

STEVE MCCURRY LESSON 18 – THE AFGHAN GIRL

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Steve tells the story of the iconic Afghan girl photo, probably the most famous shot of his career. In this lesson, he discusses the delicacy in creating the perfect opportunity to capture what would become an emblem of the refugee crisis at the time.

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Steve brings to light the importance of his work and how photography can transcend even art, to become a work that tells a story about the struggles of humanity. Stories that inform the world, that otherwise would not be told.

“The light, the background, everything was just perfect just the way it was. I didn’t have to touch anything...everything was just perfect.”

Steve describes the moment the stars aligned, allowing him to make one of the most recognised pictures in photographic history.

TRANSCRIPT

So I get this picture of this Afghan refugee girl wandering through one morning in a refugee camp, really, again, just wandering almost aimlessly, but very attentive and very aware of my surroundings. I heard voices coming from this tent, and I realized that these were girls, who were reciting something, so I realized it was a school. I went over. I peeked in. I asked the teacher if I could come in, make some photographs. I had permission to be in the camp.

So the first thing I noticed when I walked into the classroom was this little girl in the corner with these incredible eyes and this incredible look. And I looked around the classroom, and I realized that this was going to be the most important picture, most important portrait I would make that day. So what I did was in order not to sort of frighten her off, I photographed some of her other classmates in order to set up a situation, where she would realize that this wasn't going to harm her. This was OK, that this wasn't a big deal, that this may even be a bit of fun.

And so I photographed her other classmates, trying to set up, again, the situation where she would want to participate. After a few minutes, I asked the teacher. I said, well, what about that little girl? Can we photograph her as well? And so she came over. At first, she was a bit shy, and she put her hands up to her face. Then the teacher kind of said, no, no, no, let him photograph you, because the world needs to know our story that we've been driven out of our villages, our villages have been bombed, and that now we're living in another country as refugees. This is a-- people need to know so that hopefully, some action can be taken to help us go back home.

So I photographed her for maybe two minutes, maybe a few pictures. And my main kind of interest was to try just to get this picture sharp, get the right framing. And after that, then she got up and walked away, which-- before I was done, because she didn't realize that she was supposed to wait until I was finished taking her picture. But fortunately, I got what I-- I liked the result of my picture.

So of course, this little girl was not only a refugee, but she was also an orphan. She had escaped her village with some relatives. Their village had been bombed, and so it

was-- she was living a very sad life, as millions of other Afghan refugees at that time. So her story was dramatic and profound and sad and heartbreaking. And I think the picture, in some ways, shows that-- not every frame, of course. As you work through a portrait situation, some pictures are better than others, and expressions change. Mood changes, and you are kind of waiting for that right moment, that one that really defines, in your view, that person and that situation. So it's just a question of a bit of patience and waiting.

It's not a question of coaching or directing. It was just waiting and taking what was offered.

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The light in the picture that morning was-- it was 11 o'clock. It was very bright, very sunny, very harsh. But inside the tent, it was this beautiful, indirect light coming in. So there's always good light somewhere. I mean I don't recommend shooting out in a very bright, harsh light. But sometimes when you're inside, the light's very kind of pleasing. It's very muted. It's kind of low contrast, and that's the way it was in that morning. And it was just by chance that it happened to be.

But I realized that this was the perfect situation. The light, the background, everything was just perfect just the way it was. I didn't have to touch anything. It was just the right expression, the right what she was wearing. Everything was just perfect.

The background in this picture is just simply the back of the tent. But backgrounds in general should be-- I don't think you want them to interfere with your subject. I don't think that-- I mean the hero of the picture is the subject, and you don't want the background to distract from the story you're trying to tell. So you have to be mindful about not only the subject in the foreground, but what's behind the subject in the background. And that can sometimes make or break your picture.