

Getting to Know a Regular

By: Madeline Abel

Being a first-time barista at a huge Starbucks is a nerve-racking experience that consists mainly of rushed smiles, meaningless how are you's, and a tremendous lack of thank yous. Having customers watching your every move while learning such an intricate job is scary, to say the least.



The first time I took Herb's order, I could sense he was different from most. Gentle, understanding, and most importantly, never in a rush. Herb is the definition of calm, cool, and collected.

"It is my consistent intention to maintain a clear focus on my values in all aspects of my personal and artistic life. No matter what the external variables that change over time, I keep front and center my respect for all human beings as well as my self-respect as a person and as an artist," He says, "This perspective enables me to weather the storms that life brings, providing me with the peace and clarity to focus on the beauty of life. The camera is my artistic instrument that allows me to share my vision and express what I see and feel through this life's journey".

I learned quickly that Herb is a regular and our conversations grew with every visit. Almost a year after meeting Herb, I overheard my manager speaking to him about his work. I had to ask about the conversation and my manager informed me that Herb is a photographer while handing me his sleek business card.

On my break I looked through his [website](#) and could not wait to discuss this discovery I made. While I was learning more about Herb, I found out he is a member of the Kamoinge collective, compelling me to learn more about this regular customer whom I have the privilege of serving an afternoon cup of coffee to.

Photography has been an extremely important medium in modern times because it allows individuals to see and portray almost anything imaginable. Decades ago during the Civil Rights movement, it was uncommon to see figures of diversity making their mark in American photography. White photographers would often exploit black communities by focusing on struggling areas, leaving out the truth in order to spread the false narrative that consumes this country.

Everything changed in 1963 when a small group formed the [Kamoinge Workshop](#) (pictured right) in New York City. The term “Kamoinge” derives from Kenya and means “a group of people acting together”, which is exactly what the workshop did for their community ([London](#)).



They were able to shed light on the beauty and authenticity of black communities in America through the moving and influential art form of photography. The group consisted of 14 individuals, with only nine original members still alive today.



The workshop has been featured in prominent museums all across the globe including the [Whitney Museum of American Art](#), Museum of Modern Art, Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, and multiple across Europe. The group's work is highly successful and has become the world's longest-running photography collective ([Rosen, 2021](#)).

A 10-piece portfolio was what stood between Herb and the group, and he attributes his Miles Davis portrait (pictured above) to being the one that got him in. Mediocrity was not an option

within the collective, and Herb recalls one of his mentors, Ray Francis, frequently explaining that Kamoinge was a group the stars fell on.

“You have to be right for Kamoinge, and Kamoinge has to be right for you”, he adds.

The group was extremely dedicated to the work they were doing for their community and it is such an inspiration to see how far they have come. Kamongie was a huge part of Herb’s life and he still considers the group a second family, as do all of the members.

“It’s not just working together...it’s a common goal, a common purpose,” he says. “That’s what we have always had no matter which way the wind blows”.

Herb was able to use his knowledge and expertise from the advertising world when it came to his work for Kamoinge.

“It becomes so automatic that you don’t think, you don’t have to think, because you have all that background”, he adds.

He expresses, “Commercial photographers in advertising, they are problem solvers... What makes one photographer different from the other is, can they solve problems?”

Herb attributes his strategic photography skills to the hours spent practicing in his studio creating commercial art where he was able to experiment and really master the tools he was using. He worked with an array of brands from pharmaceutical companies to the first contact lens manufacturer.



“I have gained so many jobs from where a photographer screwed something up”, he said. “There were clients that would come to give me the job and firstly I would listen because it was not about me.”

Too many photographers nowadays worry more about their image and less about the work they create. No one can jump straight into success, it takes a lot of learning. When it comes to the new digital age of photography, a lot of the key creativity is stripped away.

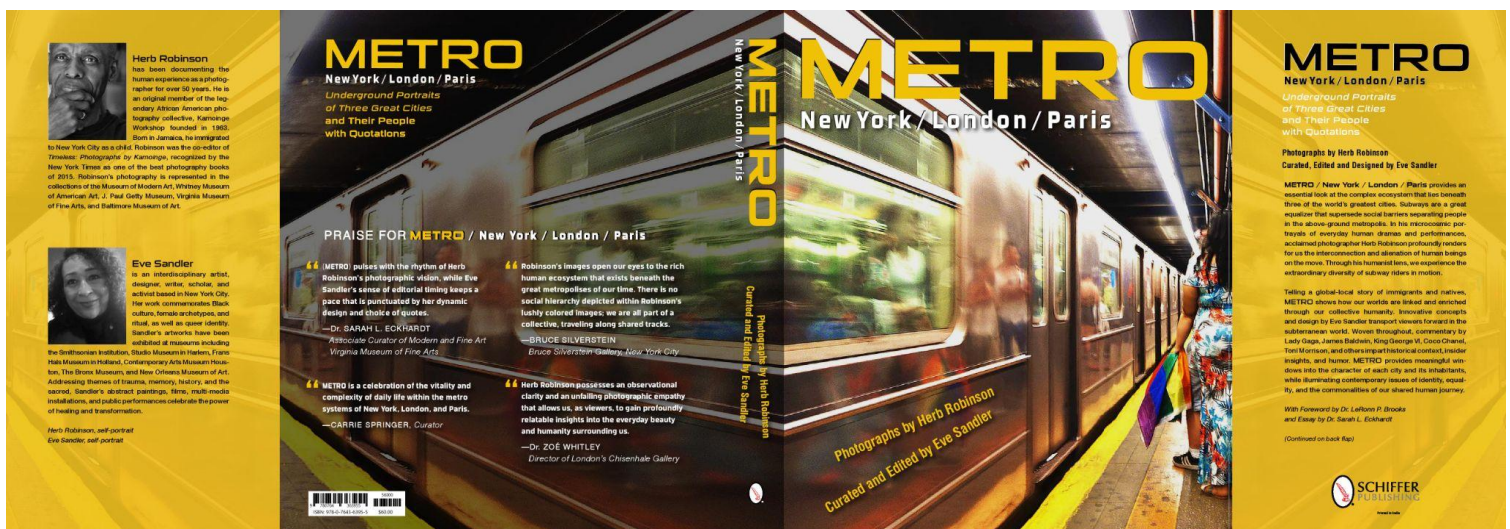
Lighting is a huge aspect of photography for Herb, and he feels that the new generation of photographers are missing out.

“Very few modern photographers can see lighting, feel it... Be aware of it, that’s the key. It’s not because we are living in a digital age... that’s not the issue, it’s the photographer; the software. A digital photographer will automatically not think of the lighting because they’re so worried about the machine, about the hardware, thinking from the outside in”, he said. “You have to work from the inside out.”

When people ask Herb about the specifics behind finding his inspiration, he always responds with, “It comes to me, it comes to me because I work from the inside out.”

I feel inspired every time I talk to Herb and our conversations have flourished over the months. He has offered such great advice and I am deeply touched by his work and ways of treating other humans. He is truly one of a kind, like the photographs he continues to take.

Herb's newest book is coming out in Spring/Summer 2022. The book titled, “Metro”, focuses on the public transportation of three cities – New York, London, and Paris.



References

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