



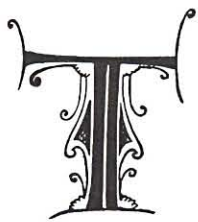
Frances Benjamin Johnston, Self-Portrait (as "New Woman"), c. 1900. Photograph courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Frances Benjamin Johnston

Promoting Women Photographers in *The Ladies' Home Journal*

GILLIAN GREENHILL HANNUM

Frances Benjamin Johnston successfully carved out an unprecedented niche for herself as a respected professional photographer with connections in high places. Having done so, she then took it upon herself to play the role of mentor to other women photographers.



The year 1900 marked the beginning of a new century, seen by all as the advent of a truly modern era. It also marked the coming of age of the "New Woman." Charles Dana Gibson's famed images of the Gibson Girl epitomized this vision of an energized, athletic, take-charge female who rather than remaining demurely occupied with home and hearth instead ventured into the wider world and challenged male ownership of various pursuits and pastimes. Photography was one of these. As Clarence Bloomfield Moore noted in *Cosmopolitan* in 1893:

Unlike the gun, the racquet and the oar, the camera offers a field where women can compete with men upon equal terms; and that some women have so successfully striven should encourage more to follow in their lead, especially as the only distasteful portion of the work—the staining of the fingers—can now be entirely avoided.¹

In the realm of American photography, Frances Benjamin Johnston (1864-1952) best represents this "New Woman." Clearly, she recognized this when she made her tongue-in-cheek *Self-Portrait (as "New Woman")*. Indeed, Johnston positioned herself carefully as both role model and mentor to the generation of women photographers coming of age at the turn of the century. She was, in fact, one of the primary successes to whom Moore referred in his *Cosmopolitan* article.

The rise of amateur photography in the 1880s and 1890s opened the doors of the photographic world to large numbers of women. The availability of commercial

dry plates and, later, of roll film made photography infinitely more accessible at just the time when travel and tourism were becoming possibilities for the rapidly expanding American middle class. Indeed, the choice of the Kodak Girl for advertising purposes reflects this very trend.² For middle-class women, the liberation from drudgery made possible by modern, laborsaving devices allowed the leisure time to pursue outside interests. For those with artistic ambitions, the camera provided a modern and relatively easy entrée into the fine arts.

Compared to painting and sculpture, which had centuries in which to form hierarchies and whose august institutions consciously discouraged participation by women, photography carried little baggage. There were no national schools or academies, no large-scale controlling organizations and no canon of great masters to challenge.³ Upper-middle-class women like Johnston who had trained in the more traditional arts of drawing and painting quickly recognized the opportunities presented by the new medium. Not only did Johnston move swiftly to carve out her own niche as a respected professional photographer with connections in high places, but she also seems to have consciously decided to play the role of mentor for other women photographers, organizing an exhibition of work by American women to be shown at the 1900 Paris Exposition and later, in 1901 and 1902, publishing a series of essays on "The Foremost Women Photographers of America" in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, the magazine with the largest circulation in America at that time.⁴

Interestingly, the rise of activity of women in photography parallels the rise of the popular press in America, a phenomenon made possible by cheaper paper and improved printing techniques. Johnston's reputation

rested, in large part, upon her work for the press. Thus, her use of the popular *Ladies' Home Journal* to familiarize a broad public with the work of her female colleagues was a natural synergy.

As her self-portrait with cigarette and beer stein suggests, Frances Benjamin Johnston saw herself as a reformer; however, she also had a sense of humor about playing that role. The composition for her rendering as a "New Woman" clearly mimics that of a Keystone View Company stereograph of the "New Woman," a widely-circulated image showing a husband slaving at a wash tub in the background, while his wife reads the newspaper in front of the fire with her skirts hitched up about her knees and a man's hat perched on her head.⁵

Certainly, Johnston was a pioneer; she is often credited with being the world's first female photojournalist.⁶ Her first professional job came in 1889 from *Demorest's Family Magazine*, for whom she provided an illustrated article on the United States Mint in Philadelphia.⁷ As the magazine had recently begun employing the new halftone process, which allowed for the simultaneous reproduction of actual photographs along with text in articles, Johnston set out to learn all she could about the medium, writing to family friend George Eastman in Rochester for advice about equipment and processing.⁸ She also apprenticed herself to Thomas W. Smillie, director of the division of photography at the Smithsonian Institution.⁹ She assisted Smillie in making a series of photographs of the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago to illustrate the United States Government Board report.¹⁰ She furnished the photographs of Annapolis students for the U.S. Navy's exhibition space at the fair.¹¹

Johnston also specialized in portraiture and interior photography. In fact, she published a book of her photos of the White House in 1893, earning her the reputation of being the first official White House photographer.¹² Quickly, she gained a reputation among Washington's inner circles as one who could produce images that proved socially and politically advantageous to America's rising political aristocracy of the Gilded Age.

However, it is Johnston's work in photojournalism that is best known, and certainly it was that work which drew her to the attention of *The Ladies' Home Journal*. With the popularization of the halftone process in the 1880s, the circulation of illustrated magazines boomed. Johnston worked for many of the most well known: *Harper's Weekly*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Frank Leslie's Once a Week*, *the Illustrated American*, *Demorest's* and, of course, the *Journal*. Among her features were a series on Pennsylvania coal mines that appeared in the March 1892 issue of *Demorest's Family Magazine*. Over the years she also produced photo essays on women workers in a shoe factory in Lynn, Massachusetts; on Hampton and Tuskegee Institutes and the Carlisle Indian School; and documentary photographs of the U.S. Mint and Mammoth Cave, among others.¹³

An 1895 advertising poster designed for Johnston by artist Mills Thompson depicts her as an intrepid photojournalist, striding into the rising sun with plate carrier

and tripod in hand. As early as 1893 Clarence Bloomfield Moore noted, "Miss Johnston . . . possesses a facile pen, and her descriptions are as graphic and spirited as is the camera work which they describe."¹⁴

Even at this early date, Johnston recognized that she was a role model for other women. She told Moore:

It is another pet theory with me that there are great possibilities in photography as a profitable and pleasant occupation for women, and I feel that my success helps to demonstrate this, and it is for this reason that I am glad to have other women know of my work. I began to publish my illustrations in 1889; and I feel that I may have a pardonable pride in the way I have extended my work in these short years.¹⁵

In September 1897, Johnston published her first essay in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, a two-page spread of text and images entitled "What a Woman Can Do With a Camera."¹⁶ She was paid a sum of \$300.00 for the piece.¹⁷ Apparently, Johnston had toyed with the idea of writing an article on women photographers for some years. An earlier project on "Women Who Use Kodaks" was proposed to George Eastman in 1891. He seems to have been quite interested, but Johnston appears not to have followed through.¹⁸ Her piece for the *Journal* was illustrated by fifteen of her own photographs, including a view of the exterior of her Washington, D.C., studio.

In her essay, Johnston points out that photography holds out great promise as a career for women, many of whom already have some training in the arts. She writes:

Photography as a profession should appeal particularly to women, and in it there are great opportunities for a good paying business—but only under very well-defined conditions. The prime requisites—as summed up in my mind after long experience and thought—are these: The woman who makes photography profitable must have, as to personal qualities, good common sense, unlimited patience to carry her through endless failures, equally unlimited tact, good taste, a quick eye, a talent for detail, and a genius for hard work. In addition, she needs training, experience, some capital, and a field to exploit.¹⁹

Indeed, Johnston – with camera and pen – became quite a political crusader, urging social change for impoverished coal miners and exploited female factory workers and promoting education for African Americans and Native Americans of both genders.

On April 12, 1900 Mrs. Charles Henrotin of Chicago wrote a letter to Johnston on the letterhead of the United States Commission to the Paris Exposition of 1900. It extended a unique invitation:

In connection with the Paris Exposition a congress is to be held on Photography, July 23rd to the 28th. I promised Mrs. Potter Palmer when she went to Europe that I would assist her in securing women delegates to the series of congresses to be held in connection with the Paris Exposition. We are endeavoring to secure women who are specialists in their line of work. Women photographers, in this country, have accomplished such unique work that I am endeavoring to ascertain who among them will

be in Paris this summer and would take part as a delegate in that congress. Are you to visit Paris during the coming summer and would you be willing to serve as a delegate? Do you speak or write French and could you give a short address on the work of Women in Photography and their specialties?²⁰

The invitation reveals several interesting things about the way in which Johnston was perceived by her peers. First, she was clearly seen as a force to be reckoned with in the photographic world. She was also perceived to belong to the social class that summered in Europe. Finally, her credentials as an expert on women photographers in America seem to have been well known. Undoubtedly, this was, at least in part, the result of her 1897 essay in *The Ladies' Home Journal*. Mrs. Henrotin and Mrs. Potter Palmer may have been familiar with Johnston's photographic activities at the 1893 Chicago fair, as well.

Johnston must have hit upon the notion of an exhibition in Paris almost immediately. As soon as her participation at the congress was assured, the photographer began writing to her female colleagues, asking them



Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers of America: Mrs. Gertrude Käsebier." This and the following photographs of women photographers appeared in *The Ladies' Home Journal*, this one in May 1901. All of these photographs are courtesy of The Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.



Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers in America: Miss Mathilde Weil," June 1901.

to send her a brief biographical sketch and to loan her a few prints to exhibit. The group of women she selected included some professionals, like herself, but also serious amateurs who submitted images to the photographic salons of their day. Their work was typical of the then dominant Pictorialist style of photography, which produced painterly, artistic photographs.²¹

Johnston left for Europe in early July. The Third International Photographic Congress was held at the Palais des Congrès, Place de l'Alma, as part of the Exposition Universelle of 1900.²² While no complete manuscript of Johnston's speech has been found, biographical notes on some of the thirty-one women whose work she presented give a flavor of what the event must have been like:

Zaida Ben-Yūsuf

1896 – Began as pastime: Soon decided to adopt portraiture as a profession. Studio like a painter's, no artificial accessories. No previous artistic training. Does all her own printing and developing. Does not care to handle more work than she can develop personally. Born in England. Came to America several years ago.²³

The French government awarded Johnston the decoration of Officier d'Académie for her work at the con-



Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers in America: Frances and Mary Allen," July 1901.

gress.²⁴ Her exhibition was such a success that, following the congress, it was shown at the Photo Club de Paris and also in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Johnston's initial letter to women contributors had already anticipated publication of some of the submitted photographs following the congress. However, it is doubtful that the specifics of the *Ladies' Home Journal* series had yet jelled in her mind when she wrote to her colleagues in the spring.

Over the years, Johnston and *Journal* editor Edward Bok developed a relationship in which the photographer periodically suggested feature ideas that she wanted to pursue. In January of 1900, for example, she seems to have been promoting a project on fashion photography.²⁵ Thus, in the fall of 1900, when she proposed the idea of a series of features based on the work of American women photographers, the *Journal* responded positively, but with certain stipulations:

Dear Miss Johnston:

Our understanding in regard to the pictures which you are to supply for use in the proposed series of pages in the *Journal*, under some such title as "What Women have Done in Photography", is as follows:

You are to contribute enough pictures – say, five or six to the page – to fill nine or ten pages in a manner satisfactory to Mr. Bok; and for each page used you are to supply such descriptive matter as may be desired.

We are to have only the right to reproduce the photographs in question, are to pay one hundred and fifty dollars (\$150.00) for each page accepted under this agreement, and are to be responsible for no other payments to any person save yourself, as provided above.

Kindly confirm the above understanding if it is in harmony with your own views.

The payment of one hundred dollars (\$100.00) today is understood to be a partial payment for the first article.

Yours truly,

Wm V. Alexander,

Private Secretary²⁶

The first article in the series, entitled "The Foremost Women Photographers of America," was devoted to the work of Gertrude Käsebier and appeared on page one of the May 1901 issue of *The Ladies' Home Journal*.²⁷ An article on Philadelphian Mathilde Weil followed a month later. Deerfield, Massachusetts sisters Frances



Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers in America: Emma J. Farnsworth," August 1901.



Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers in America: Eva Lawrence Watson (Mrs. Martin Schultze [sic])," October 1901.

and Mary Allen were featured in the July issue, and Emma J. Farnsworth of Albany was profiled in August.²⁸

There was no article in September of 1901, and the publication of the October page featuring Eva Watson Schütz had its share of difficulties prior to publication.²⁹ A letter of July 13, 1901, from Alexander to Johnston suggests that the photographer was failing to meet deadlines and expectations:

Dear Miss Johnston:

Here is a proof of your page for October. I find that we have space for only about fifty words of text.

Relative to your suggestion that your series of pages be extended, I would say that Mr. Bok discussed the matter with me and concluded that it would be best not to do anything along that line at present. Possibly he may change his view, but I am inclined to think that he will not.

Very truly yours,

Wm V. Alexander³⁰

Alexander put it more bluntly in a letter of July 25:

The long delay was really very trying, inasmuch as we are quite late on our October issue and every day's delay means considerable expense.³¹

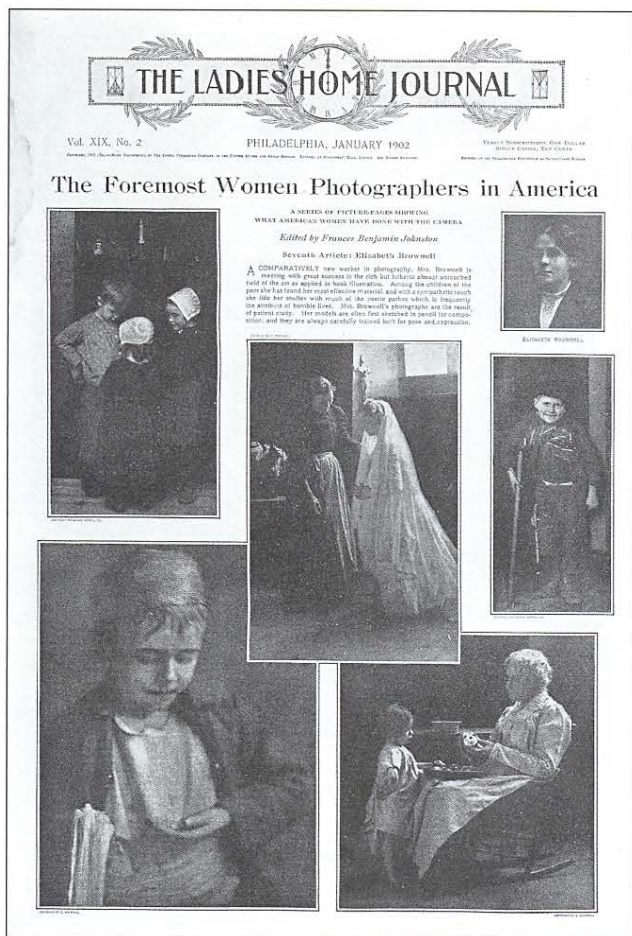


Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers in America: Zaida Ben-Yûsuf," November 1901.

No wonder Bok and Alexander were unenthusiastic about extending the series.

The essay profiling New York photographer Zaida Ben-Yûsuf appeared in November. However, there were again some difficulties regarding the publication of the final article in the series, an essay devoted to Chicagoan Elizabeth Brownell.³² The agreement between Johnston and the *Journal* had stipulated that she would not have an article in the December issue, probably because it was to be filled with holiday features. Circumstances required, therefore, that the final article be carried over for a month.

Johnston seems to have tried appealing to Bok himself regarding a continuation of the series.³³ These discussions came to naught, and the profiles of "The Foremost Women Photographers in America" ended with the January 1902 article on Brownell. Johnston's next correspondence with *The Ladies' Home Journal* dates from November 1902 and has to do with photographs of "the Page House" – an entirely different matter.³⁴ Thus, Johnston was able to publish only a small sampling of the work she had taken to Paris. Nevertheless, her series provides a vital perspective on how America's leading female photographers were seen in their own day and is an especially significant resource to photohistorians try-



Frances Benjamin Johnston, "The Foremost Women Photographers in America: Elizabeth Brownell," January 1902.

ing to reconstruct lost or overlooked careers. Most significantly, perhaps, it shows the willingness of America's leading women's magazine to embrace photography as a pursuit appropriate to the "New Woman."

NOTES

1. Clarence Bloomfield Moore, "Women Experts in Photography," *Cosmopolitan* 14 (March 1893), 581.
2. The Kodak Girl's physical resemblance to the Gibson Girl is obvious.
3. See Richard Whelan, "Are Women Better Photographers Than Men?" *Artnews* 79 (October 1980), 80-88.
4. For a detailed study of Johnston's Paris exhibition, see Bronwyn A. E. Griffith (ed.), *Ambassadors of Progress: American Women Photographers in Paris, 1900-1901* (Giverny, France: Musée d'Art Américain, 2001). See also Judith Fryer Davidov, *Women's Camera Work* (Durham, N.C. and London: Duke University Press, 1998), 74. *The Ladies' Home Journal* was the first American magazine to break the one million circulation mark, in 1905. (E-mail correspondence from Kim Korby Fraser, Reader Service Editor, *Ladies' Home Journal*, May 10, 2000.) By 1900 thirteen percent of the 3,580 photographers documented by the national census were women. (Davidov, 76.)
5. Special thanks to Bridget and Heinz Henisch for bringing this image to my attention, an example of which is reproduced in their book, *Positive Pleasures: Early Photography and Humor* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1998), 153. It also appears in *Points of View: The Stereograph in America—a Cultural History*, edited by Edward W. Earle (Rochester, N.Y.: The Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1979), 79.
6. See, for instance, Marian Page, "Frances Benjamin Johnston's Architectural Photographs," *Art and Antiques* 2, no. 4 (July-August 1979), 64.
7. Fellow art student Elizabeth Sylvester provided the initial contact with the magazine. See Jennifer A. Watts, "Frances Benjamin Johnston, The Huntington Library Portrait Collection," *History of Photography* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1995), 261, note 9.
8. Oral tradition, based on comments Johnston made late in life, long held that Frances's first camera was a gift from Eastman. However, her correspondence of 1889 and 1890 states clearly that she had purchased a camera.
9. Whelan, 86.
10. Frank W. Crane, "American Women Photographers," *Munsey's Magazine* 11 (1894), 406.
11. Constance W. Glenn and Leland Rice, *Frances Benjamin Johnston, Women of Class and Station* (Long Beach: California State University, Long Beach, 1979), 13.
12. Frances Benjamin Johnston, *The White House* (Washington: Gibson Brothers, 1893). In all, she photographed five administrations: Harrison, Cleveland, McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt and Taft.
13. The series on Kohinoor Coal Mine and Mammoth Cave were both shot underground, requiring the use of highly volatile flash powder.
14. Moore, 586.
15. Ibid.
16. Frances Benjamin Johnston, "What a Woman Can Do With a Camera," *The Ladies' Home Journal* (hereafter *LHJ*), September 1897, 6-7.
17. *LHJ*, receipt, March 4, 1897. Library of Congress, Manuscript Division: Frances Benjamin Johnston Collection [hereafter, LC: FBJ Collection], reel 4, frame 000496.
18. See Amy S. Doherty, "Frances Benjamin Johnston, 1864-1952," *History of Photography* 4, no. 2 (April 1980), 98-99.
19. Johnston, "What a Woman Can Do With a Camera," 6. Except for some sloppiness in handling bills and accounts, Johnston seems to have possessed all these attributes.
20. Mrs. C. Henrotin, letter to Frances Benjamin Johnston, April 12, 1900, LC: FBJ Collection, reel 5, frame 000495.
21. Alfred Stieglitz was, at the time, the most active American promoter of Pictorialism and the acceptance of photography as a fine art.
22. See S. Pector, program of the congress, dated June 28, 1900. LC: FBJ Collection, reel 34, frames 000150-000151.
23. Cited in Doherty, 107. These notes were also the basis for Johnston's later picture pages in *The Ladies' Home Journal*.
24. Doherty, 107.
25. See William Alexander, letter to Frances Benjamin Johnston, January 27, 1900. LC: FBJ Collection, reel 5, frame 000440.

26. William Alexander, letter to Frances Benjamin Johnston, November 21, 1900. LC: FBJ Collection, reel 5, frames 000682-000683.
27. The second and subsequent articles were titled "The Foremost Women Photographers in America."
28. For a detailed discussion of the work of the Allens, see Suzanne L. Flynt, *The Allen Sisters: Pictorial Photographers, 1885-1920* (Deerfield, Mass.: Pocumtuck Valley Memorial Association, 2002).
29. Ironically, Johnston—whose own name was so often muddled up—incorrectly listed Eva Lawrence Watson's married name as Mrs. Martin *Schultze*, rather than Schütze.
30. William Alexander, letter to Frances Benjamin Johnston, July 13, 1901. LC: FBJ Collection, reel 6, frames 000050-000051.
31. William Alexander, letter to Frances Benjamin Johnston, July 25, 1901. LC: FBJ Collection, reel 6, frames 000066-000067.
32. The question of whether Johnston had obtained the necessary copyright permissions to publish some of the photographs by these last two women was a matter of great concern to Alexander and Bok.
33. A letter from William Alexander to Johnston dated December 13, 1901, appears to be a response to a request by Johnston for an appointment with Bok. A meeting on "Wednesday" is suggested (see William Alexander, letter to Frances Benjamin Johnston, December 13, 1901. LC: FBJ Collection, reel 6, frame 000295).
34. See LC: FBJ Collection, reel 6, frame 000502.

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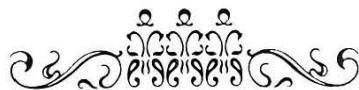
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