

Nov 04, 2016 by [Andrew Wulf](#)

Pictures at an Exhibition ^[1]

The title for this commentary is deliberately borrowed from Russian composer Modest Mussorgsky's famous piano composition of 1874. It also underscores the tone for this review of a recent exhibition that has opened in Los Angeles, "The 21st Century Family of Man: Photography as Public Diplomacy," on display in the second floor gallery of USC's Annenberg School for Communication. And just as Mussorgsky's ten-movement suite has evolved into a *pièce de résistance* for creative reinterpretation by virtuoso pianists, this new display of photographs brilliantly reframes Edward Steichen's "Family of Man" exhibition that opened at the Museum of Modern Art in 1955.

[Paul S. Rockower](#), photographer, public diplomacy grad student, and artist, sticks to his convictions (for that is what makes him an artist) in fulfilling the vision for his current show, an impressive chronicle of the universality of the human condition. This exhibition echoes both the aesthetic sophistication and the emotional sensitivity of the original to which it pays homage. Rockower's photos, divided into such sections as "Cities of Man," "Faith of Man," and "Children of Man," reveal how effective visual art can be in "widening the bridge" that connects humanity, which the artist cites as the main purpose of public diplomacy.

His photographs deftly show the unity of humanity. On a gallery wall, our shared experiences overlap peacefully, regardless of creed, color or country. Yet, as the main signage declares, this display is not about heavy-handed politics. Instead, "...this latter-day exhibition of photographs reminds the visitor of the fundamental values that mankind shares." As a visitor, I would say these values are distinctly celebrated here: family, community, faith, happiness, beauty, elegance, and laughter. There is no evidence of bombs, barbed wire, or regional strife in this exhibition. Not one of the individuals photographed in this exhibition is famous. It is simply a showcase of real people being themselves, and in a way, this is what makes these images sacred.

Also curious, if not courageous, is Rockower's choice to use the gendered nomenclature of the original exhibition's title. Whereas "Family of Man" may have raised few eyebrows among visitors in the dozens of countries it toured in the middle of the 20th century, today the use of "man", even as a historical referent, may have the potential to trigger an occasional sour reaction among self-declared feminist thinkers. However, one need only take a moment to engage with the content of this exhibition to determine the speciousness of such an argument. There is simply no need for this exhibition or its creator to pay lip service to the dogma of political correctness, for the reason that what it contains transcends such limited doctrinal thinking. The photographs depict (a partial list):

- An old woman spinning prayer wheels, Lhasa, Tibet
- A man at Friday prayers at Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore, Pakistan
- A Quechua family, Cusco, Peru
- A bride, Jodhpur, India
- A family, Madras, India

- Children hugging, Laos
- Crowds at prayer at the Western Wall, Jerusalem
- A mother and child, Lhasa
- A father and child, Rajasthan, India

To quote Yael Swerdlow, a photographer for the Associated Press and other news outlets over the last twenty years: “Paul can effortlessly mix in to any group wherever he travels.” This sentiment is reflected in the calm and candid portrayal of his human subjects, and proves he has a sharp eye (and soul) for the civic and educative nature of his work.

Rockower’s photographs of children, in particular, are complex studies of innocence from around the world. His physical landscapes are calculated, yet invite the viewer to tag along, at the same time demonstrating the obvious limits as to just how far we can tread into the wild. The oldest photo in this collection is a tableau of young lovers canoodling on a motor scooter in downtown Naples. One can understand how the photographer might feel apprehensive, perhaps apologetic, catching this special moment between two people who believe they are engaged in a private moment in a public place. What makes Rockower’s work so good is that he lets the image take on its own life, rather than imposing his artistic will.

At the exhibition’s opening, Nick Cull shared some insights into the relevance of Rockower’s show. The 1955 “Family of Man” MOMA creation was at its opening hailed as “the greatest photographic exhibition of all time—503 pictures from 68 countries...” The exhibition catalog included a commentary by organizer Edward Steichen’s brother-in-law Carl Sandburg, the American poet, who said, “If the human face is the ‘masterpiece of God’ it is here then in a thousand fateful registrations.” Following the original exhibition’s success in New York, the United States Information Agency adopted the show and traveled it in various formats to 40 countries over the next six years. Millions saw the exhibition, and the catalog sold more than three million copies. The few detractors, such as French leftist Roland Barthes, saw it strictly in Marxist terms, while American right-winger Hilton Kramer feared it contained communist undertones. What is most important to remember about this exhibition is its success in soberly documenting universal human values. This homage to “The Family of Man” on display in Annenberg thus represents an important chapter in the original’s legacy.

Also during the recent exhibition opening, Rockower spoke graciously of his own family, friends, and colleagues. He discussed the process and near peril of staging a one-man show that carried such a strong message. The message he wanted us to take away that evening he spoke first in Hebrew, then in English: “The world is a narrow bridge, and you mustn’t be afraid to cross it.” For me, this means we all have the opportunity in our lives, to some degree, to journey forth and confidently meet the world, which I believe is a better place because of this exhibition.

Public diplomacy in the 21st century is more about the richness and sharing of human contact than anything else, the discovery of common ground while still maintaining personal values. Rockower invites us to take a trip - a number of trips, really - from Xi’an to Cusco, Lesotho to Saigon. Ultimately, what this exhibition and this photographer have accomplished is no small feat. These are not travel photos, nor a personal diary. Answering his own question as to the defining message of the 1955 exhibition, the poet Sandburg wrote this:

There is only one man in the world
and his name is All Men.
There is only one woman in the world

and her name is All Women.

There is only one child in the world
and the child's name is All Children.

Following the original concept, this new exhibition deserves commendation for
unpretentiously, idealistically, and effectively reintroducing all of us to each other.
