
UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT GENRES OF STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Quick Guide
Written by Diane Wehr





Photograph by Diane Wehr

There is no **"Bureau of Street Photography"** like the "Bureau of Weights and Measures," which certifies the accuracies of weights and measures standards (United States) and even more importantly conducts evaluation on new commercial weighing devices.

So it is every photographer for him, or her, self to decide where they stand on the philosophical issues of this genre of photography.

We could have a lively discussion: What is your definition of street photography? Do you think street photography has to be candid? Does it have to be shot on the street, or even in a public place? Does it have to include people?

When I came across an article by Spyros Papaspyropoulos of Street Hunters about the different types of street photography, it was so definitive that I thought, "Well, at least this is settled."

Of course, it is not. This was just a starter list. And even more fascinating was the way that other photographers sliced and diced what the classification of "type" even means.

There is some very fancy thinking out there when it comes to defining street photography.

This article is about three of the **straightforward types** of street photography.


For these types of street photography, the intention of this article is to:

1) Give a name, or classification, to the type so that if you see a street photo of this type you can identify its classification and think about how it fits into the broader category of generalized street photography. This process will also allow you to see how the various types of street photography overlap, because street photos are sometimes more than one type.

2) Identify some famous photographers whose works fall into a particular category. Internet searches will always give you an opportunity to see photographs of famous photographers that cannot generally be reproduced, for example, in an article like this. You can see what is regarded as the best work. You possibly can see how that type of photography has

evolved over time. Most importantly, you can see what has already been done. That leads into a glib observation: "No point in reinventing the wheel." It is true that the goal is to develop your own street photography style, but a tried and true path toward that goal is learning from, if not outright copying, the masters of the genre.

3) Provide some "homegrown" tips on how you might get started or further develop this type of photography for your own portfolio.

 **Recommended Reading:** If you'd like to improve your portrait photography, including street portraiture shots, Grab a copy of Photzy's [Art of Portrait Photography premium guide](#).



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CLASSIC OR CANDID STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

There is a lot of agreement in the photography community that this is one of the types of street photography. It has these characteristics:

1. It captures of the day-to-day lives of people in their daily surroundings
2. It is candid photography; that is, people are unaware of the presence of the photographer
3. It tends toward being documentary or journalistic
4. There is a balance between people, the environment, the story, and the feeling
5. It was traditionally shot with a focal length lens of 35mm to 50mm

The most famous candid street photographers were Henri Cartier-Bresson (1908-2004) and Robert Doisneau (1912-1994). They set the standards for street photography in general, and candid street photography in particular. Their photographs are widely available for viewing on the Internet.

Almost every street photographer takes some classic or candid photos. This is an easy entry point into street photography because smartphone cameras are perfect starter devices for candid, documentary-style photography. They are inconspicuous; always with us; and have focal lengths, which vary by brand and model, of about 30 mm.

As you might imagine, the fact that you have taken a photograph of people in a public setting does not mean that it is a compelling picture. If you go out to take this kind of photograph, look for interesting scenes.

Henri Cartier-Bresson often used juxtaposition; that is, employing compositional contrast like young versus old or large versus small – anything that your viewer will perceive as opposites.

Also compelling are photos that have compositional connection, such as a repetition of color, people being spread out evenly, or any group of things that the viewer will see as similar.

Photos that capture a funny scene, show surprise, or signal distress also tend to be more interesting.

Composition counts for a lot, so the more familiar you are with the principals of composition, the better chance you have to produce a good candid photo.



Photograph by Diane Wehr

STREET PORTRAITS

This is another straightforward type of street photography; although, goodness knows, we could spend a lot of time debating whether the “posed street portrait” really qualifies as street photography. Or should it be in its own genre? I think history is on the “yes” side of that question.

Street portraiture has these characteristics:

1. It can be shot candidly or not candidly
2. It focuses on the person more than the environment
3. It often conveys feelings. There is a lot of interest right now in telling the story; think of the work of Brandon Stanton in his series, “Humans of New York.”
4. The face is the focus



Photograph by Grant Ashford

There are so many great street portraitists and so little space to mention them! Diane Arbus (1923-1971), whose photos were often not candid, was noted for her portraits of marginalized people in our society. Vivian Maier (1926-2009) was an inspirational “amateur” street photographer whose photos were unknown and unpublished in her lifetime. Their work is easily searchable on the Internet.

I am currently following two photographers on Instagram whose street portraiture work is mesmerizing.

John Farnsworth, armed only with an iPhone, is making his way through South and Central America leaving a trail of wonderful, colorful street portraits.

Grant Ashford has a gallery of amazing work, which he has taken – get this – with his range finder camera held upside down at his hip. He must be left-handed! Grant’s other great gift is that he tells an incredible story for each of his photographs through a short caption. His work, complete with captions, can be seen on Instagram.

Street portraiture was an inadvertent entry point into street photography for me. In my frequent travels, I was very interested in photography that portrayed the culture.

The travel company that I use specializes in offering cultural opportunities, and as a bonus it does the hard work of securing permission for photography.

When I looked back at my travel pictures, I realized that I had a large collection of street portraits. You might look back on your portfolio; it can give insight into your photographer's soul!

If you are given to studying tips on photography, as I am, there is no shortage of coaching about the how-to of getting started and advancing your skills in the street portrait genre.

My homegrown suggestions revolve around the availability of opportunity.

Travel is one opportunity. Because cultures are so different, almost everyone is interesting.

Also, your inclination to boldness is heightened because perhaps it might be a once-in-a-lifetime chance for a photograph.

You will find that vendors on the street, at trade shows, in food trucks, or at community events welcome the opportunity to be photographed.

Anyplace there are crowds, there are street portraits to be taken. For example, a number of the photos taken in the January "Women's March" in venues around the world are earnest facial shots.

This is, in part, is because the crowds were so large and confining that there was often no other choice but to concentrate on the "close shot."

Mass transportation, such as a subway system, is also a place of much story, and therefore another accessible and good place for taking street portraits.



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GEOMETRIC STREET PHOTOGRAPHY

Geometric street photography is another traditional type of street photography, but the name is not as familiar as this type of art is. It is also sometimes called graphic street photography, but as the term 'graphic' can have a larger meaning than design, I will just stick with the term 'geometric.'

These are the characteristics that define geometric street photography:

1. Patterns, textures, shapes, lines, tones, color, and light are all used to give a visual experience
2. There is little reportage or documentation of events
3. It is a pleasing combination of people and objects, but the people, or parts of people, are not usually the main subject; the emphasis is on the environment



Photograph by Thomas Leuthard

4. This type of photography rarely tells a story, but can pique feelings

The original master of using geometry in street photography is Henri Cartier-Bresson.

To quote Eric Kim in his article, *10 Things Henri Cartier-Bresson Can Teach You About Street Photography*, "If you look at the composition of his [Bresson's] images he integrated vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines, curves, shadows, triangles, circles and squares to his advantage. He also paid particular attention to frames as well."

An award-winning photographer, whose images include the stunning use of geometry, is Antonio E. Ojeda. You can find his work on Facebook and on Instagram.

Thomas Leuthard, who is recognized as one of the top street photographers of this decade, often uses geometry in his photographs. His work can be viewed on Instagram or Flickr.

Geometric street photography is a great entry point for anyone interested in architectural photography.

If you are a STEMs type (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics), you will likely find this type of street photography to be the most comfortable place to start. Ironically, it is probably a good fit for the artistic types as well, because the hallmark of this type of photography is good design.

One way to look for this kind of photograph is to find an interesting building, staircase, door, or anything architectural; study where you will get the most dramatic light; and then wait for a person to show up there.

Look for lines, shadows, bands of color, or the repetition of shapes, and again, wait for a person to enter the scene. This is not a type of street photography that requires stealth, but rather a good eye.

Street photography is deceptively simple. You don't have the same constraints as some genres of photography, such as demanding placement of focus or stringent lighting requirements.

There are literally streets everywhere, so opportunity abounds.

Nevertheless, it can be daunting to start taking pictures of people you do not know.


Understanding the types of street photography can help you find an entry point that feels comfortable.

Understanding who some of the great street photographers are, in each type of street photography genre, gives you a starting point to study photos that are considered to be the best.

Hopefully, you will find these "starter tips" helpful in getting you started, or perhaps help you to branch into a different type of street photography.



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📷 Self Check Quiz

1. Can you identify the type of street photography each of the three photos on the left represent?
2. Can you identify one street photographer famous for taking photos in each of the three types?
3. What type of street photography is (was) the best entry point for you?
4. What are three things that can make a street photograph more compelling?

About the Author



Diane Wehr is an amateur photographer and author with a particular interest in street and travel photography. She travels far and wide with her Olympus Mirrorless camera.

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