

## The Art of Photography and Pete Souza

Welcome to Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, NY! This fall, our museum of American fine art, folk art and Native American art is fortunate to be showcasing the special exhibition, Pete Souza: Two Presidents, One Photographer. This exhibit includes dozens of photographs by the former official White House photographer for presidents Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, and Barack Obama from 2008 to 2016. Some of Souza's photographs have become iconic images, showing these two presidents at times of reflection, determination, sadness, and joy. They reveal relationships with loved ones and with the public at large, and help define how future generations will see them. Let's explore what makes these photographs tick by reading Pete Souza's own memories about making them, and by learning how documentary photography can be used to record compelling moments in time.

A documentary photographer's job is to tell the true stories of the events they see around them. They may take hundreds, or even thousands, of pictures during a day's events, but out of all of those usually only one will become the image people see, if they're lucky. A successful photograph not only needs to share an interesting story, but also simply needs to be a good picture, with a strong composition that strikes the viewer's eye and makes the narrative as clear as possible. Photography was invented in the 1830s, and by the Civil War in the 1860s photographers were using the process to document important events. Matthew Brady and Timothy O'Sullivan photographed the aftermath of battles at Gettysburg and other Civil War sites, and as photography got faster and more technologically advanced, people like Lewis Hine used it to enact social change by recording the plight of kids exploited by child labor in the early 1900s. Dorothea Lange showed us the hardships of the Great Depression, and Bruce Davidson recorded iconic moments of the Civil Rights movement. Pete Souza follows in the path set by photographers like this, with his job of recording the daily lives of two US presidents. Let's take a look at one of his most iconic images of President Obama.

Stop for a moment and look at this picture. What do you see in it? Where do you think it was taken? Why do you think this picture became famous? [pause] Here's what the photographer, Pete Souza, had to say about it: "Five-year-old Jacob Philadelphia touches the head of President Obama, after Jacob told the President that his friends said his haircut was just like the President's. "Go ahead and touch it," the President responded. The photograph resonated with people for a couple of reasons. One, that a young African-American kid was touching the head of a President of the United States who looked like him. But it also says something about President Obama, that at the behest of a five-year-old, he would bend over and let a kid touch his head like this."

This is a wonderful example of how photography can take simple, fleeting moments and freeze them in time so that people can stop and study them for meaning and importance long after they occurred. Another famous example of this is Souza's photo of President Obama fist-bumping with custodian Lawrence Lipscomb in the White House, which came to represent the president respecting people from all walks of life in a cool and casual way. These photographs are good examples of the phrase, 'The Decisive Moment,' coined by documentary photographer Henri Cartier Bresson. A photograph taken during the Decisive Moment tells the most complete, most interesting story through a combination of

timing and composition. Take the photograph too early or too late, and the story is lost. This is why most photojournalists take hundreds, if not thousands, of pictures, every time they go out.

Pete Souza's job allowed him access to all manner of moments of Reagan and Obama's presidency, both lighthearted and serious, private and historic. He was there when President Reagan first watched the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger in 1986. He was there when Obama and his national security team monitored the raid against Osama bin Laden in 2011. He was there when the presidents met with world leaders, some of whom they had serious disagreements with, and when they met with the families of the fallen. These photographs, to be successful, need to show the gravity and the emotion of the situations, and to do so the photographer needs to be able to read the situation without being overcome by the emotion themselves. One great example of this is when President Obama and his family visited the former prison cell of anti-apartheid leader and former President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela. This is one of the few pictures in the exhibition that is in black and white instead of color. Do you think this affects the emotion the photograph expresses? How so?

Capturing the correct moment in time is important to a documentary photographer, but so are lighting, angles, subject placement, and all of the other elements which make up the composition of a picture. Lighting can be used simply to make parts of a picture easier to see, but it can also be used to enhance the drama of a photograph through backlighting or the diffused light of a foggy morning. The angle at which you photograph can help to make a picture more interesting, by providing a viewpoint we're not used to seeing. Many photographers try to avoid placing their main subject right in the center of the picture, because it tends to create a very static, boring photograph. Try placing your subject slightly to the left or right and up or down, to create a more dynamic picture that the viewer's eye spends more time exploring. Finally, another very important rule of photography is that what you leave out of a picture is just as important as what you put in. The elements that exist in the four walls of the picture are the only things that will help to tell your story. Sometimes, photographs are changed after the fact. For example, take this picture of president Reagan taken after a routine medical procedure. According to Pete Souza, quote, "Astute historical observers will note that the released photograph was not this full-frame version. The photo was cropped on the left to not show the IV bag dripping fluid into the president's veins." What are some possible reasons that this might have been done before showing the picture to the public?

Let's finish by hearing Pete Souza's comments on one more photograph of Ronald Reagan and his wife Nancy. Quote, "The Reagans watch a movie during a taping for a television special with Barbara Walters in the Family Theater of the White House. I recall this is the moment just after the First Lady said, "I can't see over Pete's head!" We like to think of photographers like Souza being invisible, almost like the people they're photographing don't know that they're there. In Souza's position as official White House photographer, though, the only way that's possible is if the people he's photographing have absolute trust in him. This is why Souza had such incredible access Reagan and Obama during their presidencies. Thanks for joining us at Fenimore Art museum today.

Souza and Obama were familiar with each other before Obama's inauguration. In 2004 Souza was hired by the Chicago Tribune to document Barack Obama's first year in the US Senate, and continued to

photograph Obama through 2008 when he was formally asked to join the White House staff upon his election.