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An introduction to documentary photography.

Gather tips for taking photos of historical events and everyday life. Learn how to walk the line between fine art and photojournalism.



Taking photos that capture real life.

Documentary photography describes any photos that attempt to record the world as it is. From wide-angle photographs of war to close-up snapshots of people on the street, these images can inform an audience about the hidden corners of contemporary life and even become part of the historical record. Whatever types of photos you want to take, whatever your motivation, you can find inspiration in learning a little about the pioneers who first used their cameras to inform, enlighten, and improve society.

Early documentary photographers.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, when the camera was still a new and cumbersome technology, photographers documented events like the Crimean War and the Civil War in the United States. They also joined exploratory expeditions to capture faraway places, basically inventing the genre of [landscape photography](#).



Toward the end of the century, some photographers focused their cameras on ordinary people. In New York, newspaperman Jacob Riis wrote about the plight of the poor. When he learned of flash photography, he used it to expose the dark, squalid living conditions of immigrants and children in the city. These were later collected in a book of street photography called *How the Other Half Lives*. His photos helped bring about new child labor laws and better schools, proving social documentary photography could effect social change. A few decades later, sociologist Lewis Hine used his camera to expose the cruelty of child labor in the Appalachian Mountains.

Twentieth-century documentarians expand the field.

In the 1930s, American photographers Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans were employed by the Farm Security Administration to document the struggles of migrant workers and sharecroppers during the Great Depression. Lange's photos, like the iconic *Migrant Mother*, helped raise awareness and spur the federal government to send aid.

During that same tumultuous decade, French photographer Henri Cartier-Bresson took photographs all over Europe, obsessed by the idea that a photograph could "fix eternity in an instant." After World War II, he joined Robert Capa and other photographers in the founding of Magnum Photos, a picture agency whose mission was to serve humanity by recording images all over the world.

Then in the 1960s, photographer Diane Arbus used documentary photography to bring representation to marginalized groups. Her subjects included exotic dancers, nudists, carnival performers, elderly people, children, mothers, and members of the LGBTQ+ community. A decade later, Nan Goldin would become famous for her photographs of drag queens in Boston and the post-punk scene in New York.

For almost two centuries, documentary photography has been a means for artists to shine a light on injustice and expand the circle of concern to include all of humanity.



Where to begin.

Follow your curiosity. "If there's something you have questions about, other people probably have questions about it. Pursue that, and you might be onto something," says documentary photographer and photo editor Alex Cohn. Of course, going out into the world and taking pictures of people can be intimidating, so here are some tips on how to approach it:

Master your tools.

Learn how your camera works. Understand the purpose and effect of each setting, and practice taking all kinds of photos in all kinds of conditions. Cohn recommends using a camera with manual settings: "You can't be beholden to the camera for doing all the work, and you should know why it's doing what it's doing, so that you can override it at times and say, 'No, actually this will work better.'"

Learn what makes for a good photo. Pay attention to composition, light and shadow, the story that an individual image can tell, and how a few great images can expand that narrative. "It takes a while to get to the point where you have several good photos, but then you can figure out a way to string them together into a more complete story," says Cohn.

Using Adobe Photoshop to make adjustments can help you fine-tune your images. If you're shooting photos as reportage, you don't transform the photo, but, as Cohn explains, "You use tools like Photoshop to try to show what you saw. You're trying to put the world that you saw into this little frame."



Do your homework.

Research your subject. "Documentary photography really blends with research and interviews," photographer Andres Gonzalez says. For *American Origami*, his book about school shootings, Gonzalez spent six years in various archives researching the stories embedded in the larger narrative of gun violence.

Write a lot, too. "You have to storyboard," Cohn says. "You have to think about shots and you have to write about the photos — the moments — that you want to show. Be able to explain to yourself and write it down so that you can explain it to someone else. Then you can go and try to get those images."

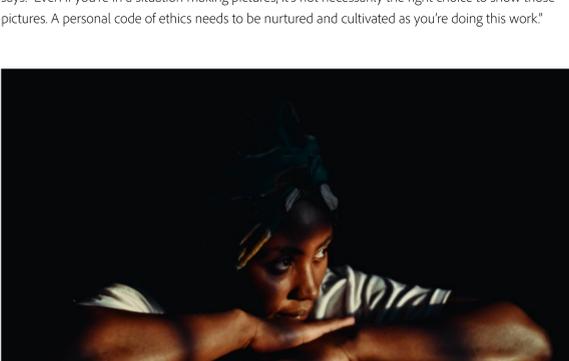
Be patient.

Making a living as a photographer is difficult, and it takes time and perseverance. "Don't be afraid to take other work to help pay for it," Cohn says. "Do whatever you can do to make things work, and don't be ashamed of that."

Your patience has to extend to the process as well. Before you take photos of people, get to know them if you can. Listen to their stories. "Sometimes you're so eager to go in and make pictures that you end up walking into a space and not taking the time to introduce yourself to people because you just need to get that picture," Gonzalez says. "But it's really important to give your subject space to approach you, and also to allow yourself to be vulnerable."

Cultivate empathy and build trust.

No matter your vision, you have to pay attention to the stories of the people you're photographing. "Be mindful of who they are, what's going on with them, and why you're taking certain pictures," Gonzalez says. "Even if you're in a situation making pictures, it's not necessarily the right choice to show those pictures. A personal code of ethics needs to be nurtured and cultivated as you're doing this work."



Tips for working in unfamiliar environments.

Dating back to its earliest days, documentary photography has served to broaden people's perspectives and teach them about different people and cultures. Documentary photographers still do that today, and still encounter cultural barriers.

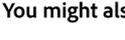
Gonzalez suggests a few strategies for overcoming these. One is to work with local translators or fixers. If you're in unfamiliar territory, you might go to the photo departments at universities and try to recruit students to work with you. Gonzalez says, for him and his wife, who's also a photographer, "It helped open up the community for us. And through that, it also becomes a collaboration because you're working with someone in the community. You need collaborators, people to help you open doors and understand the places that you're trying to make pictures."

Wherever you go looking for stories, take inspiration from the documentary photographers who have come before you. Aspire to use your curiosity, patience, and compassion, as well as your photography skills, to show us something new about ourselves. Remember that taking pictures can change the world.

Contributors

Alex Cohn, Andres Gonzalez

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