

STEVE MCCURRY
LESSON 14 – PORTRAITURE

REVEAL THE MOMENT

“In portraiture, you never quite know when the best moment is going to reveal itself. There could be one instance where there’s an expression, or a look, or a glance, or a hand gesture, and that’ll be the picture. But you have to be ready.”

Photographs capture moments in time. In this lesson, we follow Steve on a shoot in a small fishing village in Portugal as he talks about his process for capturing these ephemeral scenes.

“I think that’s really what we look for in great pictures is that element of emotion: of love, hate, sadness...I think that’s really what makes pictures great.”

For Steve, it is moments of emotion that produce the best shots. Using a family as his subject, we watch Steve in action as he teases out scenes of affection in an otherwise ordinary day for the fisherman’s family.

“I’d like to talk to you a little bit about lighting in portraiture. My approach has always been to make it as natural as possible...I think it gives it a more authentic feel.”

In a pre-revolution Cuban house, Steve works with the natural lighting and historical setting to make a fascinating portrait of Josie, the owner of the house.

STEVE MCCURRY PROJECT: LESSON 14 – MAKE A SERIES OF PORTRAITS OF FRIENDS

“In portraiture, you never quite know when the best moment is going to reveal itself”

Try using different focal lengths on your zoom or prime lens. See what this does to the face and decide what you like and don't like about the effects. Then note when you might use that particular zoom or prime length lens.

Once you settle on this look for a person on the street or at work somewhere that has something that catches your eye ...something you find interesting about them...perhaps a face..or their clothing. Ask permission to take their portrait. This maybe in the street or in a building. If you can walk or move with them to a place that has interesting light.

Talk to them and keep shooting. Spend as much time as you can with them and be ready for the moment when something is revealed in their expression.

TRANSCRIPT

There's people-- especially here in this fishing village-- that have really wonderful, expressive faces with great character. And I wanted to ask them and talk to them and see if they would agree to let me take their portrait. And they were very kind and accommodating. So we made some wonderful pictures here of the fishermen, and the fisherman and his wife, and then their little dog. I thought it was really wonderful.

I followed the fisherman to his boat. And they were fixing their nets. And when they got out-- I guess they were getting out to go home or whatever-- I asked them if they would stand and let me take their photograph. And then I suddenly realized they had their little dog. So they have the dog in this sort of family portrait.

I thought it was really wonderful. It was a nice, tender moment between, especially the woman and the dog. And they were very cooperative. They agreed to let me take their picture. So in a way, this was sort of an official portrait of them.

So to me, that was kind of an emotional situation where this affection was really evident. And I think that's really what we look for in great pictures is that element of emotion-- of love, hate, sadness, people being happy, or whatever. I think that's really what makes pictures great. I think if you see somebody who you are struck by-- somebody who you think has a great face or a great personality-- I think you shouldn't hesitate to ask them if you can make their portrait.

In portraiture, you never quite know when the best moment is going to reveal itself. There could be one instance where there's an expression, or a look, or a glance, or a hand gesture, and that'll be the picture. But you have to be ready. And I think that people's expressions change over the course of a few minutes. I think that you want to keep shooting to make sure you get those subtle changes in expression.

Sometimes people are nervous, or self-conscious, or so too self-aware. And after some time, once you get rolling and they become more comfortable and more at ease, their expressions change. So you want to kind of follow that progression. And that may require multiple exposures-- maybe a lot of exposures. You may spend 5 or 10 minutes photographing the person.

But you really have to be sort of careful and attentive to their change of expression. Sometimes people start very kind of giddy, and giggly, and smiling. And it appears very self-conscious. So you have to kind of work through that when they become more at ease and more comfortable with you. And then I think you'll get something which seems more real, or something that doesn't seem forced, or something that doesn't seem posed.

Sometimes when I'm photographing someone in the street, they become very self-conscious and a bit maybe embarrassed, I sometimes will try and change the conversation or talk about something else. Or I might look at my camera and do something in order for them to take their mind off of what we're doing to have them relax and maybe feel more comfortable. So I think you have to kind of work through that. I think if you can develop a sense of confidence where you can read the situation so that you know how to put the person in a more comfortable place, that's when something will happen.

I think when people relax and they're more at ease, then their facial expressions will become more natural. And that's what you want. You want something that's very natural and authentic.

...

I'd like to talk to you a little bit about lighting in portraiture. My approach has always been to make it as natural as possible. First of all, it's much easier to use natural light-- window light, light from a doorway. But also, I think it gives it a more authentic feel.

I think as soon as a picture looks too lit, or overproduced, or whatever, I think the attention is drawn away from your subject, and you tend to be looking more at the technique. So I think something that's just more-- again, lighting with natural light is much simpler. You don't need strobes and LEDs and all this sort of thing. So I generally try and get somebody possibly in an interior situation. And light from the window or a doorway could be perfectly fine-- if it's outside, perhaps in very maybe even low light-- maybe late in the afternoon or early in the morning.

Obviously, there's times when you see somebody on the street that really catches your eye, and you think this is a person who is going to make of wonderful portrait, I think that if you ask permission, and once they agree, I think you can take this person, and maybe there's a doorway, or there is some shaded place where you can make this picture, especially so that their eyes are open. I think when it's too bright, people tend to squint, and their eyes tend

to close, whereas if it's a bit darker, the eyes tend to open up. And then it becomes much more. You can actually connect with their eyes.

For me, the best solution is light coming in directly into the person's face-- kind of a softer light-- not at a hard light. But I think in photography, in portraiture, you can break all the rules. I don't think you have to follow one particular set of principles. I think you can do whatever you want to. Just what I think works best for me-- and I'm looking at other portraits which I admire-- I think generally, if the light's coming in on their face, that has a nice look. Sometimes, if the picture is completely backlit-- and I can show some examples of that-- that's also quite a nice way to work.

But I think that you should be free to experiment. I think you can find your own way, your own style, your own signature by experimenting and working with multiple situations. And through trial and error, you can find your own personal technique which works great for you.

There's no really right or wrong lens to use in portraiture. It really depends on what you're trying to accomplish. If it's an environmental portrait, then you might want to go wider-- 24, 28, 35, 50. Or you might want to go-- if it's more isolating that person's face-- then maybe a bit longer.

But there's a lot of different solutions. And you may find your favorite approach. It's much more personal to you. I've used all the lenses for portraiture-- from 24 to 28 up to 100 or 200.

We spent a lot of time in this wonderful house owned by Josie Alonso. I think it's one of the most interesting houses I've ever been in, because it's really like a time capsule. It was built in 1929. And all of her things-- everything from last 50 years-- are just still right there. It's an amazing piece of history.

As we were leaving, I asked Josie if I could make a portrait of her. I didn't want to just photograph the house empty, like a museum. I really thought of this more as an environmental portrait.

I wanted her in her setting and her home. But I also wanted to show what her home looked like. I felt by photographing her in her library, her study, it would show her environment. This is her world.

I used the various focal lengths. I wasn't sure if to go very wide or maybe going close. But I thought the best solution really was trying to show as much as I could.

This kind of lifestyle is almost gone. And this was kind of a glimpse into seeing how grand, and how opulent, and in a way, how luxurious many Cubans lived prior to the revolution.