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Discovering India

Explore the subcontinent through the images of India's Foreign Photographer of the Year, Fredric Roberts

By Christopher Robinson, Photography By Fredric Roberts



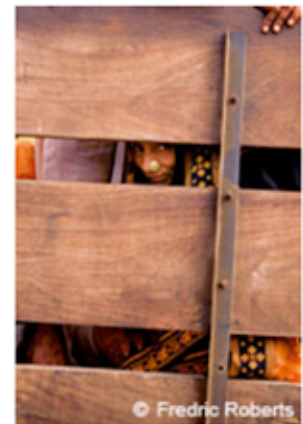
Much of Fred Roberts' work in India has coincided with the dramatic advancements in digital cameras over the last decade. He shoots exclusively with digital SLRs. Working in narrow streets and shadowed doorways, then moving quickly to capture vibrant crowds in direct sun is challenging. Spontaneity is an important part of Roberts' photography. The people he photographs are real people in their homes or going about their lives. They aren't made-up models. Roberts' relationships with his subjects—the people—is the fundamental underpinning of his work, and bringing out the unique communication he has with them is critical to the images. Above: Dancing Bells.

“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.

—Fred Roberts”

In 2011, Fredric Roberts of Los Angeles, Calif., was presented with the award for Best Foreign Photographer for India. The award was given by the government of India at a ceremony in Delhi, and Roberts' photographs were displayed at the UN in New York for a special exhibition to commemorate India's presidency of the UN Security Council. For Roberts, the award and exhibition were the culmination of a whirlwind decade of travels and adventures, both physical and spiritual, in a part of the world he has come to admire and respect.

Roberts' journey began when he enrolled in a photography workshop at the Santa Fe Workshops. It was 2000, and he had just retired from an enormously successful career as an investment banker. Roberts had risen to the top of the finance world, but that world had changed around him. His career was built on the values of bringing his clients to troubled businesses with the goal of building something sustaining and beneficial. He was both brilliant and passionate about it, but the industry transformed around him. In the 1980s and 1990s, investment banking morphed into an endless race for fees and ever-larger deals that often were more self-serving for the bankers than beneficial for the community. Roberts, who had previously explored his own spiritual and artistic side with a six-week journey to Asia in 1986 where he photographed the rural areas and ways of life of Buddhist monks, felt the passion for his work in high finance slipping away. By the end of the 1990s, he had decided to devote his efforts to various charitable and civic organizations in Southern California, and to his photography.



Woman In A Truck



Brahmanpuri

Roberts' photographs from India show the synchronicity that happens when an artist meets his muse. Roberts' photography turned a critical corner when the photography techniques he was learning in workshops met with the opportunities that India presented. During his many trips to India since 2000, Roberts has developed a close relationship with the people, place and pulse of the subcontinent. His museum exhibition, "Humanitas: Images Of India," and the books, *Humanitas* and *Humanitas II: The People Of Gujarat*, capture cultural nuances and the spiritual and emotional wealth of people who most Westerners would consider to be poor. In a 2008 interview, Roberts articulated his feelings about the people and what he's trying to do in the photographs: "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."



Rathwa Man At Home #1



Gau Ghat



Malharrao Ghat

By all accounts, India is a massive assault on the senses. Visually, the colors can be overwhelming to the point of utter chaos—women in bright orange saris, the unbelievably saturated reds of Holi festivals, buildings painted indigo. Creating order from the chaos takes a trained eye. One needs to embrace the fantastic hues without being so distracted that one loses the bigger context. The story is in the people; the color is the conduit through which this unique culture flows. In his images, Roberts never loses sight of the people he's photographing. He never sees them as mannequins for colorful garb. He uses the colors to captivate our attention and draw us in to reveal the people and the culture.



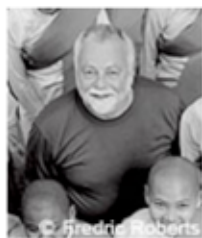
This Article Features Photo Zoom

India is in transition. With a middle class that's now larger than the entire population of the U.S., a new sense of prosperity and the subtle erosion of traditions have come to India. In this context, Roberts' work has taken on yet another dimension. Because he's drawn to the rural areas where change comes more slowly, he's inadvertently documenting a way of life that may not exist much longer. The homogenization of India is taking place, but outside of the big cities one can still see the rich traditional culture with its ancient roots.



Vishnoi Mother And Child

In *Humanitas II: The People of Gujarat*, Roberts explores a region that's off the usual agenda for most tourists. Nestled in the northwestern corner of India with a coastline along the Arabian Sea, Gujarat is an economic driver for the country. Ancient port cities, a border with Pakistan and the neighboring states of Rajasthan, Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh make Gujarat a cultural crossroads. Temples dedicated to a broad range of religions abound and folk art is everywhere. Here, Roberts' DSLRs have found a fertile environment. Away from the developed cities, the region's villages still show their roots to hundreds of years of princely state rule, and in the protected national parks and forests, Gujarat is the natural habitat of the rare Asiatic lion.



As a foreign photographer, Roberts comes to India with a vision that hasn't been jaded by the constant stimulation that is India. Around every corner there's something new to see. Some people speak of the ability to see the world with the eyes of a child, constantly discovering and questioning. This is how Roberts approaches the sights and people of India. And at every step, his camera is ready. Seeing India through Roberts' photographs is to glimpse the richness of a deeply spiritual people.

To see more of **Fredric Roberts'** photography, visit fredricroberts.com.