STEVE MCCURRY
LESSON 15 – PORTRAITURE: 9 KEY TIPS

KEY TIPS TO TAKE A PORTRAIT FROM REVEALING EMOTIONS TO BACKGROUND

"I think a great portrait is one that reveals something about the individual you're photographing, or says something about humanity"

In this lesson, Steve provides his 9 essential tips of portraiture, the key aspects of taking great portraits. He discusses his fundamental philosophy for portraiture; capturing the human behind the photograph. His portraits are an expression of some kind of emotion or feeling, something that says who that person is.

"let the person's face carry the picture, not some fancy technique."

Steve goes through his process for taking portraits. He discusses each tip from framing to background, finding subjects to asking for permission. He also covers the subtler points such as the softness of lighting on the face, the eyes of the subject and their direction of focus. His overriding focus, however, is on the simplicity of the shot: the person in front of the camera and their story that is told through the photograph.

"I always prefer to have people look into my lens...I want them to look directly back at me to have this connection"

STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT: LESSON 15 – MAKE A SERIES OF STREET PORTRAITS

"let the person's face carry the picture, not some fancy technique."

You need to really get permission, talk to people, persuade them, get them interested in your process. And then once you establish a relationship and a connection, then you can start to work with the person.
Occasionally you'll see somebody that has a great look, great face, perhaps you think they'll make a great portrait. Of course, these great opportunities are really few and far between. You really have to take time, walk around a place, get to know people, meet people, talk to people. Even if it's not about making pictures, it's always good to engage your surroundings. I think once you've immersed yourself in the street, in the environment, and you feel comfortable, I think then things will open up and reveal themselves.

Use both vertical and horizontal framing. Compare afterwards for what works best for you and the subject and think about which you prefer.

I think if you look at some of the great portraiture over the last 100 years, you'll find that the best approach might be looking your subject directly at eye level and not looking down at somebody or looking up at somebody. That can work occasionally. I think by and large, you want to be on the same plane, the same sort of eye level.

TRANSCRIPT

I think a great portrait is one that reveals something about the individual you're photographing, or says something about humanity in general, something that is interesting, something that reveals something about the human condition or human behavior, or some emotion. Something which really connects with the viewer. And it's not about the background. It's not about fancy lenses and angles. It's just about the human quality of that face.

Regarding framing in portraiture, I think you can, again, you can approach this in many different ways. I generally like to leave a fair amount of space around the person. I don't like the crop people's heads off. I like to keep the whole head and some space around it. But it's really a personal preference. You can do it-- I don't think there's a right way and a wrong way. You should feel free to go in your own direction.

But again, we don't want to do something which looks-- draws too much attention to your technique, cropping people really tight or whatever. So I think just something that-- the subject should be powerful enough to carry the picture. And you don't want to do some funny technique or some device which really draws attention away from the subject.

In portraiture, feel free to shoot verticals or horizontals, depending on how the person's dressed or the background. Sometimes the best solution is a horizontal, because of the certain elements in the background. Sometimes, maybe, it's tighter and is more of a vertical. It really is case by case basis. You can't really generalize. And either way, sometimes I do both. Sometimes I shoot a few verticals and sometimes a few horizontals. And then later, when I'm reviewing the work, making my selection, I'll decide which option is better.

It's always best to ask permission of people that you want to make a portrait of. You're never going to be successful walking around with a long lens, grabbing pictures, stealing pictures. That's not the way portraiture is done. You need to really get permission, talk to people, persuade them, get them interested in your process. And then once you establish a relationship and a connection, then you can start to work with the person. And people are generally flattered. And people, generally, are very willing to cooperate if they think your intentions are honorable. You seem like a decent trustworthy person.

•

And of course, a bit of humor, a bit of fun also helps to break the ice.

I think as you walk around a particular area looking at whatever interests you, the landscape or what's happening on the street, occasionally you'll see somebody that has a great look, great face, perhaps you think they'll make a great portrait. Of course, these great opportunities are really few and far between. You really have to take time, walk around a place, get to know people, meet people, talk to people. Even if it's not about making pictures, it's always good to engage your surroundings and get-- so I think once you've immersed yourself in the street, in the environment, and you feel comfortable, I think then things will open up and reveal themselves.

But you can't just jump off the bus and kind of expect great things to happen. It takes time and concentration and observation.

I think if you look at some of the great portraiture over the last 100 years, you'll find that the best approach might be looking your subject directly at eye level and not looking down at somebody or looking up at somebody. That can work occasionally. I think by and large, you want to be on the same plane, the same sort of eye level, which puts you kind of more of an equal status with the person. You don't want to be looking down at people or sort of looking up. I think just something simple, something that doesn't draw too much attention to some odd, funny angle.

I think you need to be more classical, more simple. And let the person's face carry the picture, not some fancy technique.

Generally, the best solution is photographing the person where you find them, at that place. In the case of the background of the Afghan girl, it was lucky, in the sense that it complemented her red shawl. So the background was a green, the green tent. And her shawl was red. So that complementary color thing was working very well. If you can photograph the person where you find them, you can always move to the left or the right, or from any direction, and you may find the best solution exactly where you're standing. You may not need to go anywhere, which would be the first choice.

I think in color photography, for me, a portrait is better done in low contrast, muted, maybe an overcast day when things are soft, the light's soft. So in the case of this coal miner, it was a cloudy day. And in any event, he was coming out of this dark mine shaft. So the light was even on his face. And I think it gives the best result. When

you're in a more of kind of a dark situation, people's eyes tend to be much more open.

And when it's very bright outside, people tend to sort of squint and their eyes tend to be closed. So for me, I think I prefer looking into somebody's eyes, the people I photograph, I want to have this direct eye contact. And I want their eyes to be open. And hence, I always prefer a low, kind of muted, dark situation.

I always prefer to have people look into my lens. It seems as though, if I'm kind of directly looking at them, I want them to look directly back at me to have this connection, this sort of direct eye contact. It never seems odd to me to photograph somebody and then to have them look off to the side like that, as though I'm not there. I think if I'm confronting them with my camera, then they should sort of confront me. We have this sort of relationship working.