

With a camera in Asia, former investment banker uncovers intangible wealth

Roberts' work in "Humanitas," including "Sikh Couple," aims to show those who are rich in spirit, despite being materially poor.



## windows on the heart



Fredric Roberts shot "Nabi Sunset" in Siyana, India, in 2003. It's one of more than 50 color photographs included in his first book, "Humanitas."

Story by JOHN ARNOLD ■ Of the Journal  
Photographs Courtesy FREDRIC ROBERTS



Roberts' travels included a visit to Inle Lake in Myanmar, where he photographed these fishermen in 2002.

When Fredric Roberts took his first photography course at the Santa Fe Workshops in 2000, the class began with a lesson on how to load a camera. Five years and 10 workshops later, Roberts is returning once again to Santa Fe, not to take another course, but to discuss the work in his first book, "Humanitas" (Hymas Publishing), published last year. A slide show and discussion is scheduled for Tuesday at the College of Santa Fe, and an exhibit of Roberts' work will go on display at Tadu Downtown, beginning Monday.

Most of the plates in "Humanitas" — a collection of portraits and pastoral

scenes from far-flung locales in Asia — were shot less than three years after Roberts' beginning photography class.

"I can't remember anybody on this fast track — in two years and a bunch of workshops — come to the point where Fred is, with a book and an exhibit," said Santa Fe Workshops director Reid Callanan.

But "Humanitas" not only belies Roberts' photography experience, in a way it belies his former career. Unlike the humble subjects of his photographs, Roberts was immersed in a world of extraordinary wealth and privilege. His skills as an investment banker made peo-

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## Images Rich in Spirit

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ple "in the hundreds of millions of dollars rich," he said.

When Roberts, 62, started his finance career in the early 1970s, the work was about more than building piles of money, he insists. It was about building "wonderful relationships" and helping troubled businesses. It was about advocating for clients and "doing the right kind of transactions."

But then came the 1980s.

"It became all about money," Roberts said recently by phone from California. "It became all about fees and getting deals done. People made enormous amounts of money, but I'm not sure the world was a better place."

And it didn't get better in the 1990s, according to Roberts. The culture of greed continued, he said, and investment banking was "a kind of business I liked less and less."

By the end of the decade, after Roberts had established his own successful investment bank and served as chairman of the National Association of Securities Dealers and NASDAQ, he decided he'd had enough, and he called it quits. As Roberts explored his retirement options, he thought about taking up photography, a hobby he entertained briefly in the mid-1980s during an Asian vacation. A friend suggested enrolling at the Santa Fe Workshops, an organization that has been offering classes to photographers of all levels for 15 years.

"And I took (a photography workshop), and it was like somebody released something inside me," Roberts said. "There was this thing that happened to me. I don't know what it was. It just opened up a whole new world for me that I didn't know existed."

That new world led Roberts back to Asia, where



Roberts, a former California investment banker, shot "Mehrangarh Woman" and other photographs in "Humanitas" just a few years after taking a beginner's photography course at Santa Fe Workshops.

experiences in some of South Asia's poorest areas proved enlightening and stood in stark contrast to the world Roberts had been a part of for so long — a world of multimillion-dollar houses filled with miserable marriages and spiritual voids.

Roberts recalls an encounter in 2000 with a Vietnamese farmer who, after Roberts and his translator asked for directions, invited the strangers into his home for tea.

"So we come in, and his wife is there, and we are honored guests in his house," Roberts said.

Roberts realized during his

visit that the farmer and his family were rich in ways unknown to many Americans.

"They were rich intellectually. They were rich spiritually. They were rich culturally. They were rich in terms of their relationships with each other and their community," he said. "And yet they had no electricity, no running water, no Internet, no car."

People who may be penniless but are rich in spirit dominate Roberts' images in "Humanitas." They are, for the most part, photographs of contentment — stoic, sometimes smiling, subjects staring comfortably into the camera. The portraits, along

### If you go

**WHAT:** Slide show, discussion and book signing with photographer Fredric Roberts

**WHEN:** 8:30 p.m. Tuesday

**WHERE:** Tipton Hall, College of Santa Fe, 1600 St. Michael's Drive

**HOW MUCH:** Free

### On display

Roberts' photographs will be on view at Tadu Downtown, 110 W. San Francisco, beginning Monday. The exhibit will be up through July 31.

with peaceful scenes of village life and temples, are largely defined by Roberts' use of color, whether it be in vibrant clothing, a camel herder's deep green eyes or a lush orange sunset over the Indian countryside.

"Fred's message," Callanan said, "is definitely a positive, hopeful one for humanity."

In schools and monasteries, on farms and fishing boats, Roberts found most of his subjects willing to share their lives with him. The photographer said he was able to connect and form relationships with the people he met, sometimes by spending the day with them, sometimes by a simple conversation.

While stopped at a railroad crossing in India, a group of women sat in the bed of a truck next to Roberts' vehicle. He began talking with them and began shooting from where he sat. "Woman in a Truck," a photograph from that encounter, is included in "Humanitas."

"I never got out of the car. She never stood up," he recalled. "And somehow we just connected."