

Then one day a rather unattractive couple came in and asked for portraits, specifying that they wanted to look beautiful and handsome. I retouched the negatives before I showed proofs; the man and wife were pleased with them and gave me a good order. Then, without even realizing the proofs were already retouched, they proceeded to enumerate the things they wanted taken out! And what they wanted out was precisely everything.

It was a \$400 order. I removed everything from the negatives as instructed, and when I went into the darkroom to print, the sight of them made me physically sick. It was then I decided what the \$400 would be used for. The couple seemed a little startled when they first saw the finished prints, but after a lengthy inspection decided they liked them and gave me a check. I cashed it at once and the next day ordered the 4x5 R.B. Auto Graflex fitted with an f.5.5, 10³/₄" Meyer Plasmalens which I have used for portraiture ever since.

As soon as possible I had a row of 4x5 contacts hung on my studio wall, opposite a row of 8x10s. To my joy I found an almost unanimous expression of preference for the small ones. I found plenty of people who were tired of big portraits, thought them vulgar, didn't like to give them to friends, saw no place for them in modern homes and apartments. This encouragement was all I needed. Soon there were glossy contacts in my showcase with a sign reading UNRETOUCHED PORTRAITS.

There was a pleasant epilogue to the horror-order that bought my Graflex. A few weeks after the retouched-to-death prints had been delivered, the man wrote to tell me none of their friends would have the pictures. I answered immediately saying I would be glad to give them another sitting free of charge and \$400 worth of prints free of charge—unretouched contact prints on glossy paper. My letter was never answered. (*The second half of this article will deal with my present way of working, technical problems, etc., with examples of work from 1934 to the present.*)

II.

(*Portraits illustrating this article were made with a 4x5 R.B. Auto-Graflex, fitted with a 10³/₄" f:5.5 Meyer Plasmalens, on Panchromatic film, developed in Pyro-Soda, printed on chloro-bromide developed in Amidol. Heads of Stravinsky and Carma Lita were made in direct sunlight, latter with sky background. All others were made indoors with window light. None were posed, even by suggestion.*)

The word *retouch* means to repair or restore. I retouch my negatives when I remove imperfections due to dust specks, scratches, etc. Since photography cannot very well be carried on in a vacuum, these flaws are bound to appear, and if the photographer wants to present clean work he must retouch his negatives and spot his prints. That is the legitimate and necessary place of retouching in photography. But when the photographer applies this technique to his subject rather than his negative, when he tries to restore the bloom of youth to a middle-aged, double-chinned dowager by removing her actual image

and substituting a new one, the act should not properly be called retouching any more than the result should be called a photograph.

I know a good many photographers who admit this. But, they say, we have to eat, so we must please the customer and the customer wants to be flattered. The answer to that is that image-retouching does not produce a flattering photograph.

I have spoken before of the importance of authenticity in a photograph; in portraiture this quality is doubly important. The chief charm of the photographic portrait lies in its intense reality, its ability to vividly represent a living person. As I have pointed out before, this quality depends upon the integrity of the photographic image; and retouching the image, by destroying that integrity, robs the portrait of its most important attribute. Admittedly there is good and bad retouching; but no matter how adroit the pencil work something of the living photographic quality is lost—and too often the pencil work is far from adroit and all is lost.

Every beginner should study the portraits that date from photography's childhood. In the work of D.O. Hill he will find the quality I speak of. When he sees there what was once accomplished with the most primitive of tools—paper negatives that needed three to six minutes' exposure in direct sunlight—then he will be able to appreciate how far photography has fallen, and perhaps he may bestir himself to do something about it.

Many portrait photographers are handicapped by their steadfast belief that the camera takes the picture and that they can have no voice, or very little, in the matter until after the exposure is made. Their aim is to make photographs without learning to be photographers. Through their efforts the process of image-retouching has been incorporated into portraiture as an indispensable ingredient:

- A. Make the negative
- B. Remove the image
- C. Substitute another image

This has come to be such a recognized procedure that the words *unretouched portraits* instantly calls up an unpleasant image: the leering visage on an old passport or a "modern" epidermis-map of enlarged pores and blemishes. So it is well to remember that the camera is a machine and that there must be a photographer to take the picture. The camera can flatter as well as distort, even as the violin can produce sweet notes as well as sour ones.

There can be no formula for good portraits; rules, in fact, are a handicap. But the very nature of the medium suggests the best approach. Spontaneity is implicit in the photographic process. A costume piece always looks like a costume piece; a carefully posed, intricately lighted model looks carefully posed and intricately lighted. Stagey treatment fails because the photographer is unable to put anything over on his basically honest medium—his results invariably tell on him.

To achieve spontaneity is the first and most important problem in photographic portraiture. To this end my own way of working has undergone various changes. I started out, as I have already told, with all the usual gadgets (though I think the "indispensables" were fewer in those days than now). As time passed my technique improved and the accessories became unnecessary; I was able to eliminate until my whole portrait equipment consisted, as it does today, of a Graflex and a background—and I don't often use the background.

The professional's first concern must be to please the sitter, and more often than not that means the results must be flattering. The photographer succeeds or fails in this task, not by the kind of camera he uses, not by the presence or absence of gadgets and accessories, but by his own personality. If he can establish the proper exchange between himself and the sitter he can make good portraits regardless of what equipment he uses. But no one can teach him how to establish this rapport. It can only come with his own growth in life, from his ability to penetrate below the surface of his subject through his own understanding and sympathy. To bring out the best in a sitter, to recognize the rare moment when the face is unmasked to reveal the inner self, and to capture that moment without hesitation—all this requires profound insight. The portrait photographer must deal in psychology without the sitter knowing it, almost without knowing it himself. He must be in complete control of the sitter at all times but the sitter must never be aware that he is.

Furthermore, the photographer must learn to recognize swiftly, characteristic gestures and postures, to penetrate at a glance the reality of the person before him. And besides these things he must be a sure technician. Any fumbling or hesitation on his part is instantly felt by the sitter; his uncertainty makes the sitter self-conscious, his confidence puts the sitter at ease.

So, then, the portrait photographer's first concern is mastery of his equipment, and for his own sake as well as the sitter's this equipment should be as simple as possible. Through practice his use of it must become as automatic as breathing. Then only is he able to devote his whole attention to the person before his lens. Mastery of equipment is comparatively easy to attain. Mastery of the subject is harder. The arts of subtlety and diplomacy that must be brought into play are only perfected by experience. But once the technical complications are reduced to the minimum the photographer is able to give his whole energy to mastering this difficult aspect of the problem.

There can be no rules, no formulas, for success in this field because each individual demands different treatment. Only wide experience with all kinds of sitters can give the photographer confidence and knowledge. Experience shows him that Mrs. A. requires different tactics from Mr. B. The only rule that applies consistently is that the sitter must be unaware that any tactics are being used.

From these remarks it must be clear that

my technical approach is not suggested as a model for others to copy. My method and equipment suit me personally—other photographers will have different needs. We may all walk on the same street but we require different sizes and kinds of shoes. Therefore, in setting down my own routine I am hoping only that it may be suggestive.

Aside from occasional 8x10 exceptions, all my portraits since 1933 have been made with a 4x5 R.B. Auto-Graflex. I have selected this type of camera because among all those available it is best suited to my special needs.

Most important among its advantages is that it allows you to see your subject right up to the second of exposure, so that seeing and recording may more nearly coincide. Since my aim is to record the spontaneous gestures and fleeting expressions which cannot be assumed to order, this first advantage would probably suffice to ensure my use of the Graflex. But there are other advantages. I need a camera that allows me to see my subject full size. Since I am not planning to perform any major or minor operations on the negative I must be quite sure that I have exactly what I want at the moment of exposure. I don't mean to suggest that I work with elaborate care. Indeed, my approach in portraiture is quite the opposite of my approach in my other work. For a still life and sometimes for a landscape, there is time to study the thing before making a decision. But portraiture is a matter of split-second decisions: the sitter is never the same from one moment to the next,

and out of the *moving picture* before you you must abstract the *stills* that will carry the message of the whole. I work very quickly and usually make three dozen negatives in half an hour.

I usually use the Graflex on a tripod. If the subject is an active child I am sometimes forced to hold the camera, but I dislike doing it: it is a strain on the arm, keeps you tied to the camera, and greatly increases the problem of focussing. When the camera is on a tripod I am free to move around as I choose and the camera can be kept focussed on a seated subject with only occasional checking. Also, since I am rather short, the tripod is an advantage in that it elevates the camera above waist level. When I do have to hold the camera I often resort to standing on a box.

The Graflex has its disadvantages and possibly the most serious is the tendency on the part of the sitter to look up at the photographer when he is focusing and carrying on a conversation. This is an especially difficult problem for the beginner because it takes subtle hints to get the sitter's eyes back to the lens level without causing him to become self-conscious. And in the Graflex I miss two advantages of my old studio outfit: the controls for raising, lowering, and focussing, were convenient and could be quickly manipulated; the yards of rubber hose, and the bulb which released a silent shutter, enabled you to be free of the camera and so take the sitter's attention from it. Until now the Graflex's advantages have outweighed these, but some day I may return to a studio camera.

I have never seriously considered the miniature camera for portraiture. I realize that it has unique advantages, but it does not suit my temperament. To me, squinting through a little peephole would be the most effective way to lose contact with the sitter, and I should never be happy with the guess-work necessary in composing, nor the extra darkroom work of enlarging, and the perils of grain, scratches, etc. When my 4x5s are developed (in a tank, 18 at a time, by inspection) it is the work of seconds to decide which are good and which must be discarded—every detail is readable. Most photographers I know who use miniature cameras have to make enlarged proofs before they can tell what to discard and what to keep. Even when the face looks all right in the small negative they cannot be certain about the expression of the eyes. My present method is so simple technically, printing and developing so easy, that there would have to be advantages not yet advertised to induce me to change to a miniature camera.

At one time I experimented with artificial light, but I never seriously considered it for portraiture. More than any other one thing, artificial light produces self-consciousness in the sitter, and that is what I most want to avoid. An added reason is that I prefer the quality of daylight to artificial light. To be sure, the best daylight cannot be had to order, but even the dullest day provides such a variety of lights that I can usually find what I want for any individual, any day.

One can indulge in generalities about

daylight, but any attempt to formulate strict rules is useless. What worked with great success on one occasion will be your ruin on the next if you seek to repeat. Both the nature of daylight and the nature of your subject make absolute repetition impossible.

The simplest, most direct light arrangement is usually the best. For indoor work, a large window open to the sky gives the best modeling since most of the light comes from above. Sometimes the lower part of the window needs curtaining off. You can find a good light in almost any home if you look for it. One of the best portrait lights I ever had I discovered in a house I had rented. A second story room with one side window had a door opening onto an aluminum painted sunporch. The afternoon sun on the porch floor reflected a dazzling light which, combined with that of the open sky, lit the subject's face with sparkling brilliance. It was an incredibly fast light and almost shadowless.

Since a majority of my portraits are made with this straight front light the question arises: does this extreme simplification tend to impose a formula on procedures and results? As to procedure, yes, with consequent advantage to the photographer, since it makes his technical performance simpler. As to results, no. The light is the same more or less, but it is the most generally flattering light for any subject; and in this light, since there is no *effect* to be spoiled, the sitter can be allowed complete freedom of movement, so that the subject rather than the light will provide variety in your results.

When a background is necessary, the simplest and most practical kind is a plain grey one. This can be turned from the source of light to obtain any shade from almost black to almost white.

Ideal conditions for portraiture are not always to be found. The photographer will do well to practice in all kinds of surroundings and with all kinds of light so that he will know how to take best advantage of whatever circumstances offer. I often work on the shady side of a house, or under a tree whose foliage is dense enough to avoid the spottiness of filtered sunlight. The portrait of Stravinsky was made in a backyard; the background is the shadowed interior of a garage.

One of my favorite portrait lights is direct sunlight, one of my favorite backgrounds, the sky. A cloudless sky isolates the head as no solid background can; it gives a feeling that one could walk around the subject. The special quality of sunlight can be duplicated by no other means and its possible variations are

unlimited. Between the sunrise or sunset light that renders delicate textures and subtle modeling, and the dazzle of high noon light which carves features like cut stone, an infinite scale of results can be obtained.

The portrait photographer who understands his work will never seek a formula for success. Those who would simplify portraiture to a few rules and diagrams will serve you pretty cold potatoes, for the vital essence of the good portrait is too elusive to be caught and bottled. Portraiture will always be an art of discovery. No matter how much you learn from experience there is always more to be learned. The human face you want to record is not a stone or a stump; besides the changing daylight upon it, it has a changing light of its own. It is a living thing, in constant transition, now concealing, now revealing the person behind it. To translate all this to film and paper is an absorbing and exciting task that can never dull as long as you continue to approach it with an open mind.