

KARSH: A FEAST FOR THE EYES
BOOK REVIEW

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Karsh: A Sixty-Year Retrospective by Yousuf Karsh;
Little, Brown and Company, Boston. 192 pages. \$75

H.G. Wells. Ansel Adams. Bill Clinton. Sophia Loren. Helen Keller. Fidel Castro. Mother Teresa. I.M. Pei. What do these luminaries have in common? All sat in quiet pose before Yousuf Karsh, the outstanding portrait photographer. His autobiographical retrospective expansively illustrates his talent and genius. Nearly every image is worthy of extended contemplation—skillfully crafted, thoughtful, reflective.

Not only that, but this book features storytelling. Most coffee-table photography books begin with concise text followed by page after page of images without any significant descriptive. Potential buyers tend to peruse the pictures in the bookstore, then see little reason to purchase the invariably costly volume. The Karsh retrospective is different. Comprised of 140 full-page portraits and 30 smaller images, it manages to read as an absorbing book of historical sketches: Each image is accompanied by anecdotal history as recalled by Karsh himself. The bookstore browser finds it difficult to put the book down, and the buyer acquires not just a treasury of photography but a wealth of biographical history. In this spellbinding volume, you can learn what King Faisal thought at the UN Conference in 1945; about Ernest Hemingway's approach to beginning a novel; and a full description of Georgia O'Keefe's simple adobe house in New Mexico, as told to or witnessed by Karsh. Yet he is clearly loyal to his subjects, as the recollections do not contain anything unseemly or embarrassing.

About Yousuf Karsh

Karsh was born in 1908 in Armenia, and immigrated to Canada with his family in 1924. As a youth he thought of pursuing medicine but became enamored with photography after visiting his uncle's studio in Ottawa. At the age of 17 he became a photographer's assistant, and later apprenticed with John Garo, a seasoned portrait photographer. Karsh set up his own studio in 1931. He struggled for some years, but within the decade built up a sterling reputation for quality portraiture, and a friendship with Prime Minister Mackenzie King. From that point, prominent foreign visitors to Ottawa were invariably photographed by Karsh, and a distinguished career was born. When world war raged, Karsh was brought to England to photograph the leadership.

Churchill Defiant

Karsh relates how Winston Churchill was a subject who did *not* sit in quiet pose. The year was 1941. The Prime Minister had much on his mind. He was self-absorbed at the time, and reluctant to set aside his cigar. Karsh approached Churchill, said “Forgive me, sir,” and removed the cigar from his mouth. Churchill struck a belligerent pose, at which moment Karsh took the photograph, which would be his most famous. Karsh relates that the silence was deafening until Churchill abruptly smiled and asked him to take another picture. At the conclusion of the session, Churchill congratulated Karsh for having been able to make a roaring lion stand still to be photographed. A second image from the same shoot is shown for comparison, in which Churchill put on a smiling pose that is hardly compelling. Karsh was invited back 15 years later to photograph the lion in winter.

The Young Elizabeth Taylor

Elizabeth Taylor had starred in “National Velvet” and was on the verge of sensation. Karsh took a remarkably sensitive and radiant photograph of the 14-year old actress. Her tender beauty is drawn out by a masterful melding of light and shadow, creating a subtle luminescence that highlights her delicate features without the appearance of special effect. Such is the mark of a master.

Use of the Icon

The majority of individuals who posed for Karsh appear with classic symbols of their character or achievements:

- ❑ Pierre Elliot Trudeau with a red rose in his lapel.
- ❑ Muhammed Ali with a clenched fist.
- ❑ Sophia Loren in a stylish broad-rimmed hat.
- ❑ Joan Miro with brush in hand.
- ❑ Nikita Khrushchev in a burly winter overcoat.
- ❑ Albert Einstein in a natty sweater.
- ❑ Ernest Hemingway in a natty sweater.
- ❑ Vladimir Nabokov with a cased butterfly.
- ❑ Mies van der Rohe with a T-square.

The only symbolism that may have been overdone is a photograph of President Clinton seated next to a replica of Rodin's "The Thinker," but in fairness, the image was taken in 1993.

Also of note is a section of the Karsh retrospective highlighting images of delicately portrayed hands. Talent and craft speak through these photographs, featuring individuals such as Dr. Albert Schweitzer, Helen Keller, Thomas Mann and Leonard Bernstein.

A Sensitive Man

Yousuf Karsh died in 2002 at the age of 93. His writing as well as his photography indicate he was a strongly empathetic individual who understood the human condition. Karsh writes that his perceptiveness began with suffering he had observed as a child. He maintained close emotional bonds with those with whom he worked, as well as his family; and became attached to many of his clients after only one or two shooting sessions.

Typical of Karsh is this narrative he provides to accompany his discerning portrait of Eleanor Roosevelt:

"During the war in Vietnam, I received a request from a sergeant for my photograph of Mrs. Roosevelt. It intrigued me that a young man would be interested in a First Lady who was in the White House before he was born, and I wrote asking the sergeant about it. He replied that he was not a 'young man,' but rather a career soldier. He told of being a patient in a Korean military hospital ward, where the broken and wounded soldiers viewed the impending visit of the globe-trotting President's widow with a mixture of ridicule, guffaws and defensive cynicism. In the end, of her sincerity, compassion, and tender concern, which had an intense impact on each war-hardened man, he wrote, 'When she came in, I thought she was the homeliest woman I had ever seen—and when she left, the most beautiful.'"

Such sensitivity makes a great photographer.

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