



FREEZE FRAME

WAITING FOR LEFTY (1936)

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Yousuf Karsh got his big break while volunteering at the Ottawa Little Theatre (OLT) in Ottawa, Canada. Karsh learned many tricks of the trade while photographing theatre productions. Much of what he learned stemmed from the nature of working in the theatre – the use artificial lighting, props, and the creation of character through costume. Many of the

tools and techniques he learned in the theatre stayed with him throughout his career and became part of his signature style.

An important element of Karsh's work at the OLT was choosing dramatic moments in the plays to capture. These photographic 'stills' appeared in advertisements and magazine reviews and were designed to create curiosity about the play in potential ticket buyers. Although the photographs look like they were taken during a live performance of the play, Karsh's theatre photos were actually scenes he had the actors re-enact specifically for his camera. Karsh would sit in as the cast rehearsed and would pick a specific line in the script as his cue. What was created was a 'tableau', or a moment frozen in time, ripe with potential narratives.



Waiting for Lefty (1936)
Yousuf Karsh
Ottawa, Canada
Library and Archives Canada,
Yousuf Karsh Fonds, e010752218

In this image of the play *Waiting for Lefty* (1936), Karsh selected to shoot a moment full of drama: Why is the young man reaching forward, and why is there a line of uniformed men behind him? By learning to stop the action at a moment full of storytelling possibilities, Karsh created powerful images that continue to captivate his viewers.

KARSH IN THE CLASSROOM

- If this is a dramatic moment something must be about to happen, or perhaps already has. Look at the image and think about what happened before and/or after it was taken. Who are the men with the hats? What is the man in the middle saying or trying to do? Is he reaching out to someone or something? Think about the name of the play *Waiting for Lefty* -- what could it mean? Have students write the story of what happened before or after this scene. Once the stories have been written, students can act them out.
- Look through magazines for advertisements or photo-shoots that set up a narrative through a tableau. What is the story being told and what are the clues given? Reading a photograph or a painting is much like reading a book – there are visual clues that tell the story or at least give a starting point for piecing it together.



Waiting for Lefty (1936)
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SHINING A LIGHT ON KARSH

MARY OF SCOTLAND (1937)

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

Photography is all about light – in fact, the name comes from the Greek for 'light writing'. In a more artistic sense, how a photographer uses light can greatly impact the mood or message the photograph conveys. For a sombre picture, the photographer can use less light and greater contrast. To create a more upbeat photograph, more vibrant lighting is used. Lighting can also highlight a certain area in an image, while muting another. Lighting can guide the viewer's gaze in the direction the photographer desires.

Mary of Scotland (1937)
Yousuf Karsh
Ottawa, Canada
Library and Archives Canada,
Yousuf Karsh Fonds, e010752221



Before the use of artificial lights, photographers had to work within the confines of natural daylight or candlelight. With the advent of artificial lights, photographers became less dependent on natural sources of light and were able to manipulate the light as a tool in the creation of their photographs. Once artificial lighting came into play, photographers began using the 'key' light, or main light source and 'fill' lights to soften the shadows created by the key light.

The photographer Yousuf Karsh used light in even more inventive ways. This image, taken from an Ottawa Little Theatre production of *Mary of Scotland* (1937), shows his use of 'jazz lighting'. This technique uses lighting almost as a prop, and in this instance it adds depth to the image and perhaps foreshadows an unfortunate and violent end to Mary's life. No longer having to rely on natural light sources meant Karsh was more in control of his photography and the way his subjects were portrayed.

KARSH IN THE CLASSROOM

- Use a flashlight to see how different lights affect your image (above, behind, below, from one side or the other). Experiment with putting coloured transparencies in front of the flashlight and seeing how different colours affect the image. How does this change the message of the photograph? Cut out a pattern in a piece of heavy paper and put it in front of the flashlight. Does it change the image and/or the message?
- If a camera is available, have the students take photographs with different light – for example with or without flash and/or natural light.
- Sun print paper can also be a fun and interesting way of starting a conversation about light sensitive chemicals and the scientific side of photographs and how they are developed. It is a great starting point to understanding how photography is 'writing with light.'



Mary of Scotland (1937)
Yousuf Karsh
Ottawa, Canada
Library and Archives Canada, Yousuf Karsh Fonds, e010752221



STAY COMPOSED

CHRISTOPHER BEAN (1936)

ROMEO AND JULIET [JULIET'S CHAMBER] (1933)

FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

When a photographer wants to draw your eye to a certain part of a photograph, he will use light sources, cropping, and props, but also experiment with lines and composition. A line does not necessarily have to be obvious, or drawn with a ruler, it can be created by lining things up in a path that subtly guides your eye. There are different kinds of lines: horizontal, vertical, diagonal and curved. All of these are used by artists to get a desired effect, for example a diagonal line gives the sense of movement or depth.

As a photographer, Karsh made many decisions before taking a photograph. One of these decisions was how the image would be composed. The composition of an artwork is the way in which its visual elements are arranged to create a shape. A common shape used in art is the triangle. Renaissance artists, for example, would use the triangle to represent hierarchy in paintings, pointing to what they considered most important – Heaven.



In this image from a production of *Christopher Bean* (1936) at the Ottawa Little Theatre, a very strong diagonal crosses from the upper left corner to the lower right.

That line is also slightly curved around the group of people. Karsh deliberately selected these elements and paired them with the use of light. This focuses our gaze on the action in the centre of the image, and provokes curiosity about the story.

In the photograph from *Romeo and Juliet* (1933), the two main characters form a symmetrical triangle. The shape is reinforced on the right by Juliet holding out her arm and Romeo's outstretched leg on the left, as well as the bench they are on and the archway under which they are sitting. This creates a stable image.



Christopher Bean (1936)
Yousuf Karsh
Ottawa, Canada
Library and Archives Canada,
Yousuf Karsh Fonds, e008441745

Romeo and Juliet [Juliet's Chamber] (1936)
Yousuf Karsh
Ottawa, Canada
Library and Archives Canada,
Yousuf Karsh Fonds, e010678944

KARSH IN THE CLASSROOM

- Use a cut-out frame to see how different angles/details can change how we 'read' an image. Also try using a cut out shape such as a triangle and look for themes in the online gallery at: www.festivalkarsh.ca.
- Give students magazines and have them group together different compositions in images or advertisements. This will help them understand why they look at things the way they do and how photographs or artworks are composed.
- Another way to get students familiar with the idea of composition is to use objects on sun print paper or to create a collage with images from magazines. Have them explain why they arranged the objects or images in the way they did and how the message of their artwork would change if they arranged it differently.



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