

A half-century of photography



IMAGE COURTESY STAN SHERER

Back into the light: Bud Warnock climbs out of a furnace in the old Northampton State Hospital in this 1991 photo by Stan Sherer.

Forbes Library exhibit showcases the vintage work and world views of photographer and digital printmaker Stan Sherer

By STEVE PFARRER
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When Stan Sherer was growing up in the Bronx in New York City in the 1950s, an uncle paid a visit to his family one day and brought along some World War II-era darkroom equipment.

Sherer didn't know it just then, but he was about to find his life's calling — starting when he and an older brother turned the bathroom in their apartment into a darkroom.

When it came to photography, says Sherer, "I was riveted."

Now, at 77, the longtime Northampton photographer and digital printmaker is offering a snapshot of his career in a retrospective exhibit in Hosmer Galley at Forbes Library, with images dating back over 50 years that highlight his talent for capturing details of people's lives, from the Valley to Europe, West Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

From vintage street scenes of New York City in the 1960s, to portraits of working people in Ghana, France, Albania, Russia and here in the Valley, the exhibit, which runs through June 29,

also showcases Sherer's focus on black and white photography, though he occasionally works in color, especially with his digital prints.

The exhibit also marks a pivotal point in his career. Sherer, who has shown his work across the United States and in Europe and China, is donating most of his extensive archives — prints, negatives, and digital files — to the Special Collections and University Archives of the W.E.B. Du Bois Library at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

He's also contributing many local images to Forbes.

"I didn't want anyone else to have to take responsibility for that," he said during a recent interview at his exhibit. "I had to find a home for [the materials] so they didn't end up in a dumpster."

The donation to UMass makes sense in a number of ways. Earlier in his career, Sherer worked as a photojournalist for a number of former area newspapers such as The Holyoke Transcript, and as a freelancer for the Associated Press and United Press International. But he also spent close to 20 years as the photographer for the Campus Chronicle, the for-

mer UMass newspaper for faculty and staff.

And after he retired from UMass when the Chronicle shut down in 2003 because of budget cuts, Sherer, who had first studied photography at City College of New York, returned to the university as a student to get an MFA in photography. But at the suggestion of some faculty and staff there, he instead studied printmaking, which he says opened up a whole new visual world for him.

Digital techniques such as photopolymer plate printing, in which a photographic image is transferred to a polymer plate and then printed, can be "a beautiful process," Sherer says, creating an especially sharp, tactile image that can be mounted on a range of different paper and other surfaces.

His exhibit includes several examples of this work, in which he's introduced other colors and images to create kaleidoscopic, almost 3D digital prints based on initial photos of original materials, such as metal models that Dorothy Wrinch, an early 20th century English mathematician and biochemical theorist, made to represent protein structures.

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Vintage black and white

The heart of the Hosmer Gallery exhibit, though, lies in Sherer's large-scaled black and white photographs, developed primarily in the old-fashioned way: in darkrooms. One section is devoted to images from Ghana and a few other countries in West Africa, which he visited in the late 1970s.

"I was at a time in my life where I really needed to get out in the world," said Sherer, who got the London office of the Associated Press to cover his expenses during a three-and-a-half month trip. It was the first time he went overseas, he notes.

Traveling and living simply, Sherer captured some striking portraits: a man in Mali shouldering a huge sack of flour; his face, arms and clothing dusted white; a woman emptying a bucket of fish on the banks of the Niger River in Mali; a man in Ghana pounding a container of yams and plantains to make fufu, a popular food for dipping in soups and stews.

Communication was mostly limited to gestures, Sherer said, so in some cases he took his photos a bit surreptitiously, such as a portrait of a tough-looking man wrapped in a headdress who was traveling with Sherer on a ferry on the Niger River.

In the 1990s, Sherer and his wife, Marjorie Senechal, a writer and a former Smith College professor of math and science history, traveled in Albania, a country that had been closed to the West for decades. His images from the mountainous north of the country depicted a rugged land where some rural people appeared to be living in a way not much changed for centuries, such as a woman baking bread in a stone fireplace.

Sherer had received a Fulbright fellowship to photograph in Albania, and he and Senechal published a 1997 book, "Long Life to Your Children! A Portrait of High Albania," that documented their experience and the lives of the people they met.

"It's a beautiful country, and the people we met were wonderful," he said, noting that he and Senechal made multiple trips back to Albania over the years. (Sherer has also published several other themed volumes of his photos.)

Elsewhere in the exhibit, Sherer's sharp eye for documentary detail captures some timeless and sometimes humorous images, such as a pair of monkeys, dressed in tiny shirts and pairs of pants, during a rest period at the Moscow Circus.

And in what seems a quintessential photo from France, an elderly cobbler in Paris, wearing a beret and surrounded by shoes and tools in his cramped workspace, leans over, his hands cupped near the end of a tiny cigarette that juts from his lips.

"I've always enjoyed photographing people at work in their shops," said Sherer, who turned his master's thesis into a previous exhibit focused on shopkeepers, including several from Northampton.

Speaking of local angles, one photo in the exhibit that could qualify as the *pièce de résistance* shows Bud Warnock, an employee of the former Northampton State Hospital, squeezing out of the tiny door of a furnace, which he had been cleaning.

Choosing what to display at Hosmer Galley from among literally thousands of photographs "was really a challenge," said Sherer. But in sifting through the negatives of his early work in New York, he says, he made an interesting discovery.

"I haven't changed my style of photography since I started, when I was about 19 or 20," he said. "I've been consistent."

There will be an artist's reception for Stan Sherer's exhibit at Hosmer Gallery on June 8 from 2 to 4 p.m.

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Delivering sacks of flour, Mopti, Mali, 1979.



Stan Sherer in the Hosmer Gallery, Forbes Library, 2024.



Dazu Rock Carvings, Dazu District, Chongqing, China, 2004.



Cobbler, Paris, 1986.