On the centenary of his birth, museums around the world are celebrating the exceptional accomplishments of one of history's great photographers, Yousuf Karsh (1908-2002). This year, museums from London to Ottawa, Boston to Los Angeles, Chicago to Montgomery, Ala., and beyond, will present a series of unique exhibitions and publications on the man universally regarded as one of the finest portrait photographers of all time.

In a prolific career that spanned three-quarters of a century, Yousuf Karsh endeavored to document through photography not only the likenesses, but also the personalities of many great and important people of the 20th century. His unique presentation of these individuals allows greater insight into what Karsh called their "inward power." This knowledge and sensitivity toward the subjects, combined with the artist's consummate technical skills, produced images that permit the viewer a more intimate glimpse of these outstanding personalities of the modern age.

From early in his career, Karsh sought to record through photography and to preserve for posterity people of consequence in every field of endeavor. Karsh once stated, "It has been my good fortune to meet many of the world's great men and women, people who have left their mark on our era. I have used my camera to portray them as they appeared to me and as I felt they have impressed themselves on their generation."

Karsh was born in 1908 in Mardin, Armenia, the son of an import/export entrepreneur and the grandson of an engraver. As a boy, he witnessed the horrors of the Turkish atrocities against the Armenians and, in 1924, he was forced to flee his native land with his family to Syria. Two years later, his parents sent him to live with his uncle, George Nakash, a studio portrait photographer in Sherbrooke, Quebec, Canada.

Under the influence of his uncle, the young Karsh soon developed an interest in the art of photography. His first photographic success was that of a landscape with playing children, which he gave to a classmate as a gift. His friend secretly entered the picture in a contest where it won first prize.

"While at first I did not realize it, everything connected with the art of photography captivated my interest and energy," recalled Karsh. "It was to be not only my livelihood, but my continuing passion." Karsh then served a three-year apprenticeship with the well-known Boston portrait photographer John H. Garo. Under Garo's tutelage, Karsh learned technical processes, which required great skill and prepared him to develop his own unique interpretations and style. While in Boston, Karsh was encouraged to attend art classes and to study the works of great masters such as Rembrandt and Velasquez. Their paintings...
EXHIBITIONS

Karsh exhibitions are scheduled at the following museums in 2008 and 2009. Some are unique to that institution, others may travel to additional venues. Some dates are not firm and/or might change so it’s best to confirm schedules in advance of planning a visit.

National Portrait Gallery, London
Opening January 2008

Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts
March 27, 2008 to June 15, 2008

The Museum of Fine Arts Boston
Sept. 14, 2008 to Jan. 18, 2009

The Boston Public Library
Opening the same time as the MFA in Boston 2008 (above)

The Art Institute of Chicago
Opening fall 2008

Canadian Embassy, Washington D.C.
Opening January of 2009

National Portrait Gallery of Canada
Opening spring 2009

The Rhode Island School of Design
Opening spring 2009

The Detroit Institute of Art
Opening summer 2009

Monterey Museum of Art
Opening summer 2009

Los Angeles Public Library (Getty Gallery)
Opening summer/fall 2009

Traveling exhibition by the Art Gallery of Windsor (Canada)
Multiple venues for 2007, 2008, 2009
had an impact on Karsh’s own sense of design, composition and lighting.

In Garo’s studio, the apprentice was allowed to share encounters with some of the greatest personalities in the world of music, letters, opera and the theater of the 1920s. “Even as a young man, I was aware that these glorious afternoons and evenings in Garo’s salon were my university. There I set my heart on photographing those men and women who leave their mark on the world.”

In 1932, Karsh returned to Canada and established his studio in the national capital of Ottawa, in close proximity to Parliament Hill. Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King discovered Karsh, and became his friend and patron, often arranging introductions with visiting dignitaries for portrait sittings. The Prime Minister also gave Karsh the opportunity to take one portrait photograph that would rocket the photographer to international fame.

On Dec. 30, 1941, Winston Churchill delivered a speech to the Canadian Parliament. Afterward, it was arranged that Karsh would be given two minutes to take a photograph of the British Prime Minister. When Churchill, who had not been told of the photo session, entered the room, he lit one of his favorite cigars and then grudgingly walked to the location where Karsh had carefully prearranged his camera and lights. Churchill continued to puff on the cigar, but Karsh did not want the cigar to be in the portrait. He respectfully suggested that Churchill put it down. Receiving no response, the photographer said, “Forgive me sir,” and snatched the cigar from his mouth. Instantly, Karsh snapped the camera’s shutter and captured Churchill’s expression of belligerence. A moment later Churchill smiled, allowed another picture to be taken, and said, “You can even make a roaring lion stand still to be photographed.”

It was this image of a defiant Churchill that became a symbol of the courage and resolution of the British people in response to the struggle of World War II. The Churchill portrait was a phenomenal success. It appeared on the cover of Life magazine and has become one of the most widely reproduced portraits in the history of photography.

The portrait also illustrates Karsh’s in-depth perception of his subjects and his ability to illuminate their character and personalities. According to Karsh,
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“The aim and the art of the portraitist who works with a camera are not merely to produce a likeness but to reveal the mind and the soul behind the human face.”

Like most of Karsh’s work, the Churchill portrait continues the tradition of portrait photography begun in the 19th century that, in turn, can be traced back to compositions from the Renaissance. The figures are usually posed close to the camera, filling the photographic frame. The importance of the face, sometimes its contour and the eyes, are given emphasis and drama by sharp value contrasts and a combination of sharp-versus soft-focus areas. Notice in the Churchill portrait how the face is in sharp focus, silhouetted by back lighting, while the hands and paneling, foreground and background respectively, are less focused.

Karsh prepared for each photo shoot by learning as much as possible about each sitter. By doing his “homework” he was better able to capture the sitter’s character and illuminate his or her personality. In some instances, Karsh would incorporate an attribute easily associated with the sitter.

Although he maintained a staff and studios in Ottawa and New York, he always preferred to photograph subjects in their own environments. “It’s worth the time and effort to travel to where my subject is,” he once stated. “And even if the background of the person’s home or country is not visible in the photograph, the psychological effect is definitely there. The subject is more at ease.” Establishing a rapport or creative bond with his sitters enabled Karsh to evoke the desired emotion or expression.

During his long and prolific career Karsh photographed thousands of people. It’s interesting to note that of the 100 most notable people of the 20th century, according to the International Who’s Who (2000), Karsh had photographed 51!

Many of his portraits were included in one of the 15 books that he published. Many more were included in innumerable exhibitions of his work that traveled to hundreds of venues around the world. His works are included in the collections of most leading museums, and especially any museum with a photographic collection.

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