

## DRAFT

### Artist Bio: Anna Atkins

British, 1799–1871

In October 1843, the botanist and photographer Anna Atkins (1799–1871) wrote a letter to a friend. “I have lately taken in hand a rather lengthy performance,” revealed Atkins. “It is the taking photographical impressions of all, that I can procure, of the British algae and confervae, many of which are so minute that accurate drawings of them are very difficult to make.”<sup>1</sup> Atkins proceeded to inquire whether a mutual acquaintance, also interested in aquatic plants, would care to receive a copy of her recently completed book, [\*Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions\*](#).



Unknown photographer, “Portrait of Anna Atkins” (1862), albumen print (courtesy Nurstead Court Archives)

<https://hyperallergic.com/473240/blue-prints-the-pioneering-photographs-of-anna-atkins/>

With this book—the first to be illustrated entirely with photographs—Atkins combined her passions for scientific inquiry, technological experimentation, and artistic expression. Initially, Atkins conceived it as a companion volume to *Manual of British Algae* (1841), a lengthy, un-illustrated guide to aquatic plant life. Motivated by her belief that the visual appearance of plants possessed both botanical importance and aesthetic interest, Atkins resolved to collect, classify, and picture the specimens in the guide. Yet the last stage of her project—picturing—soon began to absorb her. While previous scientists had supplemented their research with drawings or prints, Atkins sought, as she later explained, “to obtain impressions of

plants themselves.”<sup>2</sup> In pursuit of an accurate yet evocative mode of representation, she adopted a technology that had emerged just several years prior: photography.

Atkins learned of photography through its British inventor, [William Henry Fox Talbot](#). Only months after Talbot patented his most successful photographic process, in 1841, Atkins and her father, a respected scientist, decided to replicate the “talbotype” at their home. “My daughter and I,” Atkins’s father wrote to Talbot, “shall set to work in good earnest ’till we completely succeed in practicing your invaluable process.”<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, it was a different photographic process—the cyanotype—that captivated Atkins. Developed by her friend and neighbor [Sir John Herschel](#), the cyanotype process produced blue-and-white prints that Atkins prized for their sharp contours and striking colors. Atkins added hundreds of new plates to *Photographs of British Algae* throughout the 1840s and early 1850s, all the while refining cyanotype chemical solutions and exposure times.

After completing *Photographs of British Algae* in 1853, Atkins turned from aquatic to terrestrial plants. The same year, she began to produce cyanotypes of ferns, including [Polypodium Phegopteris](#) (1853), [Aspidium Lobatum](#) (1853), and [Pteris Rotundifolia \(Jamaica\)](#) (1853). As in the algae cyanotypes, each fern is arrayed on a simple ground, its stems and leaves—and, in some cases, roots—captured with clarity and precision. Perhaps inspired by her first book, Atkins gathered many of these prints in [Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Plants and Ferns](#) (1853), widely considered her most accomplished publication.

During this time, Atkins also began to photograph entirely different subjects. Likely collaborating with her childhood friend Anne Dixon, Atkins incorporated flowers, feathers, and lace into prints that feature newly intricate compositions, subtle layering, and varied textures. Freed from the imperatives of scientific accuracy, she focused increasingly on visual properties such as line and form, color and space, and transparency and opacity. Even so, Atkins and her groundbreaking photographs were nearly forgotten by the late 19th century. In 1889, a collector writing on the origins of *Photographs of British Algae* proposed that the initials “A. A.”—Anna Atkins’s modest signature—stood for “Anonymous Amateur.”<sup>4</sup> But in recent years, scholars and artists have reexamined Atkins’s contributions to science, technology, publishing, and art, proof that what the botanist and photographer described as her “lengthy performance” is having an even lengthier afterlife.

Annemarie Iker, Mellon-Marron Research Consortium Fellow, 2020

1. Anna Atkins to Sophia Bliss, October 8, 1843, in “Blue Prints: The Pioneering Photographs of Anna Atkins [Exhibition Audio],” accessed December 2019, .
2. Atkins, “Introduction,” *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (1843), n.p.
3. John George Children to William Henry Fox Talbot, September 1841, in Larry Schaaf, *Sun Gardens: Cyanotypes by Anna Atkins* (New York: Prestel, 2018), 26.

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## Cyanotypes by Anna Atkins



### **Dandelion (*Taraxacum Officinale*)**

Atkins, Anna, born 1799 - died 1871

Cyanotype print showing the outline of dandelion flower and leaves, pale blue on a dark blue background.

Anna Atkins was the world's first woman photographer. She was also the first person to print and publish a photographically illustrated book, *British Algae* (1843). She took up what she called 'Sir John Herschel's beautiful process of cyanotype' as soon as it was invented in 1842. At that time she was already skilled at drawing shells and other natural specimens. Her motivation for taking up photography was surely aesthetic as well as scientific. This is probably the first photographic portrait of a dandelion. (It could even be called a self-portrait, in that the dandelion was placed on light sensitive paper and imprinted its own image under the rays of the sun, without the use of a camera.) It comes from Atkins's finest album, which she presented to her friend and co-photographer Anne Dixon in 1854.

<https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O82810/dandelion-taraxacum-officinale-photograph-atkins-anna/>

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### **Blue and white photographic image (photogram) of a poppy**

One of 160 plates removed in 1981 from a unique album, *Cyanotypes of British and Foreign Flowering Plants*, inscribed by the artist in 1854 as a gift to her family friend and collaborator, Anne Dixon, second cousin of the novelist Jane Austen.

Provenance: The artist; Anne Dixon; Sotheby's Belgravia, London, October 28, 1981, <https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O91281/papaver-orientale-photograph-atkins-anna/>  
non-commercial use with citation



<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/99168/new-zealand-anna-atkins>

{{cite web |title=New Zealand |url=https://collections.artsmia.org/art/99168 |author=Photographer: Anna Atkins |year=c. 1853-1854 |accessdate=13 Nov 2020 |publisher=Minneapolis Institute of Art}}

<https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2018/11/24/anna-atkins-photographys-blue-beginnings/>

<https://hyperallergic.com/473240/blue-prints-the-pioneering-photographs-of-anna-atkins/>

Anna Atkins and Anne Dixon, "Peacock," from a presentation album to Henry Dixon, (1861), cyanotype (private collection, courtesy of Hans P. Kraus Jr., New York)

## **Influence**



**Title: Ode to Anna Atkins**

**Creator: Burrell, Ginger R.**

Date: 2010

Physical Description: 1 artists' book ; 13 cm

Description: 13 cards of cyanotypes are placed in small manilla envelopes which are glued together in the center to give the appearance of an accordion binding. The end of the first and last envelopes are then affixed to boards covered with cyanotypes.

Standardized Rights Statement: <http://rightsstatements.org/vocab/InC/1.0/>

Usage Rights: In Copyright

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<https://ulib.iupuidigital.org/digital/collection/BookArts/id/97>

Time Period: 2010-2019

Subject: Atkins, Anna, 1799-1871