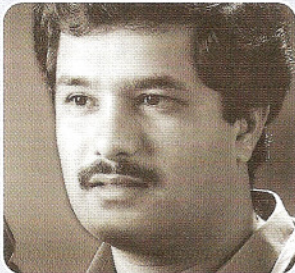


VIEW FROM THE GALLERY

Mohammed Arfan Asif on the great masters of pictorialism, 1930s

"THE PHOTOGRAPHS OF THAT TIME REMAIN BEACONS OF INSPIRATION."



The essence of art never changes. In photographic art, techniques evolved through the ages. In this evolution, the 1930s was a remarkable period for purity of approach and passion of the pictorialists. An unusual wedding gift—four volumes of *The American Annual of Photography of the 1930s*—revealed to me the golden period of pictorial photography.

Undoubtedly the most prolific salon participant ever was the editor himself, Frank R. Fraprie. He remarked: "There have been pages upon pages of controversy as to whether photography is an art. The man who is an artist is never interested in defining his status. If he has the urge to create, he will use any medium available to him to tell the story he has to tell the world. To produce a print which will not only record the beauty of detail, which is inherent in all photographs, but will seize and perpetuate the translucent moment when ineffable beauty of light has surpassed human expectation. The art of photography is in putting into photography more than nature ordinarily offers and giving the beholder food for imagination and thought, as well as the mere mechanical charm of the eye."

The first recognized photo-artist from the United States was Alfred Stieglitz. His ten years of toil saw the foundation of a pictorial school in the United States, which was much followed by the pictorialists of the nineteenth century. Stieglitz once remarked: "Everything I do can be done in a bathroom, with the simplest equipment." Extreme simplicity in all matters was a characteristic of Stieglitz. "I can find beauty everywhere even in a heap of trash," he said. He was a pathfinder, inspirer, probably the first to photograph in rain, snow, and


at night, and a pioneer in vertical and oblique perspective, intentional double exposures, and the tradition of montage. His publication *Camera Work* and encouragement to Edward J. Steichen and Edward Weston gave photography a new dimension.

The Belgian Leonard Misonne was a classic photographer whose work reproduced the quality of landscape that has the charm of poetry. For Misonne there was no object that light could not convert into a picture. "To learn to see is the essential quality of the photographer," he said. "Photographic art must have its own individuality, and it should not lose it by endeavouring to copy other arts."

The American Dr Max Thorek was known for portraiture and figure studies. Portraitists from England like Frank Meadow Sutcliffe, Madame Yevonde, H Douglas, and WG Briggs were well known. But it was the American, WM Mortensen, the master of theatrical photography, who took a wealth of pictorial studies rather than the usual type of record shots. His character studies are works of deep reflection and introspection.

One of the greatest pictorialists of that time was the Englishman, Francis James Mortimer, editor of *The Amateur Photographer and Cinematographer*, founding member of The London Salon and former President of the Royal Photographic Society. He has long been recognized as one of the greatest marine photographers ever. He lived long in Southern England and photographed its rugged coasts and shipping industry with passion and an assiduity that's difficult to match. He often risked his life to photograph his favourite subject, the sea. It is said that he tied himself to a ship's mast to get some of his most dramatic shots of crashing waves!

There were many other significant photo-artists in the 1930s and their enchanting works are historical truths of a bygone era. The photographs of that time shall always remain beacons of inspiration and great food for thought on the art of picture making. ■

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