

FACIAL RECOGNITION

Steve McCurry has the honour of having taken one of the world's best-known photos – Afghan Girl. But the adventurer of yore has returned to his roots, exploring the deeper meaning that comes from an everyday occurrence, or a thoughtful glance.

STORY RYAN SWIFT
PORTRAITS TERRY WONG

Look at the portrait of *Afghan Girl*, the 1984 photograph that made Steve McCurry one of the best known names in photography, and it's not hard to understand why the photo so captured the public imagination. As the story goes, when McCurry showed the photo to his then-editor at National Geographic, said editor responded immediately "that's our cover!"

The portrait of Sharbat Gula, known as *Afghan Girl*, was taken at a dusty refugee camp in Pakistan, during the horrors of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Gula's parents had been killed by Soviet bombs when she was six, and she and her remaining family had walked across a mountain range from

Afghanistan into Pakistan, reaching the refuge camp where McCurry would accidentally spot her. Gula was 12 years old when the photo was taken.

That photo has been the focal point of McCurry's career, but nowhere near the entirety of it. And McCurry does not feel overshadowed by it either. "It's a great honour to be associated with such a photo. It's known beyond photography."

McCurry's work certainly did not stop there, and he has since covered conflicts throughout the Middle East. But he bristles somewhat at being called a war photographer, and his projects range from travel photos to collections and books.

01 Steve McCurry at the Asia Society

02 *Afghan Girl* is McCurry's most recognisable work

03 Taken in Mexico City at the age of 19, this is one of the early works by the photographer that solidified his passion for photography



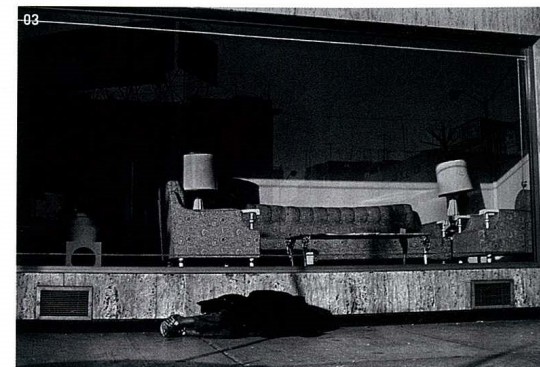
"I want to work for pleasure now – I want to do things that interest me," McCurry says in a private interview during an exhibition and presentation in September at Asia Society. That doesn't mean he's above the occasional commercial foray. McCurry was in Hong Kong as part of the exhibition for Vacheron Constantin's Overseas Tour, which highlights McCurry's work from 12 locations that he chose for their immortal value. He has also done product photography for The Macallan whisky.

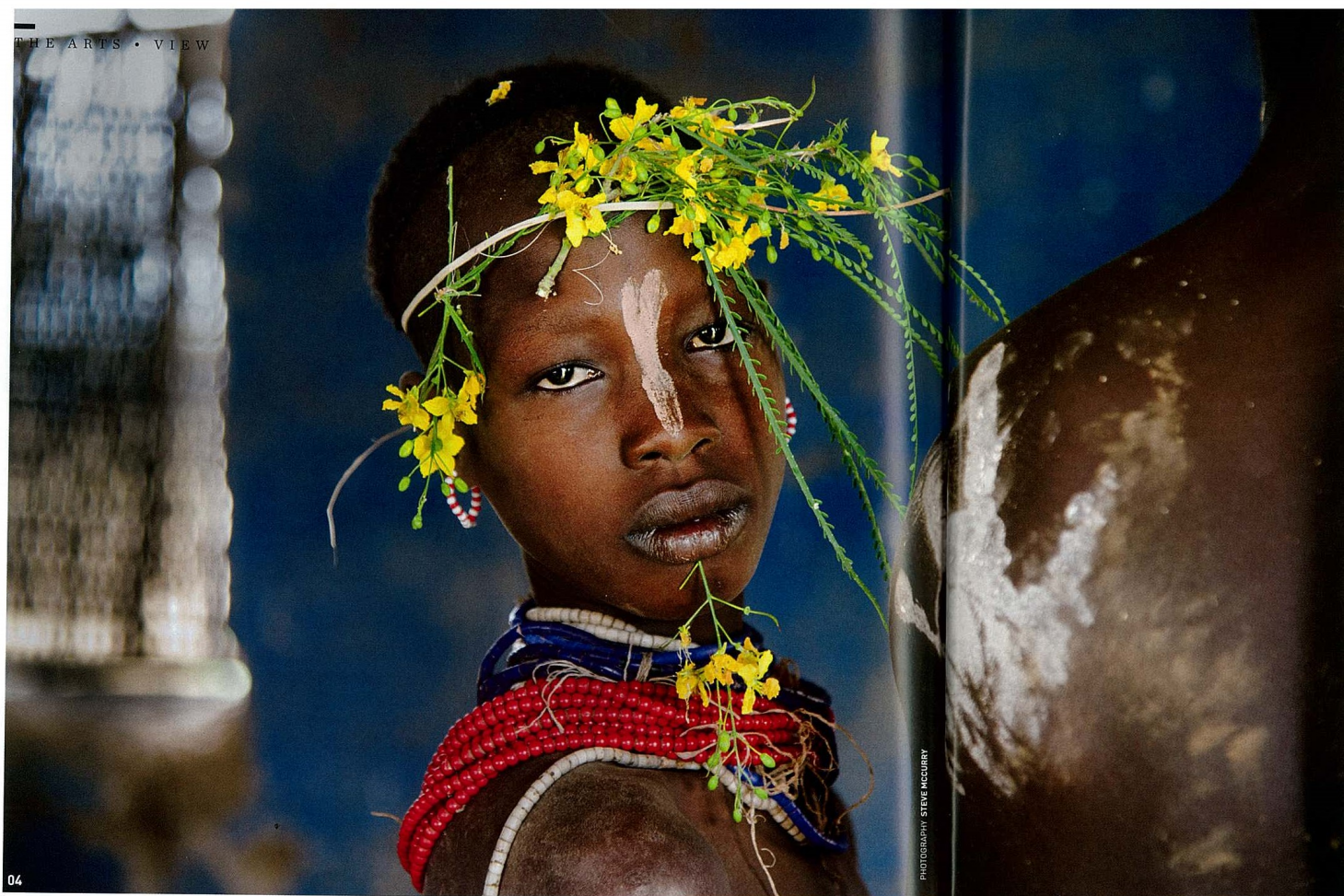
But the thing that has seemingly interested McCurry the most over his career as a photographer is travel – he seems to wish to go places and explore with his camera. "I started working when I was travelling in India – it was my first destination. As time went on, I visited other countries in the region. I always liked mountains, so I was drawn to Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan." Combined with an interest in Buddhism, McCurry has toured and photographed most of the major nations that surround the Indian Ocean. He lists destinations such as Iran and Madagascar as the next highest on his bucket list.

Listening to McCurry rattle off the list of places and faces he's photographed, you realise he's less the war photographer of repute and more of a travel artist/photographer. One of his favourite destinations, and source of some truly compelling imagery, is Yemen.

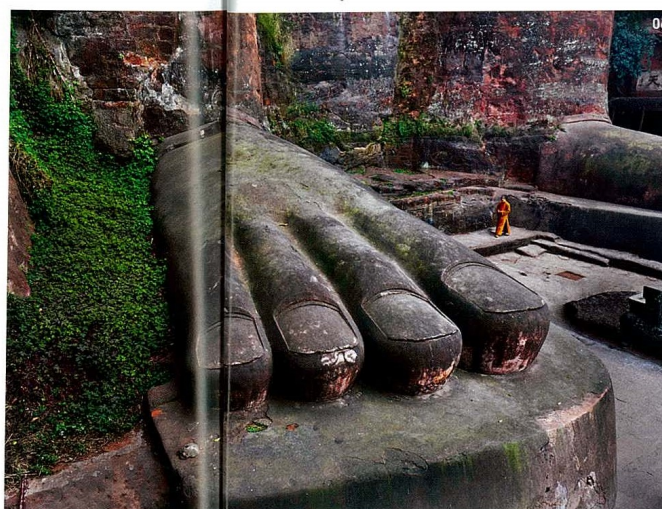
But there is a common thread that runs through much of McCurry's work, and that's the face. Capturing facial expressions, or the battle scars and laugh lines on a person's face is the source of McCurry's most potent photos. In this, *Afghan Girl* really represents a powerful moment in his career, rather than a pinnacle.

"I think we're all fascinated with each other," McCurry says of his portraits. "I'm fascinated with endless variety and the wonderful stories that are written into people's faces. Human behaviour and interaction is something I've always been drawn to."





PHOTOGRAPHY STEVE MCCURRY



04 McCurry captures an Ethiopian child and the vibrant tribal costume.

05-06 Photos captured in Ethiopia and China as part of McCurry's collaboration with watchmaker Vacheron Constantin.

There is also the colour. McCurry's photos seemingly revel in stark, brilliant colour. The photo of *Afghan Girl* is striking not just for the look on young Gula's face and in her piercing eyes – it's the colours that are compelling as well. Indeed, the current edition of *Afghan Girl* has been altered – the green background has been enhanced to better match the eyes.

In recent months, McCurry has been plagued by questions about the extent of the alterations to the photos that have since become iconic, including *Afghan Girl*. Some of his photos have indeed been altered, ranging from enhancing and sharpening, to actually adding or removing elements in the original photo.

This debate about the virtues (or lack thereof) of altering photographs to suit the artistic sensibilities of the photographer isn't likely to subside any time soon in photographic circles. Technology has made it possible to do things that photographers in the pre-digital era couldn't have imagined. For his part, McCurry seems to navigate this terrain image manipulation by regarding his current work as art, not photojournalism.

Moreover, the number of photographs being taken is growing exponentially. A 2015 report in the New York Times said that in 2000, Kodak estimated a total of 80 billion photographs had been taken that year, globally. In 2015, the estimation was that one trillion photos will be taken, thanks to smart phones. By 2017, the number should be around 1.3 trillion.

This photographic cacophony puts professional photographers in a bind – there is a massive amount of technological wizardry available, which is now available to anyone. Photographic skills, once honed in dark rooms and in the field, are now less relevant.

This doesn't seem to bother McCurry much, and he genially welcomes the photographic works of anyone who wants to play in the field. "Virtually every person can have a phone with a good camera and take pictures. I see it as a positive thing; it's great to have a visual record of our lives.

But curiously, all the digital wonders in photography, and the broad mass appeal it now has, has lent extra weight and poignancy to those images taken in the pre-digital past. "I wish that we had had all these pictures of my friends and family when I was growing up. Nobody had cameras – or maybe there was one camera per family," McCurry says. "Now we don't move without our cell phones."

In all the modernity, McCurry seems to find solace in older civilisations, without the qualities that are common in a modern city. "The romance is gone. In New York, any kind of quaint architecture is gone... it's kind of sad to see that some great architecture and



the way we dress has become global and homogenized. Cleveland looks like Buenos Aires."

To some extent, McCurry reckons this is the reason for his continued attraction to India (which by his reckoning, he has visited nearly 100 times in his career). Another favoured destination is Italy, which he credits with an old-world feel. "We long for that, because there's a beauty in that craftsmanship. I'm afraid the world's going to become one big airport, all glass and steel."

McCurry got his start in photography as an exchange student to Sweden in the 1960s. The family he was living with decided to go out and take some photos. "We took pictures on the street – but it was the sole purpose, just going to photograph for its own sake. I had never done this before."

07 A photograph of Morocco by McCurry for Vacheron Constantin's Overseas Tour

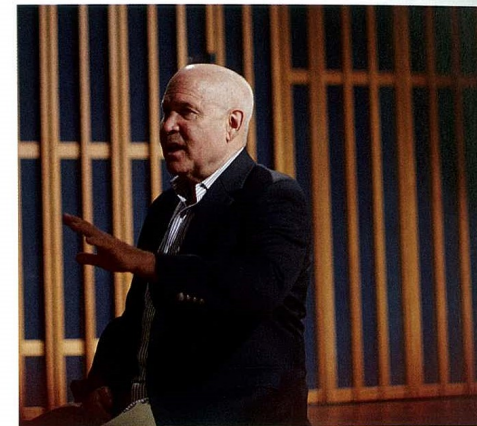
08 Rural Tibetan life as seen through the lens of McCurry.

09 New York City as captured by McCurry for Vacheron Constantin's Overseas Tour



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That experience was enough to propel McCurry into a life of photography. He studied film, but found photography "more immediate, less complicated" and something that didn't need a script or production. The first photo McCurry took that seemed to herald a life in photography was in Mexico City. Then just 19, he photographed a man lying in the street, in front of a store selling luxury bedding and furniture.

"That one was special. It was the juxtaposition, between the poor guy and the beautiful living room display. I thought it was interesting commentary."

That desire for commentary has not ebbed. If anything, it has grown. McCurry even envisages a book of photography dedicated to people sleeping – picking up on that photo from decades ago. At first, I laugh, thinking he's joking. But photography is a serious subject to an artist. ☺

