

Swaps: Photographs from the David Hurn Collection

"I am not a great one for prints under the bed you know, I want an audience. It is important to me and becomes one of the delights of photography".

So says David Hurn as we sit in his kitchen, discussing his Swaps exhibition at the Museum of Wales. The exhibition was made possible by his generous donation of 700 photographs from his personal collection (swaps with other photographers – their work for his) and includes works by leading 20th and 21st century photographers including Henri Cartier-Bresson, Eve Arnold, Sergio Larrain, Bill Brandt, Martine Franck, Bruce Davidson and Martin Parr, through to emerging photographers such as Bieke Depoorter, Clementine Schneidermann, and Newsha Tavakolian.

His collection is valued at £3.5m but he says, "It has nothing to do with money. When you collect, it is like collecting bus tickets, and it really is like having the definitive collection of bus tickets. If you are into collecting and you love doing it, the joy is getting another picture and that was the fun of it".



Edinburgh. Retired gentleman at the MG Car owners 1967 © David Hurn /Magnum Photos

Pictured above is one of the three most requested swaps from David Hurn. As he says, in one of his insightful and delightful comments that accompany the gallery's display of prints, "the great thing about photography is that it is always an extension of the personality of the photographer".

I ask how he selected the 80 images for inclusion into this first exhibition of photographs, (his donation to the museum being permanent, there will be now be a gallery dedicated to photography at the museum, a first for Wales). "My criteria is a gut criteria to a certain degree. I just like the pictures, so that is a part of it. I do confer with other photographers that I particularly like. It is also important to me that the photographs are by working photographers...they are not playing at it. Then I put those three things together and I don't differentiate between anybody".

It has taken three years to get the exhibition open, which has meant time away from shooting pictures, the thing he "enjoys immensely because by definition every day is different". However his fierce desire to get photography "out to the public" means this time commitment has been worth his while. He thinks David Attenborough "an extraordinary man, almost the most influential person during my lifetime, because he has never lowered standards and has always got out to everyone". Attendance at the exhibition after only a few months has exceeded

33,000 and shows no sign of abating. Of this he says “The public like the idea of seeing variety and if you look at it in that light we (*the museum*) are as good as the Getty”.

He hopes the exhibition will reach the selfie generation. “I think it (*the selfie*) is a charming idea. It brings happiness to everybody...but I do think, with a bit of luck, it could be developed into something else”. He means people progressing to taking photographs of what they “see,” because, in his words, “what photography does terribly well, is to point out how peculiar and how wonderful the world is. It allows you to see and point out to somebody else the things they might not have seen themselves”.

On the surfeit of images available via the Internet today, he says, in his typically upbeat fashion, “I try to look at it in a positive way. For the first time in history everybody likes photography and there has never been a time in history when everybody had a notebook and pencil” (*commenting on everyone having a phone*).



David Hurn. Tintern. 2018 © Valerie Mather

Our conversation turns to the practicalities of photography and as we take “dear diary” snaps (his words) of each other in his kitchen (his of me being infinitely superior to mine of him: pictured) he explains that he has always carried two cameras. In his film days they were Leicas. Now he shoots with the Fuji X Pro 2. One has a 28mm lens and the other a 50mm lens, so he can quickly swap between cameras without having to change lenses. Each camera has a coloured sticker on top (yellow and red) so that he can discretely glance down and select the right lens. He doesn’t shoot using the rear screen, preferring to place the viewfinder to his eye to compose. He

has also customised each camera, adding a raised bump on the rear function button, again colour coded, so that he can easily fix the focus in advance of pressing the shutter. He chuckles at how “Fuji had a heart attack” when he showed them his handiwork!

He has always been his own man, turning down all permanent employment offers (including Life magazine!) because “you are doing a job that you hope to get paid for, but it is a job you enjoy so much that you don’t want an assignment as such, because an assignment is a moral obligation to fit in, in some way, with what the person assigning the project will want”. “I do it (my job) as well as I can. I don’t bend from what I want to do”. The same is true of the swaps he has collected; always insisting on a particular photograph from his fellow photographers, which makes the Swaps collection at Cardiff incredibly personal.

On becoming a photographer he says “I was very lucky because I had no inkling that I wanted to be a photographer. I was in the army because I couldn’t do anything else (*DH left school without qualifications due to his dyslexia*) and I happened upon a photograph which literally changed my life, because it made me cry, and not only that, but in a way, to me, made me convinced the propaganda I was hearing (*from the army*) was... propaganda. I remember

thinking quite seriously, anything that can, just by looking at it, emotionally can make you cry and at the same time kind of convince you that you know (*something*) is not true....that is pretty good. I quite liked that. I was lucky in that when I started I knew exactly what I wanted to do in photography (*because of that revelation*). Basically I just wanted to photograph people's reactions to each other and their emotions. The other bit of luck that I think I have is that I think I have a really enhanced sense of design, pattern whatever you like to call it, geometry or composition".

In 1973 his passion for photography, and desire to share photography with everyone, led to him forming, and teaching at, the School of Documentary Photography in Newport, Wales. He left when the diploma became a degree, believing that the course should lead to job opportunities: "My beef with education, is that it is so far removed from reality...and doesn't lead to anything. Ultimately, to me, it seems that you need to be paid".

He believes in the art and the science of photography, citing radiology as being a "most important (*form of photography*) because it really does save lives".

Touching on his experience with academic hierarchies he comments: "the people who talk most about these things (*photography*) take awfully bad pictures, and the most important picture in my life was taken up my arse with a camera, (*he had cancer in 2000*), you can't dispute that, it saved my life, so (*laughing*) if you want to talk hierarchies, well then a camera up the backside is number one!"

Does he believe anyone can take good photographs I ask: "So I mean the thing about photography is that you only have two controls. One is where do you stand and one is when do you press the button and the answer is, if you stand in the right place, and press the button at the right time, you have got a pretty good chance of having a picture, and the standing in the right place is all to do with getting your subject matter projecting in a design which is pleasing for people to look at. People like design, they feel safe with design".

He is very involved with the gallery's future, and in typical hands on fashion, he has been negotiating new swaps for the forthcoming year-long exhibition:

Women in Focus - a two-part exhibition that explores the role of women in photography, both as producers and subjects of images. On his experience of trying to swap images with women he chuckles "boy are they fussy", but joking apart, he has always been a supporter of talent, regardless of gender, and a number of his female students are rightly included in the Swaps exhibition.

He has many ideas for the continued success of the gallery, including a regular lecture programme "delivered by the best people in the world" (the opening lectures, given by him and Martin Parr sold out and had to be relocated to a lecture room that could hold the 300 plus audience wanting to attend) but he is aware that continuing to reach an audience that is increasingly technology focused is challenging. "What is the web going to do in 4 or 5 years" he says. "Got a little bit of that (*the web*) in the gallery at the moment, but it is usually me on a screen talking about photographers, making funny jokes, but it really needs to get into this thing with your ipad you can do the photograph and then go further. I have no idea what that is but it has to go further". A year ago he joined the Instagram community



David Hurn reaching the next generation. 2018© Valerie Mather

and publishes tips and recommended reading (and images from his own archive) on a regular basis (davidhurnphoto).

"I am doing a thing with the museum (*of Wales*) at the moment" he says. "I am trying to set up a thing with schools, in which we run competitions, at which we have in the museum a little exhibition, maybe of ten pictures by different photographers, maybe Henri Cartier-Bresson or Bill Brandt or Lee Friedlander or whoever you like, and then we bring (*the children*) in and we say there is going to be a nice prize and we want each of you, independently, to decide which picture you like, which photographer, now go off and with your phone see if you can take a picture like that and I am arguing that maybe 10 per cent of those might actually do it. It might then start them saying this is different from photographing myself.

He also has plenty of ideas for his own projects saying: "I am thinking about doing a whole thing about portraiture. I met a writer with the BBC and I have discovered that with the web the BBC goes out to 4M people. I like the idea of that sort of audience, so I am toying with the idea of doing the equivalent of almost another book. It takes a lot of time to do 100 portraits that is probably 150 days work but I thought I would just see how it goes.

In his study he generously shows me the mind map he has created for his latest book explaining: "what this does is it gives me a very loose framework, so that when I am in trouble I can fall back on it (*for ideas*)". The book is about landscapes in Wales. Entitled "As It Is" he explains that "good traditional landscape photographers all think that you get up at 4.30 in the morning and you only bother to photograph for half an hour and I kept saying why the hell do you get up then? Nobody bothers to photograph at that time –your pictures are not true-nobody sees the world like that and they said oh it is so beautiful you know etc. and I said ok fine you get up I am not going to do that. I just want to photograph it as it is, and then I suddenly thought, well I have got a title. If I call it "As It Is" then if I go somewhere and it is pissing with rain I photograph it as it is! So that was my start".

Reel Art Press published his latest book, *Arizona Trips* at the end of last year. Inspired by his twenty-year love affair with Arizona, it seeks, according to the dust jacket "to capture ordinary people in ordinary pursuits. From cheerleading to wild horse wrangling, Dolly Parton look-alike competitions, arm-wrestling contests and ladies only clubs with nearly nude male dancers." Having just purchased my copy I can confirm it is classic Hurn and, to use his words about one of his students "You can't take that sort of picture unless you are really involved with the people you are photographing".

The Swaps exhibition is a unique, inspiring, and very personal exhibition, collected by one of Britain's most influential reportage photographers trading his own prints with many of the world's leading photographers. It has inspired Magnum Photos (in partnership with theprintspace) to set up a project giving the global photography community the opportunity to participate and maybe swap a print with David Hurn as well as each other (see Magnum's website for details).

My advice: visit the Museum of Wales now for inspiration.

The last word has to go to David Hurn, as he says of the lead image (*pictured below*) for the exhibition: “Elliott’s picture of the bird and the tap I particularly like - it’s just a beautifully observed, humorous picture. It would be nothing if it were set up. But part of its enormous appeal is the fact that it’s taken by Elliott - you know it was just “seen”. It’s very elegant, beautifully balanced and composed”.



Credit line: USA. Florida Keys. 1968. © Elliott
Erwitt/Magnum Photos

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