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Portrait of a Family

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Collecting family photographs allows members of different generations to view one another and participate in their family’s passage through time. These photographs help the family to explore, in an informal way, the evolutionary process of their lives. The camera as a tool with which to gather specific familial information, however, is used minimally: to record events, capture certain moments, and render likenesses.

Individual family members rarely scrutinize snapshots with the intention of decoding messages that lie within the photo’s frame. The posed family portrait, for example, while appearing simple, may contain significant information which the casual observer often fails to discern. But the critical eye can pick up subtle clues as to the nature and intensity of familial relationships or the hierarchical structure of the family. While the positioning of family members may reveal their status within the family unit, their proximity to one another might mirror the degree of emotional attachment between them. However, the amount of significant information available in a family’s photograph is lessened when a professional photographer is involved. The primary interest of a portrait photographer is in producing an aesthetically pleasing composition; therefore he or she arranges subjects according to size or shape with little regard to their emotional ties. However, family members arrange and present themselves to the camera as they wish to be portrayed. The grouping of relatives in anticipation of a holiday snapshot is an opportunity for a mother to pose proudly embracing her youngest child, perhaps alongside a highly regarded sister or brother. In this way, family members control the image being recorded as much as the family’s photo enthusiast.

My early interest in the photographic image predated any desire to be an active snapshot shooter. I recall the hours I spent as an adolescent searching through old shoe boxes overflowing with familiar photographs detailing my family’s early history. Hypnotized by the visual language of these photographs, I would read them and remember the episodes frozen in time. Often, the reality of the scenarios existed only with respect to the photos—I had no conscious memory of them. I examined these photographs as if under a microscope, breathing life into them while wondering about the forgotten emotions. The significance these pictures held for me formed the core of my later interest in the field of photography.

At the beginning of my career in photography, I turned my lens toward members of my family and began to compile a personal photographic history of them. I documented scenes which were familiar to and comfortable for me, paying particular attention to the Sunday gatherings at the farm of my grandparents, John and Mary Russo. These traditional weekly dinners have continued for the past twenty years, with most family members in attendance. They include my maternal grandparents, parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and first cousins.

Soon after beginning this project, however, my enthusiasm diminished. What I was seeing and experiencing was not being successfully transferred onto film. I understand now that a period of time necessarily had to pass before both my family and I became comfortable enough to allow the true character of the group to emerge.

Although initially pleased at being photographed, some members of the Russo family were admittedly confused by my obsession with recording them weekly. Picture taking had not previously been considered a routine activity, so in the absence of a holiday celebration, the presence of the camera seemed strange to them. I explained that photographing my family was an integral part of a current school project. They were content with this explanation and eventually relaxed despite the appearance of an ever-increasing amount of photographic equipment. In fact, the impact of the camera as an intruder has now weakened, and the taking of photographs has become a welcome part of my family’s weekly ritual.

Though the early photographic results were vague, they enabled me, after careful examination, to understand what I really wanted to photograph. My purpose is to carry the concept of the family album a step further by deliberately producing images which reveal some of the complexities of family life. Such photos can emphasize the relationships between family members, define male and female behavioral roles, and point out the existence of the family as a cohesive cultural unit.

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The Russos are a closely knit extended family of Italian-Americans consisting of twenty-four members: mother, father, five daughters, their husbands and children, and one unmarried son.

John Russo, father, who immigrated to this country as a young man, is presently a farmer living off his accumulated resources as well as his annual profits from a small stand located in front of his New Jersey property. At this stand he sells vegetables which he and his wife plant and harvest. Mary Russo, mother, is the American-born daughter of Italian immigrants.
She is the administrator of the family and as such influences most decisions relating to family matters.

Four of the six children and their respective nuclear families reside within a 20-mile radius of their original home, in South Philadelphia. The remaining two and their families no longer live in the Philadelphia area, but their visits there are frequent and often of considerable length. Close ties between all members of this extended family are maintained, and in addition to role-defined relationships (e.g., aunt to niece) there exist personal relationships between individual members.

When the original members of the Russo family arrived in this country, the family unit was the only secure organization on which to rely. They believed in the importance of a strong family and taught their children to respect it. As their children grew and had their own children, this belief was further reinforced. It is important to understand that the Russo family does not necessarily mirror the family structure found in modern-day urban Italy. Rather, this particular organization is a function of the American experience. It was an experience affected by prejudice and poverty, exacerbated by the lack of formal education. There was a need to protect and defend. The need was fulfilled in extending and strengthening the family system. Hence a tradition was born.

Perhaps the most tangible part of this tradition is the community in which it exists. Within the Italian-American community of South Philadelphia the Church is now, only slightly less than before, the center of all community activity. Each major family function is directly or indirectly related to the Church. These include numerous Catholic holidays—not to mention Sunday Mass—and frequent celebrations of the rites of passage: christenings, confirmations, marriages, and funerals. In this way the Catholic Church serves as a reenforcer of the basic family structure—fulfilling its needs and perpetuating its existence.

In the absence of severe social injustice and overt ethnic prejudice, the strong ties and extended family structure are still maintained. In fact, members of the third generation, who define their identities and values in somewhat different terms, continue to be responsive to this kind of family structure. One possible explanation for the persistence of the strong extended family among this group is the system of communication which underlies the interactive processes of the individuals involved.

Within this family the primary ideal to be upheld is that nothing can or will ever be more important than the family. The family structure consists of a system of attitudes, values, and customs to which all members must adhere. The specific message being communicated is that these particular family members comprise the most important unit in society. Security of all types, financial as well as emotional, can be achieved only within the limits of this unit. Generally this message is communicated through the art of "favorable reaction." Elder family members react favorably to any mention of the family, thereby reinforcing positive and constructive interactions between members. Often by not reacting (disconfirmation) or by reacting negatively to the mention of non-family-related matters or individuals, they deny the likelihood of meaningful interaction with any person not a family member. Some of the elder family members employ these tactics even more openly. I doubt, however, that the children or other family members who maintain relationships outside the family unit would completely discredit basic family philosophy. The inability to reject the family ideal is the result of highly effective training.

Since all celebrations become "family affairs" and since other pleasurable experiences may take place within the framework of the extended family, the children begin to associate pleasurable activity with the company of family members. Eventually, after having enjoyed playing with a cousin, for example, a child will begin to actively seek additional interaction. Time itself is a powerful factor. If individuals are continually thrown together, relationships develop.

During the summer months, a seaside house which is mutually owned is considered home base for the Russo family. However, the primary meeting ground for the entire clan is the home of John and Mary Russo. The Sunday gatherings of this family began approximately 20 years ago when my grandparents moved to New Jersey. Their married children, who remained in the city, chose Sunday as the time to enjoy an extended visit with their parents and yet unmarried siblings.

The basic form of these weekly dinners has changed little over the years. The meal generally begins with the arrival of the freshly baked Italian bread, which is purchased in the city's Italian-American community. At approximately three o'clock, dinner more formally begins; it consists of antipasto, salad, macaroni and meatballs, some additional entrée (often chicken or lamb), homemade wine, fruit, nuts, dessert, and coffee.

After dinner, female family members clear the table and congregate in the kitchen while dishes are being washed. The men remain with their wine in the dining room for discussion or a traditional card game. By six or seven in the evening, the day's activities near an end.
Figure 1 — The Russo family. This formal portrait was taken at the occasion of the 50th wedding anniversary celebration of John and Mary Russo.
Figure 2 —Raw homemade macaroni, which was prepared earlier, is gathered for cooking.
Figure 3 — Brothers-in-law congregate in the wine cellar, testing the wine from a newly opened barrel.
Figure 4 —Some family members viewing photos taken at the wedding anniversary party.
Figure 5  — Cousins.
One Sunday, while visiting a hospitalized family member.
Figure 8 —Lisa clearing the dinner table.
Figure 10 — Brother and sister.
Figure 11 —Mother and only daughter.
Figure 12 — Mother and youngest daughter.
Figure 13 — Cousins posing with an earlier photograph of themselves taken on the occasion of their confirmation.
Figure 14 —Mother and eldest daughter.
Figure 15 — Mother receiving weekly phone call from daughter no longer living in the Philadelphia area.
Figure 16 — Brothers-in-law.
Figure 17 — The Russo family following the departure of visiting relatives.