

The big picture: A former Wall St. chief finds real riches in far-flung photo quests

BY NICOLE LYN PESCE
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This portrait is among the scenes in Fredric Roberts' "Humanitas: Images of India."

Fredric Roberts was a titan on Wall Street, but it wasn't until he quit the Financial District, to photograph rural villages in South Asia, that he discovered real wealth.

"In my first life, I was surrounded by people who wanted everything that money could buy," says Roberts, 69. "And in my new life, I am surrounded by people who have everything that money can't buy."

Roberts, now based in Los Angeles, specializes in capturing intimate portraits of everyday life in remote areas that explore the spiritual richness of a people. His latest exhibition, "Humanitas: Images of India," includes 36 large prints shot over three years, and is on display at the Sundaram Tagore Gallery in Chelsea.

He has chronicled his journeys in a series of photography books. The most recent, "Humanitas III: The People of Burma," which hit shelves Tuesday, was six years in the making, taking him out of the country for months at a time.

"I usually take one or two trips a year, sometimes three," he says, "but as I get older I want to take more, because I feel like I'm running out of time."

Turning the lens on his own life, the Yale graduate spent 30 years on Wall Street, starting his own firm, F.M. Roberts & Co., in 1980 before being elected chairman of the National Association of Security Dealers, which then owned and operated the NASDAQ stock market.



Fredric Roberts' large prints capture the color and vibrancy of Indian culture.

But he became disillusioned with the culture of greed.

"The business had become all about money," he explains. "It just wasn't rewarding to me." He picked up his first camera, "a fancy Canon 35mm with three lenses," before taking a six-week sabbatical to Thailand, China and Tibet in 1986.

"I didn't go to shoot pictures," he says. "I went to think about what I wanted to do with my life, and coincidentally, I went to all of these cool places and took pictures."

He didn't know what to do with all his slides, so he brought his best pictures to a photography workshop. The instructors offered him private lessons. Roberts had to table his photography dreams, however, after losing his fortune in a scheme similar to the one run by Bernie Madoff. He spent another 14 years in finance, joining NASDAQ and working to prevent people from falling victim to similar deals, before he could retire in 2000 when he was 58.

That's when he dusted off his equipment and went to every camera workshop he could find, honing his craft before jetting to India.

"One of the things I immediately noticed about these people is that they had incredibly rich lives," he says. "Rich in culture, rich in spirituality, rich in family ... even though they struggled, even though they lived at the subsistence level, in many cases they were really very happy."

"That is what I'm very proud to capture in my photography: the spirit of wealth beyond money."

He made it his mission to document not just foreign countries but foreign places in foreign countries. He left the cities to go to obscure villages like Madhya Pradesh and Orissa in India, where he was invited to village banquets and to the spring festival of Holi.



Getting the access to photograph these intimate moments - from girls getting ready for a religious festival to Burmese monks at prayer - is a delicate operation.

"I don't immediately start by sticking a camera in their face," Roberts scoffs. "I get introduced. We talk. We have some tea. I tell them about where I live. They tell me about what they do, and whether it takes 10 minutes or 10 hours, I have to feel that we formed a real relationship - and they do, too - before we are all relaxed enough for me to start taking photos."

"These people have never seen a white guy before, let alone a camera," he explains, "so I am very, very sensitive to relate to them before I begin entertaining any thought relating to photography."

This sensitivity and mutual respect is the key.

"This is not a photography assignment to me," he says. "I go there because I want to go there."

In December, he put together a photography workshop for high-school-age students in Budapoor, India. At the session, the teens were asked to tell the story of the environment in their villages using photography.

"We produced 20 amazing, story-telling photos," says Roberts. "I am going back in December with different instructors, and we are building a curriculum and training the alumni so that the class can be ongoing. The dream is to build a permanent school."

Roberts was the first American honored with the Best Foreign Photographer for India award. The Indian ambassador to the United Nations displayed the "Humanitas" portraits in the General Assembly chamber last month before moving them to the exhibit's current home in Chelsea.

"The validation of this work has been extraordinary and very, very gratifying," Roberts says.

"My second life is a lot more fulfilling and rewarding than my first life ... and now the third stage is teaching and setting up the school, which adds a whole new dimension to the work that I didn't have before, and I love it."