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United States Mission
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ROBERT CONNAN

The World through the Lens of an American Diplomat

14 JANUARY - 29 JANUARY 2009



EU COMMISSION
BERLAYMONT BUILDING - PIAZZA

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*Seventy-four countries
and a camera
....elements of life
through a lens*

Lawrence of Arabia in the Empty Quarter, Irving Penn along the Sepik in New Guinea and Andre Kertész in Paris, they all photographed their surroundings. My life in the Foreign Services has offered me similar opportunities.

I have always been fascinated with photography. I can still visualize myself as a small boy in Pittsburgh leafing through Life magazine and National Geographic and dreaming of exotic locations; the whole world beyond the garden was an exotic location for me, waiting to be explored through the camera lens.

A creative internal urge must have cried out for liberation as I recalled other Pittsburghers: Andy Warhol, Gene Kelly and Erroll Garner, all of whom sought that elusive sense of creative self-fulfilment. They chose art, dance and music, but I followed Duane Michals and chose photography.

Like any neophyte, I began with simple snapshots. Eventually, I attended a Minor White lecture: an hour-long metaphysical exploration of a single photographic image! While I could not fully grasp the analysis, I did like what my eye saw: simple designs of contrast with a dash or two of detail. My underlying philosophy was more elemental: the eye is trained through imagination and experience -thrown in with a good mix of lighting.

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Another photographer, Elliot Porter, made a strong impression on me when he spoke of waiting hours for the perfect shot. I soon realized that was not my nature. Lacking that patience when I see a fascinating subject, I move to capture it quickly and then search out other angles. I was also inspired to contact André Kertész - a titan of the photographic art world- and was generously received at his Park Avenue studio in New York City.

I began to build a collection of his celebrated works from his Paris period, and, through his mentoring I was able to build trust in my own eye. I discovered that my greatest enjoyment came in viewing a small highlight inside a larger scheme - an intersection of angles of detail and contrast that pulls together in a simple design.

I then freelanced briefly along the breathtaking Maine seacoast and operated a small gallery, but, faced with economic reality, I opted for a career in the U.S. Foreign Service - a choice I never regretted.

Before my first overseas posting, I spent a summer at the Maryland Institute of Art in Baltimore, receiving a formal education in art photography. I covered the field, from the basics of using a coffee can pinhole camera to the rich and varied history and philosophy of the art. Learning to shoot and edit a full series of photos taught me to discipline eye and mind to produce a coordinated narrative. The skills, knowledge and encouragement I received at the institute still serve me well.

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VENICE - 1997



PAPUA NEW GUINEA - 2001

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HAWAII - 1995



AUSTRALIA - 2001

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EGYPT - 2007



TUNISIA - 1987

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PINNACLES - 2003



YEMEN - 1981

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PERU - 2000



VENICE - 1997



FEZ - 1987



SUDAN - 1981

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ALGERIA - 1986



DENMARK - 1990

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SWEDEN- 1991



SAUDIA ARABIA - 1981

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Robert S. Connan discovered photography at a young age. He said later: “I discovered that my greatest enjoyment came in viewing a small highlight inside a larger scheme - an intersection of angles of details and contrast that pulls together in a simple design.” He cites André Kertész, W. Eugene Smith, and Paul Strand as inspirations. His career in the Foreign Service has enabled him to practice his art around the world. His journeys through 74 countries have resulted in unique images of our world. Connan’s work has been exhibited in Paris, Rome, Stockholm, Kuwait City, Sydney, and Washington, DC. He has also been published in National Geographic, Down East, the Hasselblad Forum and CLAM Magazine.

He began his international career in the private sector. In 1980, he entered the Foreign Commercial Service. His first assignment was Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, followed by Johannesburg, Algiers, Stockholm, Kuwait, Rome and Sydney. He served in Baghdad, Iraq from September 2003 till January 2004 under the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), setting up the Iraqi Business Center for the Iraqi Ministry of Trade. After Baghdad, he was posted to Paris as Minister-Counselor for Commercial Affairs. Currently, he serves as Minister Counselor for Commercial Affairs at the U.S. Mission to the European Union in Brussels.

Robert S. Connan is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He earned his undergraduate degree in Econometrics from Carnegie Mellon University and his MBA in international marketing from the Wharton School of Finance, University of Pennsylvania.