

Chiltern U3A

A personal view of

Yousef Karsh

6th October 2017



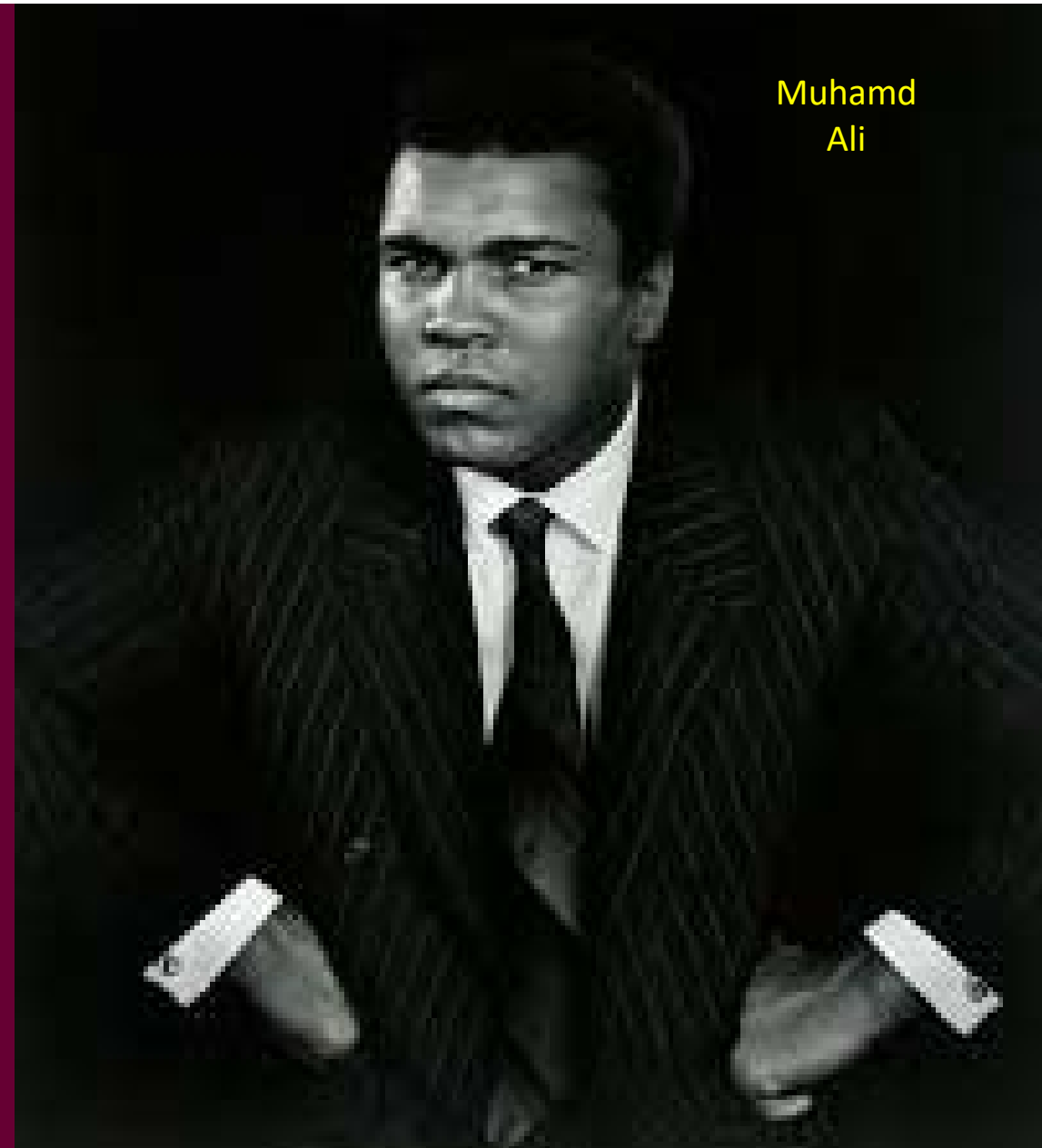
Yousuf Karsh

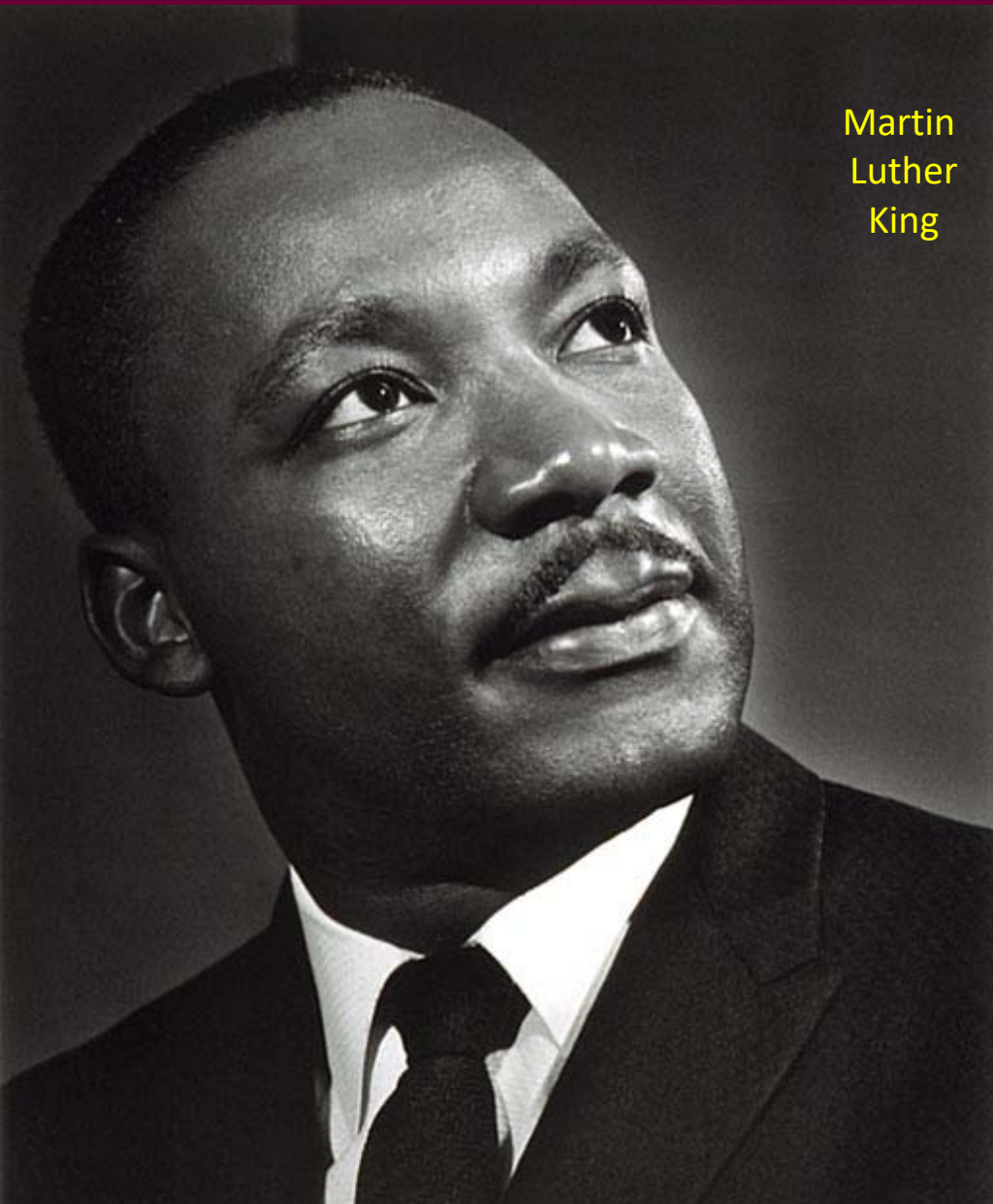
Born December 23rd 1908
in Mardin.

Died July 13th 2002, aged 93,
in Boston Massachusetts.

His birthplace, Mardin was then part of the Ottoman Empire but is now in modern day Turkey.

He is unquestionably accepted as one of the great portrait painters of the 20th century.

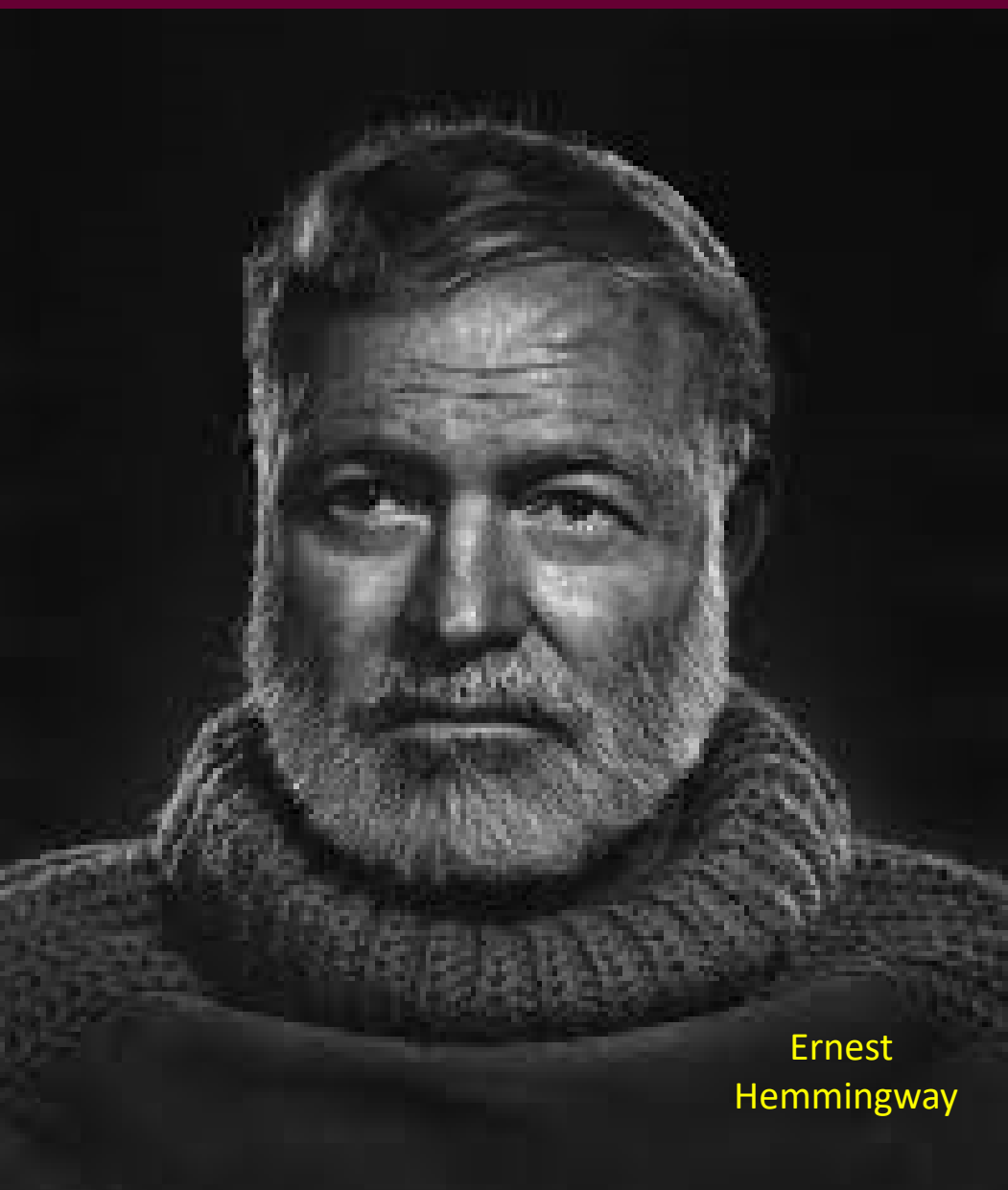




Martin
Luther
King

Karsh grew up during the Armenian Genocide and witnessed the massacre of many of his relatives and also his sister starving to death.

The Armenian genocide started in 1915 and continued after the end of WW1.



Ernest
Hemmingway

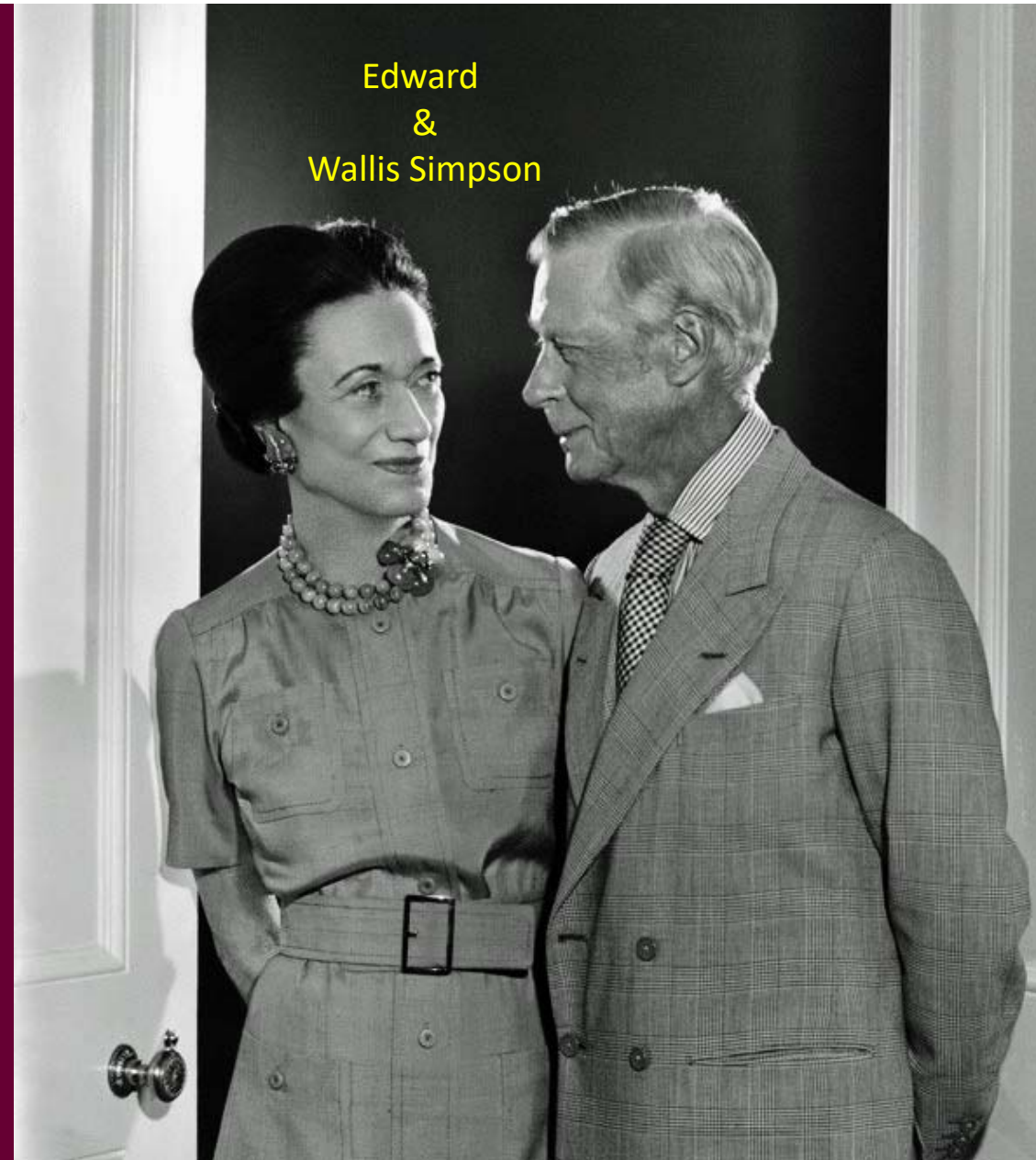
During his childhood the Ottoman Empire persecuted and systematically exterminated between 800,000 and 1,500,000 Armenians. Largely, I suggest, forgotten by history.

He , and his family, were constantly under threat and were driven from village to village.

In Karsh's autobiography he says :-

“Cruelty and torture were everywhere.”

“ My earliest memories were taking food parcels to two beloved uncles torn from their homes, cast into prison for no reason and later thrown alive into a well to perish.”





Wallis
Warfield
Simpson

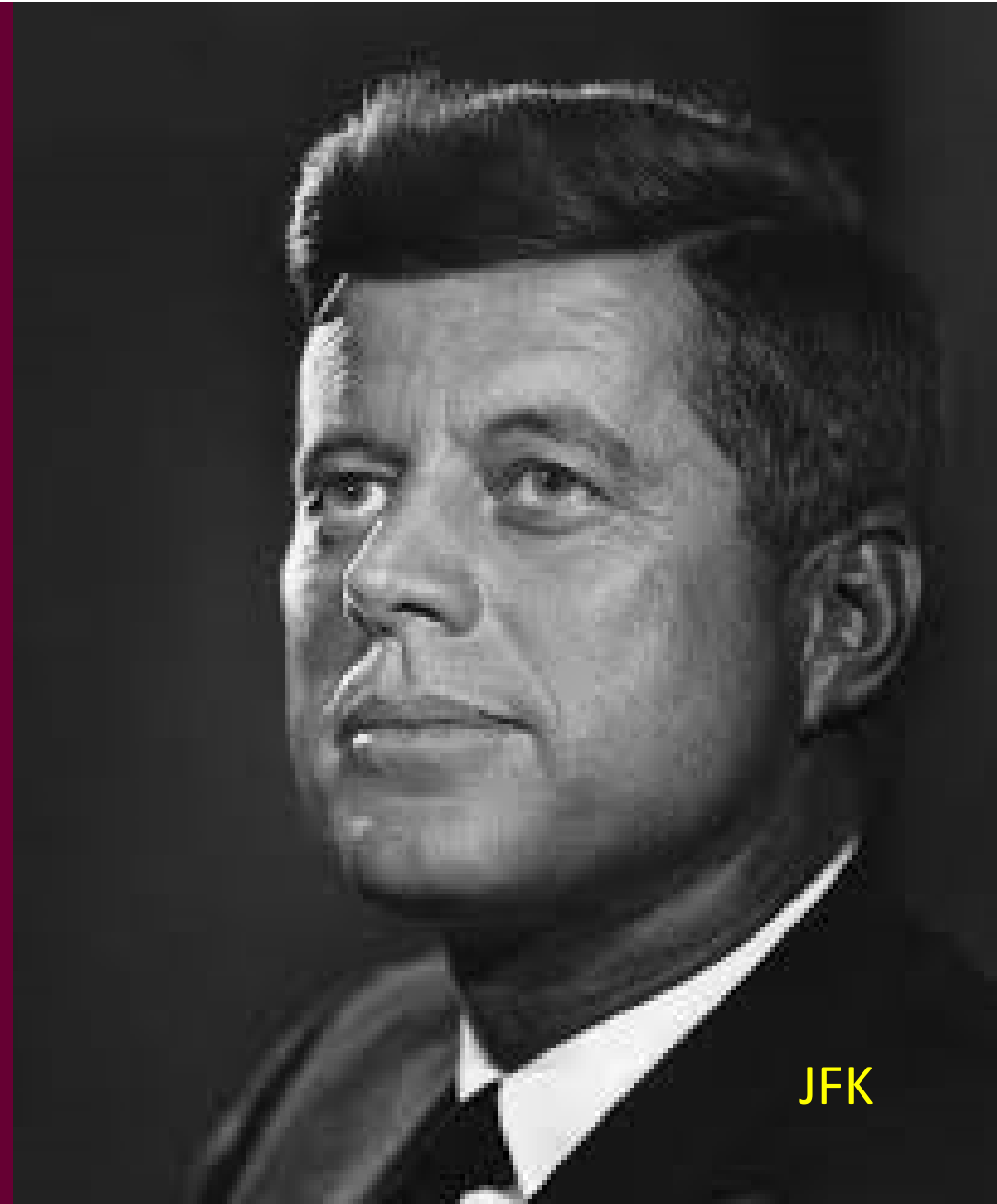
He also recalls a severe typhus epidemic in which his sister died.

In 1922 his family fled on foot leaving all their possessions walking for a month to Aleppo, Syria.

Had they been able to travel by train which was forbidden, it would have taken just two days.

Later, at the age of 16, he was sent to his uncle in Sherbrooke, Canada.

He travelled on the liner Versailles from Beirut and after a voyage of 29 days, and having turned 17, he arrived in Halifax, Canada on New Years Eve.



JFK



Yul
Brynner

He spoke very little French, even less English, and had practically no money.

He was met by George Nakash, his uncle, who had sponsored his entry into Canada and who he had never seen before.



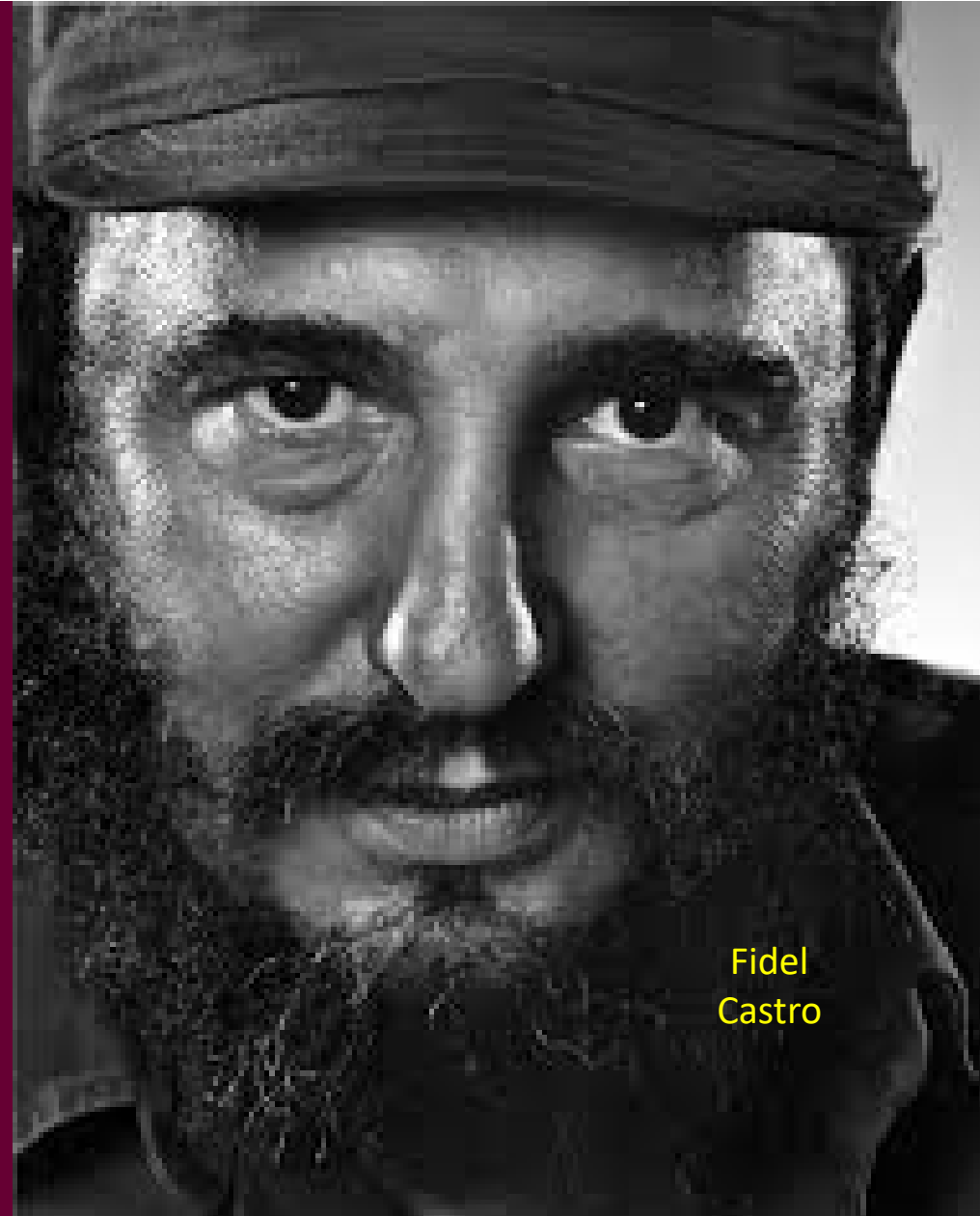
Lauren
Bacall

It took two full days by train to travel to his uncle's home and Karsh marvelled at the size of the country.

In Sherbrooke fortuitously his uncle was working as a photographer.

In addition to attending school Yousuf assisted his uncle in his studio although at the time it was his intention to be a doctor.

His uncle however quickly realised that his nephew had great potential and offered him every encouragement to develop his skills.

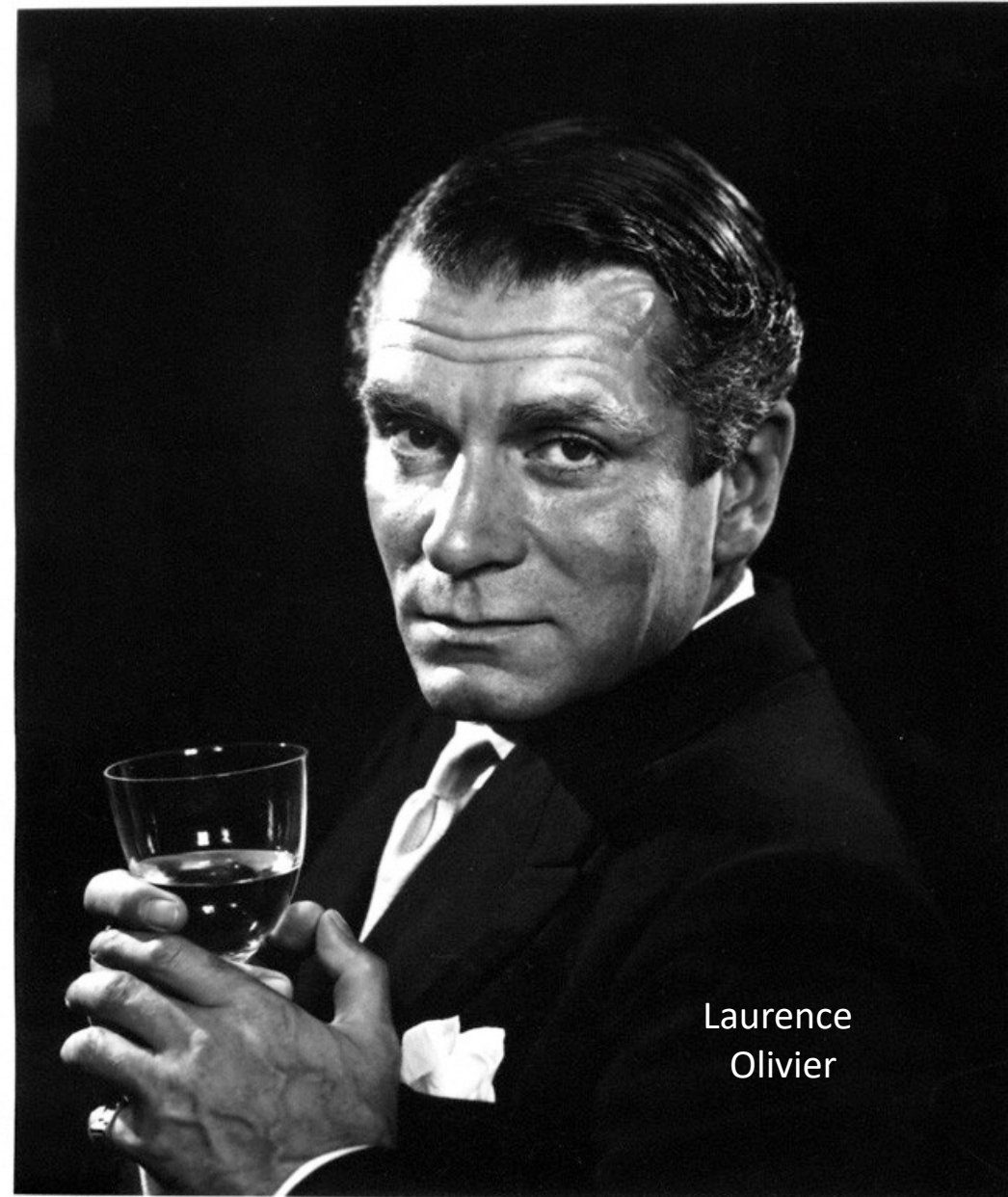


Fidel
Castro

Using a small camera given to him by his uncle he took a picture of a landscape with children playing.

He decided to give the print to a classmate as a Christmas present.

His friend secretly entered it into a photography contest and it won the 1st prize to Karsh's astonishment.



in 1928 his uncle arranged for Karsh to be apprenticed for six months to John Garo, a successful portrait photographer in Boston, Massachusetts.

He credited Garo with teaching him “to see and remember what I saw.”

Garo also told him “Understand clearly what you are seeking to achieve and when it is there, record it.”

Dwight
Eisenhower

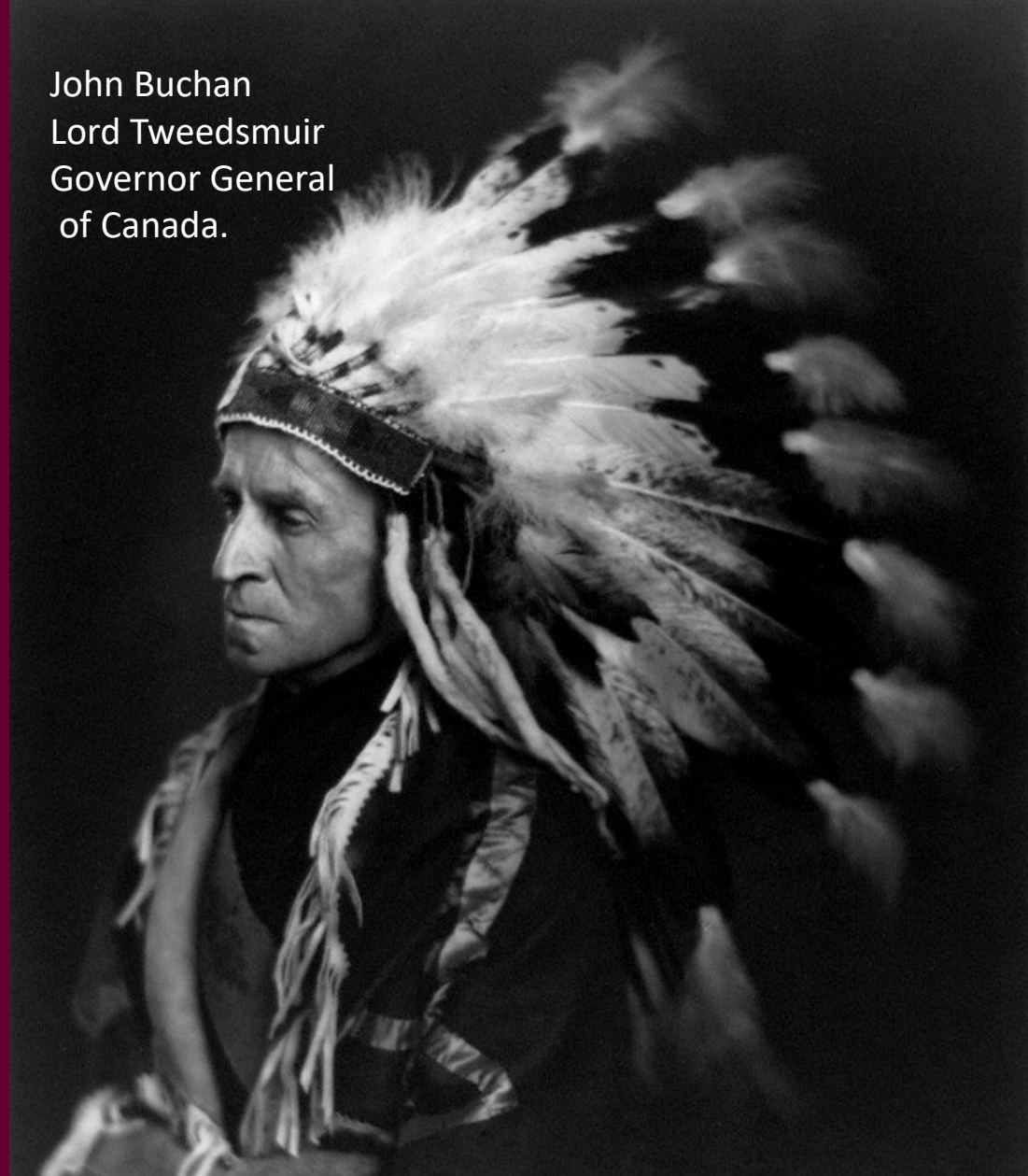


After four years working in Boston he decided to return to Ottawa, where he joined John Powis in his studio.

It was a modest studio, the furniture mostly being covered orange crates.

Two years later in 1934 when John Powis retired Karsh inherited his studio.

John Buchan
Lord Tweedsmuir
Governor General
of Canada.

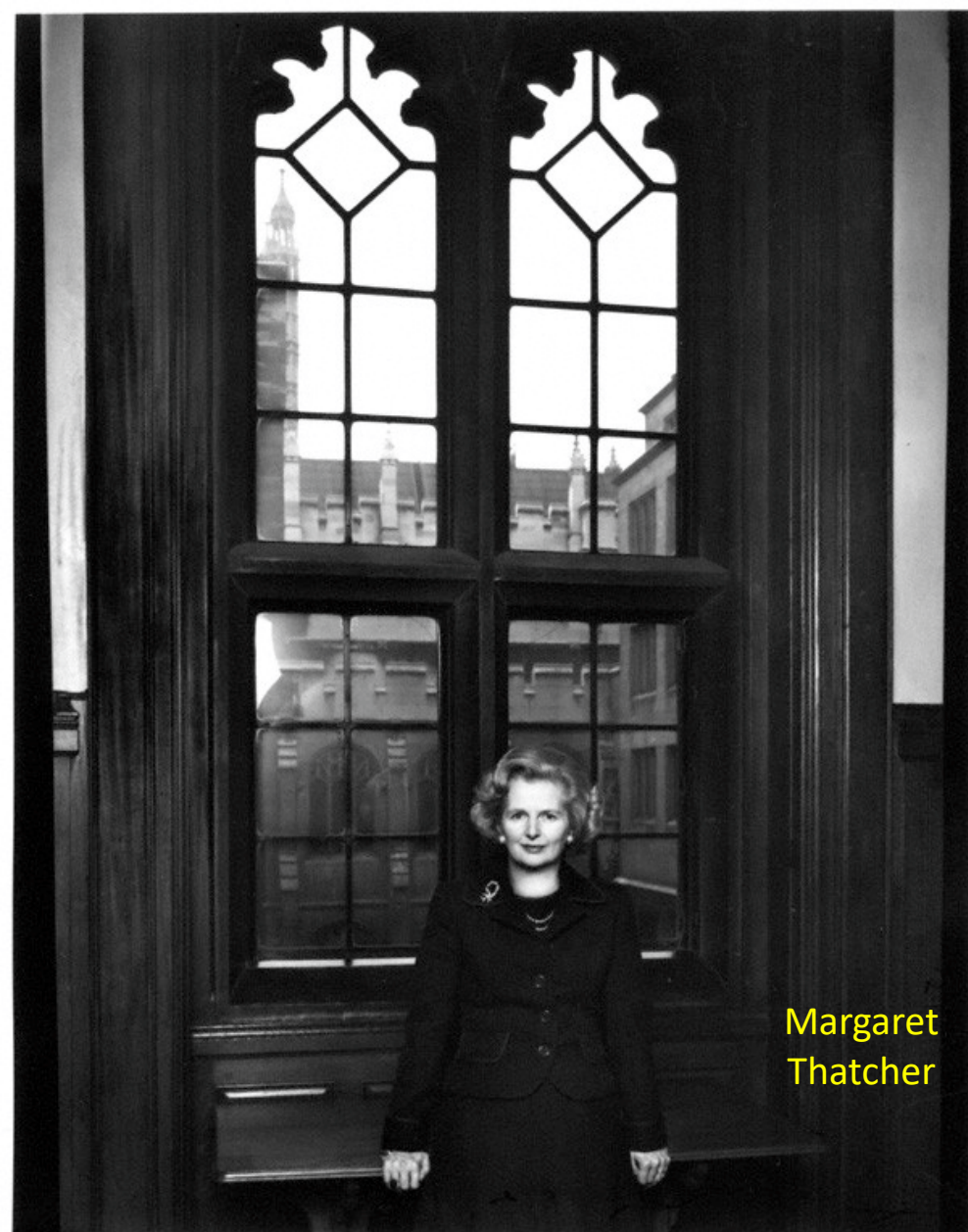


Mother
Theresa



He remained at the same studio for forty years, i.e. until 1972

His ambition was to photograph Ottawa's leading figures and the many notable foreign international visitors.



Karsh held his first exhibition in 1936 in the drawing room of the Chateau Laurier Hotel.

He also received and accepted an invitation to join the Ottawa Little Theatre.

On his first night there he was ushered into the dressing room of the leading lady, Solange Gauthier who was from France.

They remained married until her death in 1960.



Yuri
Gagarin

Yuri
Gagarin

Canadian Prime Minister Mackenzie King discovered Karsh and invited visiting dignitaries to sit for him.

On 30th December 1941 Churchill was visiting Ottawa when he sat for and was photographed by Karsh

Karsh said

“He was in no mood for portraiture and two minutes were all that he would allow me as he passed from the House of Commons chamber to an anteroom. Two niggardly minutes in which I must try to put on film a man who had already written or inspired a library of books, baffled all his biographers, filled the world with his fame, and me, on this occasion, with dread.



Karsh said :-

“Churchill’s cigar was ever present. I held out an ashtray, but he would not dispose of it. I went back to my camera and made sure that everything was all right technically.”

“I waited; he continued to chomp vigorously at his cigar. I waited. Then I stepped toward him and, without premeditation, but ever so respectfully, I said, “Forgive me, sir,” and plucked the cigar out of his mouth.”

“By the time I got back to my camera, he looked so belligerent he could have devoured me. It was at that instant that I took the photograph.”



It was Churchill's image, which is said to be the most reproduced photographic portrait in history, which brought Karsh to international prominence.

Of the 100 most notable people of the 20th century named in the International Who's Who, Karsh had photographed 51.



Asked why he photographed, almost exclusively, only famous people he replied,

“I am working with the worlds most remarkable cross section of people. I do believe it’s the minority who make the world go round, not the minority.”



Alfred
Hitchcock



Mikhail
Gorbachev

One of Karsh's secrets was that he was a master of studio lights.

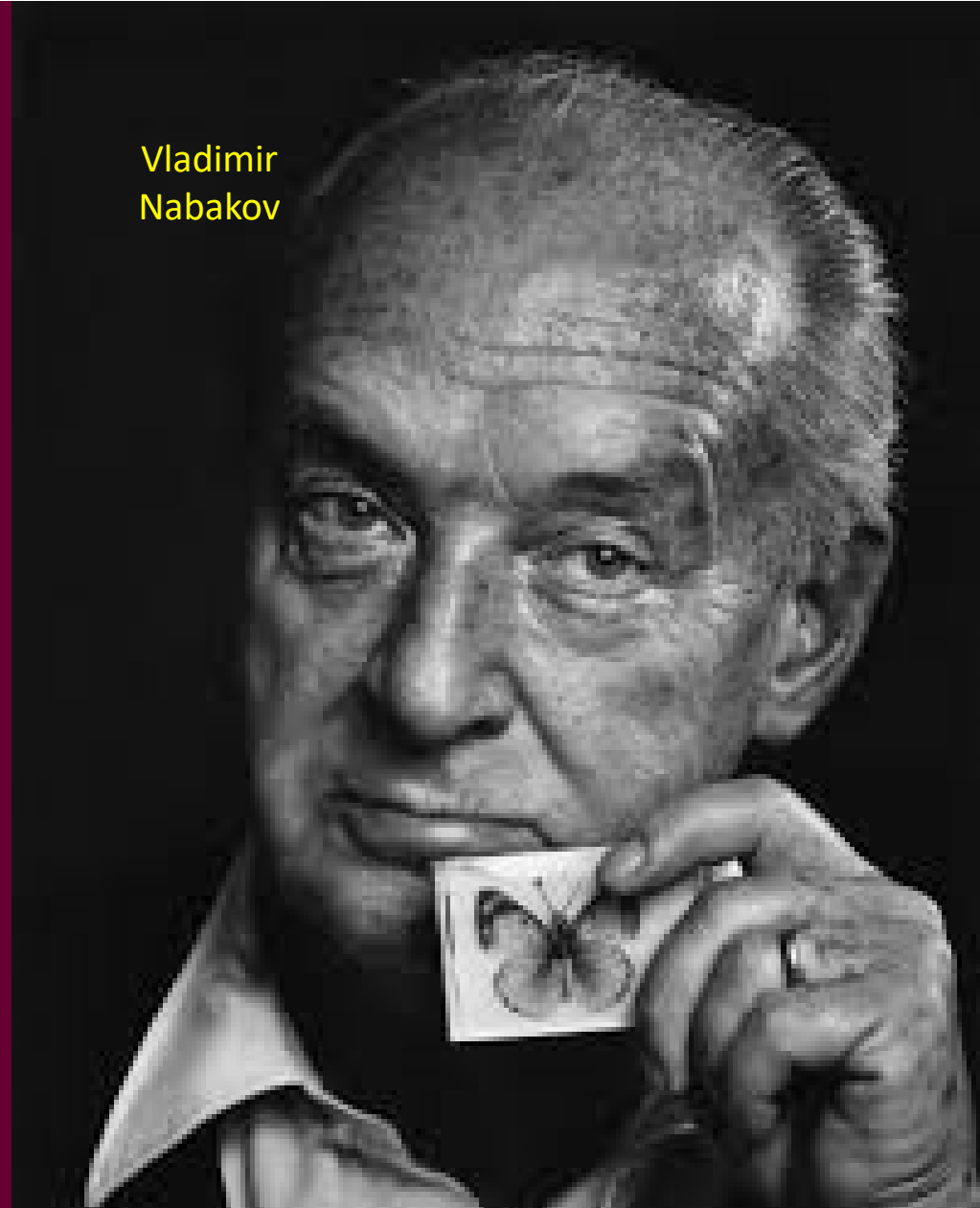
A distinctive practice was to light the subjects hands separately.

As can be seen in these photographs he almost always shot in black and white only rarely resorting to colour.

In 1998 Karsh celebrated his 90th Birthday, Queen Elizabeth opened His exhibition “Karsh in London” at Canada House in Trafalgar Square.

In the same year he was honoured with the prestigious Fox Talbot Award.

Vladimir
Nabakov



/This picture was taken on February 14th 1946 at her parents house, not long after she had appeared in the film National Velvet.

Surprisingly she was just 14 years old at the time.



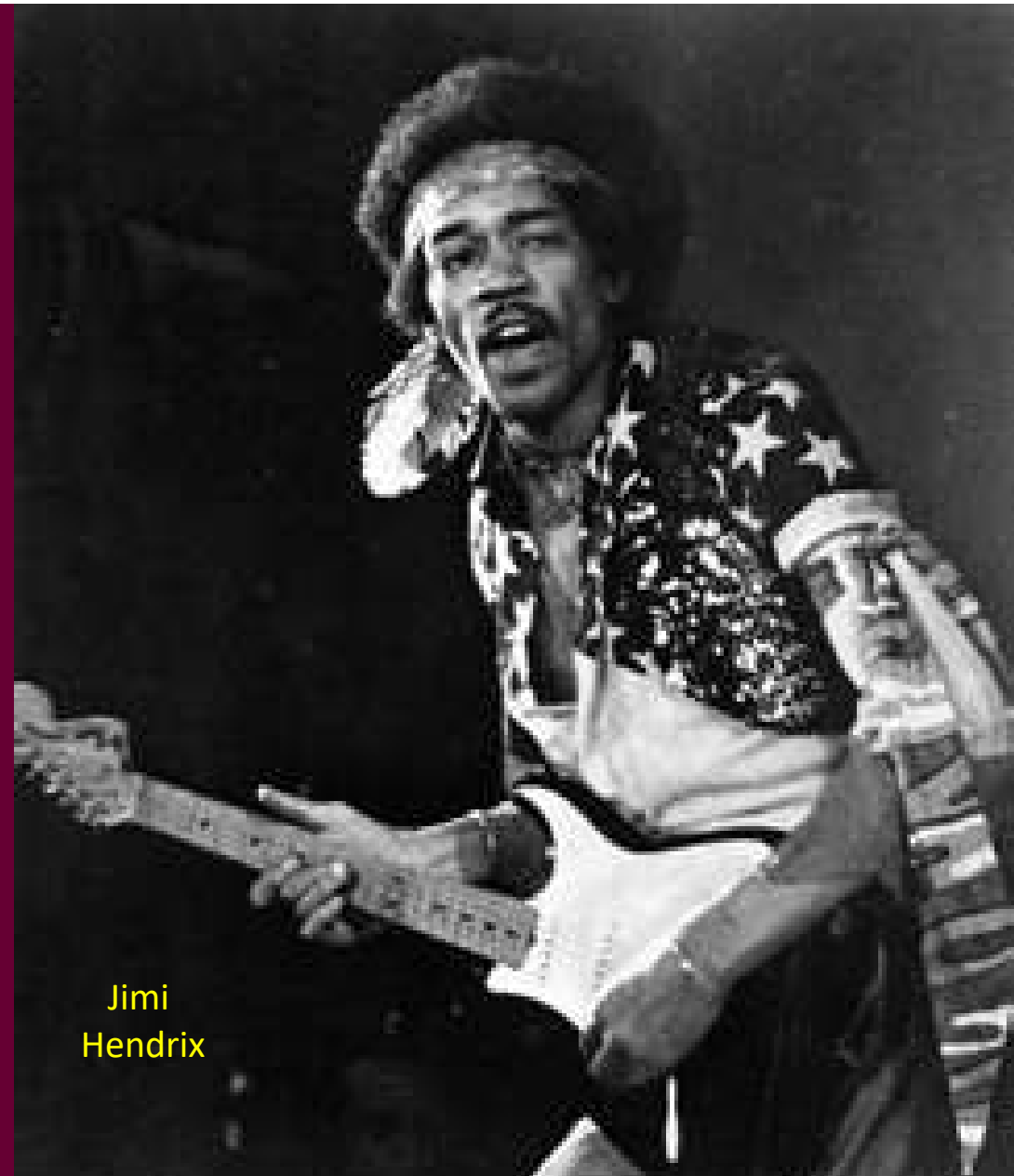
Elizabeth
Taylor

In his autobiography Karsh wrote;

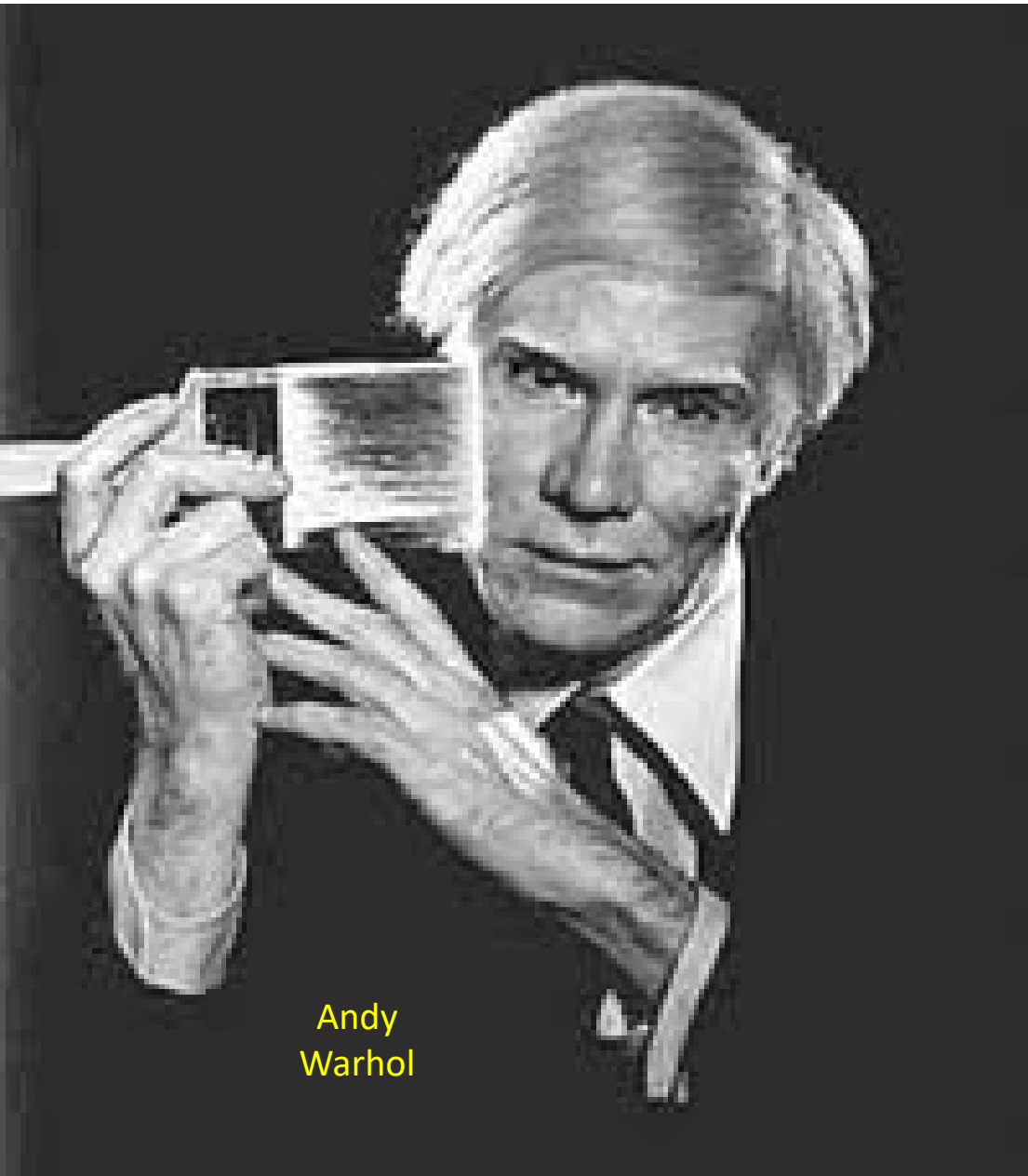
“I believe it is the artists job to accomplish at least two things – to stir the emotions of the viewer and to lay bare the soul of his subject.”

“

“When my own emotions have been stirred , I hope I can succeed In stirring those of others.”



Jimi
Hendrix



Andy
Warhol

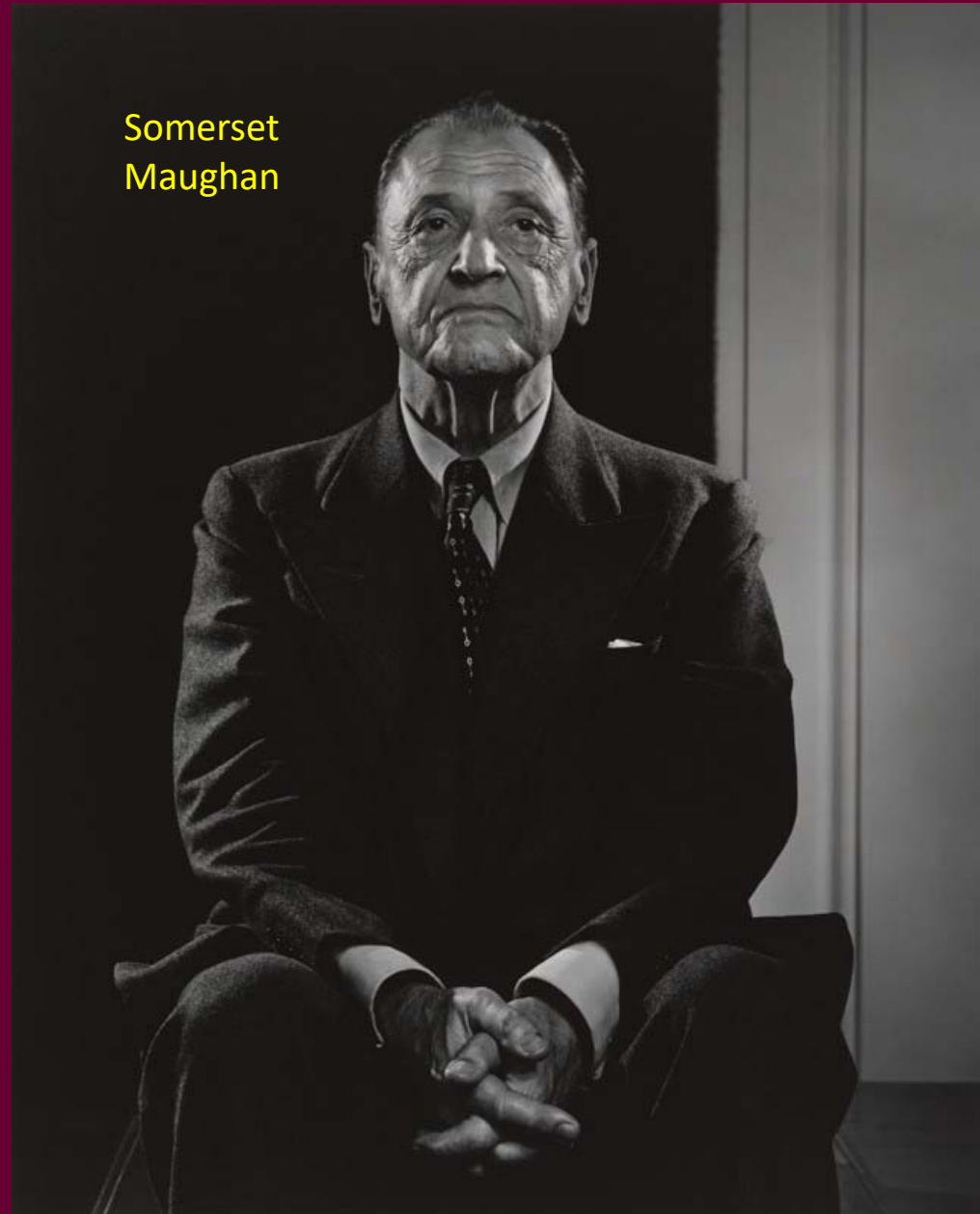
“But it is the mind and the soul of the personality before my camera that interests me most, and the greater the mind and soul, the greater my interest.”

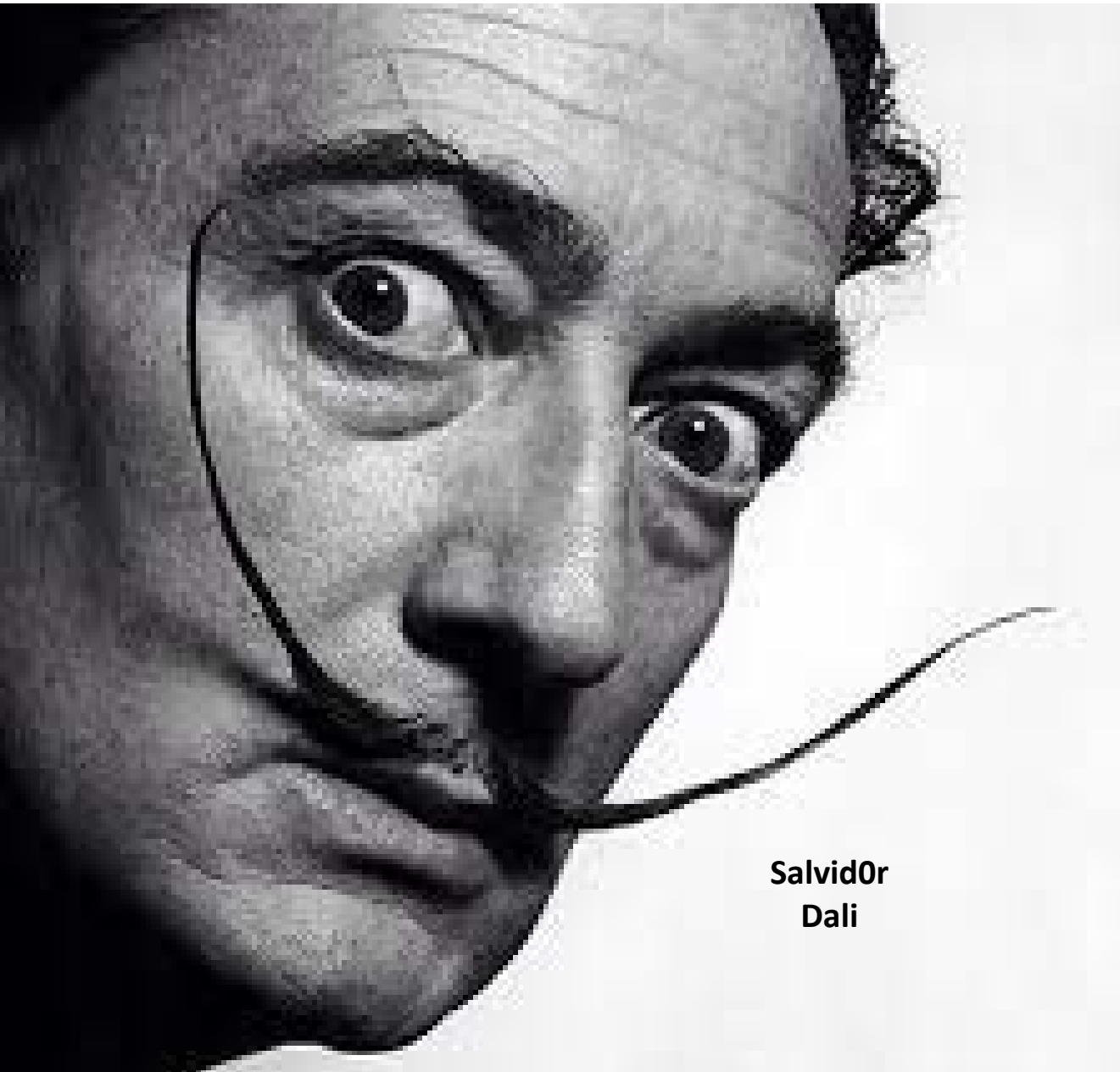
Some of his more vocal critics stated that his photo portraits are too similar, most of them having a solemn feel.

However his supporters and admirers were more than sufficient to dwarf the number of his detractors

The Economist likened the criticism of his work to complaining that “Rembrandt’s paintings do not make you laugh!”

Somerset
Maughan





Salvid0r
Dali

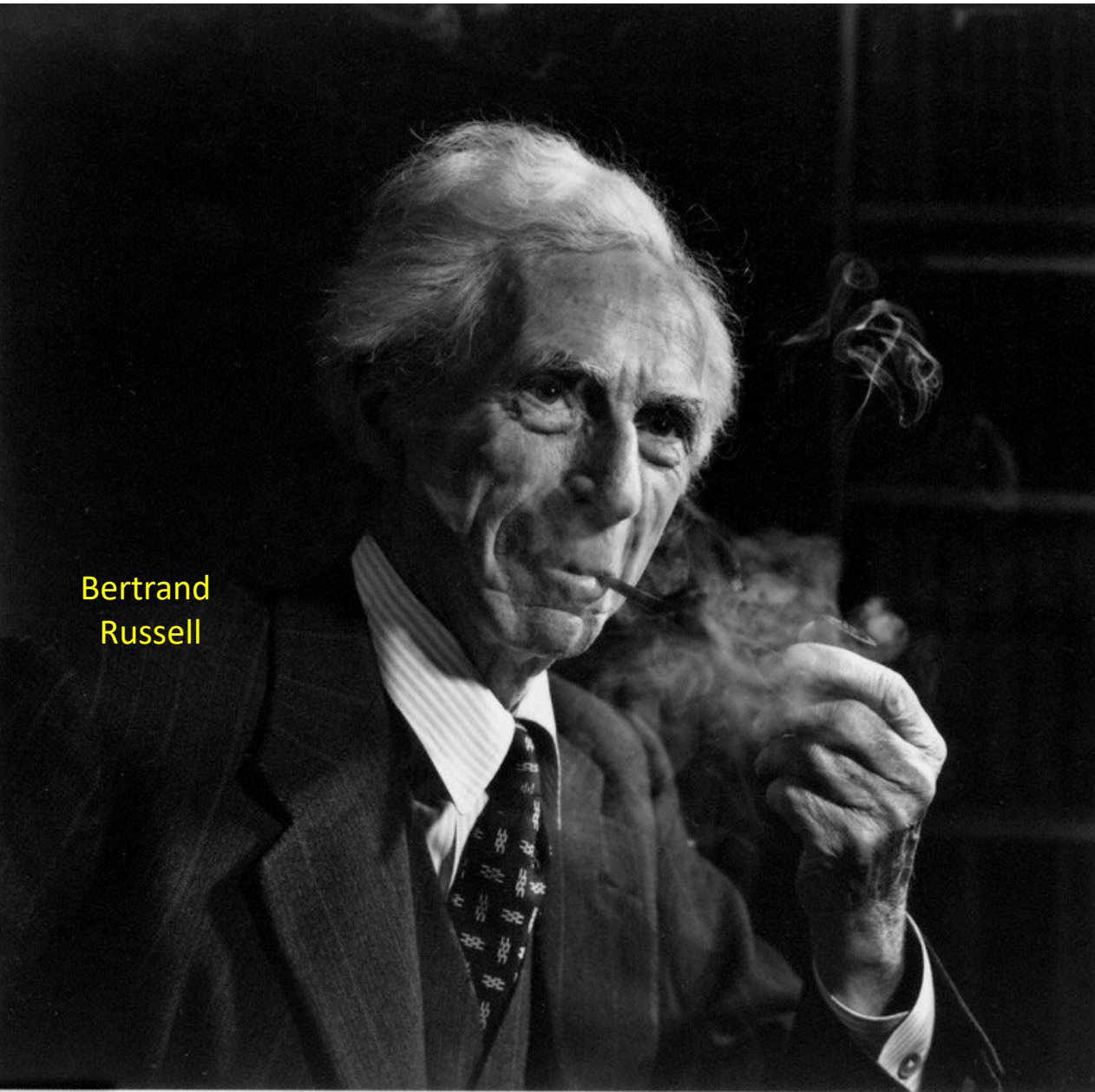
Maybe this portrait goes a little way to contravene the suggestion that all his portraits were the same and extraordinarily solemn!

In my view this fully captures Dali's eccentricity and his attention seeking.

Another less than solemn portrait!

Do you recognise who is this subject is?





Bertrand
Russell

All 335,000 of Karsh's negatives are now Deposited with the Canada National Archive in Ottawa

These represent the core Collection of the Portrait Gallery of Canada opened in 2005.



Fidel
Castro

He said that his ability with the lighting of his subjects came from his early days in Ottawa when he regularly photographed the local amateur theatre group.

He was recognised for giving just as much time and attention to all his subjects, whether or not they were famous.

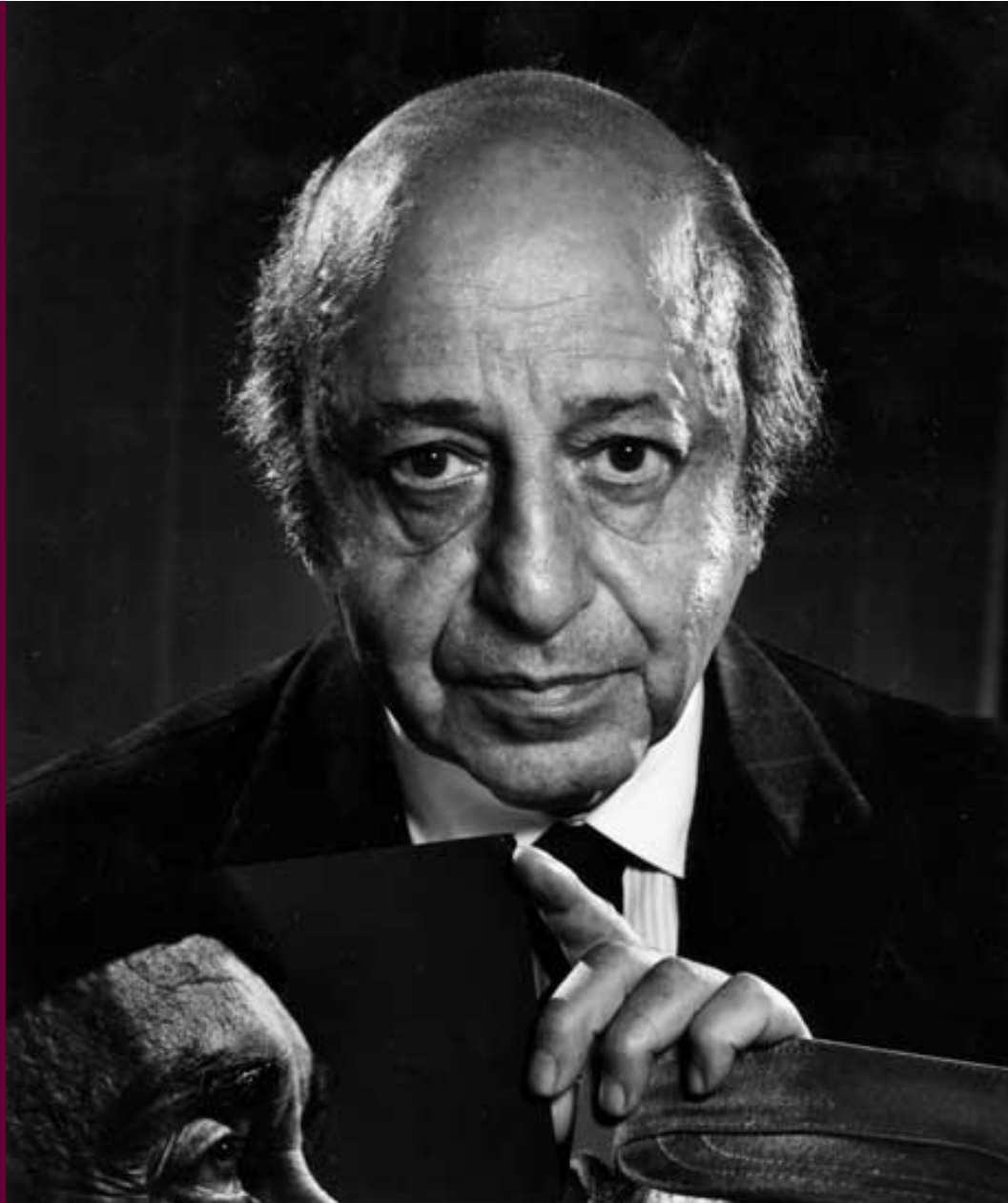
Karsh said one of his secrets was to fully research his subjects prior to meeting them.

He said that this enabled him to converse easily and relax his subjects before photographing them



Yousef

1908



Karsh_s

2002

Thank you
for your attention
and hopefully
also your interest.