

KARSH: IMAGE MAKER

In 2009, the Portrait Gallery of Canada, a program of Library and Archives Canada, and the Canada Science and Technology Museum organized the exhibition KARSH: IMAGE MAKER to mark the 100th anniversary of the birth of renowned portrait photographer Yousuf Karsh.

During a prolific career that spanned six decades, Yousuf Karsh photographed the leading heads of state, diplomats, entrepreneurs, writers, performers, religious leaders, scientists and architects. His comprehensive archive of more than 15,000 portrait sittings constitutes, in effect, a

visual encyclopedia of the 20th century. The exhibition offered an opportunity to reunite for the first time the photographs, documents and equipment of the Karsh Studio in the collections of Library and Archives Canada and the Canada Science and Technology Museum.

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KARSH: IMAGE MAKER built on emerging and exciting thinking about how pictures work. The curatorial framework was based on an interdisciplinary approach and focused on performance in images, the power of mass communications, the construction of identity, the function of storytelling, and the role of audience as meaning-makers. While Karsh described simply capturing an elusive “moment of truth” in his photographs, his signature style was the result of many meticulous artistic and technical decisions. KARSH: IMAGE MAKER presented a new view of how Yousuf Karsh developed his portrait style through the examination of his tools and techniques, consideration of the stories that he told about his subjects and himself, and exploration of the ways these stories and images continue to carry meaning for us today.

Making visible the connection between contemporary and historical practices was significant as Karsh’s career itself spans several changes in portrait making and diffusion. His mastery of camera technology spans paradigm shifts from glass plate negatives through film photography using large format cameras, small portable cameras, colour photography and mass media diffusion. When his practice closed in the early 1990s, the world of picturing ourselves was on the brink of radical change with the advent of digital photography, social media such as Facebook and My Space as carriers of personal identity, and the mass media proliferation and consumption of paparazzi celebrity portraiture.

Through creative design, visitors were engaged in “visual games” awakening the process of active looking and critical thinking by activities such as peering into the viewfinder of Karsh’s Calumet camera and by activating specially-designed “safe” lights to examine an actual Karsh negative and combination prints made from multiple images. The principal interactive experience for visitors of all ages was the “Immersive Studio” where visitors could conduct their own portrait photography sessions. The live portrait session experience fostered a greater awareness among visitors, already camera users and portrait makers themselves, about the construction of personal identity and the negotiations that inform it. The immersive studio encouraged visitors to create their own images by applying some of the techniques and portrait approaches they had seen in the preceding sections.



KARSH: IMAGE MAKER was exhibited at the Canada Science and Technology Museum in the summer of 2009 and then toured to the Art Gallery of Alberta in the winter of 2010.