

Jason Schneider: Renaissance Man on a Motorcycle, Cont.

Q: Jason, what is your favorite Leica of all time?

A: Sorry, I can't pick just one. For pure elemental simplicity, the original Leica A (or I) of 1925. For sheer mechanical perfection, the late single-stroke Leica M3, serial number around 1,100,000, with Dual Range 50mm f/2 Summicron lens with goggles. The Leica I would most like to own right now, is unquestionably the M9 with 50mm f/1.4 or 35mm f/1.4 Summilux-M ASPH.

Q: What gives you more enjoyment, your "favorite Leica of all time," or your Vespa?

A: My 2004 Vespa 2000GT gave me lots of enjoyment for the 20,000 miles that I owned it, but its imaging performance cannot compare to my battered Leica M6, which continues to bring me great joy. By the way, I traded in the Vespa for a Kawasaki Concours, a 1000cc sport/touring motorcycle that has hard luggage which is much more convenient for carrying my Leicas.

Q: Who was your mentor?

A: That's easy, the late great Herbert (Burt) Keppler, longtime editor and publisher of Modern Photography and later Publishing Director of Popular Photography. Insofar as writing, communicating, leadership (whatever limited amount of that I possess), and simply being in the world, he was my exemplar. He was brilliant, warm-hearted, caring, curious about everything and a great natural off the cuff writer — a truly remarkable man that I love and miss very much.

Q: Why do you use Leica equipment?

A: The simple answer is that it puts a big smile on my face every time I use it. It is also beautiful to look at and to hold in your hands, beautifully made, and Leica cameras and lenses perform flawlessly to the highest standard. A Leica camera inspires you to be a better photographer because you don't want to disappoint the people who crafted it and because it doesn't give you the option of blaming substandard results on your equipment.

Q: Classic, aren't they?

A: Put it this way... I'd say that Leica has produced a higher percentage of cameras/ lenses/ binoculars/accessories that have become classics than any other photographic company in the world.

Q: Many blog readers may not be aware of this, but you're quite the Renaissance man. Not only do you conduct and write interviews for the Leica blog, but you also are a photographer in your own right and a great enthusiast of poetry. Which of these forms of your expression is your truest love?

A: I doubt that I qualify as a true Renaissance man, but I am passionately involved in writing, photography, poetry, music, philosophy, architecture, motorcycle riding, and of

course my family. Asking me to pick my “truest love” from this list is like asking a polygamist to pick his favorite wife.

Q: You’ve been known to recite Emily Dickinson poetry by heart. Is there one thing you’d like the Leica readers to know about Emily Dickinson that they may not already know?

A: Yes. Emily was an enlightened master whose poetry comes from a place of direct cosmic experience and knowledge of the relationship between the unfolding processes of universe and human consciousness. She flowered during the period of the American transcendentalist movement, but she was not an Emersonian transcendentalist — she was simply transcendent. She was also sui generis — although she was at times romantic and could convey a New England Victorian sensibility, she did not really proceed from any identifiable tradition or point toward any new one. She was kind of a 17th century metaphysical poet somewhat uncomfortably ensconced in mid-19th century America. Her precision, vitality, and fearlessness with words is matched by only one other literary personage in my experience — William Shakespeare.

Q: With technology in the photo industry changing so rapidly, how do you keep abreast with the changes?

A: There is nothing like work and deadlines to concentrate the mind. When you constantly write about the latest cameras, lenses and imaging technology, you learn an awful lot in the course of your research. I also do a lot of hands-on testing for the equipment reviews I write. Teachers often learn more than their students in the course of the educational process, and the same thing is true of writers.

Q: How do you decide if it is time to use your analog Leicas or your digital Leicas?

A: At this juncture I am shooting about 85% digital and digital is easier to deal with if you are supplying images for publication, especially when it comes to equipment reviews. When I’m shooting for myself or have the grandiose illusion I am creating something for the ages, I’ll shoot on film, invariably with a 35mm Leica M. As far as I’m concerned, the essential process of creating images is the same regardless of the capture medium, but I do like the look I get with film, especially black-and-white.

Q: When you go on your long bike trips, what kind of images do you like to capture with your Leica?

A: I have never stopped fancying myself as a street photographer and a photojournalist, so many of the images I shoot many are in those genres. I also like abstract compositions and creating surreal little vignettes so I guess that the broad category of art photography also interests me.

Q: Which Leica is your favorite companion on a long bike trip?

A: The D-Lux 5 and M6.

Q: How many Photokinas have you been to and what is your most memorable one and why?

A: I have attended every Photokinas since 1970, a total of 21. The first was especially memorable because it was the first time I had ever visited Germany, and it was also the first clear indication that photographic journalism was likely to be my lifelong career. I consider myself blessed that it has turned out that way.

Q: What's your favorite story about marketing and why? How does it relate to your approach for writing on the blog?

A: My favorite true life marketing story that follows below does indirectly reference the fact that the best of anything carries a premium price, but aside from that, any similarity to presenting the Leica experience is, as they say, purely coincidental.

Many years ago I was visiting a college classmate of mine who was then an English Professor at the University of Ohio in Columbus. On a wide commercial street adjacent to the urban campus was a typical array of bookstores, gin mills, cheap restaurants, etc. and tucked into the middle was a prime example of that endangered species, an old fashioned novelty store — the kind of establishment that sells whoopee cushions, Chinese finger puzzles and the usual assortment of practical jokes. When I stepped up to the glass showcase next to the cash register I noticed a display that included two “dog poops,” designed to be placed on somebody's sofa when they weren't looking to cause an instant freak-out. The first one was made of a shiny plastic material, and though the basic shape and color were correct it wouldn't be very convincing to an astute observer. The second one was made of a less reflective composition material, was far more detailed, and had textures and color variations that made it look exactly like the real thing. The first one was labeled “Shit, \$2.95.” The second was labeled “Deluxe Shit, \$4.95.” It suddenly occurred to me, here in a most direct and (um) graphic form was the essence of all marketing.