

Dreams,  
Pakse, Laos



## Defining Character and Personality with Expressive Portraiture

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Expressive portraiture goes beyond simply describing the appearance of the subject. In addition to showing us what people look like, portraits made for communication can tell us something about who they are. Thought provoking portraiture can define both character and personality, and perhaps even go on to say something about where the subjects live, work, or play.

When making portraits, try to interpret the subject for the viewers. An interpretive image is an expression of an impression—in this case, the photographer's own impression. Richard Avedon, one of the great portraitists of the 20th century, offered a mindful insight: "A portrait is not a likeness," Avedon said. "The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph, it is no longer a fact but an opinion...All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth." Hopefully, portraits will convey a version of the truth—studies rich in essential human

values that viewers can understand and perhaps learn from. If portraits can go on to tell a story as well, that's even better.

Traditional portraits usually include only the sitter, and are often made for the sitter's benefit. This photographer's roots are in photojournalism, so portraits are made for the benefit of the viewer. Often included is a significant amount of symbolic environment that adds important context to the image. Such images are called *environmental portraits*. In many cases, the setting can be useful in telling the story. Sometimes the subjects nearly fill the frame, but more often than not, they share the space with environmental context.

Many images are *travel portraits*, because the subjects are found in streets, shops, parks, markets, hotels and homes in cities and towns around the world. Some of the subjects are aware of the camera. Others are not. All of the portraits reflect natural expressions. Subjects are never



*Craftsman, Hoi An, Vietnam*



*Seamstress, Mo Cay Town, Vietnam*

*No smiles,  
Khajuraho,  
India*



*Produce man,  
Fez,  
Morocco*



asked to smile, or behave in a particular way. Instead of smiling for the camera, it is preferred that the subjects respond naturally, in a manner that can help express their feelings, and define their character and personality.

Many subjects are often flattered to have their picture taken. They can be put at ease by holding the camera down at waist level, and using a flip out viewfinder to make the portraits. Waist level shooting allows the photographer to make eye contact with the subjects at the moment of exposure. By not masking the face with the camera, I appear less threatening and more congenial.

Sometimes, a portrait will be composed at waist level and then I look elsewhere as I release the shutter, which causes some of my subjects to be unaware of the moment of exposure. Now and then, portraits are made from a distance, using a telephoto lens, so as not to influence the behavior of the subject. Never use a flash, as firing lights at subjects would be intrusive and intermittent bursts of light will call attention to the camera. I have always used natural light to illuminate my images, and wholeheartedly agree with photojournalist Henri Cartier Bresson's advice: "Complicated equipment and lights and various other items of hardware are enough, in my mind, to prevent the birdie from ever coming out."



*Shy child, Beijing, China*

While the travel portraits included with this article may differ in approach and method, they share a common quality—they express the nature of the subjects by conveying essential human values. In communicating these human values, it is hoped the portraits will help the viewers to better understand the person who looks back at them from the image. ■



*Newspaper shop, Kanjipadam, Kerala, India*



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