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When Art Triumphs Over Commerce

The Story of Fredric Roberts

BY AYSEGUL SERT PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID MIEZAL

"Who is Wise? He who learns from all men.
Who is Strong? He who controls his passions.
Who is rich? He who is happy with what he has."
-The Ethics of the Fathers

These are the opening lines from Fredric Roberts' first photography book, *Humanitas*, published just a few weeks ago. Roberts grew up in Long Island, went to Yale, and for thirty some years worked in the world of finance. In 2000, he surrendered to the artist within, retired from business and dusted off his camera, which had been put away in a closet for fourteen years. Since then, Roberts has been in a group show for the Photographic Arts Council at LACMA, has a current solo exhibition at a prominent gallery, and his book, *Humanitas* (Latin for humanity), is in stores. Not bad for a first time photographer! If Jean-Paul Sartre were to glance through Roberts' captured moments, he might have appreciated how this photographer understands the concept of "autrui," the other. Indeed, the other in Roberts' frames are reflections of humanity as a whole. Venice visited with Roberts in his Mandeville Canyon home to discuss his Journey from financier to photographer.

Venice: How many trips did you take to the underbelly, so to speak, of these far away lands to get the pictures you have in your book?

Fredric Roberts: The book is the result of over two years of work. Some of the pictures were taken in 1986 when I shot for a brief period of six weeks. I stopped for 14 years and started again in 2000. My trips usually last about a month because they are exhausting and after a while fatigue takes over. The temperature, the altitude, the living conditions in which I live when I am in these regions are difficult. Sometimes I wake up at three in the morning, travel for a few hours, and get to watch people wake up, build fires and cook breakfast. I have to travel across mountains or down rivers. And in all this moving around, I have to carry my heavy equipment.

How do you approach the people you want to photograph? Do you ask for their permission first, or choose to do so after-wards so as not to spoil the moment?

The good part is that I get to spend time with the people I photograph and they enrich me. I don't just shoot them; first I try to get to know them. A comment I hear often from people who see my work is how struck they are by the connection I seem to have with my subjects. It seems odd that I can go to

places where people could not be more different yet we have some sort of connection, some sort of communication. Somehow it works between us and I think that comes out in the photographs. A lot of times when you tell people you are going to take their picture, they stiffen up. So you have to relate to them first, then you have to stay long enough so that they get past the point where they stiffen up and where they actually relax. And there are interesting stages in that. At first, they stiffen up, and then they pretend to relax, and then they really relax.

Do you ever wish they could see how you photographed them?

I try really hard to send back photographs to them, so that they have their own memory of that time.

How do you do that?

Usually I have a guide who can find them again. I prepare a comprehensive notebook with names and locations. I send large piles of envelopes filled with pictures that my guide takes back to villages and finds their owners. People are dazzled by their own image.

And what do you hope to achieve by this gesture?

It is my way of thanking them. It is my way of showing them my appreciation for the time they spent with me and that I hope they remember that time as I do.

Is there a message you want to spread through your photographs?

I used to give speeches to young businessmen, and I would start by saying, 'You need to figure out what you want to do with your life. Do you think you were put on this earth to sell more tires than anyone else? Do you think you were put on this earth to sell more sheets and pillowcases? I mean really. Why are you here? You should look at your business as a vehicle to fulfilling your life, not more. This is the Zen of the deal in business.' When I look at the people I photograph, I see they have a larger vision of life, a vision that transcends monetary value. It is about their relationship to their god, to their land, neighbors, and family. It is that relationship that I want to give as a message.

In other words, they are the real wealthy ones...

Exactly! I find the subjects of my photographs to be extremely wealthy despite the fact that they do not have material wealth. It is the arrogance of western societies, to look upon more rural communities as being primitive or "lesser." The fact is that we just have more stuff and they have less stuff, but they are not necessarily any less developed than we are.

These people are extraordinarily intelligent in their own way. They might not be able to drive a car, but they can survive in a way that we could not survive if we were to live in their society. I have tremendous respect for them and in my photographs I want that admiration to come through. These people should be a beacon to my friends, neighbors, and fellow citizens in the more developed world to say that there is something far bigger in someone's life than the accumulation of assets.

How did you start photography?

In 2000 I started to study photography. I went to the Santa Fe workshops, which I find a marvelous place with extraordinary teachers. My first class started with how to load a camera and I was somehow smitten by the whole process. After that I was hooked and couldn't get rid of it. Photography is probably the most positive, wonderful addiction I have ever had.

What do you think it is that triggered something in you about the process of loading a camera?

I spent 30 years doing financing and I always considered the deals I did to be works of art. I handcrafted every business deal myself and I was very proud of that work. But in the end, that wasn't enough. That's perhaps because, while people were thrilled about the result, five minutes later they would forget about it, taking their 200 million dollars. Everybody loved the result but few understood the artistry of the deal. I think people don't think of them as being art. And suddenly I started taking photographs and people appreciated them. In 1986, I shot for six weeks. I flew to Asia and I bought a camera just for the trip, because I thought it would be a shame to go to these places that were so exotic and not take any pictures. So I bought a camera and read the manual on the plane flying over to Bangkok. When I got back I took a class taught by a husband and wife who were senior photographers for National Geographic, and they loved my pictures from the trip. That's when I found out that I had a gigantic business crisis and I took those slides and my camera and put them in the closet and didn't look at them for 14 years. Fourteen years later, having grown to not like the state of affairs of the finance world, I retired. I ran into a fellow who said to me, 'You know, if you are thinking of pursuing photography (which I was), you should go to the Santa Fe Workshops. Two weeks later, I was



Inis Lake Sunrise

in Santa Fe, learning about photography. Whatever it was that was living inside me would never have come out had it not been for this advice and the workshops. The world of photography is full of generous and gracious people. I came from a former business where people were Machiavellian and competitive, sometimes hostile and devious, ruthlessly competing with each other. In the world of photographers, it is the opposite. I am in a completely different world now.

When you photograph these "different" people, how do you see yourself? As an insider or an outsider?

At the beginning, when I started to shoot in Asia, I was an outsider and I didn't care that I was one. It was as I became closer to them, through more frequent trips, that I felt more like an insider. I wasn't conscious of whether I was an insider or an outsider until I really began to relate to these people. I think it is impossible for a photographer to truly be an insider because, unless you were born into that village and experienced all the things they have, there is no way you can be 100% an insider. There are, I know, lots of people who travel to these places and say, 'Well, I am a native now,' but they are kidding themselves. I was recently in Burma, taking photographs, and I realized you never hear babies crying; you don't hear a child whining. There are places in Indonesia, for example, where babies don't touch the floor until after their first birthday; they are held by an adult for that long, which is an amazing expression of love and caring. You see five-year-olds caring

for their newborn sisters or brothers. You don't see that in the western world. These people have experienced being self-sufficient in a place that doesn't help them, and many times their governments oppress rather than assist, and they survive without infrastructure without healthcare, and no photographer can come and say, 'Now I am an insider.' I can never be them, all I can do is appreciate them, and that's what I try to do with my photographs.

***Humanitas* is set in Asia, in the sense that all of the pictures in the book are taken there. Does this mean you are mostly drawn to Asia?**

Well, for this book it turned out to be Asia, but no, I am fascinated by other places, as well. Remember, this is "Volume One." Asia is incredibly different. People don't look the same, they don't eat the same food, don't live in the same kind of housing, don't have the same God. Everything about what they do is unlike what we do. I love Cuba, for instance, its colors and music. And Mexico. I used to work with agricultural financing and in my visits I was fascinated to see how hard Mexican farmers worked, how dedicated they were, and how unappreciated they were. It was awful. In order to find what I consider "unspoiled people," I have to go farther and farther out from the cities to more and more rural areas.

When you say "unspoiled," you mean the essence, the true nature of who they are?

Right. There is a certain homogenization of metropolitan areas where it doesn't matter what country you are in, people are wearing Benetton T-shirts or some common logo, and you don't know where the hell you are anymore. There is a sameness about everything. I want to photograph people who are still unspoiled, who are not wearing those jeans and shirts, because that's the true nature of life to me.

Speaking of which, you are a member of the Board of Directors of the Los Angeles Music Center as well as former chairman of the Fraternity of Friends and founding chairman of the Spotlight Awards Scholarship Program for Los Angeles Music Center. So much work for the Arts, Why?

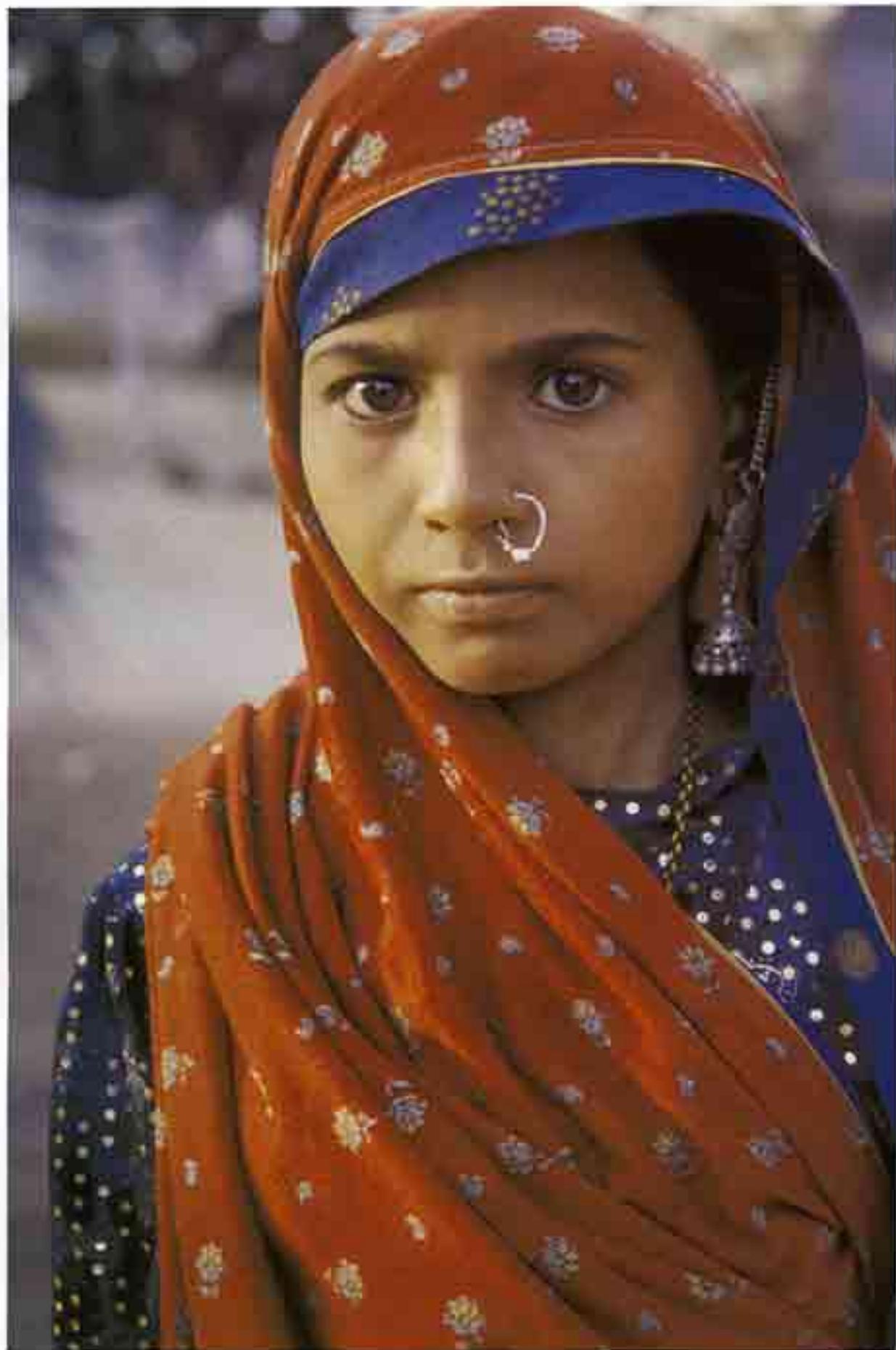
I guess it is the artist and human in me that draws me to do it. I have raised a lot of money for the Walt Disney Concert Hall and for other charities because I believe in them. I did my best, my very best. The arts are an essential element of life and this is my contribution to them.

Why did you choose photography?

I guess I had this need for artistic expression when I was working in the world of finance. Painting is out of the question, because I cannot even write legibly. The nice thing about photography is that a picture is a picture, you don't have to paint it.



Courtyard Women





You have to have the inner vision, you have to have the sense of expression, and you have to speak visually. It is like someone who starts laughing and cannot stop. I didn't know the sensations that photography would create in my life. Now that I know, I cannot stop.

What is a successful photograph?

It's one that you don't have to explain. If someone looks at my photography and sees that it speaks to them, that means a lot. It may not speak the same way to everybody, that doesn't matter. But that it speaks to them, that matters.

Who influences you? What inspires you?

Great thinkers, great writers, great painters, and great photographers.

Could you be a little more specific? People such as...

Such as Henri Cartier-Bresson. Because of his genius that comes out through such simplicity. He makes daily life look extraordinary with what seems to be ease. He just has the eye and the sense, and you feel as though everyone has just done exactly what he has wanted to express in his photographs. There is a certain effortlessness against what I consider to be the incredible beauty of his images. He is my idol and that's why I have so many of his books.

Speaking of what you have in your house, let me ask you about what you don't have. Why are none of your photographs on the walls?

I am afraid of celebrating my work too much. I need to keep moving on and critiquing my art. If I put it up on the wall, there is somehow a message that says: "Okay. This is it." I would feel uncomfortable if people were to come to my house and see my art in my house. I am afraid that by framing it and putting it in my house, that says, 'Okay, I have arrived, I can rest now.' I can't rest, I am too new. Four and a half years is too young. Yes, I am proud of my progress, yet I am still an infant in the photography business.

Are there times when you say to yourself, "Fredric, what have you been waiting for? Why did it take you so long to discover the artist in you?"

[*laughs*] There are times when I look at the photographs and I cannot believe I took them. I remember being at the printer and watching my prints come out and I looked at them and said, "These are beautiful, did I really take them?" It is sort of the opposite of Groucho Marx who said, "I would never join a club that would have me as a member."

Do you see yourself as an artist now or as a former businessman who found the art of photography?

I see it as having had two lives. In my first life, I was a businessman, now I am an artist. What made me progress in this art form so quickly is that I have joined some of the skills I learned in my first life and have attached them to this life. I may consider myself an artist but I still think strategically; I still have a perspective of where I am going that is different than other people. My good fortune was that I was able to rise quickly, which I attribute to my teachers and to other photographers who helped me release this genie in me.

Let's talk about technique. You shoot in film, correct? Any intention to shift to digital?

This is a difficult transition for me because I am so new at it; and I am comfortable with film. I love the feel of the slides. On the other hand, it's tiresome having massive arguments at the airport, trying to explain to security that these are just rolls of film and nothing else. I am psychotic about having my film hand checked and not x-rayed no matter how many signs say 'film-safe.' I get in this same debate over and over again. When abroad, you worry about the film - is it too dusty, too hot, too humid, too cold? You can't leave it alone when you are on these trips; you have to watch it.

You sound like a father speaking of his child...

[*laughs*] You are right. Recently, a friend of mine got us access to shoot in some remote villages of Burma. Seduced by the 'green light,' I went. One day we spent eight hours in a truck going to these remote villages. We went through 21 military and police checkpoints. They check your permits and papers and you have to bring your own food because the place is so delicately, ecologically balanced that the village cannot sustain newcomers. I have to make sure that I take the pictures right. A once in a lifetime chance. Sometimes I take a lot of film to capture that one frame that I had in mind. So, once back in L.A., I look at the 150 rolls I have from that remote village and there are times when I am not only unhappy with what I shot, but I see things where I could have fixed them if only I had known what I had shot. And I don't know it until I am back home, at which point there is nothing to do about it and I cannot go back. It is not like shooting on Venice Beach or in downtown L.A., where if I don't have a shot I can go back the next day and re-do it. These are impossible places to go back to. So, I finally came to the conclusion that the place is the controlling factor and therefore, I must know that I have achieved what I wanted to achieve before I leave the area. And the only way I can do that is by shooting with a digital camera. And I will not have these fights at the

airport. The location is the controlling aspect and if I miss that shot, I miss it forever.

How come you never shoot in black and white?

I think it is because I didn't start to take photographs at an early age. People who generally start to shoot early, shoot in black and white. I sort of missed all that. I am not yet in the feel of the black and white photography: not yet in the smell of the dark room and the chemicals, because I am only four and a half years into this. I see in color. There are people who see in black and white. I see things in color even when they are in black and white. There is a subtlety in color that I love. There is a starkness in color that I love. Some of the pictures that I take are all about color. I am struck by the power of the color.

You dedicated *Humanitas* to your father? Why this book?

He was a man who had very high ups and very low downs, but each time he adjusted. I think that was because he had started out very poor, so he knew that if he worked his way up once, he could do it twice, and he did. I see people for who they are and not what they have. I respond to the essence of humanity with my pictures. To live, I need both the western and the more 'primitive' society. I don't think I could live with only one. I need both. But I don't photograph both.

I am not a fan of psychoanalyzing photography, but if we were to do so, which picture in the book reflects you the most?

I knew this was coming. [*laughs*] I think it is the picture of the fisherman that I dedicated to my father. The quote was about my father; the picture was about me. The Zen solitude in that frame is mine.

What is on the horizon for you? What's next?

It was a gallery owner who came up with the title, *Humanitas*, for my book, and he was right on. My publisher decided to give it a subtitle, and I said, 'Oh God no, he is going to call it something like "my life as a white man". I could feel my stomach churning and I said to him "What is it?" He said, "Volume One." I had tears in my eyes. He was telling me that this is good, but this is just the beginning. So, the next step is "Volume Two." I am not sure what volume two is. I know that it will be a celebration of these people again. I want there to be a "Volume Two" and I want it to be better in my own eyes. I am my harshest critic.

For more information on the book "Humanitas" or related fine art prints, go to www.fredricroberts.com