

The engaged observer

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The engaged observer

René Burri, born in Switzerland but well-travelled throughout the world, is one of the leading reportage photographers of our time. We pay homage to an octogenarian who has remained young at heart.
By Manfred Papst

It is 20 November 1946. Winston Churchill is making a state visit to Zurich. He is being driven through the city in an open-top car. He is sitting in the back of the vehicle wearing a hat and overcoat. With his famously sceptical expression, he is observing the curious onlookers on the Bürkliplatz. One of them is thirteen-year-old René Burri, the son of a chef who has not only brought the unfamiliar taste of lobster, oysters and other exotic seafood to the city on the Limmat but has a passion for music and photography as well. He sent the young boy off with the camera: "An important man is visiting Zurich. You have to be there."

René Burri has often recounted this anecdote, and none of his biographers has omitted the tale. It marks the beginning of a lifelong passion for his profession as a reportage photographer in the right place at the right time, and it is just as much part of the Burri legend as his most famous photograph – Che Guevara in Havana in 1962. The nonchalant, self-assured army commander with cigar in mouth became one of the century's iconic images. The Beat Generation reproduced the portrait thousands of times even if it was not quite as famous as the Che portrait by the Cuban photographer Alberto Korda, taken two years earlier, which appeared on countless T-shirts, posters, cups and emblems. The youth of 1968 celebrated the revolutionary like a pop star. Everyone is therefore familiar with Burri's photograph, even if they have never heard of the socialist experiment in Latin America or the Swiss photographer himself.

World-famous portraits

Observing not just this classic photograph but the whole series that Burri took at the time is very enlightening. It reveals how the por-

traitist approaches his subject, wins his trust or at least stimulates his interest, captures dynamism in his photographs and creates a mood that enables a precise and expressive portrait with a depth of focus to be taken from close-up. Producing such masterful photography as that of René Burri cannot be achieved with a cold remoteness but instead requires an approach based on empathy, curiosity and even love. This is illustrated by Burri's portraits of Che Guevara as well as those of Le Corbusier, Alberto Giacometti, Yves Klein, Maria Callas and Pablo Picasso, whose Milan retrospective in 1953 bowled him over and whom he accompanied to a bullfight in Nîmes in 1958, in addition to those of many other nameless people going about their everyday work.

The Swiss photographer accompanied Le Corbusier discreetly but persistently for years. Three thousand negatives pay testament to that. He would otherwise never have been able to take the epochal portrait of the young woman on the Second Sunday of Easter in front of the famous chapel of Ronchamp, among hundreds of other photographs. But Burri also sometimes takes advantage of opportune moments. Nothing exemplifies this better than a snapshot taken in Havana in 1993. A young man wearing black trousers and a white shirt cycles through the city. His girlfriend is sitting on the bicycle rack. She gives the photographer a beaming smile and indicates something to him with an intricate gesture that probably only he could understand.

Reality and dreams

But even when Burri is photographing buildings and landscapes instead of people, he demonstrates this enigmatic ability to involve

himself in his work. It is extraordinary that the artist kept back some of his best photographs and only released them later, including work featured in the 2011 issue of the culture magazine "Du" dedicated to him.

By his own admission, René Burri has always been a very visual person. He drew a lot as a child, became a passionate film buff as a teenager and enrolled at the School of Applied Arts. There, the photography course was the closest match for his dreams. But reality was different back then. Like the two legendary Swiss photographers, Werner Bischof and Ernst Scheidegger, Burri attended the classes of the austere object photographer Hans Finsler. He learned his trade thoroughly, for which he later had reason to be grateful. But at the time, the meticulous lighting of still life and photography of such spectacular subjects as hen's eggs and pans was not exactly what the young man had been dreaming of.

Working for the Magnum agency

In the end, Paris and not Zurich was to be the centre of Burri's life. The metropolis on the Seine became his great love and destiny. Life was vibrant here, and literature and art flourished. There was something extraordinary to capture with the camera all the time. In 1956, Burri began his collaboration with the famous Magnum agency founded in 1947 by Robert Capa, David Seymour, Henri Cartier-Bresson and others. He had been taken there by his former colleague Werner Bischof (1916–1954). By 1959, Burri had become a fully-fledged member of Magnum at the age of 26. In 1963, he married Rosselina, Werner Bischof's widow, who worked on the international photography scene herself. He had two children by her, and his second wife, Clotilde Blanc, bore him a third child.

Paris was one of Burri's great passions; the other was travel. David Seymour and Henri Cartier-Bresson took him under their wing at Magnum. They sent him on great journeys with editorial journalists. Burri's photographs soon appeared in Europe's leading magazines. A

dream career! The young Swiss toured the Suez Canal, the Mekong Delta and Israel, but also documented the reconstruction of Germany after the Second World War – a subject of great interest to him



From the Brasilia series: a family on the opening day in 1960 and an architectural photograph from 1997

Le Corbusier in his studio in Paris in 1960 and the famous photograph in front of the Ronchamp chapel, which he designed



as his mother was German. His study "Die Deutschen" (The Germans), which first appeared in 1962 and was later significantly extended, became a standard reference.

Brasilia – a long-term project

From the early 1960s, Burri travelled all over the world with his Leica cameras visiting Latin America, the USA, Japan and China, south-east Asia and Canada, as well as Africa. He became a tireless citizen of the world. One of his special areas of interest was the megalopolis of Brasilia. He dedicated a fascinating long-term project to the new city, covering the period from 1958 to 1997. It is intriguing to note how Burri followed the bizarre urban project of the architect Oscar Niemeyer. Before that, in 1958, he had devoted a photo-reportage to the gauchos in Argentina, which we still find spellbind-

ing today. Why? Because Burri's best photographs are always symbolic. They do not just depict a moment but interpret a society and an era. They often emerge because the photographer does not concentrate on the subject of general interest but instead displays the courage to turn, look around and focus on seemingly minor elements in proceedings.

As a photographer, Burri has developed a highly personalised style where precision and empathy, proximity and distance, an instinct for melancholic charm and situational comedy come together. However, he is certainly not in thrall to his own achievements and convictions. He says he is no "Burrst", coining this nice word-play himself. Many others have attempted to imitate him, but he is always one step ahead. He has dealt with the transition from analogue to digital photography effortlessly and although he established himself early on as a

classicist of black-and-white photography, he has also masterfully conquered the world of colour, partly because this was required by clients such as "Life", "Look", "Stern" and "Paris Match", but also because he is interested in experimenting. For decades he has always carried at least two cameras around his neck. This year, his dual talent was on display in an exhibition at Zurich's Museum of Design. It was entitled "A Double Life", alluding to an embarrassment of riches and not to a dichotomy.

In his colour photography, Burri is free, playful and audacious. He casts off the constraining demands of his black-and-white world. He did so in 1957 when his first colour reportage was published in "Du". Burri plays with perspective, detail and background. Nothing is firmly defined any longer. This irritated some of his critics. They missed the familiar cohesion.

Burri also recognised the historicity of his medium at an early stage. He attentively observed the development of cinema and television. It was apparent to him as early as the 1960s that photography as he practised it belonged to the world of yesterday – digitisation or not. But he also saw its unique qualities – the ability to capture moments and expand upon them in a context of fleetingness and superficiality.

Charming, self-assured and amiable

A René Burri homage that just looked at his artistic talents but not his personality would fall short of the mark. The grand seigneur of Zurich is not just someone who disappears behind the camera and triggers the shutter release. He's a character of whom you would wish a congenial photographer to take pictures: a dandy dressed in a suit, hat and scarf, possibly also with a cigar; a flâneur who is charming, self-assured, eloquent and quick-witted; a man who knows and loves life. A cheerful, approachable person. Who can blame him for his small vanities? He can also be extremely generous. He donated all the exhibits in the show to the Museum of Design in Zurich, the former School of Applied Arts where his career began.

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Impressions from Cuba: a couple on a bicycle on the Malecón in 1993 and Che Guevara as Minister of Industry in 1963



1957: Picasso in the studio at his home in Cannes and giving an art lesson to his children Paloma and Claude and two friends



Rio de Janeiro in 1960: the Ministry of Health designed by the architect Oscar Niemeyer



RENÉ BURRI

René Burri was born in Zurich on 9 April 1933. He has belonged to the elite in his profession since 1959 as a permanent member of the Magnum agency. He obtained global fame with his black-and-white reportage and portrait photographs but has also excelled at colour photography. He has never perceived himself purely as an artist. As a photo-journalist and witness of the times, he has produced an oeuvre of lasting significance. Numerous publications and exhibitions document his work.