



# Portrait of the Artist

by Ruth Van Gorp

# Yousuf Karsh: A Life in Images

Iconic, groundbreaking—these words are more often used to describe the famous persons whom photographer Yousuf Karsh (1908-2002) captured during his lifetime, but in many ways can and should be used to characterize the work of the artist himself.

Karsh, an Armenian Genocide survivor, migrated to Canada in 1923 as a refugee. His uncle, a professional photographer, facilitated Karsh's apprenticeship with the renowned Boston portrait photographer John H. Garo in 1928. Garo encouraged Karsh to attend evening art classes where he studied master painters, specifically Rembrandt and Velázquez, and learned to utilize composition and lighting to portray a sitter to their best advantage. By the time Karsh returned to Canada, he had "set [his] heart on photographing those men and women who leave their mark on the world." In 1932, he opened his own portrait studio, and quickly established himself as a significant photographer in Ottawa. He remained there most of his adult life, although he travelled extensively for work in order to take professional portraits of political leaders and dignitaries, artists, business

men, doctors, and celebrities. In a career spanning more than six decades, Karsh immortalized many famous persons, from sitting popes, to royals and presidents, to silver screen starlets, and even the first men on the moon. However, it was the phenomenal success of his 1941 portrait of Winston Churchill that catapulted him to international fame.

*Having only two minutes and one shot to capture the prime minister, the story goes that Karsh forced Churchill to remove his emblematic cigar. The resulting scowl was exactly the picture of defiance Karsh was looking for: an image of dogged resilience that epitomized the determination of the British to defeat Hitler.*

It was this desire and ability to capture the personality and genuine character of his subjects, in addition to his technical proficiency in his use of lighting techniques, drawing inspiration from a variety of sources, that gave Karsh's portraits their distinctive style. Introduced to stage lighting techniques through his association with the Ottawa Drama League, he experimented with artificial

lighting to achieve his signature dramatic characteristic effects. Believing that "the heart and mind are the true lens of the camera," Karsh also developed a genuine rapport with his sitters through casual conversation and partnered with them to fashion portraits that were both revealing and respectful.



It was at the Ottawa Little Theatre that Karsh met the son of Lord Bessborough, the governor general of Canada, who persuaded his father to sit for Karsh, initiating a long and close relationship between the photographer and successive Canadian political figures. The next governor general, Lord Tweedsmuir, introduced him to Prime Minister Mackenzie King, who brought him in to photograph Winston Churchill during the latter's wartime visit to Canada in December 1941.

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*"People want to present themselves a certain way and that's not what he was looking for... he was always looking for something that was real and genuine."*

—**Jerry Fielder**, *Karsh's estate director and photographic assistant*

Following this success, the Canadian government sent him to London to photograph the other leaders of wartime Britain. Life magazine assigned him to photograph the American war leaders. By the end of the war, he published these portraits in his first book, "Faces of Destiny."

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*"When the famous start thinking of immortality, they call for Karsh of Ottawa."*

—George Perry, *Journalist for the Sunday Times*

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Karsh spent much of the 1940s building on the success of his Winston Churchill portrait. In 1952, he accepted a lengthy assignment from Maclean's magazine to document Canada's postwar economic development during a period of great paternalism in industry. In the seventeen months it took to complete the undertaking, he made a total of 8,334 negatives.

After the war, while continuing his work as a portraitist, he collaborated with Bishop Fulton J. Sheen on a series of books on various aspects of the Roman Catholic religion. More books would follow, supplemental to numerous solo and group exhibitions around the world.

In addition to over twenty photos which appeared on the cover of Life magazine, Karsh's work is included in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago; the government of Alberta; the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, in Rochester; the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York; the Museum of Modern Art in Tokyo; the Museum of Modern Art in New York; the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa; the National Portrait Gallery in London, and the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Throughout his life, Karsh received many official honors for his achievements as a photographer. Those included the Canada Council Medal, 1965; United States Presidential Citation, 1971; Gold Medal, National Association of Photographic Art, 1974, and the Achievement and Life Award, Encyclopedia Britannica, 1980, as well as numerous honorary degrees from Canadian and American universities. He had visiting professorships at Ohio University in Athens and at Emerson College in Boston,

and was photographic adviser for Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. He was an honorary fellow of the Royal Photographic Society of London, a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts and an officer of the Order of Canada. Karsh has been recognized as Canada's leading portrait photographer. In general, he is recognized as one of the best-known and great portrait photographers of the twentieth century.

Perhaps his biggest achievement though is the way in which Karsh's intuitive portraits memorialized and shaped the public's perception of important historic and culturally significant figures. During his career he held 15,312 sittings, produced over 250,000 negatives, and left an indelible artistic and historic record of the men and women who shaped the twentieth century.

As the historian Peter Pollack put it in his "Picture History of Photography", "Yousuf Karsh, in his powerful portraits, transforms the human face into legend." Although Karsh himself and many of his famous subjects have now passed, as in great master paintings of old their spirit lives on.

In Yousuf Karsh's own words, "I try to photograph people's spirits and thoughts. As to the soul-taking by the photographer, I don't feel I take away, but rather that the sitter and I give to each other. It becomes an act of mutual participation."



**“Look and think** before opening the shutter.

