

#5 April 2013 *Cameraderie* Margaret Bourke-White (1904-1971)

Margaret Bourke-White is best known for a grand series of firsts, as stated in the much-repeated first few sentences of the Wikipedia article on her:

“She is best known as the first foreign photographer permitted to take pictures of Soviet industry, the first female war correspondent (and the first female permitted to work in combat zones) and the first female photographer for Henry Luce’s Life magazine, where her photograph appeared on the first cover.”

Here is a website holding a large number of her photographs, and photographs of her. Have a look at it, and then let’s discuss what kind of photographer she was. Check out her images of the Chrysler Building in New York City, Marlo Brando, Soviet workers and industry, war, world travel, and the picturesque western United States.

<http://pinterest.com/floriegray/margaret-bourke-white/>

Did you spot her image of the steps behind the Lincoln memorial here in Washington?

<http://pinterest.com/pin/284782376407577512/>

A year later, there would have been a floating bandstand to the left of the steps—the name of the bandstand was “The Water Gate,” although some say that name applied to the steps themselves, or the docking points at the base of the steps. I remember attending a U.S. Military Band concert at The Water Gate around 1960. Anyone else?

Did anyone see the 1982 film, “Gandhi,” in which Candice Bergen portrayed Bourke-White? Bourke-White photographed Gandhi frequently, and for the last time just a few hours before his assignment in 1948. Here is a link to her iconic shot of Gandhi spinning thread:

<http://pinterest.com/pin/284782376407577374/>

If you look through the images on the referenced web-site, and read about her in detail, you will see a dynamic, daring photographer in action. No assignment location too remote, no obstacle to that assignment that cannot be overcome, no first not to be had by her. This is not quite an artistic photographer (although there is plenty of art in her photography)—this is adventure, and the documentation of it. She simply went where the pictures were, and they all shimmer with the excitement of someone being in those places to take those pictures and bring them to us.

Technically, I think she uses “angle” to great advantage. Look at these shots of the Chrysler Building and of camels in Syria:

<http://pinterest.com/pin/284782376407577449/>

<http://pinterest.com/pin/284782376407577488/>

Here is a quote from Bourke-White, reproduced in many places:

“The camera is a remarkable instrument. Saturate yourself with your subject, and the camera will all but take you by the hand and point the way.”

Now we are beginning to see a pattern of thinking among some of the photographers in this series. In the last article, it was Dorothea Lange who said, “The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera.”

Let's cast our minds back to the others so far—Edward Weston, Alfred Stieglitz, and Richard Avedon—and ask also, did their cameras teach them how to *see*? And are *we* all doing what we can to learn from our cameras about *seeing*?