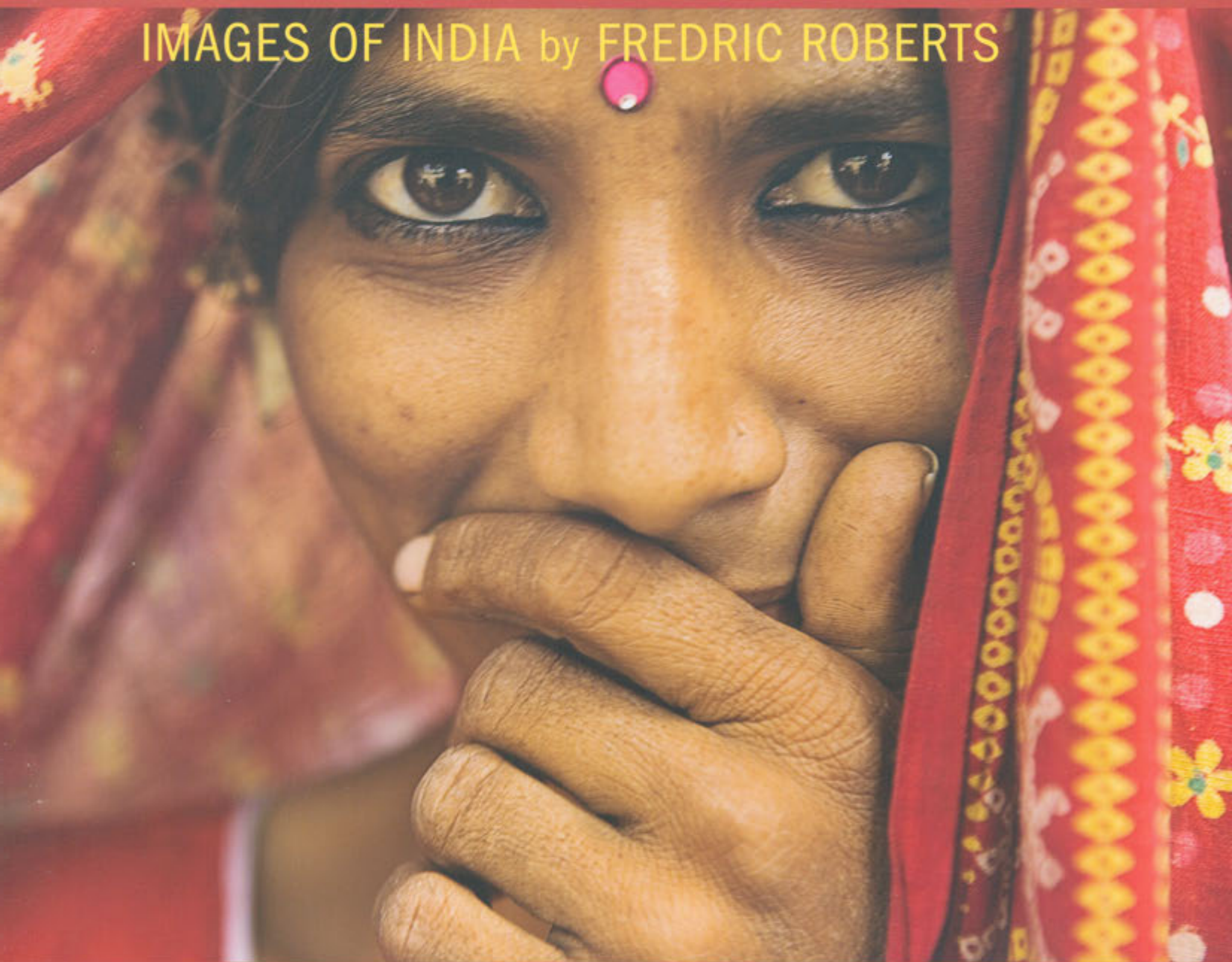


HUMANITAS

IMAGES OF INDIA by FREDRIC ROBERTS



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STONY BROOK UNIVERSITY

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Regardless of the medium used to facilitate it, portraiture is the picture representation of an individual and it can be challenging, interesting and historically significant—capable of embracing an era and the people who exist within it.

— Gordon Parks

When I look at the people I photograph, I see that they have a larger vision of life, a vision that transcends monetary wealth. It is about their relationship with their god, with their land, neighbors, and family. It is the power of those relationships that I want to communicate.

— Fredric Roberts

Humanitas II: Photographs by Fredric Roberts is a book about relationships that tells a story of beauty and grace, work and family, spirituality and devotion, while decoding the notion of documentation and representation. Echoing photography of India through time yet created in a contemporary context, the photographs in this book are concerned with the present and its link to the past, notions that are fully realized through the photographic process. Fredric Roberts photographs ordinary and daily life occurrences, ceremonies, revealing the interiority of a place. This time he is in India—Mumbai, and throughout the state of Gujarat: Chhota-Udepur, Ahmedabad, Poshina, Zainabad, Bhuj, Gondal, and Palitana. In the last six years he has been to Rajasthan, as well as Cambodia, Bhutan, Thailand, Myanmar,

China, and Tibet. In his portraits, the subject often looks directly at him and then to us, the readers, effortlessly constructing historical significance in the process. These photographs reveal the rapport Roberts establishes with his subjects as well as their own sense of elegance and self-possession.



Aarti Devotion, 2006
Pigment print
Courtesy of Fredric Roberts

Prominent characteristics in this body of work include a sense of order and shifting interplays with focus and photographic planes. Spontaneous poses are revealed as one ponders the different focal points along the axis from foreground to background. Ultimately one understands the significance of the visual language of photography, reading the middle ground as a reference point for the photographer. Themes of spirituality, labor, beauty, landscape, architecture, and family are prevalent in this book, underscoring relationships: spatial, artistic, gender, and familial. The photographs tend to be open, engaging the reader and challenging what we think we know. Through the interactions between the photographer and his subjects, we get a sense of the intercultural engagement Roberts is emphasizing as he explores complex stories and relationships with his lens. Essentially his photographs are exchanges with people from diverse cultural backgrounds—his subjects as well as his audience. Interested both in the visual noise of the photograph as well as the

silence that accompanies the making of an image, he uses motion to create quilt-like forms and patterns, incorporating details that are often overlooked: complex planes created by simply two figures; the pain and grace of stoop labor; the role ornamentation plays in everyday life in India. His vision is one of exquisite sensitivity.

“Photography either sees through the caked-layer of life and reality,” writes Okwui Enwezor, “or it obfuscates them in a relentless production of sentimentality, spectacle, and fragmented rumors of existence.” This notion of layering life and reality is incorporated within Roberts’s photographs. By combining formal portraiture with casual portraits, landscapes with documentary-style images, the photographer offers us an alternative reading of reality. Take, for example, his striking photograph of two men in Dasada Village in Gujarat. Titled *Meer Pals*, it reveals the experience shared by Roberts and his subjects; collectively, they have frozen the photographic moment. The two male subjects, dressed stylishly, appear aware of the photographer’s gaze; they seem to allow us, the readers, to imagine their sense of self and confidence. One wears a white shirt with breast pockets, while the other is draped in fabric and a scarf and has a colorful headdress and a fashionable wristwatch. Their poses reflect masculine power and dandyism. Historian Robert



Harijan Beauty, 2006
Pigment print
Courtesy of Fredric Roberts



Camel Fair Sunrise, 2003
Pigment print
Courtesy of Fredric Roberts

E. Moore suggests that “Dandyism as a cultural phenomenon has always been closely associated with certain special qualities of metropolitan life in Europe; the sidewalks, arcades, and commercial displays of major urban centers.” But Roberts has located the dandy in Gujarat—stylized in rich colors, scarves, headdresses, and ornamentation.

Roberts also turns his attention to a visual narrative about male and female attire. In writing about women and dress in India, Rachel Dwyer has pointed out that “A taboo on wearing stitched clothing has meant that a variety of methods of draping different lengths of cloth have been practiced in India for at least two millennia. Today there are two main lengths. One is the 9-yard sari, worn only by married women, now rarely by the upper-classes, being mostly restricted to the lower castes and classes. Instead the norm now is for the 6-yard sari, now found worn in two major styles, the so-called Gujarati-style, where the pallu (the patterned end) is worn draped over the front, but the sari is usually worn with the pallu hanging loose over the left shoulder....The choice of color is also important: red, green and yellow are the choice for festive occasions.”

Roberts's photographs of women in India reflect this sense of value in the sari's connection to community and a legacy bound in pride and hard work. His photographs of women adorning their arms and feet with bracelets and beads focus our attention on beauty and history; the images value the relationship to personal memory. "Ancient Indians regarded ornament as a *sine qua non* of beauty," notes art historian Philip Rawson in his essay "An Exalted Theory of Ornament"; "things lacking in ornament were considered imperfect or incomplete." The boundaries of social status seem to disappear when one looks at these photographs: women in their saris working under the hot sun in the wheat and cotton fields; nuns seated next to a stone column; or younger women in their homes with their babies. They all reflect the respect Roberts has for them and for the photographic moment and the mystery invoked by the click of the shutter. By creating these moments, Roberts encourages us to think about the lives of the women in these faraway places.

From its beginning, notes the photographer, this project was a self-conscious endeavor. "You have to spend time with people and genuinely care about them, in order to honestly photograph them," Roberts explains. "I found the camera to be a conduit that enhanced my insight." Through a combination of portraiture and landscape, Roberts presents a fascinating and engaging depiction of domestic and economic life. His photographs form a narrative that is informed by his juxtaposing the photographic moment with symbolic references. To explain his process, Roberts references Henri Cartier-Bresson's notion of the "'decisive moment' [that] because of Cartier-Bresson's genius ... comes out through such simplicity. He makes daily life look extraordinary with what seems to be ease. He just has the eye and the sense, and you feel as though everyone has just done exactly what he has wanted to express in his photographs. There is a certain effortlessness against what I consider to be the incredible beauty of his images. He is my idol."

These words are quiet reminders of photography's history and reflect the quality Roberts seeks in his own photographs. For example, the image titled *Jain Prayer Book* is a simple one—only one person is pictured yet we feel the presence of others and their sense of spirituality and community. The woman kneels as she reads a text, her body covered except for one foot, revealing how he uses quiet moments like this one in which to locate and revive ritual celebrations and temples where his subjects are transformed.



Lone Wheat Harvester, 2006
Pigment print
Courtesy of Fredric Roberts

Photographs of women at work in the wheat and cotton fields symbolize inherited family values and clarity of focus for Roberts. He contextualizes their individuality by giving us signifiers within the image about a given experience. As the solitary wheat harvester gathers the long stalks, for example, she looks away from the camera; her demeanor is regal. Her head is covered with a colorful scarf that reveals not only that she is a laborer but also that she is conscious of the notion of adornment and beauty within her community. The photographs of women

who work while wearing nose rings, arm bracelets, beads and necklaces reflect community pride and an understanding of their long history of adornment.

In contrast, in the striking composite portraits of an elderly woman—*Old Woman in Tundra Wandh*—who has obviously worked the land, Roberts shows us a different dialogue between photographer and subject. The woman stands in the doorway of her home, which has been decorated with small genre scenes. At ease with the camera, she directs her gaze to the photographer, the translator, and the reader. She laughs with her eyes, as she raises her arms in an animated conversation. We see her touch her face in a seemingly shy pose; her white hair is covered with a colorful scarf. Her elaborate earrings hang loosely from her ears, an indication that she has worn such jewelry for many, many years.

Roberts' work interprets gesture—men sitting around with walking sticks, women performing stoop labor, little girls dancing in a circle, men fully aware of their style and masculinity. The subjects regard the photographer with a strong sense of self, affirming his impressions and challenging them at the same time. Images of homes—views of women sewing framed by a window or a door frame, a baby in a cradle—seem to resemble private altars. Roberts's photographs give us a complex story full of nuance, beauty, and devotion.

Born in New York, Roberts turned to photography after leaving the field of finance in which he worked for some 30 years. In the same way, he asks us to imagine life beyond the photograph, locating his experience through images of family, work, and celebrations. His photographs mediate between idealization and documentation.

He began this project intending—like many photographers working in Asia—to document a

different way of life. India has been a Mecca for Western photographers who seek to interpret an “other” culture. However, Fredric Roberts soon found that he was more interested in a quest for beauty, which he sees as inherent in the photographic process. His images call attention to the diverse experiences between Indian men and women as well as comment on their roles in society. Leisure and work is disrupted within the gendered frame of role playing which forces us to question what we have accepted and rejected. Through his photographs Fredric Roberts celebrates, documents, and humanizes his subjects while revealing the beauty, the humanity, and the wonder of everyday life.

Deborah Willis, Ph.D.

Deborah Willis is a MacArthur, Guggenheim, and Fletcher Fellow and Professor of Photography and Imaging, New York University, Tisch School of the Arts. Her most recent book projects include *Family History Memory*, *Black: A Celebration of A Culture* (Hylas, 2005) and *Reflections in Black: A History of Black Photographers 1840 to the Present* (2000).



Making Chapatis, 2006
Pigment print
Courtesy of Fredric Roberts

This essay originally appeared in *Humanitas II: The People of Gujarat* by Fredric Roberts, Abbeville, 2006. Additional information about Fredric Roberts and his work is available at www.fredricroberts.com.



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Rhonda Cooper
Director

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Dark Eyes, 2006 (detail)
Pigment print
Courtesy of Fredric Roberts