

## **My Passion for Photography**

For most of my adult life, photography has been my passion, my avocation. Although I have never earned a living from this skill, it has opened many doors.

From 1943 to 1952, my job as Chief of Printing and Publications for the American Embassy in Cairo gave me the opportunity to create an efficient printing and publishing organization. We had two photographers on our staff.

At that time, a professional photographer would usually control the processing, developing, and printing of his negatives. In our organization, this segment of the work was controlled by a guild of skillful Armenians who protected the secrets of their craft as a means of survival. Sometimes I challenged the photographers: “Is this the best you can do?” Always they would assure me that nothing more could be done.

I was polite because I didn’t understand the process. To make a difference I would need to get a camera and learn how to process and print negatives. The lab technician had a Voiglander camera – an early model that was followed later by the dual-lens Rolleiflex. One evening, as I was approving some photographs for release to the press attaché, I asked Artine DerBalian if he was interested in selling his Voiglander. I offered him twice the market value, hoping that I could entice him to sell me his camera and teach me how to process and print negatives.

On condition that we do it after hours, Artine began demonstrating the fine points of creating good finished prints. He was an excellent teacher and I was an avid student. Within two months, I was ready to experiment on my own.

Buying the Voiglander from Artine gave me an entre into the magical art of developing and printing negatives. However, it was the purchase of my dream camera, a Rolleiflex, which freed my imagination because the faster lens allowed me to take candid shots and to shoot in low light. I practiced often and eagerly awaited the evening hours to

see what would unfold in the dark room. The camera became my eyes and my constant companion.

My understanding of the art of photography took a leap forward around 1947, when the famous Life Magazine photographer David Douglas Duncan stopped by the embassy in Cairo on his way home from the war in Korea. Duncan's approach was unique. Using his Leica camera, fitted with a Nikon 1.2 lens, he shot his images in difficult conditions without a flash. To ensure that the film would reveal the underexposed images, he boosted the film speed from 100 ASA to 400 ASA. This innovative approach to capturing images required an equally innovative approach to developing the film. David borrowed my lab so he could have creative control of the development of the negatives and assure the quality of his effort.

David's visits meant a great deal to me because we exchanged ideas about what it takes to create a good image. David shot photos on the move without elaborate preparations or posing of his subjects. He had an amazing ability to frame his shots and anticipate the exact moment to snap the shutter, capturing an image that vibrated with life and an immediacy that most other excellent photographers missed.

During this time, in 1947, Egypt and Israel were engaged in a conflict that created an environment of suspicion in Cairo. A person who took photographs outdoors risked being arrested as a spy; but because of my position as chief of publications at the embassy, I had some wonderful photographic opportunities. Often I would accompany Ambassador Caffrey when, with a full consort of Egyptian authorities, he went on excursions to visit the area west of Cairo known for antiquities. The pyramids and the sphinx were two of his favorites. Our escorts did not interfere with my preoccupation with capturing wonderful images.

Later, in 1950, a feminist magazine, *La Femme Nouvelle*, commissioned me to illustrate a feature story about the mosques in Cairo. The journalist I accompanied around Old Cairo was Gaston Wiet, an historian, who was a fount of knowledge about the beautiful old structures. He would point to a mosque he felt had significance, and then, as

I danced around looking for a unique shot, he would enlighten me about the building's history. Our article appeared in the magazine's December 1951 edition, *Art Arabe*.

The opportunities to photograph the monuments and buildings of this ancient city were like a dream for me. Perhaps it was because I grew up in Egypt, a land of nearly constant sunlight. Perhaps, it was the way the light played off the shadows in the courtyards and ancient buildings of Old Cairo. Or, maybe it was the amazing sunrises and sunsets I witnessed in the desert: Light has been a lifetime fascination for me.

Most people in Egypt were cautious of my camera. They would present a very solemn face. Yet, when I was gentle and patient with those who shyly hid, or when I showed that I was sincerely interested in them, I was often rewarded with a special smile.

Like people, buildings also have moods. The texture of the stone, etched by the sun and rain and wind, speaks of centuries of history. I was fascinated by the way the light and shadow fell on the ancient monuments - the way they totally changed as the sun crossed the sky, lighting up what had been dark, revealing what had been hidden.

Later, alone in my lab, I would play with the images, trying a variety of techniques to draw out aspects that I had overlooked when I first captured the scene. Can I get a better view of a dim corner? Ah, there, emerging from the bath I could see the steps that were once hidden in the shadows. Can I single out that mother and child among a group of women in the tent? I was fascinated by the hidden details that revealed themselves in the silence of my dark room.

My work with the Armenians and my long sessions in the lab with David Douglas Duncan heightened my awareness that capturing memorable images was only part of the work of a photographer. Like David, I found that to create a superb photograph, I needed to have control over the whole process.

Over the years, I kept up with the technological changes in photography: I gave up the Rolleiflex for the Nikon, and then in the '80s I bought my first electronic camera. And with the advent of the electronic camera, my dark room became obsolete as a means of processing film.

Technological advances have provided photographers with an extensive variety of equipment to help create images. Artists and amateurs alike can express their imagination and visualize it in a final form on paper or a computer screen. Purists contend that photography produced with the aid of technology is not “art.” But would ease of production make Cartier Bresson’s inimitable candid photographs less valuable? I think not.

In the Renaissance, the artists discovered the “camera oscura,” a short cut that showed the perspective needed to give the feeling of dimension to a subject. Their work was not judged as fake art, but on the merits of the product. The camera oscura was only a tool to facilitate the final art piece.

Purists have always been critical of the photographic art form as it progressed from rigid view cameras that captured panoramic views to 35 mm cameras and telescopic lenses; from paper and glass negatives to Polaroid instant emulsions; from black and white to 35 mm color transparencies; and from slow speeds of ASA 25 to speeds of ASA 1000. Each time there was a technological advance, the critics decried it saying that only the older techniques produced real works of art. Yet were the photographs of the 1850s more “real” art than enlargements of a 35mm camera in the 1980s? Are photographs produced by new digital cameras and printing processes less “real” art than a print from 100 years ago?

Technology is an integral part of a final photograph. I would be limited in my artistic expression if I didn’t avail myself of the latest tools of the trade. For the first time, I have found it necessary to work as a team in processing my negatives. My wonderful, competent friend Steve Barr stands by my side and helps me reinterpret my original negatives. Over the past ten years, we have digitized the negatives from my 1952 Egyptian exhibition. I tell Steve what my vision is – crop here, look more deeply into that corner, flip that image, zoom in on that image, enlarge that print, and so on. Steve is able to make the computer obey my commands.

My highly skilled friend is a lithographer by trade and specializes in scanning, color correction, and image manipulation. With his help, I have been delighted to see the

complexity of the images I took more than 60 years ago. New technology has revealed a depth and detail that I was unable to draw from the negatives with the technology of the 1950s.

I have undergone the discipline of working in a dark room – manipulating my black and white prints – drawing out of them all that is possible with that process. I am certain that with the aid of the computer and a modern printer, the artistic value of my work has been enhanced. The true test of what is artistic is not the medium of expression, but the effect of the finished work on the viewer.