

# Yousuf Karsh

Lord Montgomery had said, “If my eyes look red, it is because I have been karshed.” Conchita Fernandes looks back at the extraordinary obsessions of the iconic portraitist.

**T**he pressing of the camera's shutter is the most integral aspect of the picturemaking process. Its function, however, comes only towards the end. In the moments preceding this, the image is subconsciously or deliberately perceived, where the photographer brings a part of himself into the photograph. Going by this, no picture is objective, or can claim to

accurately depict the subject as it is. We are all biased and influenced by what we see and know. When we look at portraiture from this point of view, especially the photographs of famous people, we often assume their portrayal as an accurate representation of their personality. However, the idea that a single photograph can 'capture' someone's identity is a challenge that has been pursued ever since the camera came into being. ▶



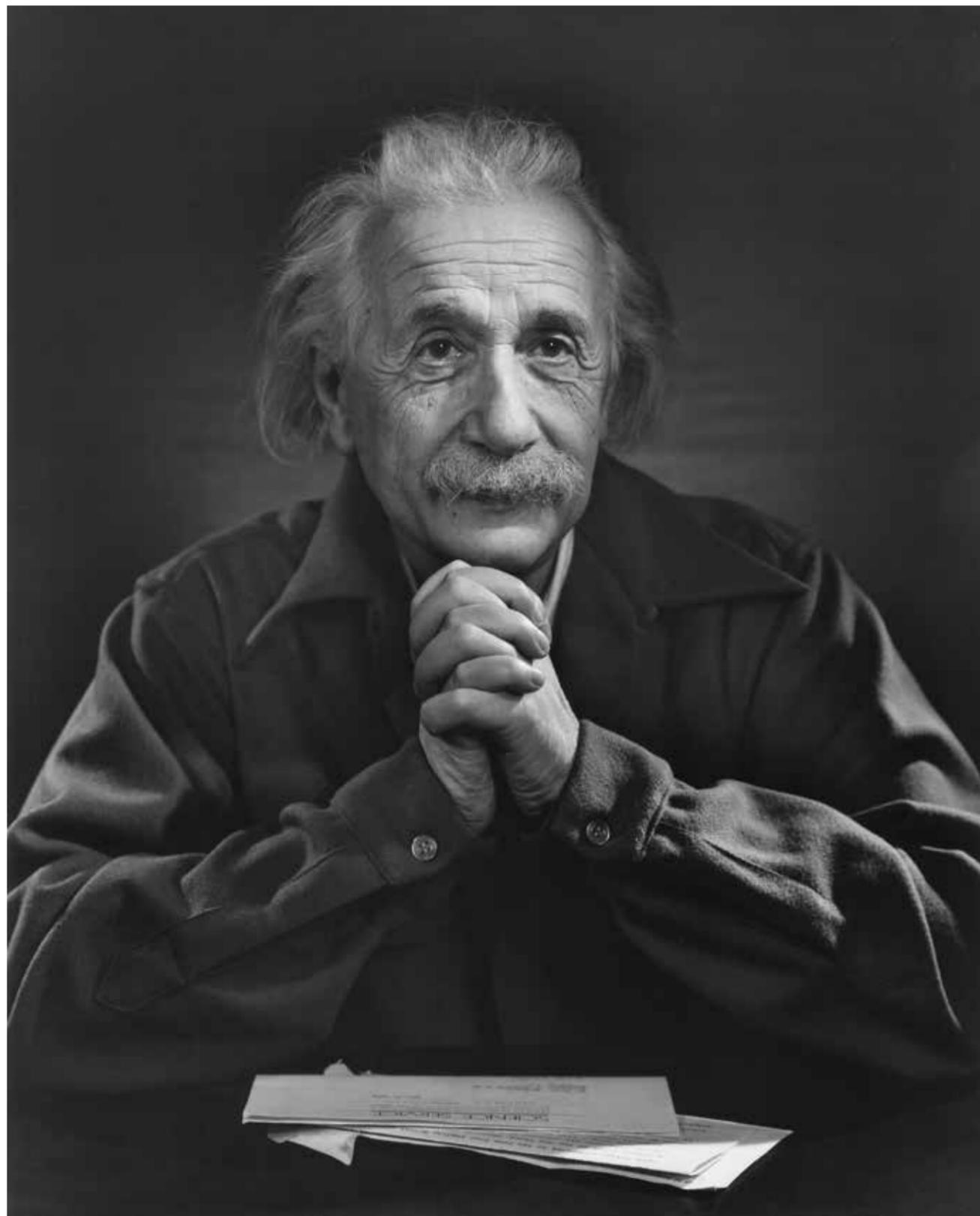
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© Ernest Hemingway, 1957.

All photographs courtesy the Yousuf Karsh Estate

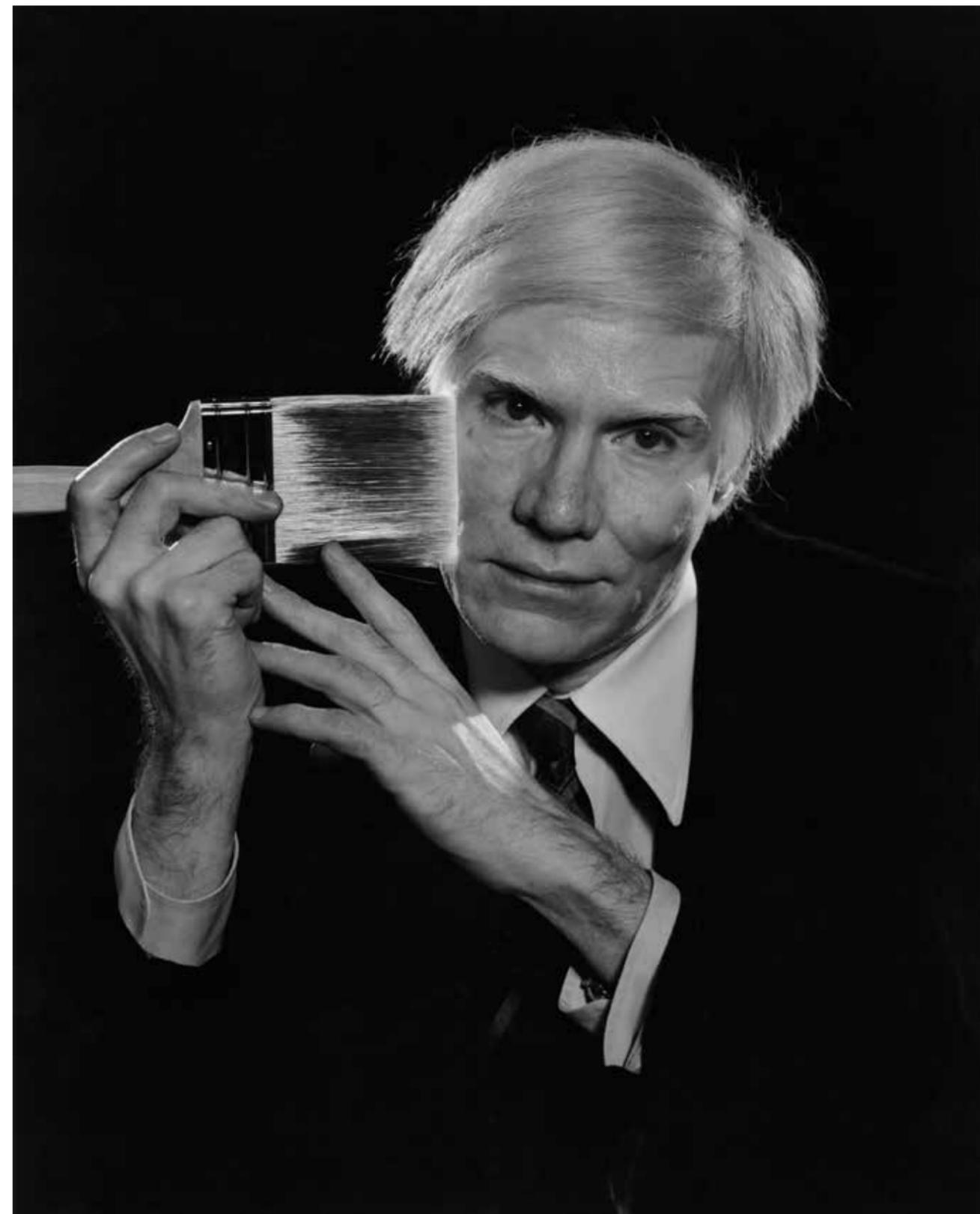


➤ Albert Einstein, 1948.

But people change, and their personalities evolve. Several photographs, made over a period of time, can probably attempt to do this.

Therefore, if you look at the work of some of the most famous and celebrated

portraitists, they have never sought to visually summarise an individual in a single photograph. Instead, they have focused on very specific traits that provide a window into the subject's inner self. Yousuf Karsh was one



➤ Andy Warhol, 1979.

such great portraitist who was conscious of this at a time when people were still tinkering with the idea. "As I became aware of the scope of photography as an art, I had at first to seek out the world personalities whom I wished

to portray, and I had to also develop all the skill and understanding I could in order that I might be enabled to record their greatness in my portraits. To this kind of seeking there is no end, for both new subjects and new ways of ▶



Ruth Draper, 1936.

interpreting them are firing me constantly with new hopes, and new ideas. The perfect photographic portrait has still to be made.”

Having witnessed and survived the Armenian Genocide, and then arriving in Canada as a young 15-year-old refugee, Karsh's rise to acclaim was driven by the idea of honouring men and women of special achievement. His mother, Bahai Nakash, had taught him that all people shared a common humanity. His goal was to bring about positivity, and even a sense of hope and wonder in the minds of those looking at

his work. But he wasn't alone in this journey. There were a few key figures in his life that shaped his photographic sense and his human side as well.

One of these individuals was his uncle, George Nakash, who was also a photographer. Nakash was responsible for Karsh's passage to Halifax from Syria (where his family had escaped to), and then his subsequent education and initiation into the world of photography. It was he who first saw potential in a rudimentary family picture that Karsh had taken. This was

▶ **Audrey Hepburn, 1956.**





Man Ray, 1965.

enough to convince him to send Karsh to Boston (USA), to hone his skills with the renowned portraitist, John Garo.

Garo had a massive influence on Karsh's career. It was with his support that Karsh learnt and understood the significance of lighting. Garo was also a devoted teacher, and encouraged independent thinking, honesty, and free expression, as long as it was based on sound artistic understanding of composition, and on the use of light and shadow to strengthen the frame. But more importantly, he instilled in Karsh the habit of not rushing into making a photograph, and on being decisive and not wasteful. In his autobiography, *In Search of Greatness: Reflections of Yousuf Karsh*, he recalls Garo telling him the following... "Reflect before you expose a plate. Don't expose carelessly, relying on averages through a series of exposures... Understand clearly what you are seeking to achieve, and when it is there, make your exposure. Art is never fortuitous. Remember that on every exposure you make, you expend energy and thought; respect them." To this Karsh added, "When he (Garo) pressed the bulb for an exposure of a second, half a second, or two seconds, he would have given a great deal of himself to each of those exposures. When he had taken six plates of a person, there had been much sharing of truth between the photographer and his subject."

Karsh spent three years with Garo, and by then he was sufficiently confident of himself. He then moved to Sherbrooke (Canada) in 1931 to practice photography with his uncle. However, after enough time had elapsed, Karsh sensed a deep desire to move away from the regular portraits he was making. He wanted to move up and photograph eminent figures. Moreover, he wanted to work solo. "The desire to be on my own was welling up inside me with steadily increasing pressure." So once again he moved, this time to Ottawa, in 1932, and began work at the Powis Studio. His career had officially begun, and eventually he became known as Karsh of Ottawa.

In the following decades, Karsh photographed some of the most historic and elusive personalities known to the world. But why photograph only the famous? This was a question that he was frequently asked throughout his career. "It is true that the photographs that have given me the greatest satisfaction are, with a few notable exceptions, those of people of consequence, although by no means of consequence

in the same field or for the same reason. They have included scientists, film stars, physicians, clergymen, military leaders, princes and presidents. I have also been interested in the 'common man,' and have made countless photographs of people of all kinds. But I have, not as a rule, felt the same challenge when photographing people who have made no special contribution, good or bad, to the world... I seriously doubt if the interpretation of an unknown face is likely to have interest equal to that of a known personality, either to a photographer or to those who view his work. The best proof of this is that my portraits of famous people are better known than any of my other photographs."

So how did he go about encapsulating his larger-than-life subjects in a photograph? What did he look for? And in the case of some of them, how did he maneuver around their daunting personalities?

One example of this was the iconic photograph that he made of Winston Churchill, in 1941. Imagine plucking a cigar out of the mouth of an ill-disposed Churchill, who at the time had gained a kind of mythical status for this authoritative and robust approach in politics. "It's a story that has been dramatised by the press a great deal... I photographed Churchill three times, twice after that occasion. It was a spontaneous act on my part. It was intuitive. It's unthinkable that I would plan such a thing beforehand. It was similar to picking a piece of thread off your shirt. It was done with respect and appreciation. But he responded. His expression, although not planned on my part, fit the need of the hour. He represented the great British determination," Karsh had said of the image. In response to the picture taken of him, Churchill had said to Karsh, "You can even make a roaring lion stand still to be photographed."

That was how far Karsh went to get the picture he wanted. But it was always done with grace and politeness. "I would stand and smile and bow through all the points of the compass... Perhaps it was the only thing I could do really well, and which people could understand." He always looked for positive values in his sitters, even if they were not known for them. So his subjects trusted him, and revealed a part of their inner selves that very few photographers have managed to do since then.

For Karsh, the 'photography' or the 'camera' was the end process. What mattered ▶

**"Following our marriage, Solange continued to be teacher, my expression, my conscience. She complemented my general lack of information, and when she realised that I might display some technical shortcomings, she filled in. She travelled with me constantly. When I was planning to photograph an important personality, she would help me in the research beforehand, and when the sitting had begun, would engage the subject in animated and useful conversation."**  
—Yousuf Karsh on his wife Solange Karsh



◉ Muhammad Ali,  
1970.



◉ Dwight D. Eisenhower,  
1946.

was being able to identify the fleeting sliver of revelation that momentarily appears between the sitter and the photographer. But it also had to do with his sincere desire to know each of his subjects. “The most important skill for a photographer to develop, be he an amateur or professional, is that of being able to see his subject through his eyes before he sees it through his camera,” he had said.

However, making pictures of such extraordinary personalities gives rise to the question of whether to photograph the legend or explore an unknown aspect of the individual. While Karsh admitted to being influenced by the person’s legend, he never let it come in the way of his own perception of the individual. “I do not think that I have ever been unduly awed by an important person who has come before my camera, just because he was important. My temperament, my nature, compel me to approach all people with consideration,

but I have a tremendously strong ally beside me when I am carrying out my duty, for my companion is my camera, which will never forget...” he had said.

When the time came for the portrait to be made, Karsh would have already planned and set up the lighting and arrangement. He would then evoke the necessary mood through conversation, something he picked up from observing Garo and his clients. He also preferred to be alone with the subject. “The relationship between photographer and subject is similar to that between physician and patient. A man can hardly be expected to bare his soul in an interview when a third party is present.” To this he added, “I observe constantly the composition as it is, or as it might be, and as we chat together, I continue to observe. Never do I use the phrase, “Hold it.” It is not in my vocabulary. When everything is ready, the raising of my finger, a smile to the subject, perhaps nothing at all, will mark ▶



📍 Betty Low, 1936.

the moment to be captured by the camera. Talk is suspended, the camera clicks, and our conversation continues immediately... As I do the photographing, something within me tells me when what I have taken is really right, and it also tells me when to terminate the sitting..."

His wife, Solange Karsh, was another integral figure in his life. Their partnership was a strong one, both personally and professionally. One of her suggestions was to make notes of the conversations that took place between Karsh and his subjects. "We always carried a typewriter with us, and she would record the substance of our interviews, as soon as a photo had been taken. I did not realise as first how valuable these

records would be, but when I came to put together *Faces of Destiny* (1946), I realised how wisely and well she had worked," he had said.

Karsh's early professional photographs had noticeable influences from Garo, as well as Edward Steichen's fashion and celebrity portraits that appeared in *Vanity Fair*. It was only in the late 1930s that we see his style emerge with his use of artificial lighting, which evolved from his earlier experience in stage lighting. For him, the lighting had to be such that it brought out what he referred to as the subject's 'inner power'. It was characterised by contrasting highlights and shadows that gave his subjects a kind of celestial aura. He preferred a gradation

📍 Elizabeth Taylor, 1946.





100 **Nelson Mandela, 1990.**

of illumination from light to shadow, across the image, as he was more interested with the middle tones that this form of lighting created, and which also contributed to the third dimension of the face in the photograph.

Although his technique was highly nuanced, Karsh's interest in the technical aspects of photography wasn't as much as what the image conveyed. "I never became a technician by choice, nor have I a flair for being one.



101 **Sir Winston Churchill, 1941.**

My use of chemicals is purely pragmatic; I adjust my formulas to achieve the results that I am seeking." "My spirit has constantly rebelled against the intrusion of the technical equipment with which a photographer must

surround himself... How much more desirable it would be if all such equipment would be out of sight while the photographer was doing his work! My dream has long been of a camera which would be completely concealed..." ▶

But he was still in charge, and never delegated the development of his negatives. The first master print was always made by him. Karsh also preferred making large-size prints of his work because he believed that a print of this size would give a more vivid impression of the subject, just as a life-size painting would. He was a perfectionist too, there was no room for mediocrity. "Photographs that I don't like don't see the light of day," he is known to have said.

Karsh was a traditionalist, and never consciously sought to be innovative. For him, the camera was a means to project the idea that

there was still goodness in the world, and in its people. He never made photographs to please others, but to satisfy himself. Besides, he never asked people if he could photograph them. He wanted his subjects to come to him of their own volition, so that it was a collaborative effort. But Karsh's virtue lay in the fact that he was a tireless student of his subjects. His insatiable fascination with the human face and the traits that changed its nature and quality has provided the world with some of the most enigmatic and timeless photographs it has ever seen. 📷

*Yousuf Karsh's work can be viewed on [www.karsh.org](http://www.karsh.org) and [www.camerapress.com](http://www.camerapress.com)*

📷 Jawaharlal Nehru, 1956.

📷 Martin Luther King Jr, 1962.

