

Karsh caught century's pillars

By CORINNE ABATT

While Yousuf Karsh's portraits of the leaders of 20th century life are technical masterpieces, it is the intuitiveness of the artist which sets them apart.

Karsh touched on this when he was in Birmingham for the opening of a new show at the Halsted 831 Gallery.

Saying, "We all use the same cameras," he added, "The key to photography is when you are a student of the humanities."

At a question and answer session at the gallery, he urged those to wish to succeed in photography to "be perfect before you start—don't be in a rush to get there. Apprenticeship is important. Experience is important."

"If you make a mistake you are doomed."

This was the road Karsh himself traveled to reach his artistic pinnacle. He was born in Martin Armenia in 1908 and was brought to Canada by an uncle as a teenager. His uncle, a photographer, handed him a small camera when he was 17. Karsh took a photograph for one of his classmates and without his knowing it was entered in a contest and won first prize.

THE ORIGINAL AMBITION had been medicine, but his uncle, sensing another goal for his nephew, sent him to work as an apprentice photographer with John Garo of Boston for three years.

Karsh called these three years, "the most fantastic of my life." Garo, he said, did all of his work by available light, so at 4 p.m. the work day concluded.

After that, friends such as Arthur Felder and Serge Koussevitzky came to call.

"I, as a young man, was like blotting paper, absorbing it all." When he returned to Ottawa, Karsh established a working relationship between the cabinet and himself and the years in Boston served him well. He didn't fail when invited by cabinet members to photograph visiting world leaders such as Madame Chiang Kai Shek.

Ideally, Karsh likes to visit with his subjects the day before he takes a picture.

"After the first half hour, I have some idea of the personality."

However, long before that he has done his homework even to learning things like Hemingway's preference for daiquiri.

"OFTEN," KARSH SAID, "the human face is not totally revealing. Men of power wear a mask to cover the personality behind."

Khrushchev, Karsh discovered, had a sense of humor, which led the pho-

tographer to request that Khrushchev be photographed in a great fur coat. The photograph has become more than a portrait of an individual, but a composite of the Russian people—sturdy, strong, dauntless, ready to face a cold world with a warm smile.

On the same visit to Russia, when Brezhnev appeared for a sitting, he told Karsh he came because the chairman had assured him that Karsh would make him look as good and glamorous as Audrey Hepburn. Karsh had been invited to Russia on the strength of an earlier book which the leaders (at least Khrushchev) had seen.

While, Karsh, was reluctant with good reason, to name a favorite subject, he settled on Helen Keller as one of several.

He called her, "the sublimest person I have photographed," and followed with a moving story of the meeting which is documented in his book, "Karsh Portraits."

WHEN HELEN KELLER shook his hand, she expressed how pleased she was to meet him. He told her he knew her through an article she had written, "How to Appreciate the Beauty of the Sunset," one of the first he had tried to read in English.

He added that at having met her he would now think of her as sunrise.

She replied, "How I wish the world leaders would take sunrise as their slogan and leave the shadows of sunset behind them."

Although he had done his homework before photographing Hemingway, and quickly answered, "a daiquiri" when asked by the writer what he would like to drink, he wasn't prepared for Hemingway's remark, "At this hour of the day?"

Hemingway was 59 at the time Karsh went to Havana to photograph him. He had survived a war and plane crashes, the latter seriously injuring him. Karsh said that although the man hid his physical pain from the world, it was obvious to the photographer that he lived with it.

"I was aware he was in a great deal of pain and after we asked my wife and Miss Mary (Hemingway's wife), to leave us, he could allow himself the luxury of admitting it."

Karsh called Hemingway, "the shiest man I have ever photographed."

He pictures the writer as a survivor even to the knitted sweater collar which cradles his neck like a life preserver.

Many of the portraits contain symbols of the life and personality of the individuals, in the style of portrait painters who add something of the world of the subject in their work.



Yousuf Karsh believes those who want to succeed in photography should study the humanities.



Pablo Picasso's portrait by Karsh, like the artist's work, is a subtle study in line and motion.



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