

Photographing the Soul

A review of *Iconic Photographs* by Steve McCurry (Phaidon reprint edition, 2012; first published by Art and Architecture, 2011)

By Walter Cummins

Two-thirds into Steve McCurry's *Iconic Photographs* I thought I was encountering a group of happy men, their smiling faces lined in a row. Then I realized those smiles were painted-on masks, not real expressions. The photo's title is "Young Wadair Men, Niger 1986," and the explanatory note at the end of the book reveals that these young men were participating in an annual tribal ritual of dancing for hours to attract brides with exaggerated made-up looks that revealed nothing of person beneath them, only guises of artificial joy.

What made me especially alert to these seeming smiles was a photograph several pages before the Wadair men in which one brightly costumed girl, a Cambodian dancer, tilts her head and displays what I took to be youthful



happiness. It hadn't occurred to me till then that in the dozens of photographs up to that point solemnity dominated. The faces, young and old, stare directly at the camera, the young often seemingly startled or fearful, their elders weathered and almost defiant, inured to hardship. The dancer's smile stood out, and I began looking for more.

Of course, I'm reading the photographs, possibly imposing meanings preconditioned by my assumptions about the areas where McCurry found his subjects. *Iconic Photographs* contains 244 pictures, the great majority taken in Asia and some in Africa. His picture-taking travels included Nepal, Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Tibet, Burma, Pakistan, Cambodia, Mali, and Yemen, countries in which many people live in extreme poverty, some of the countries long locked in civil war. In addition to close-ups of individual faces, the collection includes people in the midst of landscapes, many of these people shown doing arduous work or surrounded by scenes of poverty.

Was I seeing what I expected to see? Did McCurry select people and scenes that reinforced such preconditioning? How much are the looks on people's faces reactions to being photographed, and by an outsider? Do these expressions tell us much more about the photographic process than about the people?

Certainly in some of the group scenes and those with humans in the midst of urban and natural environments, it's likely that people didn't know they were being photographed. But I wonder about the many close-ups of faces, where the camera must have been so close that the subjects couldn't have been unaware. How camera-conscious were they?



In many ways the photograph of the young Wadair men is emblematic of the whole of McCurry's book—artistic design applied to ambiguous realities. A question arises. Is McCurry with his excellent photographer's eye "falsifying" these people and the settings in which they must live, perhaps even to the degree of unconscious exploitation for the sake of a picture? Or is he revealing an essential dignity in their existences and in their manner of living, a triumph of endurance?

Many awards, including Magazine Photographer of the Year, attest to McCurry's status as a significant photographer. A round sticker on the dust jacket of *Iconic Images*

announces that McCurry's collection was "Awarded Judges Special Recognition Pictures of the Year International Best Photography Book Award." Just opening the cover and viewing a few examples led me to validate the judges. These are remarkable photographs, with great aesthetic beauty in their design and use of brilliant colors. But what does such design have to do with the actual subjects being designed? Has McCurry produced works of art rather than works of social-economic verisimilitude?

Although he has published photographs in many magazines, McCurry is most associated with *The National Geographic*, perhaps the result of a single cover photo of a Afghan refugee girl the magazine's website calls "a high point in McCurry's career . . . that many have described as the most recognizable photograph in the world today." Some believe *National Geographic* imposes its editorial perspective of imposing a comfortable view of life on the entire world. Its web page on McCurry credits him for capturing "the essence of human struggle and joy" and notes that he realized, "If you wait, people will forget your camera and the soul will drift up into view."

While many may still consider photography to be an "innocent" art, an objective depiction of what's out there, whether it be people or place, many analyses have deconstructed that notion. Photography, like painting and literature, is a selective art, the result of many choices—camera angle, boundaries, lighting, exposure, what's included and what's excluded, the number of shots discarded before one is chosen. I don't know about McCurry's processes—how he frames, how he chooses, how he selects, how he edits, how he decides he has captured the "soul." Even with the unlikely possibility that he just points and shoots, the results would be just momentary glimpses.

We appreciate a good photograph as we do a good painting, poem, story, or novel. These arts provide a fulfilling aesthetic vision of life that is ultimately self-contained, shaping the inchoate world outside the work. Through selection artists produce artifacts rather than reports. Of course, a photograph also conveys a sense, right or wrong, that it is closer to reality than configurations of painted colors or of words. The phenomenon of news photography reinforces this assumption. We'd like to believe we can know what is truly happening.

McCurry's art is especially convincing, particularly when it fulfills expectations, at least of someone like me who knows about the worlds of his subjects only through what he has heard, read, or seen before in print and on TV. McCurry's dominant treatment of people

and places depicts things as I thought they would be in regions of poverty. Walls are cracked and crumbling, pillars chipped, layers missing. Streets are surrounded by heaps of rubble, in some cases the result of bombing, in most others just decay. Old cars are battered shells, landscapes often dark, obscured by smoke and steam. Street scenes reveal a jumble of signs, carts, food stands, battered buildings, and shabby people. Beggars sleep in streets. Workers stagger under burdens.

In those few photographs that include examples of middle-class life or Western brands, the results are ironic. A young monk in a teashop in Bodh Gaya, India, sits under a huge Coca-Cola sign that dominates the top half of the picture. A young businessman in



Mumbai sits for shoe repair among the ragged cobblers in an open-air shop by the railroad station, his white shirt and tie placed in the exact center of the photograph. Shirtless men paint publicity signs for Bollywood films, the faces of the stars much larger than those of the living painters.

Occasional pictures of tranquility relieve these views of deterioration and adversity.



People pray. A white-bearded man in white robes sits while a boy, perhaps a grandson, also in white, sleeps against him. While a standing woman prays, seated male monks in Tibet smile (another rare example of smiling), the monks and the woman seemingly oblivious of each other.

At the Holi festival in Rajasthan, India, a man in a state of reverie is carried aloft through the crowd on a sea of turbans. The colors of these turbans, like those of the monks' robes and so much of the clothing and objects throughout the book, are bright and vibrant.

Ultimately what McCurry offers in these "iconic" photographs are images that suggest that human existence is richly complex. Have he and his camera revealed in the

midst of the seemingly severe lives “the essence of human struggle and joy”? Would another photographer in the same places and seeing the same people have produced photographs of defeat and misery? At the least, McCurry’s talent results in aesthetic satisfactions.

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Credit: Photographs from www.stevemccurry.com.