

## Arnold Newman

*I received an urgent message from the editor of a photographic magazine. He was publishing a feature on Arnold Newman and needed, now, a short personal appreciation of his life and work in order to spice up the piece. Could I oblige? This is the piece which was published with Arnold Newman's response.*

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Bill Jay

If the careers of photographers who have received acclaim and prominence in the first half of the 20th century are compared to types of runners then the majority have been sprinters. Time and time again we find that their major contributions have been made early in their careers and over a relatively short period of time. From Jacques Henri Lartigue, whose most memorable work all occurred before he was out of his teens, to Robert Frank, whose seminal work *The Americans* was published over forty years ago, the history of photography reminds us that the medium seems to encourage achievements early on and that extraordinary high levels of productivity and merit are very rare. And, I would add, the duration of such acclaim is becoming increasingly shorter, living as we do in an age and culture which fosters fame based on canny publicity and gallery promotion rather than on solid achievement. Today, photography is a medium of quick stars whose light cannot be sustained and all we are left with is a sense of passing and a question: whatever happened to. . . ?

In this age of hype and superficiality it is particularly gratifying, therefore, to pay tribute to one of the enduring distance runners, whose career and productivity inspires through sheer tenacity, long-term commitment to a singular vision, and a steady determination to create throughout the long haul. There is something noble in a spirit, epitomized by Arnold Newman, who has not pandered to changing fads and fashions or the art market, but who has narrowly defined a path of progress and pursued it with consistency for more than fifty years. Such devotion (a heavy word but one that I would not change) demands respect.

By the time of his first exhibition, "Artists Through the Camera," (with the photographer Ben Rose) in 1941 at the A-D Gallery in New York City, Arnold Newman had already made his mark as an accomplished portraitist. Around this time he was being encouraged by such luminaries as Alfred Stieglitz and Ansel Adams, by Beaumont Newhall who as the Curator of Photography at the Museum of Modern Art purchased his work for the permanent collection, by the painters and sculptors with whom he was interacting and, creatively, by the pictorial discipline of the images by Walker Evans.

As one of the most celebrated, and congenial, photographers of our age, Arnold Newman has been interviewed extensively and any search of a good library will introduce you to an abundance of biographical, technical and philosophical material concerning his life and attitudes. If you want, however, the definitive book on Newman's work, I would recommend finding a copy of *One Mind's Eye: The Portraits and Other Photographs* by Arnold Newman. Published in 1974, it does not of course include images of the past 25 years but it is still a classic monograph, indispensable for any serious library, not only because of its careful image selection and sequencing but also for the fine appraisal of Newman by Beaumont Newhall and the informative introduction by Robert Sobieszek. It might be difficult to find a copy but it is worth the effort (and the price).

Interspersed among the texts are comments by Newman himself on the art and craft of portraiture and these constitute some of the most astute and wisest writings by anyone on the relationship between the photographer and the sitter. Unfortunately I only have space to give you a single, but typical, quotation:

I'm convinced that any photographic attempt to show the complete man is nonsense, to an extent. We can only show, as best we can, what the outer man reveals; the inner man is seldom revealed to anyone, sometimes not even to the man himself. We have to interpret, but our interpretation can be false, of course. We can impose our own feelings upon a man, and these feelings can do him a great injustice – we cannot always be one hundred percent correct. I think one of the greatest tests of the portrait photographer is his intuitiveness, his ability to judge a person, his ability to get along with all kinds of people . . . his ability to have sympathy for each man and to understand the man he is photographing, to show tact and understanding of the problem the man obviously faces being before the camera. . . .

Give Newman a break for the gender issue (he wrote this before the advent of political correctness) and what emerges from this and many other of his comments is his striking empathy. And so it is if you meet him in person. Physically he is burly, bearded and bespectacled; emotionally he displays an enveloping warmth. On his own admission, he is a "Jewish mother." On one of my infrequent visits to New York I had a few hours before my flight out and mused on whom I would most like to meet before I left. Arnold Newman was a good choice because he had just published his book, *The Great British*, which appealed to my (albeit insipid) nationalism. So, on the off-chance as the saying goes, I called him, not expecting his effusive "come and visit." After two and a half hours I was reeling from his generosity of spirit. My notebook is littered with words like "voluble," "articulate," "expansive," "effusive," "caring," and "committed." I relished his amazing fund of anecdotes about his life, photographers he had known, and the stories of his famous sitters. He was still genuinely enthusiastic about the medium and his own images after all those years.

If you saw his recent traveling retrospective exhibition (organized by his friend Arthur Ollman, Director of the Museum of Photographic Arts and one of the best curators in the country) you can see the consistency that has informed his work for six decades. He has written:

*I don't think I've changed so much as I've progressed. I think change for the sake of change is not creativity: it's a matter of activity for the sake of commercialism. In my own case I've become freer in some of my pictures but in others I have gone back to the tightly controlled approach I started off with. If anything, I've simplified, which I think is the natural thing. Most people do. The spontaneity and freshness of youth is one thing. It's important for any creative person . . . But then, as I would explain it in baseball terms, you begin to pitch with your head as well as your arm, and that's what I'm doing now: thinking things out more carefully.*

Well, Arnold, you might think of yourself as a pitcher, but to me you are a marathon man. May you never reach the finish.

### *Postscript*

Arnold responded to my appreciation. He wrote, in part:

I never thought of myself as a “marathon man,” but you have to realize a marathon man can get awfully tired after a while. So what do you do? You just keep going. . . . Frankly, any good creative person I know (photographer, painter, sculptor, writer, etc) has never retired. This is talked about frequently amongst those kinds of people and all of us agree that complete retirement is inviting death. Besides, one is driven to go on. I am reminded of a story by Jean Renoir, the painter, told in one of his books about his son the great film director, Pierre, who had a friend that wanted to ask his father a specific question. Renoir agreed despite his constant pain from arthritis, his brushes were tied to his hands because his fingers crippled with arthritis could not hold them – he had to go on. The question asked of Renoir by this friend was: “How do I know I should be a musician?” Renoir’s answer, and I can imagine it was filled with irritation, was: “How do you know if you have to take a pee?”

There’s still a bunch of us racing that marathon, guys like Penn, George Segal (the sculptor), Arthur Miller, and the list goes on. None of us will ever stop willingly. Besides, it’s fun!

Thanks, Arnold. In an age of superficiality and short-lived promotions, we all need to hear the lesson of commitment to the long haul. (George Segal died this last summer, shortly after the letter was written.)