

## Personal portraits

Three exhibitions at Glenbow Museum focus on people

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### Spotlight

Zidane, A 21st Century Portrait, and From Our Collections: Portraits run until June 19 at the Glenbow Museum; Karsh: Regarding Heroes runs until June 15.

Have you ever found yourself staring at a piece of art, scratching your head in bewilderment trying to figure out what the heck it is? Believing that if only you were a little bit smarter (or if the artist was a little bit more talented), you'd be able to figure it out? This is not the case with the three exhibitions currently at the Glenbow Museum; Karsh: Regarding Heroes; Zidane, A 21st Century Portrait; and From Our Collections: Portraits.

The shows are about people, offering intimate portrayals of some of the most recognizable, and not so recognizable, figures of the past hundred years.

"Portraiture is one of the most accessible forms of art, because it's people and we can relate to that," says Glenbow art curator Colleen Sharpe. "I mean we're all human. We all have bodies. We all have faces, so it's one of the most easily accessible and approachable things as an artwork for you to see and understand, and just get into."

Karsh: Regarding Heroes offers 100 photographs by Yousuf Karsh (1908-2002), the Armenian-born, Canadian whose skill as a portraitist established him as one of the world's greatest portrait photographers.

The likes of Muhammad Ali, Albert Einstein, and John F. Kennedy with wife Jacqueline can be seen hanging on the museum's walls, their likeness captured with the dramatic honesty indicative of Karsh's work.

Centre-stage in the exhibition is the photograph that earned Karsh international prominence, his portrait of Winston Churchill. Taken in 1941, after Churchill had addressed the House of Commons in Ottawa, Karsh was granted only two minutes to capture the iconic leader.

In a moment of genius, Karsh plucked Churchill's cigar from his mouth before taking his picture. As British prime minister glowered with indignation, Karsh snapped the photo, immortalizing Churchill in the defiant stance that epitomized one of the 20th-century's greatest leaders. The portrait appeared on the cover of Life magazine, and would become the most reproduced photograph in history.

The power of the Karsh exhibit doesn't rest solely in the Churchill portrait. With every turn, there's a photograph of someone who has helped shape our world. Explorers (Sir Edmund Hillary) and politicians (Peter Lougheed among them), writers (Ernest Hemingway) and artists (Pablo Picasso), they're all there.

Of particular importance to Sharpe is that the all three of the exhibitions be accessible to everyone.

"I really believe as a curator that you have to be able to find yourself in an exhibition in some way, and find the context if it's Calgary, or if it's a dress that looks like what your grandma wore. Those are ways that you can approach things."

In the depths of the Glenbow archives, Sharpe discovered a 1954 Mclean's magazine article that detailed Karsh's visit to Calgary during Stampede. When asked his opinion of the city, Karsh focused not on the annual cowboy bacchanal, but on Calgary's fantastic modern architecture, stating that it was better than any he'd seen. The article itself, with photos of such prominent Calgarians as Eric Harvey, is enlarged and on display as part of the exhibit.

In contrast to the frozen moments caught by Karsh's camera is the 90-minute movie of three-time FIFA Player of the Year, Zinedine Zidane. A collaboration between Scottish artist Douglas Gordon and Algerian filmmaker Phillippe Parreno, Zidane, A 21st Century Portrait follows the soccer player during a 2005 match between Real Madrid and Villarreal.

Whereas the black-and-white portraits by Karsh beg such minute examination that your nose presses against the glass (an urge to be avoided), Gordon and Parreno's portrayal of Zidane is so large that you have to sit on the other side of the room to take it in. Projected onto two 4.2-metre high screens, the film installation is comprised of footage taken from 17 cameras that tracked Zidane's every move.

Notwithstanding its much larger scale, the Zidane piece is no less intimate than the photographs in Karsh: Regarding Heroes. In fact, the movie so adeptly captures the spirit of the man that it garnered accolades from the star himself. Although not for everyone, at least not in its hour-and-a-half entirety, even a brief snippet of the film provides some insight into both Zidane as a player, and the intimacies of the game of soccer.

Citing the 18th-century French philosopher Denis Diderot, who argued that the only sincere form of portraiture was where the subject appeared to be utterly absorbed in what they were doing, the Glenbow accounts for considering Gordon's and Parreno's work as a true portrayal of Zidane.

The museum further widens the definition of portraiture with From Our Collections: Portraits. Curated by Glenbow art technician Travis Lutely, the third exhibition includes encaustic paintings by Tony Scherman who portrays a moment in time, instead of an individual, with his series About 1865. Photographs by Geoffrey James seek to capture the personality of the town Lethbridge. Other artists represented include John Hall, Loretta Lux, and Fiona Sigismondi. All the works stretch the boundaries of what constitutes a portrait, yet none elicits that "if only I was smarter" feeling.

Altogether, the Glenbow Museum provides a rare opportunity to experience art of a high calibre that is both easily digested and understood.

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