

CLOSE-UP

STEVE McCURRY





*His iconic portrait of a green-eyed Afghan refugee has made **Steve McCurry** the world's best-known photojournalist. He's a hard man to keep up with, but **Keith Wilson** chatted with Magnum's most celebrated living photographer...*

Has there been a more honoured photojournalist than **Steve McCurry**? Six World Press Photo awards, the Robert Capa Gold Medal, and numerous successes in the Picture of the Year Competition are just a fraction of his accolades in a 40-year career. And then there is the 'Afghan Girl' (shown on the original *National Geographic* cover on page 85), arguably the most famous portrait of the 20th Century. As a photographer, McCurry has achieved enough for a hundred lifetimes. Yet he refuses to rest...

How young were you when you realised that your future lay in travelling beyond your home borders?

I was 19. I lived in Europe for a year then.

What took you to Europe?

I wanted to see something new. I wanted to have a different type of experience. I just thought it would be interesting to see some other part of the world, so off I went.

What was it about photography that made you want to pursue it as a career?

Travel and photography have always been intertwined. I think we have such a brief amount of time in this world that I can't think of a better use of my time than to travel, to photograph the world, experience life in different places. To me there's nothing more important than that.

Have you found over the years that rather than getting tired of travelling, you're wanting to do even more?

I don't know whether I'd say do even more. I would say I'm still curious, I still have things I want to do, places I want to go, so it hasn't dimmed. I don't think I could travel any more than now, but it's something I enjoy, that gives me purpose and pleasure.

India is a country you keep going back to. Why did you choose to go to India the first time when you went freelance?

Well, it was an arbitrary decision. I had





MUMBAI GIRL IN MONSOON

Steve McCurry spent a year following the monsoon in Asia, and says he "learned to see it as a critically-important event"

already travelled to some parts of Africa, some parts of Latin America, Europe, and also to a little bit of the Middle East. So India was a part of the world I hadn't been. In terms of Asia, there's China and there's India, but China back in 1978 was probably not as easy to navigate around as India – so I went to India because it was an easier place to be.

What were your first impressions of India? Well, I was struck by the amount of people! It was a very different place, with the culture, the food, the different religions.

Things were much more visible, people lived their lives more in public and it was just another kind of world. India had, to me, completely different music, different architecture, different food. You're always kind of hyper-aware of your surroundings because everything is a bit strange and alien and hypnotic.

India is a popular destination with many photographers. On that first trip did you worry about running out of film?

That wasn't my concern. It was more about trying to find the essence of the place, what was unique. What was it about this place that made it intriguing? There's no guarantee that you're going to make good pictures just because you happen

to be in an exotic location. The same rules of photography still apply: light and composition and a particular moment. You may be in an incredible place with an incredible story to tell, but you still have to craft it in a certain way.

You once said: "In a portrait, you want something of that person to reveal itself. Some portraits look too controlled. I like to see the naked personality; I want to see something that is real and something that is raw. You don't see the hand of the photographer; you see the uniqueness of that person" My question is, how do you actually know when you're seeing that? Usually when I'm shooting portraits they're short encounters, and you're dealing with



 **MONSOON IN BANGLADESH**
Steve's book of rainy-season
shots, *Monsoon*, was published in 1988

all sorts of obstacles. It could be a busy street, it could be light which isn't ideal. I think you just have to keep probing and shooting and sometimes it doesn't come together for whatever reason, but other times it does. You have to try to get people to be relaxed, to be comfortable, and try to find a particular moment in your conversation with that person that says something about their personality, their character. You never quite know how it's going, you're working so fast with all these variables swirling around, it becomes instinctive and you have to work from your gut, maybe thinking less and working more from your heart. You never quite know when the best moment is going to reveal itself. You shoot and there's a moment that▶

PROFILE

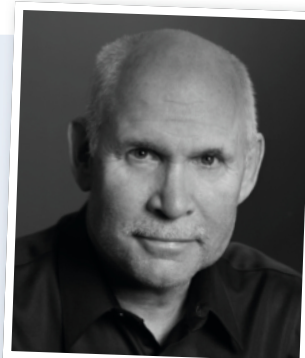
Steve's freelance career spans more than 30 years, and includes some iconic portrait photographs

■ Steve McCurry began his career as a press photographer in Pennsylvania before travelling to India to work as a freelance photographer.

■ He won the Robert Capa Gold Medal for his coverage of the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, which he slipped across the border from

Pakistan to photograph.

■ McCurry's photograph of Sharbat Gula, better known as 'the Afghan Girl', appeared on the June 1985 cover of *National Geographic*. It is the 'most recognized photograph' in the 125-year history of the magazine. In 2002 McCurry met Gula for a second time.



■ A member of co-operative photo agency Magnum since 1986, McCurry has published 11 books of his photographs, with another two due out this year.

BLACK AND WHITE STEVE

McCurry is renowned for his use of colour in portrait photography. Yet when he started out as a press photographer in Philadelphia the 1970s, he worked exclusively in black and white...

What did you think about shooting in black and white? Do you find it more or less difficult than shooting in colour?

■ I love black and white. I think black and white makes everything a little bit more graphic and sometimes there's more emotion in black and white, and certainly you don't have the added problem of the colour to solve. To me, black and white is easier. With photographing the world in colour, that's the way we see it so it makes far more sense to photograph the world in colour, but if you're going to make a colour photograph you need to think about it, whereas in black and white you don't have to think about colour at all.

It's apples and oranges. Black and white photography is wonderful, colour photography is wonderful. It just depends on how you want to spend your time in this world.

Do you still shoot black and white photographs today?

■ No. But I think the way to identify a good colour photograph is to ask yourself if you convert it to black and white does it still have interest? Does it still have value?

That would make a good story idea: let's look at a series of colour photographs, let's just break it down, see how they work: the light, the design, the graphic quality. If it's a good picture, whether it's been shot in colour or in black and white, then it's successful.

you think is interesting, you keep working and you never quite know when you've got it. It's a mysterious process, I think.

One thing I notice a lot about your portraits is your choice of backgrounds. Are you consciously looking for

“The more experience you have, the more you start to see a scene and understand how that's going to photograph”

Steve McCurry *Magnum photographer*



INDIAN GENTLEMAN, JODHPUR
Steve has made return visits to Jodhpur's ancient city for over 20 years
1/125 sec, f/3.5, ISO160

something that is clean and uncluttered or complementary to the subject?

I think a background needs to be considered because in a two-dimensional picture the background has a fair amount of importance and weight to the picture. If you're unconcerned with that part of your picture it may detract from your objective of trying to say something about a person, or the focus of your attention.

How do you feel you have changed as a photographer over your career?

I think if you asked a hundred different photographers, we'd all probably say the same thing. One hopes that you have honed your craft, that you see better and improved your sense of picture making,

you see more pictures than before. When a person is starting out they may not understand light or how most things will look like as a picture. I think the more experience you have, the more you start to see a scene or something on the street and understand how that's going to photograph. That's important, to understand what you're looking at, how that's going to look on a piece of paper.

So do you find yourself becoming more selective, more considered?

Yeah, I would say so.

How do you manage to stay so consistent with your portraits?

I suppose a photographer is looking for



his or her type of picture because maybe you're looking for something that speaks to you, so there's a consistency of response. I just travel through my life, photographing people in situations where the time of day, a particular light, a particular place is basically of my choosing. Yeah, you walk down the street and you can either shoot inside or outside, you can shoot at noon, or you can shoot at dusk, or at night, it depends on what motivates you and what fascinates you about a place, or photography, or the type of light. It just depends on what interests you, I suppose.

You're best known for the portrait of Sharbat Gula, the Afghan Girl. In what way has the iconic status of that

photograph been a help and a hindrance to your career?

I don't think it's been a hindrance at all. I don't see it in any way as a hindrance. I think it's a wonderful photograph and has a lot of emotion. It's a successful portrait and I see it only as a positive. I see it only as a glass half-full. I don't see any downside.

I was wondering if you feel the success of that photo has deflected attention away from some of your other portraits?

No, I don't see that. You put your work out there in the world and people respond to it in their own way. You can't second-guess people, you know. People are going to respond and be drawn to certain music, certain movies and certain photographs

TAJ MAHAL REFLECTION (TOP)

The area round the Taj Mahal has changed greatly since Steve first shot it – what was once farmland is now a nature reserve

TABLE FOR TWO, YANGON (MIDDLE)

The slithery guest may end up as dinner, as snake meat is on the menu at this restaurant specialising in exotic dishes

KARACHI SHIP BREAKING YARD (BOTTOM)

In an interview with Phaidon Press, Steve described ship breaking as "One of the most interesting professions I've seen"

and paintings. Nothing can be done. I have the picture of the Afghan Girl, I don't see that as having any bearing on my other work. It's beyond my control. Things that are beyond my control... there's no point in wasting time over it. It is what it is and you just have to accept and try to spend time on things you can control. ▶



PROCESSION OF NUNS
The nuns allowed Steve to follow them on their daily walk, and he found the perfect backdrop on a rainy day



PLAYTIME IN LEBANON (BOTTOM LEFT)
These children are playing on an anti-aircraft gun; Steve has shot similar photos of children on tanks in Kandahar

HOLI FESTIVAL COLOURS (BOTTOM RIGHT)
Coloured powder is flung everywhere as part of the Holi celebrations in Mumbai – this boy has been having fun celebrating



“The first point about colour photography for me is not to let the colour get in the way of telling your story”

Steve McCurry *Magnum photographer*

You have taken many other wonderful portraits. I was wondering what others you rate as exceptional?

I have taken lots of portraits that I personally like. What matters is what other people respond to. There are pictures that I've taken that I like, and other portraits I think which are successful, yeah.

Care to name any?
Dozens!

Okay, let me put two to you: *Girl in Monsoon, Bombay, 1995* and *Girl in Green Shawl, Peshawar, 2002*. Yeah, those two portraits are ones that I'm very proud of.

The thing that strikes me about *Girl in Green Shawl* (opposite) is how the colour of her eyes matches the vivid colour of her shawl. Was that something that you were aware of at the time you took the picture? I don't know if I saw that. I'm not sure if that's what made me want to take the picture. I saw that she had a wonderful face. That coloration of the shawl and the eyes was something that I only discovered later when I was looking at the pictures.

You used Kodachrome film exclusively for a large part of your career, and shot the last ever roll of Kodachrome in 2010. What do you miss most about it? Well, Kodachrome had a wonderful colour palette. The colour I always thought was

CAPTURING FACES

Steve McCurry has a very particular way of working...

Steve McCurry takes very few candids. Working with an interpreter, his portraits are made with the subject's permission and from close distance. Making the most of whatever time he has is critical to capturing that moment of intimacy that characterises his portraiture.

How much time do you spend with your subjects if someone has caught your eye?

■ That depends on how much time they're willing to give me. There are times when you get a few seconds, there are other times where you might get a few minutes, maybe longer. You are at the mercy of how much time these people are willing to give you. If you're walking on the street, sometimes you literally have only a moment or two.

How close do you like to get to your subject? Are there times where you prefer to step back to show more of the surroundings?

■ Well, you need to work with the lens so that it doesn't draw too much attention to itself. If you get in tight with a wide-angle it's going to look distorted. Some people like that, but I prefer to work with something that's more true to reality.



MONK AT THE JOKHANG TEMPLE, TIBET
"I have never seen a face quite like his," Steve said of this Tibetan monk

wonderful for its interpretation of the world. I guess the downside of Kodachrome was that there was 25, there was 200, there was 64 – extremely slow films compared with what you can do with digital photography. If you have a Kodachrome 64, it's very complicated and difficult to shoot indoors. You need filters, you need lights, there's a colour temperature problem. It's all solvable, but it's not like digital where you don't have to think, you just take the lens cap off and shoot and you've got a fine picture almost in total darkness. So it's a huge, huge difference.

But it's the colour palette you miss?

Well, I don't miss it that much! If you said, here's a thousand rolls of Kodachrome, I

probably wouldn't shoot it. It's like going from the typewriter to the computer, going from the horse to the car, you know. If I presented you with a brand-new beautiful electric typewriter I doubt that you'd use it!

Have you tried to replicate the Kodachrome colour palette digitally?

No, no, no. I think with colour, the first point about colour photography for me is not to let the colour get in the way of telling your story. You don't want someone looking at your picture and have the colour be the main thing. I guess there are all sorts of styles and flavours of the month. A person has a set of rules, and someone else comes along and breaks them. It's about whatever pleases you. For me, I don't

want the picture to be about colour, I want the picture to be about a particular story, about the personality, it's got to be about the person and not the fact they're wearing a bright red shirt with a red ribbon in their hair. That's just me. Maybe someone else would see it completely different, but it's more important to me to show the humanity of the person. Is it possible to make a great portrait with colour? Yes, of course it is. I'm just saying that by and large I'm not so interested in making something really colourful for its own sake.

Early in your career, Henri Cartier-Bresson was a hero and inspiration. What is it about his work that you admire?
He was perhaps the most accomplished



MONSOON MOTHER, MUMBAI (TOP)
This mother and child are begging for alms at the window of a Mumbai taxi – just two of the city's thousands of beggars

BRAZILIAN RUNNER (BOTTOM)
A lone jogger finds some solitude and space not far from the sprawling, bustling city of Rio de Janeiro

“You need to photograph things that are important to you. You have to find things that you care about, as opposed to taking a series of random assignments”

Steve McCurry *Magnum photographer*

photographer whoever lived. I think he had a great sense of humanity, a great sense of light, composition and geometry.

Henri Cartier-Bresson was an outstanding portrait photographer, and he also photographed landscape, he photographed current events or world events in China, India, after World War Two, partition in India, Gandhi's funeral. His pictures are fresh, they're timeless, they're not dated. They're very elegant, he had an elegant eye. His pictures are as fresh today as they were 60, 70 years ago. They have the right light, the right, moment, the right emotion, the right composition.

He really was a very intelligent photographer and he was an artist. A lot of people can photograph war and strife,

but to photograph everyday life in a city or town, of ordinary people, that is a real gift.

What is your next major photographic project going to be?

I'm working on two books. I'm working on a book on Buddhism, I'm working on a book on India, and there's a couple of other projects which aren't yet formed enough that I can talk about.

Buddhism and India are both very rich subjects photographically. You could spend a lifetime photographing. Where do you draw the line?

Well, I won't live forever, so you have to do it inside your own lifetime! Nobody else is going to do it for you. That's basically the



SHAOLIN MONKS IN TRAINING
Steve says, "I've gained a strong appreciation for the unique way the monks look at life"


parameter. At some point you have to put it all together. I wish I had another 50 years to work on it.

How do you stay motivated? You're prolific with books and exhibitions, where does the drive come from?

I have no idea. It's just what I do and I love to do it. What did Churchill say about the Soviet Union? Something about a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma? I think that's the answer to your question!

If someone wanted to follow in your footsteps, what advice would you like to give them as a mentor?

I think you need to photograph things that are important to you. You have to find

things that you care about, as opposed to taking a series of random photographic assignments because you need the money. A lot of other advice is pretty obvious, but that's the most important piece of advice. I did a lot of assignments, which were just a case of shoot this and shoot that. I think when you start photographing things that you care about then you'll look back on your work in 20 years, 40 years, 60 years with satisfaction. It would be a pity to waste one's life. I think if you're doing something you genuinely care about then it's time well spent. 

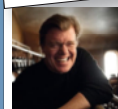
• **To find out more about Steve's work, visit www.stevemccurry.com**

SEE STEVE ON STAGE

Have you got your tickets for The **Photography Show** yet? The four-day show takes place at the Birmingham NEC from **March 1-4** and it's not just an exhibition – an all-star cast of pro photographers will be taking to the **Super Stage to share their secrets**, including Rankin, Joe McNally, Steve McCurry and Terry O'Neill. There'll also be photo workshops, catwalk shows, and retail stands. Book tickets for sessions at www.photographyshow.com before they sell out!



Steve McCurry



Joe McNally



Terry O'Neill