

GERTRUDE KÄSEBIER

What She Saw: Four Photographs by Gertrude Käsebier

by Alison Townsend

I. *Woman Seated Under a Tree*, circa 1910

At first, it seems she has taken a hand mirror down to the river to see what she can discern in its small silver circle, though it is not clear if it will be water or sky. But then I see she has turned the mirror over, its bright surface plunged into the dark of her lap, as she stares at scrolls and curlicues we cannot quite see incised on its back. She wears a long white dress, Edwardian, her hair piled high. All around her, trees form a leafy frame reflected in water, circles within circles, everything leading the eye back to her small hands, even the splash of sunlight that shines on the pale lawn of the dress. Impossible to know what she is thinking, why she has turned the mirror over, or if she will turn it back again, her own face suddenly clear, the thing she was looking for there all along, familiar features reflected up at her, alight in the midst of summer's dark green blur.

II. *The Heritage of Motherhood*, circa 1904

Is she praying or enduring, this woman with strong hands, her fingers laced so tightly together it seems there are too many to hold in her lap? And with her head tossed back as if waiting for something—a child's funeral carriage, the husband away at sea who will not know of the loss for six months. Her own face shines, still pale from fever, above her black shawl and white dress, its scarf knotted loosely, as if she's dressed in haste, not caring whether her hair is right. The wind lifts one strand from her dark bun. That's the detail that arrests me, looking on from a future she cannot imagine. And the immaculate white cuff that peeks from beneath her shawl, as if it alone held her world together. I imagine her fastening the pearl button around her wrist, tugging it smooth with those long, pale fingers. Which, I notice now, hold a shining cup some might call a *chalice*, others an ordinary pint, its bright circle shining in her hands.



Gertrude Käsebier, *The Heritage of Motherhood*, c. 1904

III. *The Sketch (Beatrice Baxter)*, 1903

She leans forward in her long, white dress as if blown that way by the wind, strands of hair loose around her shoulders as she gazes into the distance, studying this landscape where hayricks and a country house glow in the background, everything lighter than she is, standing here in the shadows of enormous trees. She is taking it all in, making the landscape part of her body before she lifts her hand to the page, its bright edge shining, a wand of light.

She is beautiful, this young woman, with her tangled waterfall of dark hair, standing there, sheltered in a room made of leafy shade. She is the kind of woman I once wanted to be—rapt, enigmatic, alight, the shadows she stands inside a perfect foil for her brightness, for the many ways sun splatters the white cambric of her dress even whiter. A band of silver gleams on one wrist, and silver beads hang in a circle belting her waist. Something that might be a key dangles there too, half-hidden in the folds of her dress. But no matter how long I look at her looking, I cannot unlock her secret or see what she sees, pencil lifted, about to draw one unrecoverable moment of this summer afternoon caught there, the image of what she perceives still there, alive in her body.

IV. *Blessed Art Thou Among Women*, 1899

They stand framed in the open door, this mother in her long dress of filmy white stuff that could be called a tea gown, and her daughter, eight or nine, dressed in schoolgirl navy blue, her satin cuffs and collar shining, tie looped in a perfect red bow. She's being presented or introduced, this girl toward whom her mother bends, even as she glances down the hall, distracted by something we cannot see, though whether it is husband, lover, servant, or the next daughter waiting her turn, we cannot say. Meanwhile, the girl stares straight ahead, not afraid exactly, but waiting for something—as we all wait for what we do not now—the moment when her presence is announced and she steps over the threshold, away from her mother's hand on her shoulder, away from the cut-off painting of two women behind her and through the white-framed door. The scene hangs there before us, the about-to-happen forever potential, as if she understands something we have yet to learn, her bangs cut straight across her forehead, her cap of dark hair shining.



Gertrude Käsebier, *Blessed Art Thou Among Women*, 1899