

Extraordinary People—Portraits by Yousuf Karsh

Armenian-Canadian photographer Yousuf Karsh (1908–2002) is celebrated for photographing the most influential people of the twentieth century. Photographing more than 17,000 heroes of his time and over 150,000 negatives in six decades, *Extraordinary People—Portraits by Yousuf Karsh* encompasses over fifty international icons ranging from artists, writers, and musicians; politicians, thinkers, and scientists; celebrities on the silver screen and the sports arena. These photographs were generously donated to the Museum in part by Estrellita Karsh in honor of Jerry Fielder, and as a promised gift by Jerry Fielder and Daniel Campbell, and as a gift of Malcolm and Joanne Millard in memory of Peggy Rockefeller.

Considered a master of studio lighting, Karsh was enchanted by theater. Whether it was a monologue, an opera, dance, or film, the way a person was lit could dramatically change the way he or she was perceived. Ordinary people could be transformed into characters of extraordinary immortality. By manipulating light inspired by the stage, the artist enjoyed commanding mood and expression. Like a director, he created a whole new world of interpretation through his camera. With major icons such as Albert Einstein, Winston Churchill, Jacqueline Kennedy, Muhammad Ali, Jacques Cousteau, John Steinbeck, and Helen Keller among many others, Karsh considered the human face as the most interesting and the greatest challenge to photograph.

Referred to as the Ansel Adams of portrait photography, Yousuf Karsh and Ansel Adams were colleagues. In every way, Karsh was as passionate and meticulous with his subjects as Ansel was in capturing views of Yosemite. In 1977 Ansel Adams invited Yousuf Karsh, and other photographers such as Morely Baer, a master architectural photographer, and Bob Kolbrener, among others, to his Yosemite workshop. Both professional and amateur photographers gathered there to study and critique black and white photography. Karsh encouraged the importance of seeing through the camera and imparted that, “If one works from the standpoint of conviction and respect, you’ll have all you need. The ideas will come to you that enable you to handle any situation. Take one

idea at a time and explore it until it hurts, and you will come out all right.”

Karsh was fascinated by the intrinsic and extraordinary nature behind the facade of the individual. Through his lens, Karsh transformed and unveiled the innate truth of his subjects. Karsh expressed, “I try to photograph people’s spirits and thoughts. As to the soul-taking by the photographer, I don’t feel I take away, but rather that the sitter and I give to each other. It becomes an act of mutual participation. Revelation, if it comes at all, will come in a small fraction of a second with an unconscious gesture, a gleam of the eye, a brief lifting of the mask that all humans wear to conceal their innermost selves from the world. In that fleeting interval of opportunity the photographer must act or lose his prize.”

Born Abdul Hovsep Karshian in Mardin, the eastern Ottoman Empire (present Turkey), the artist was later known as Yousuf Karsh or, “Karsh of Ottawa” after he established himself in Canada. At age sixteen he moved to Sherbrooke, a city in southern Quebec, Canada, to be cared for by his uncle George Nakash (Aziz), a commercial photographer. His arrival brought much relief after he and his family fled to Syria two years prior, escaping the Armenian massacres in 1915. As a young man, Yousuf witnessed the horrifying persecutions of his people and family. His uncle Aziz relentlessly pleaded with the Department of Immigration officials in order to grant the young man, who wished to become a doctor, to emigrate from Syria. Karsh began working in his uncle’s studio and gifted him with his first Kodak Brownie camera.

Perceptive to the obvious talent of his nephew, Aziz arranged for Karsh to train for six months with portrait photographer John H. Garo in Boston, also an immigrant from Turkish Armenia. Garo became Karsh’s mentor for two years, educating and exposing him to Boston’s high society gatherings with elite patrons, writers, dancers, conductors, and opera stars. He became a sponge to Garo’s glamorous world, and frequently studied at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts while learning photographic chemistry and the techniques necessary that prepared him to be a professional photographer. Returning to Canada as a professional assistant at his uncle’s studio at age

twenty-five, he opened his own studio in Ottawa, Canada where he worked with the Ottawa Drama League. There he was introduced to many social and political dignitaries and he championed the effects of *film noir*-style stage lighting in his portraiture. Influenced by his mentor Garo as well as Edward Steichen's images in *Vanity Fair*, he discovered how to light the face and bring out what he called the "inner power" of his subjects. His friendship with the Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, led to the 1941 session to photograph the eminent Winston Churchill, which brought Karsh international prominence. The photograph is said to be the most reproduced photographic portrait in history. Shortly thereafter, commissions poured in. He then traveled to England and America to photograph more politicians, national leaders, as well as visual, performing, and literary artists. The new phrase "to be Karshed" was coined and anyone with recognized or rising reputations summoned Karsh's six-month waiting list. By photographing those famous in history, it is said that he also made history famous, and he himself became a celebrity.

The desire to become a doctor as a young man and to heal others shaped his artistic path. Through photography, he became a healer of great consequence. And by surrounding himself with those who dedicated their lives to the enrichment of culture and human rights, led Karsh to preserve and honor the heroes of international importance—which in turn made Yousuf Karsh an extraordinary man.

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