



Annie Leibovitz in 2011.
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Leibovitz, Annie (b. 1949)

by Linda Rapp

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Annie Leibovitz is among the most famous of contemporary American photographers. Best known for her celebrity portraits and work in advertising, she has in recent years photographed a wider range of subjects. Her work has been shown at major exhibitions in the United States and abroad. She has also published a number of books of her photographs.

Anna-Lou Leibovitz was born October 2, 1949, in Westbury, Connecticut, but moved often during her childhood because her father, Samuel Leibovitz, was a lieutenant colonel in the United States Air Force. Her mother, Marilyn Heit Leibovitz, was a modern-dance teacher who studied with Martha Graham.

In 1967 Leibovitz entered the San Francisco Art Institute, planning to major in painting. During a school vacation, she and her mother traveled to Japan. There Leibovitz bought a camera and began taking pictures. On her return to college, she enrolled in a photography course and "was totally seduced by the wonderment of it all."

In 1970 Leibovitz received her first photographic assignment for the fledgling rock-and-roll magazine *Rolling Stone*, then headquartered in San Francisco. By 1973 she was the chief photographer.

In 1975 she accompanied the Rolling Stones on a long American tour, documenting the band's life on the road and producing a number of photographs that received wide public attention.

Leibovitz's first assignment for *Rolling Stone* was photographing John Lennon, and the former Beatle was also the subject of one of her best known pictures. In December 1980 she photographed Lennon and his wife, Yoko Ono, for a story on the release of their *Double Fantasy* album. In Leibovitz's portrait, the couple are on their bed, Lennon nude and curled up in a fetal-like position, holding Ono, who is fully clothed.

Only hours after the photo was taken, Lennon was murdered. The editors of *Rolling Stone* wanted to feature Lennon alone on the next cover, but Leibovitz argued successfully for using the picture of the couple.

Leibovitz's early work was in black and white, but in 1974 *Rolling Stone* went to color printing. Not trained in color photography, Leibovitz taught herself the process and evolved a personal style characterized by bright colors and intense lighting.

In 1983 an exhibit of Leibovitz's photographs went on tour through Europe and the United States. A book based on the exhibition, *Annie Leibovitz: Photographs* (1983), became a best-seller.

Shortly thereafter Leibovitz began working for *Vanity Fair* magazine. The job gave her the opportunity to photograph a wider range of celebrities--artists, writers, and political figures, as well as entertainers.

The poses in which she arranges her subjects are sometimes dramatic, sometimes whimsical, but always

striking. One of the most famous and controversial of her photos is a picture of actress Demi Moore, nude and heavily pregnant, which ran on the cover of *Vanity Fair* in the summer of 1991.

The photograph of Moore is stark and direct in its composition, but many of Leibovitz's pictures are elaborately staged. Leibovitz makes a habit of studying her subject thoroughly before a photographic shoot and arranges poses based on her research. "She stages a scene that has many references to the character of the sitter. She packs the picture with visual elements," comments Sylvia Wolf of the Whitney Museum.

Among Leibovitz's best-known works are photographs of Bette Midler in a bed of roses (1979), of Whoopi Goldberg immersed in a bathtub full of milk (1984), and of Arnold Schwarzenegger astride a white horse and clutching a cigar in his mouth (1988).

In 1986 Leibovitz turned her talent for creating memorable images to advertising. Her clients have included major companies such as Honda, Arrow Shirts, and the Gap. In 1987 she won a Clio award for an ad campaign for American Express.

In 1991 the National Portrait Gallery presented an exhibition of Leibovitz's photographs, only its second show of the works of a living photographer. During its five-week run the exhibit attracted more visitors than ordinarily come to the National Portrait Gallery in a year. The featured works were published as a book, *Photographs: Annie Leibovitz 1970-1990* (1991).

Leibovitz is able to get her subjects to use their entire bodies when they pose for her, a talent she exploited as an official photographer for the World Cup Games in Mexico in 1985. She also photographed American athletes at the 1996 Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta. A book of her photographs, *American Olympians*, appeared the same year.

Leibovitz's awareness of the body in motion is in part a product of her lifelong interest in dance. Her work includes memorable pictures of Mikhail Baryshnikov and his troupe. In 1990 Leibovitz spent three weeks living with and photographing the dancers at White Oak plantation in Florida, creating a photographic record that contains both carefully composed formal portraits and shots of the dancers and choreographer Mark Morris at work.

In recent years Leibovitz has undertaken several projects of photographing people who are not famous. She has done a series of portraits of people with AIDS, and she went to the Balkans to take pictures of the victims of the war in Bosnia.

In 1992 Leibovitz told an interviewer that "the biological clock is definitely ticking" and that for several years she had been considering having children. However, it was not until 2001, at the age of 52, that she gave birth to a daughter, Sarah Cameron Leibovitz, whom she named after Julia Margaret Cameron, a Victorian Englishwoman who was among the first female professional photographers. Leibovitz has not identified the father of her child, who was conceived through artificial insemination.

For over a decade Leibovitz was the close companion of writer Susan Sontag (1933-2004), who was present at the birth of the former's baby, but the two did not publicly discuss the nature of their relationship.

This reticence brought them criticism from some lesbians and gay men. Outspoken lesbian critic Camille Paglia has remarked that "One of my primary gripes about Sontag from the start was her cowardice about her sex life." When Carl Rollyson and Lisa Paddock's biography *Susan Sontag: The Making of an Icon* suggested that she had lesbian relationships, Sontag's lawyers threatened possible lawsuits; and Norton, the publisher of the book, decided not to issue it in Britain for fear of an action for libel.

Leibovitz is as private as Sontag was, noting in a 1999 interview in the *Washington Post* that she and Sontag had separate apartments--although in the same complex--and designating *friend* the appropriate term for

their relationship. "You'd be wrong to say anything else," she insisted.

Although Leibovitz and Sontag were largely silent on the subject of their relationship, they appeared in public together for years. Leibovitz was photographed by Sontag's side at the latter's readings and lectures. Sontag accompanied Leibovitz to Mexico and Warsaw for exhibitions of her photographs. The two also traveled to Bosnia together during the war there.

Leibovitz and Sontag collaborated professionally on *Women* (1999), a lavish book of Leibovitz's photographs with an essay by Sontag. The first photograph in the book is of Leibovitz's mother, and the last is of Sontag. Over one hundred women are pictured in the book, and there are thumbnail biographies of all the principal subjects except Sontag and one woman identified only as "Victim of Domestic Violence."

There is some debate as to the value of Leibovitz's photographs as art. Some critics dismiss her work because of its focus on celebrities and its commercialism. Others, however, point to her imagination and creativity in posing her subjects and stress the importance of her photographs as documents of popular culture.

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About the Author

Linda Rapp teaches French and Spanish at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. She freelances as a writer, tutor, and translator. She is Assistant to the General Editor of www.glbtq.com.