



Viewpoint Mike Smith

The environment and context used in portrait photography can reveal, or hide, a person's true character

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Fashions and styles of portrait photography have come and gone, sometimes dictated by the requirements of the technology and sometimes by the fads and fashions of society. Broadly speaking, we can place our subject either in a studio or within a contextual environment.

For example, the two pictures below show both styles of the renowned Antarctic explorer Roald Amundsen. Within a studio setting it is possible to control all aspects of the portrait – the setting, clothing, lighting, camera and expression. The photographer and subject have creative control over the photographic process. Within an environmental setting you place the subject within a context – the creative gain you achieve in an environment is offset against the loss of control over other aspects of the shoot.

Photographic-studio pioneers Hill and Adamson were known for their well-lit commanding portraits denoting status and power. By way of contrast, look at the recent family portraits of members of the Royal family photographed by Mario Testino. Of course, the nature of the portrait will depend on the basis on which they are being shot – the royal family want to demonstrate that they are a family, who have the same cultural traditions but yet are different, apart.

Ansel Adams (not known for his portraiture) believed in capturing the

'essential characteristics', and that the 'nature' of the person was recordable in an image. August Sander went further and believed that not only could he make a visual ethnographic record of German society, but also that different classes and trades were visually distinguishable. Many of his portraits are specifically plain studio-type settings in order to record the essence or spirit of the person.

Yet a viewer's interpretation of an image is much wider and taken from their cultural context. We have to take cues from the image and from what we know about the person. Expression, clothing and environment all play critical roles in our evaluation and understanding – without them an image becomes devoid of narrative. Perhaps this is why Sander's work was destroyed by the Nazis, as it demonstrated just this – all people are essentially similar.

This leads us once more to the purpose of a portrait – if you are trying to present the person, to convey an understanding of them, then record their emotion and their environment. The first image here tells you little about Amundsen, although it is a technically adept and captivating portrait. The second picture places the man in his environment, in his element, and so provides some context for you to complete.

Mike Smith is a creative photographer. Visit www.focali.co.uk for more information



These two images of Roald Amundsen portray him in very different guises. The controlled studio portrait (above left), taken by Ludwik Szacinski in 1908, tells us very little about the man, while that of him in Svalbard in 1925 (above right) tells another, more detailed, story

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New Books

The latest and best books from the world of photography. By Oliver Atwell



Lartigue: Life in Color

By Martine d'Astier and Martine Ravache, Abrams, £24.11, hardback, 168 pages, ISBN 978-1-41972-091-8



IT WASN'T until his later life that Jacques Henri Lartigue began to garner recognition as one of the best 'amateur' documenters of history. In his sixties, the photographer and painter was finally given an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Lartigue's work catalogued the lives of the wealthy Parisians who surrounded him. While many of us know him better for his black & white work, Lartigue was more than open to experimenting with colour film, and was endlessly fascinated by the results he could achieve with the autochrome process, and later Ektachrome. This volume is the first time his colour work has been compiled and offers a fresh perspective on a body of photography we thought we knew well. There's something rather strange about seeing many of Lartigue's famous friends, such as Pablo Picasso and Federico Fellini, in glorious colour. This really is a great volume for photography history buffs. ★★★★★

Francesca Woodman: On Being an Angel

Edited by Anna Tellgren, Walther König, £22, hardback, 232 pages, ISBN 978-3-86335-750-4



IF YOU look through the portfolios of any graduating class from a photography course, it becomes easy to spot a number of influences that dominate the students' images. One such prevalent photographer is Francesca Woodman, whose work has been consistently analysed and interpreted. It's not a surprise to see the widespread influence of her work. In a few intense years before her premature death, she fearlessly explored the boundaries of sexuality, gender and the body. She would often feature herself and her friends as models, using both the elements of interior and exterior locations to extend the narratives further. Woodman provides a powerful platform to explore not just one's identity as a photographer but also as a human being. ★★★★★

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