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# Steve McCurry & Musée Barbier-Mueller

Exhibition from December 15, 2020 to June 15, 2021



# WABI SABI



*Beauty in Imperfection*

# Press release

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## **Steve McCurry & Musée Barbier-Mueller**

### **Wabi-sabi, Beauty in Imperfection**

**Exhibition** ▶ from December 15, 2020 to June 15, 2021

The Musée Barbier-Mueller has invited the celebrated photographer Steve McCurry to set up a common exhibition conveying their shared values of openness to humanity and sensitivity to beauty.

Steve McCurry explores the philosophy of wabi-sabi (the beauty of the imperfect, impermanence, and incompleteness) through thirty of his works.

Combining images by the artist with objects from its collections, the Musée Barbier-Mueller looked at formal criteria. The resulting juxtapositions offer a new perspective on one of the most-recognized photographers in the world, creating echoes, both narrative and aesthetic.

**Steve McCurry Studios**

Concept : Bonnie McCurry V'Soske

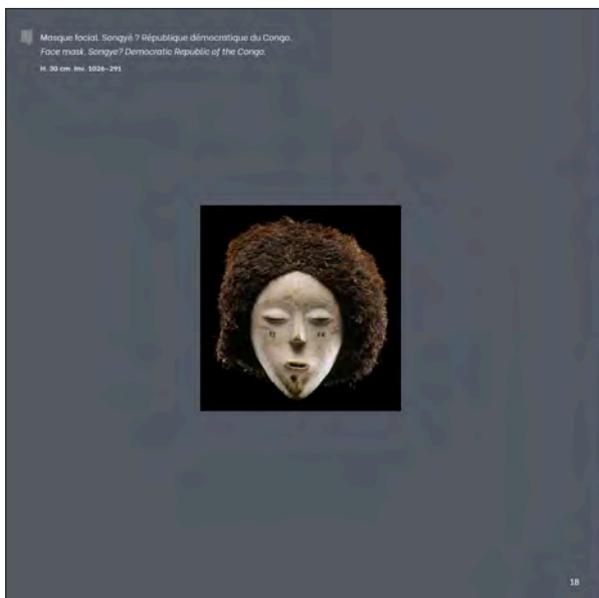
In collaboration with Biba Giacchetti and Sudest57



Male head or mask. Probably from eastern Syria, sphere of influence of the city of Mari (present-day Tall Hariri). Sumerian civilization. Early Dynastic (mid-3rd millennium BCE). Limestone, bitumen, and black and white stones. H. 12 cm. Inv. 240-107. Musée Barbier-Mueller.



Afghan soldiers, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2016. Photo Steve McCurry.



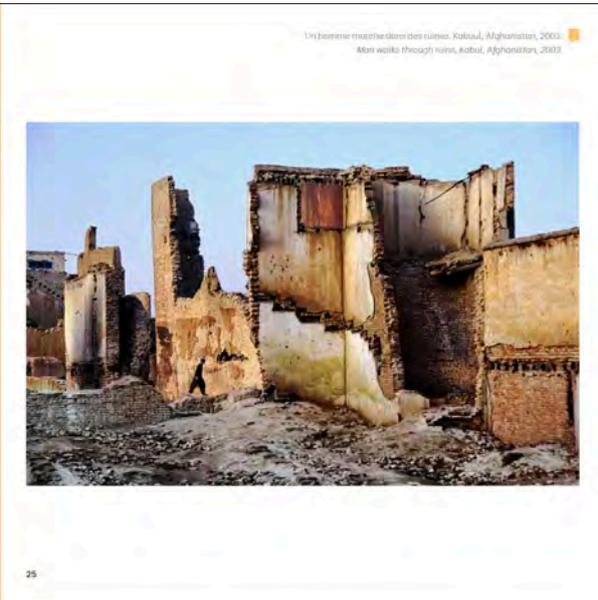
Facial mask. Songye? Democratic Republic of the Congo. Wood, with white paint and traces of blue and brown decoration, upholstery tacks, metal teeth, bast fibers, and bast weave. H. 30 cm. Former Berthe Hartert collection. Inv. 1026-291. Musée Barbier-Mueller.



Boy from the Suri people, Omo Valley, Ethiopia, 2014. Photo Steve McCurry.



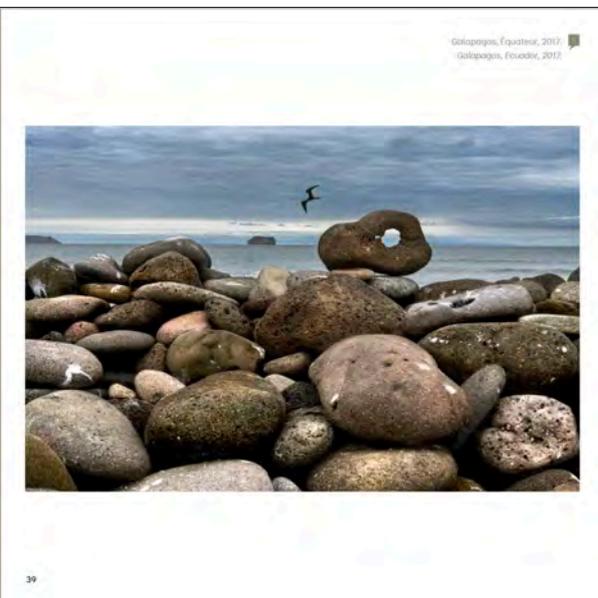
Lukwakongo mask. Léga. Democratic Republic of the Congo. 20th century. Whitened wood. H. 15.5 cm. Inv. 1026-465. Musée Barbier-Mueller.



Man walks through ruins, Kabul, Afghanistan, 2003. Photo Steve McCurry.



"Eye idol." Upper Tigris region, Iraq or Syria, northern Mesopotamia. Late 4th millennium BCE. Limestone. H. 29.5 cm. Inv. 240-202. Musée Barbier-Mueller.



Galapagos, Ecuador, 2017. Photo Steve McCurry.

## Lines, Colors, and Signifiers: The Barbier-Mueller Collection and the Photography of Steve McCurry

*Holly Roussell*

Three small figures, in the red robes of Buddhist monks climb up the steps to Myanmar's Mingun Stupa. They are dwarfed by the massive brick structure, beautifully discolored by weathering and erosion into in a spectrum of browns. Lush green mosses and vines tumble down the crumbling steps, and in the center of the image, a doorway to the pagoda with its geometric pediment draws our gaze. This magnificent portal is split in two by a fissure starting in the darkness of the holy space and reaching out like a lightning bolt beyond the frame of the image.

A small calcite container, fragile and delicately crafted, sits in a vitrine. The beige and white vessel prominently features the natural striations of the mineral and horizontal bands of neutral colors encircle its smooth, polished surface.

A sense of stillness and otherworldliness touches us when we look at Steve McCurry's photographs. Both narratively rich and visually complex, his images often seem to have the gravitas associated with Old Master portraits or grand landscape painting; McCurry offers these to the viewer in contradiction to the rapid speed and action of contemporary photography.

The project by McCurry and the Barbier-Mueller museum provides a new lens through which to view the work of one of photography's pioneering voices alongside one of the finest collections of art from the cultures of the world. The juxtaposition of the museum's objects with McCurry's photographs is an evocative curatorial action, compelling the active engagement of the visitor in their museum experience. An aesthetic and formalist experiment, these associations of image and object provide a contextualization of the master photographer's work and a greater understanding of his artistic process.

Steve McCurry's photographic practice is an act of meditation between the photographer and his medium— an instrument that has given him the opportunity to discover the world and observe its beauty and complexities. Precocious in his understanding of his craft, Steve McCurry is an autodidact photographer who went on to pursue a degree in film studies and cinematography from Penn State University. An energetic young man growing up in a rural, primarily Christian community in the United States, after graduating high school he began traveling and photographing the places he visited. With some early travel experiences in Europe and South America, McCurry recognized quickly that “his eyes were open to observe the world in ways he could not at home.” Determined to continue this process of discovery, he left his job at a local Pennsylvania newspaper at only twenty-eight years old to fly to Delhi for a six-week trip that ended up lasting over two years. He describes his relationship to the people in his photographs as fundamentally one of curiosity to—

ward humanity, and as that of an engaged citizen of the world. He has spent more than forty years traveling, meeting people, and allowing his presuppositions to be changed by those he met while his camera captured their stories. McCurry is endlessly fascinated by the parallel normalities encountered on his travels—and he insists that through photography he has learned there is not one form for success, happiness or a “good life” in this world, but a diversity of experiences, realities and cultures.

Photography as a medium has changed drastically in the twenty-first century, and McCurry is one of the few to have experienced this transition from the frontlines. In our contemporary world, travel and photography seem to go hand-in-hand. It can be hard to recall a time when either was as democratic or accessible. Because many of McCurry’s photographs narrate the stories of people, places, and cultures, they are also documents of threatened civilizations and passing historical moments. His famous 1985 cover of an Afghan refugee girl with piercing green eyes, Sharbat Gula, is a landmark in the history of photography, but it was also a picture that opened the minds of many of that generation to the realities of war and its human cost. In the last decades of the twentieth century, travel for most people meant a journey by car, except for the rare, almost luxurious, plane journey (hence the origin of the term “jet set”). In those times, for many photography provided access to a larger world. Since the advent of inexpensive air travel and the rise of smartphones, photography and travel pictures have become ubiquitous on various universally adopted social media platforms. Today, everyone is photographing, all the time. McCurry’s work is not the kind of simple diaristic travel images we are inundated with today. They couple a profoundly humanist perspective with a technical mastery of form that defined an era of documentary photography and made the places visited by many contemporary travelers become real and visible for the first time.

The use of light, color, and composition are where McCurry speaks most personally across his oeuvre. His photographs are meticulously composed tableaux of complex tonalities; they materialize the enigmatic and conjure complex emotions. McCurry’s artistic palette was hewn early on during his travels to India in the 1970s—an infinitely diverse country that McCurry saw as full of vibrancy, humanity, and contrasts. In a 1993 photograph from Rajasthan, girls dressed in flowing red skirts and vermilion scarves are pictured against the backdrop of a foreboding arid landscape. Their youth and energy is undeniable as they circle in toward one another, rushing for protection from the whipping winds of a dust storm. The gusts swirl in their skirts, pressing the voluminous textiles against their slight frames. The composition places the girls at the center of the image, and their youthful sociality clashes intensely with the weather-beaten ceramic pots lying in the foreground and the writhing, leafless trees behind them in the gales of dust.

The subject of McCurry’s work is most often people and their stories, but his work is infused with a sense of the passage of time and of what is lost or passing away; one may recall the crumbling clay pots in Rajasthan, or the fading frescos on the ocher walls of Cinecittà film studios, the pale lavender-colored moss growing on the exterior walls of a stone church in Ethiopia, the faded flamingo-pink houses and the vintage Russian cars in Havana. McCurry admits to having a proclivity toward objects and places with the patina of age. In Japanese culture, this interest in the ephemeral features in the Wabi Sabi philosophy. A somewhat abstract concept without a single definition, Leonard Koren’s explanation can provide some guidance: “Wabi-sabi is the beauty of things imperfect, imperma-

ment, and incomplete” and “represents the exact opposite of the Western ideal of great beauty as something monumental, spectacular, and enduring.”<sup>1</sup> Wabi-Sabi’s ethos permeates the images of this exhibition. For the photographer, details that define the mark of age, that embody Wabi Sabi, are vital to storytelling. These places, people and objects express the randomness and the imperfection of life. For McCurry, these frayed threads are the focus of his stories. For the collector, and the museum, objects are the keys to appreciate the past in the face of the work of time. Therefore, they can teach future generations about the world’s life before them, and the legacy of its diverse cultures and their histories, some of which are lost forever. By bringing an object from daily life into the museum space, by “collecting” it, pieces in the Barbier-Mueller collection have gone through the process known as musealization—a transformation of the status of the object whereby it becomes a subject of study, observation, and a reference used to understand other objects of this type and the culture that produced them. The International Council of Museum’s Key Concepts of Museology defines the process of musealization as “the operation of trying to extract, physically or conceptually, something from its natural or cultural environment and giving it a museal status, transforming it into a musealium or ‘museum object,’ that is to say, bringing it into the museal field.”<sup>2</sup>

The process of musealization is embodied in this exhibition catalogue. Objects enter a new discursive space with McCurry’s photographs. For example, in McCurry’s image, a young boy is sitting in a colorful restaurant in Ethiopia waiting for the evening cool to arrive. Placed beside this image is a multicolored Maasai cowhide shield from the border region of Kenya and Tanzania. In another image, two Afghan soldiers in camouflage pass an anticorruption mural; this is placed beside a limestone mask from the Sumerian civilization. In a third, a collapsing wooden tower in the middle of a grassy field in Karelia is juxtaposed with an Ethiopian silver head ornament; the unusual, disruptive nature of these associations will not leave any viewer indifferent. Both objects have been decontextualized by the act of their musealization—either in the case of the collection’s objects and their abstraction from their culture, period, or functional purpose—or in the instance of the photographs from their narrative, their moment of capture—as well as from the intentions of the artist and the situation of their making. It is in the absence of this initial context and in the presence of another—a curatorial juxtaposition—that the artworks begin to convey what artist and philosopher Ken Wilder refers to as a “representational excess: a content beyond that which they, strictly speaking, represent, precisely because this content is dependent on the beholder’s share.”<sup>3</sup> Whereas Wilder focuses most specifically on certain works of art and their intended reciprocal encounter with a beholder, this additional meaning can also be produced by curatorial contextualization: the museum invites us to bring into play our own individual projective and perceptive capacities in the space created by the dialogue of images and objects.

Photography and ethnographic objects are both used as means to observe and contemplate society past and present, and they convey their messages within formal characteristics and visual cues. Drawing attention to these formal qualities brings our attention to the process of creation. The photograph, like a sculpture or a painting, is composed using the tools of a skilled artist: technique, patience, light, and color. Part of the storytelling process employed by McCurry includes a patient and exacting attention to formal, graphic cues, and to objects with narrative potential. These markers act as signifiers for the viewer, references to collective history and knowledge that help us to read

aspects of the photograph. The significance of such markers is emphasized in this exhibition. Objects have been removed from their intended use by their musealization and are resituated in a context, curated, paired for us to explicitly contemplate, as dialogues. Objects have intentionally not been paired with photographs from the same culture; on the contrary, they have purposefully been selected for formal similarities of shape, line and color. These features draw attention to the nature of McCurry's photographic process and the intentionality inscribed in his images, as well as the way quotidian items take on the formal characteristics and become symbols of the natural world. The pairing of the work of McCurry with the Barbier-Mueller collection calls attention to the presuppositions we have as visitors when faced with unfamiliar artworks. We are invited to generate a story, in part using the images and objects, but also our own personal histories, associations, and cultural background. Thus, in this exhibition, the museum changes from a repository of material culture and historical objects to a space for artistic dialogues across time, space, and media.

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<sup>1</sup> Leonard Koren, *Wabi-sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (Point Reyes, CA: Imperfect Publishing, 2008), pp. 7, 50.

<sup>2</sup> André Desvallées and Françoise Mairesse, *Key Concepts of Museology*, trans. Suzanne Nash (Paris: ICOM, 2009), p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Wilder, *Beholding: Situated Art and the Aesthetics of Reception* (London: Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2020), p. 7.



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## The Musée Barbier-Mueller

Founded in 1977, the Musée Barbier-Mueller, located in Geneva's Old Town, is unique. Its mission is to make its collection, the arts of the world's cultures, accessible to the largest audience possible. Through temporary exhibitions, catalogues, and art books, it displays and documents masks, sculptures, ornaments, and fabrics from various cultures—Africa, Oceania, Asia, the Americas—and from classical and tribal antiquity.

Guided tours and activities tailored for children and adults foster a better understanding of the objects on display and the topics addressed. As a site of exchange and a meeting place, the museum hosts lectures, interviews, and round tables with artists, writers, and historians among others. It also organizes film screenings and fashion shows in order to expand the approaches to exhibitions.

For more information: [www.musee-barbier-mueller.org](http://www.musee-barbier-mueller.org)

## Steve McCurry

Steve McCurry has been one of the most iconic voices in contemporary photography for more than thirty years, with scores of magazine and book covers, over a dozen books, and countless exhibitions around the world to his name.

Born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, McCurry studied cinematography at Pennsylvania State University, before going on to work for a newspaper. After several years of freelance work, McCurry made his first of what would become many trips to India. Traveling with little more than a bag of clothes and another of film, he made his way across the subcontinent, exploring the country with his camera.

It was after several months of travel that he found himself crossing the border into Pakistan. There, he met a group of refugees from Afghanistan, who smuggled him across the border into their country, just as the Russian Invasion was closing the country to all western journalists. Emerging in traditional dress, with full beard and weather-worn features after weeks embedded with the Mujahedeen, McCurry brought the world the first images of the conflict in Afghanistan, putting a human face to the issue on every masthead.

Since then, McCurry has gone on to create stunning images on all seven continents. His work spans conflicts, vanishing cultures, ancient traditions and contemporary culture alike – yet always retains the human element that made his celebrated image of the Afghan girl.

McCurry has been recognized with some of the most prestigious awards in the industry, including the Robert Capa Gold Medal, National Press Photographers Award, and an unprecedented four first prize awards from the World Press Photo contest. The Minister of French Culture has also appointed McCurry a Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters and most recently, the Royal Photographic Society in London awarded McCurry the Centenary Medal for Lifetime Achievement.

McCurry has published books including *The Imperial Way* (1985), *Monsoon* (1988), *Portraits* (1999), *South Southeast* (2000), *Sanctuary* (2002), *The Path to Buddha: A Tibetan Pilgrimage* (2003), *Steve McCurry* (2005), *Looking East* (2006), *In the Shadow of Mountains* (2007), *The Unguarded Moment* (2009), *The Iconic Photographs* (2011), *Untold: The Stories Behind the Photographs* (2013), *From These Hands: A Journey Along the Coffee Trail* (2015), *India* (2015), and *On Reading* (2016), *Afghanistan* (2017), *A Life in Pictures* (2018), *Animals* (2019), *In Search of Elsewhere* (Fall 2020).

## USEFUL INFORMATION

### **Steve McCurry & Musée Barbier-Mueller** ***Wabi-sabi, Beauty in Imperfection***

#### **Musée Barbier-Mueller**

Rue Jean Calvin, 10. 1204 Geneva / +41 22 312 02 70 / musee@barbier-mueller.ch

From December 15, 2020 to June 15, 2021

- The musée Barbier-Mueller is open 365 days a year, from 11 am to 5 pm.
- Admission: adults, 8 francs; students, seniors, the disabled, the unemployed, and groups, 5 francs; children under twelve and schools admitted FREE.
- Public guided tours on Sundays and private guided tours on request, workshops for children (visit our website for more information: [www.barbier-mueller.ch](http://www.barbier-mueller.ch)).
- The exhibition catalogue *Steve McCurry & Musée Barbier-Mueller, Wabi-sabi, Beauty in Imperfection* is for sale in the museum shop and on its online bookstore, for 49 Swiss francs.
- All books published or co-published by the museum are on sale at the entrance to the exhibition halls.
- The Association of Friends of the Museum provides many benefits. For information, contact [jcmappus@barbier-mueller.ch](mailto:jcmappus@barbier-mueller.ch), +41 22 312 02 72.

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**For all requests for high resolution images, contact**  
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