio Zuloaga in traditional Spanish costume, c.1905-1907. Private Collection.

Cameron painted the dancers, beggars, gamblers, musicians and gypsies of rural Spain; she was especially interested in the traditional sport of bullfighting, but the cruelty she witnessed – not only to the bulls but also to the horses who were used as the warm-up act – horrified her.

A Bullfight, Suerte de Picador depicting a fallen horse, another under attack, and some goading *chulos*, shows the true horror of the sport, and her *Mute Martyrs of the Bullfight* was reproduced by the French government as a postcard to put the French public off the idea of introducing the sport in France. With typical thoroughness, Cameron went behind the scenes at bullfights to learn more about the rules and rituals – eventually the participants grew to trust her and let her into their world.



'Mute Martyrs of the Bullfight – (c.1900)' PHOTO John Preece
Between 1901 and 1911 Cameron tried four times to become a member of the Royal Scottish Academy. Despite being backed by academicians as prominent as John Lavery, she was repeatedly rejected; the RSA did not admit a woman until 1938, seventeen years after Cameron's death.

She was not alone; the RSA also said no to Phoebe Traquair and Christina Paterson Ross. This lack of recognition may be one of the reasons why Cameron has not had a higher profile; even when galleries did show women's work – and Cameron had paintings accepted for many exhibitions – it was often hung in obscure corners or so high on walls that no-one could see it. Cameron's bullfighting scenes also caused much controversy; when *Picadors – Bull Ring – Madrid* was shown the Glasgow

Evening Times critic wrote;

'The picture is not worth the time and the suffering that must have been expended upon it. Any canvas on the wall is a relief from this one.'

The *Daily Record and Mail* agreed;

'It is a pity that Miss Cameron should have produced..so much of the horrible.'

(Cameron kept press cuttings in a most interesting scrapbook.)

The Royal Scottish Academy wrote to Cameron asking her to withdraw the picture and provide a substitute. And the reason for this was, of course, her sex. A woman should not be painting 'unsuitable' subjects.



'The Dance of the Seises – (c.1909) *PHOTO John Preece*

The last room in this exhibition shows Cameron's later Spanish paintings. Some are sentimental, romantic depictions of young girls and their suitors, but two stand out. *El Memorialista – The Public Letter Writer* contrasts the world-weary old scribe, his heavy brows, dark clothes and wide-brimmed hat, with the bright green embroidered shawl of the jolly young woman leaning over him. This painting is notable not only for its technical skill but also as a record of a vanished profession.

Finally, *The Dance of the Seises* (above) shows young choir boys in Seville Cathedral, dressed up to perform a Corpus Christi ritual. In this vast canvas we see the gloomy interior of the building and the dark robes of the clerics, while light from a window illuminates the boys' red and white costumes. The children's expressions are haughty and proud.

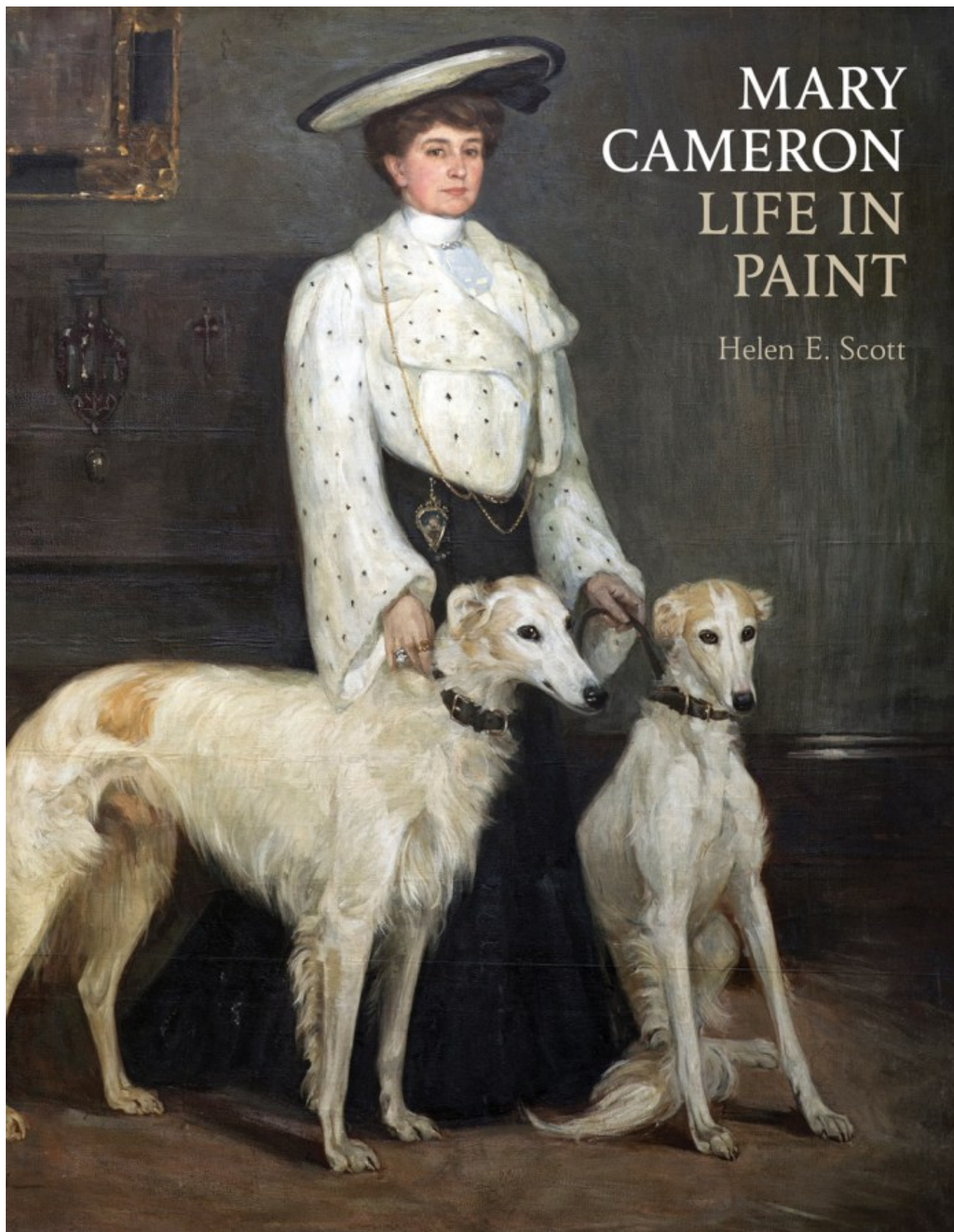
It was very difficult for Cameron to obtain permission to paint this scene, and she later said that even when she had it, the boys were very naughty and uncooperative. Nevertheless, the finished work is impressive.

In 1905 Cameron made an ill-advised marriage to Alexis Millar, an Edinburgh horse-dealer; from then on it was all downhill. She poured all her energies into four solo exhibitions (with mixed success), but when the First World War began she could no longer travel. Cut off from Spain, the source of her inspiration, the quality of Cameron's work deteriorated. Her health became poor, and she died at Turnhouse in 1921.

Many of Cameron's paintings are privately owned – 35 of the 41 in this exhibition are on loan – and some are probably still untraced. This is the first dedicated exhibition of Cameron's work since her death, and Dr Scott hopes that it will not only bring the career of this intrepid woman to public attention, but also revive interest in other forgotten female artists.

Mary Cameron: Life in Paint is at City Art Centre, 2 Market

Street, Edinburgh until 15 March 2020. The centre is open 10am-5pm daily, and admission is free.



An illustrated book by Dr Scott accompanies the exhibition. It is published by Sansom & Co and may be purchased from the

gallery shop or from the publisher [here](#).