

A Life in Photography

by Arnold Newman

Seeing photographs from over 60 years of work was the most thorough self-examination I have ever undertaken. In the past, I have put together twelve other books, as well as many museum exhibitions and countless commercial exhibitions. With 200 pages available, I had hoped that at last all my favorite photographs could now be included. After months of exhausting work and difficult decisions, I soon realized this was not to be so. In the hard process of comparison and selection, the final choices not only had to be my best work, but also had to reflect my concept and personal solution to this difficult but exciting medium. The final selection meant extremely difficult decisions. However, the whole process reaffirmed my ideas that had developed over the years.

As a “portrait” photographer I know there is no final definition of a portrait, nor can there ever be one. Yet one thing is certain – a good portrait must be a good photograph, or image, whatever the medium might be. One must be a good artist before becoming a good photojournalist, or a good still life, fashion, sports, landscape, portrait photographer. The only difference is one’s own interests, passions and the ability to communicate. We do not take pictures with our cameras, but with our hearts and minds.

Good art cannot be defined. There is only great art that creates new ideas and then there are imitations of varying degrees. There is no best way or only way. We learn from the past, in order to understand the present. The past is our foundation, the springboard into the future. Tradition and past ideas are important bases to begin with, but can be traps if misunderstood.

Ideas, conceptual and visual are what all forms of art are about. Everything else is nothing more than subject matter and technique, which is easily learned. It is not what we photograph or assemble physically or digitally that counts, but how we create our images. (Paul) Cezanne used only traditional materials and subject matter, still lifes, people, landscapes, but it was his ideas that revolutionized the 20th century art world and laid the groundwork for modern art, including photography. It was not what he painted but how he painted. It is the same for photographers. It is how we photograph that matters not what we photograph. Too often exotic or unusual subjects matter is confused with good photography and extolled by the public as well as by artists and critics, regardless of the quality of the interpretation.

As for myself, I work the way I do because of the kind of person that I am – my work is an expression of myself. It reflects me, my fascination with people, the physical world around us, and the exciting medium in which I work. I do not claim that my way is the

best or only way, it is simply my way. It is an expression of myself, of the way I think and feel.

Generally, I build my images carefully, even if they are created in just a moment. They are based on my experience, intuition, and my background as a painter, both by natural inclination and by training. When I switched from painting to photography in 1938, it was first from financial necessity in the middle of the Great Depression, and then from love. Immediately I realized the creative differences – conceptual, visual, as well as technical – and proceeded from there.

Mostly I seek ideas, visual concepts, and the vague and preconceived images that have begun to form in my mind, and then (hopefully) find them. One should be flexible and open to discover the unexpected, which is an integral part of this medium. The unexpected often reveals new ideas and unexplored paths. Therefore, one must learn to “look.” Nothing should restrict one’s manner of expression as long as “it works.” No amount of words can describe a photograph or create one. Frequently, we “find” without seeking, acting upon (Louis) Pasteur’s expression, “Chance favors the prepared mind.” That is why so many great “accidents” seem to happen to the better photographers.

I prefer the risk of failure in experimentation to the alternative of safe repetition and boredom. I do not change for the sake of change, but for experimentation that may lead to new visual ideas. Inevitably, there must be a great deal of the photographer in his finished work. In other words, the photographer must be a part of the photographic process. However, continuous exploration of a single theme in the development of a visual concept should not be confused with repetition. Ideas do not always reveal themselves immediately, and their pursuit often takes a long time. But it’s fun to try!

Rigid rules, regulations, official schools and current trendy “with it” styles needed by the unimaginative are deadly to creativity. History is full of “Golden Rules,” laws of composition and other indispensable guidelines. Yet not one great image has ever been created through their application. Style is a natural result, not an aim.

Equally destructive are the schools of “anything goes,” of shock, technical flamboyance self-indulgent, grandiose ideas, or of size for the sake of size. These are all too often labeled the “cutting edge,” devoid of lasting meaning or information, and championed by some for their own personal acclaim or interests. Yet new and original voices will always emerge.

Unaltered, or traditional, photographs are not real at all. They are flat in a three dimensional world. Color is distorted by a real lack of control. Black and white photography is further distorted or abstracted in a world of reality. Straight photography is not real at all – it is an illusion of reality, sometimes forming into fantasy, abstraction, or

any other form the photographer wishes to create. Altered images, such as collages or digital images, are newer forms for the creative mind. It is these illusions and fantasies that we create our own private worlds with. What are they? The truly innovative artists create ideas and images unrelated to anything we have experienced or seen before, new ways of seeing and thinking about our own familiar worlds. This is the real creative artist we all aspire to be.

I have been fortunate to photograph the great, the fascinating, the famous and sometimes infamous. And just what is fame? One can be famous on one side of an ocean and totally unknown on the other side – or in one country or city, but not in another. And just how long does fame last? And what is fame when it is used to describe a person of true accomplishment? How is it different from the “celebrity” syndrome created by public relations as grist for the media and an obsessed public?

For me, I am interested in what motivates individuals, what they do with their lives, their personalities, and how I perceive and interpret them. But of equal importance, or of perhaps even greater importance is that, even if the person is not known or already forgotten, the photograph itself should still be of interest or even excite the viewer. That is what my life and work is all about.

But portraiture is not my sole interest. Since the beginning of my career, abstraction, still lifes, multiple images, and collages have fascinated me. From the start I found myself alternating from one approach to the other and realized they both related to one another and unconsciously influenced each other. I have discovered that an abstraction and a portrait can be photographed years apart and in different parts of the world and still have quite similar use of color and structure. One carries one’s creative interests, instincts, and “eye” wherever one may find oneself in the world. Portraiture, a word I soon began to dislike, is a label. As a profession it is saddled with a history of flattery, fawning, ridiculous images, standard poses, attitudes, and is tainted with the worst of commercialization. It is a restrictive label, inhibiting the young and unnecessarily restricting the professionals by limiting opportunities. Yet the great masters of art, past and present, have always been fascinated with this form. From (?) Memling, Rembrandt, (Pablo) Picasso, (Henri) Matisse to Julia Margaret Cameron, from (August) Sander through (Alfred) Stieglitz, (Edward) Weston, Man Ray, (Irving) Penn, and so on. All created great masterpieces with their portraits. I see myself simply as a photographer who works in portraits, abstractions, still lifes, or whatever. Therefore, I use the word “portrait” in an all-inclusive generic sense, without limitations.

Real artists dislike confining labels and so-called rules, which are all man-made and therefore always open to question. This permits any path they might choose to explore.

The label applied to me, “father of the environmental portrait,” was formed by many “portraits” of artists, scientists, politicians, and business people, etc. in my early work when they appeared in *LIFE*, *Look*, *Holiday*, etc. They are more analytical than descriptive, But then what would the “label” be for some of my popular images, such as the early Stravinsky, Picasso’s head or Georgia O’Keeffe against a canvas, topped by a skull against the New Mexico landscape?

Perhaps the Stravinsky could be called “symbolic.” It was a solution for a photograph for *Harper’s Bazaar* of the great composer who lived a continent away in California. Loving music, I realized that the piano lid resembled a B flat note – it was also strong, hard, linear and beautiful, just like the master’s own work – combined with the space carefully balanced by two shades of grey in the background.

I spent hours with Picasso in Vallauris the first time I photographed him, creating many different concepts. Originally, the large head was surrounded by space (I love space – we all live in it), but upon examining the proofs I realized the intensity of his eyes and the natural gesture of his hand toward his face was greatly enhanced without the space. Picasso is probably the only person that I can truly say had “piercing eyes.” How could this image be labeled?

O’Keeffe in front of objects from her studio set against her personal outdoor world? Perhaps a conceived “symbolic” portrait. But it does not matter. Woody Allen wrote all his scripts in bed, so I photographed him there. But the final composition or structure was very carefully thought out as I worked, even if it appears to be a candid photograph. Therefore, there are no labels, there are only good photographs (hopefully).

One difficulty most professional photographers constantly face is meeting the requirements for an assignment and simultaneously pleasing both him or herself and the client. It has been most gratifying that many of the photographs I have made on assignment for magazines, and even for advertising, have been acquired by museums, and have been included in histories of photography – some are included in this volume.

Then there are other problems, which can affect the photographer personally. Early in my career I sought Stieglitz’s advice regarding retouching a pimple on a negative for a \$15 portrait I was asked to do by a friend of the family. I was fortunate to have a standing invitation to visit the great Master whenever I wanted. I was young, just beginning, and desperately in need of money, but at the same time I wanted to be “pure.” I had come to the youthful conclusion that to retouch was a “sin” (at the time I did not know Stieglitz retouched his own work). I was wary of his reaction when I expressed my problem, but he only smiled and wisely answered: “I don’t care what you do with the negative, retouch it, spit on it or grind it under your foot. If it is honest, it will look honest. If it is dishonest,

you and everyone else can tell.” He set me free and to this day there is only one label I respect, “Honesty.”

As early as I can remember, I had a total fascination with art in all of its forms – painting and drawing since childhood, visiting art museums and buying art books whenever I could find the money. I studied art at the University of Miami, working eight hours a day split-shift, taking three buses each way from home, and holding on to a working scholarship. I gained great basic exposure to art and its history. Unfortunately, the Depression and its bank failures ruined my family’s financial position and after two years, I had to leave the university.

Ben Rose, a boyhood friend of mine, urged me to accept a job offer at a chain portrait studio in a department store in Philadelphia. He and other friends of his, now mine, had just completed their studies under the legendary Alexey Brodovitch. This was during the depths of the Depression and I thought I would eventually return to painting. The group often had long, intense conversations and discussions about 20th century art, including photography, which opened up new worlds for me. At work in the portrait studio, I began making forty to sixty 49-cent portraits a day. Shortly after I arrived, I accompanied the group, staying up all night to photograph the “Farmer’s Market.” Excited by the possibilities of the “new” medium, I borrowed an uncle’s camera, a 2¹/₄ x 3¹/₄ Contessa Nettle, and began my own personal work during lunch breaks, Sundays, and nights. It consumed me.

Tired of being underpaid and being moved around to different cities I took a better paying job with a different chain outfit in West Palm Beach, Florida, that enabled me to buy a 4x5 Speed Graphic and a 6-inch lens for my own work. Now I was making \$2.95 per sitting. I continued to experiment in my spare time, influenced by the many exciting new sources in the 30s, such as the farm security administration, and particularly Walker Evans.

Then there was the f64 group in California. Weston was another personal discovery, so were Stieglitz, Steichen, Man Ray (who later became a good friend), and many others. Then of course, there were my original sources, the great artists of the past and present, Picasso, Braque, and Mondrian, as well as the Realist, the early Flemish painters on up to Degas, the German Expressionist, the Bauhaus group, etc. Everything from modern architecture to the 30s posters was exciting. I began to study the great "masters" of photographic portraits, who mostly worked under studio conditions. When they worked "on location" I found that they mostly pushed the environment into an unrealized, or out of focus, or unimportant background. They created masterful images, but not what I had in mind. In the 30s and 40s, from the past to the immediate present, as

students and beginners we were overwhelmed with exciting new and varied visual ideas in all media. And as a result, no single dominant idea influenced me, though I did not realize it at the time.

For me, working in studios in those days was sterile, with the cameras, lights, and distances virtually nailed down. I grew increasingly dissatisfied with these homogenized photographs, where one could not tell the difference between an owner of a factory and a foreman on his assembly line dressed up in his "Sunday best." At the same time, wandering about on "the wrong side of the tracks," first in Baltimore, then in West Palm Beach, I found that the people in their own environment (on their porches or in the streets) were more fascinating than the artificial atmosphere in the studios I had to work in. This motivated my growing idea of making photographs of people in their natural environment. I began to envision photographing them in their homes and at their workplaces, but going beyond just location. The image had to be a complete visual concept where even the composition could help the mood and offer information reflecting my approach and concepts of the subject, augmenting the statement I wished to make about that specific person. With some exceptions, the lighting and setting should be accepted as real, even unnoticed. The basis of reality was the beginning of believability with which I began to work. Of course, I deviated from this point of view when I felt it was applicable, but the concept of reality always seemed to creep in, even in collages and abstractions.

Generally I begin with the existing light, augmenting it only when necessary. Again, there are no hard and fast rules for any creative medium. I do not use artifices such as props, a concept and word I dislike as "not honest." I use whatever objects I find on location – whatever is real and natural. To move them about if needed is acceptable if it is within the context of the subject. Images begin to take shape in my mind, prodded by a vague concept and wrenched from my inner imagination.

After working almost three years in West Palm Beach, I felt uncertain about what I was doing, and terribly isolated in Florida. My friends in Philadelphia suggested I should see Beaumont Newhall at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the only curator and historian of photography at that time. It was June 1942, and I was on vacation. Seeking advice to find out whether I was wasting my time, I was stunned to be enthusiastically "discovered." At Newhall's urging, Stieglitz saw me on the same day, and I was overwhelmed by a similar reception. He asked me to add my name to a list of photographers to represent America for an exhibit in England. The next day, I was offered a two-man show with Ben Rose at the A.D. Gallery, a small but greatly respected nonprofit gallery in the entrance of the best typography house in America. It was sponsored by its owner, Dr. Robert Leslie, to exhibit graphic artists, designers, art directors, etc. I was 23

years old, and those two days changed my life.

The exhibit opened in September, but was postponed one week because of my father's sudden death only five days prior to the original opening date. It seemed that every important art director in New York attended the opening. I missed Ansel Adams, who had come earlier with Newhall. He wrote me a long enthusiastic letter from the train he had to catch to go home to California. Adams and Newhall had selected a print to purchase for the Museum of Modern Art. I became successful as an artist, but unhappily my early work was not commercial. Finding the money to live and work became a struggle.

I had left my job in Florida and gambled on moving to New York. I was determined to begin experimenting with my ideas about portraiture. I supported myself with unemployment compensation and odd jobs, sleeping on my cousin's couch, then staying with friends. Sometimes I was able to pay my share of the rent. For me, New York was the only place to be. In the late 30s and 40s it was becoming the center of the art world and it was a very special time and an exciting place. I felt lucky to be there.

I began working on my ideas about portraiture, mostly photographing artists whom I greatly admired. In 1941, New York was full of many of the great European modern artists – refugees of World War II. The city was also home to many American painters and sculptors, realists of the 20s and 30s and young artists of the budding modern movement. Some of these young Americans eventually revolutionized art. As I photographed them, many became life-long friends and they insisted on exchanging art for prints. Newhall began to purchase my work for the Museum of Modern Art almost straight from the darkroom, and included me in the 1941 Christmas show of nine photographers selling their work for \$10 each. Helen Levitt and I were the newcomers amongst such masters as Bernice Abbott, Ansel Adams, Walker Evans, Brett Weston, Edward Weston, Charles Sheeler and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, but very few prints were sold. None were mine.

The following autumn I returned home to enter the Army. I was deferred, but told to be available, since I was a borderline case and might be called in shortly. I tried to get various branches, but I never served. I spent the war years operating a small studio in Miami Beach, finding time to work on my own personal photographs, but returning north once a year to continue my work with the artists and others.

In December 1945 the Philadelphia Museum of Art sponsored an exhibit of my portraits called “Artists Look Like This.” The publicity included major spreads in *Life*, *The New York Times*, and in many photography and art publications. The press coverage was overwhelming and unexpected, and I decided once again to return to New York. I found

myself beginning at the top. I began working immediately for *Life* and *Harper's Bazaar*. The first assignment for *Life* was Eugene O'Neill. Among the first photographs for *Harper's Bazaar* was Igor Stravinsky. Strangely, it was rejected, but it became one of my best known photographs. *Harper's Bazaar* also introduced me to fashion, where I quickly discovered that I felt uncomfortable in the artificial atmosphere and with the kind of work I was asked to do. After two years I drifted away from that madness where "celebrity," money or titles counted more than anything else. It was not for me.

Not long after, *Holiday* and other publications followed. It was the beginning of my "different" work, appearing regularly in print. Soon it attracted a good deal of attention. I began to be called the "father of the environmental portrait." Of course, the "environmental portrait" was not my only approach I was working with. An example is my early Stravinsky. I have always worked in any manner that is applicable and works at that moment, even when I was just beginning.

As the commissions came in, I found that I was photographing the kind of people that fascinated me: scientists, musicians, actors, politicians, writers, artists – and I even found most business executives fascinating. In other words, these were the kind of people with whom I liked to have long conversations until late at night over dinner and wine. This began to happen as friends were made, many from the world of the arts. I found a family of fascinating creative people offering me their friendships and taking me into their homes. Most of them were much older than I was.

This became my life – and my life became complete when I met and married Augusta, a very special woman, who brought into our lives her deep involvement with Israel, which also became mine. Soon my world became hers. A classic beauty, but also a serious person, she brushed aside some editors' suggestions that she could model, saying she preferred having a family.

We were married in March 1949 in my, now our, studio home on West 67th Street. After 50 years we still live on the same fascinating street where most of the buildings on the north side were built as large artist duplexes with two story studio-living rooms. The block is like a small village where world-famous writers, painters, artists and professionals chat as they meet on the street. We have one apartment to live in and one to work in, just two buildings apart. Our lives became a partnership, with many a sacrifice on Augusta's part, making my working life much easier. We have two sons and four grandchildren, who are very close to us even though they live a great distance from New York, but we try to get together as often as possible in addition to the frequent telephone calls that keep us close.

I soon found myself traveling around the world, first on assignments, then to teach

and to lecture, frequently accompanying an exhibit. When our sons became self-sufficient, Augusta began accompanying me on my trips, and today no matter what country in five continents we go to, including all over the United States, friends are welcoming us. Our lives are as busy and hectic as ever, and after 61 years of work, 50 together, I find myself at 81 planning our future and working on new ideas, new work, new books, more trips – it never ends, nor should it.