

# RECORD REVIEW

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PULLOUT: Mr. Aarons attributes his expert eye to the master painters, whom he described as the photographers of their day.

PHOTO BY ABBY LUBY

“Slim Aarons in his backyard at his house outside Katonah”

Once upon a time in the wonderful life of Slim Aarons  
By Abby Luby

When you gaze at the photographs in Slim Aarons' new book “Once Upon a Time” you can just hear the clinking of martini glasses poolside at a villa in Acapulco, the hush of the marbled floor in a European palazzo or the lazy clear blue surf at the Grande Plage in Biarritz. These are some of the high society backdrops that frame the privileged class, the wealthy and famous from the late 1940's to the late 1980's.

“Once Upon a Time” is Mr. Aaron's second photographic book. His first was “A Wonderful Time: An Intimate Portrait of the Good Life” (1974) which was also a coffee-table volume that documented the upper class from both America and abroad.

Mr. Aarons will discuss his new book in a special program entitled “An Evening with Slim Aarons,” at Historical Hall in Bedford Village on Thursday, May 20, at 7 p.m. The event will be presented by the Friends of the Bedford Free Library.

For most of his life, Mr. Aarons had his eye behind a camera lens. He was a combat photographer in World War II but after the war his camera sought images that would be most unlike those of the wounded and war torn cities. To that extreme, Mr. Aarons started to freelance for such magazines as Life, Look, Holiday, Town and Country, Vogue, Travel and Leisure, always capturing European nobility who bounced back from the war resuming the charmed life. He was able to move easily within the world of kings, queens, princes, princesses or Hollywood's screen idols. How did he do it?

“In those days you could do it. America had just won the war, everybody was broke but we were king,” said Mr. Aarons from his Bedford Home last week.

“Tourists offices wanted people to come to Europe to take pictures and I got to know people. My photos would run in a magazine and after a while I got to be quite well known. I was a big hero.” At 85 years old, still tall and lanky, Mr. Aarons said that putting “Once Upon a Time” together has been an exhausting venture, but not without rewards. At his 1782 colonial house outside of Katonah, table surfaces in the kitchen have been transformed into working areas piled with congratulatory notes, art books and phone messages. Framed magazine covers by Mr. Aarons are interspersed with folk art and century-old artifacts on walls throughout the house. Tucked next to a workspace is a flat screen monitor that displays music selections from [www. musicchoice.com](http://www.musicchoice.com) in large type. “It's nice to work with music,” said Mr. Aarons clicking on a menu offering over 36 selections of music.

“Doing a book is easy,” said Mr. Aarons. “Its afterward when you have to go to New York for book signings and interviews. Even my dining room is now a signing room because people come with 40 or 100 books for me to sign. I have no time to relax – I want to swim in my pool – you can’t do all these things and live comfortably.”

In “Once Upon a Time” the book is divided into geographical sections. Under England and Wales formal portraits of nobility posing in front of their ancestral castles are interspersed with action shots and candid moments. Most photos throughout the book have brief narratives about the people and where they are.

A 1955 wide-angle picture of the annual cricket match at Eton-Harrow in England catches a hundred people mid-step on a cricket field with top hats and walking sticks. In the foreground a young girl in a velvet-seated horse coach is reaching for a purse about to step down. On the opposite page a 1985 crystal clear shot of Prince Charles and Princess Diana at a polo match is contrasted to the blurred, moving crowds in the background.

“I’m a great student of history because I traveled a lot,” said Mr. Aarons. “If I went to England, I drove an English car. I didn’t wear black tee shirts like you see now, I dressed nicely, people had good manners. Also, I never hurt anybody. I wasn’t interested in sex or scandal or anything like that.”

Mr. Aarons attributes his expert eye to the master painters, which he said were the photographers of the day. “The old paintings show what was happening – like an English sporting party – that’s all I did was copy it. I just did it photographically. It’s the best thing in the world. What’s good enough for all these great painters is still good enough from Slim Aarons.”

Mr. Aarons said that when he started photographing in Europe, there was no such things as “Paparazzi,” – an Italian term referring to photographers that would pop up out of nowhere to snap pictures of a celebrities. Mr. Aarons’ style was to take the time to get familiar with his surroundings. “I would arrive on the scene and not shoot a picture for three days,” he said. “I looked the place over and figured out how I’m was going to do it, wait for the lords and ladies to feel relaxed before I take a picture.”

Mr. Aarons said he would check out the light to see what was the best place for people to pose. He said he uses the Rembrandt rule for lighting in his photos. “Everything I do uses lighting that is 45 degrees high. Like a light from a window. It’s simple.”

A two page spread a 1979 picture of film director John Huston in Puerto Vallarta in Mexico shows Mr. Huston walking barefoot in white shirt and pants and a straw hat through lush red bougainvillea. Mr. Aarons said before the picture was taken a few ‘adjustments’ had to be made. “I was working with “Town and Country” and my editor loved bougainvillea – he would tell me it’s not the tropics unless it has bougainvillea,” said Mr. Aarons. “John had planted some of the flowers but they were too small so I bought cuttings of bougainvillea and I pasted it on with scotch tape for the picture.” Mr. Huston was pleased and told Mr. Aarons “This is wonderful. My dear boy, the set is yours.”

Mr. Aarons said that all the pictures in the book are his favorite pictures. “Each one I worked hard and sweated over – they’re all my favorite.”

Among the many personally signed treasured volumes in his library are a complete set of books by Mark Twain signed by the Twain himself. “He’s my favorite writer,” said Mr. Aarons “Do you know he is the number one American author read in Russia?”

Mr. Aarons pulls an old magazine style art book from the shelf. “This is from my friend Man Ray,” he said. Man Ray (1890-1976) was known as a Dada and Surrealist “artist-photographer” who worked in the early years of photography. “This is one of the books he did while living in

Hollywood during the war,” said Mr. Aarons. The book was inscribed to Mr. Aarons and his wife Rita. In “Once Upon a Time” there is a 1957 picture of Man Ray in his Paris studio pointing a camera lens out at Mr. Aarons’ camera, seemingly taking a picture of the viewer. According to the explanation under this picture Mr. Aarons said he and Man Ray “always discussed photographic equipment. He taught me so many tricks that I still use - most important, keep it simple.”

The Friends of the Bedford Free Library will present "An Evening with Slim Aarons," on Thursday, May 20, at 7 p.m. at Historical Hall on the Bedford Village Green. Mr. Aarons will discuss his newest book of photographs, "Slim Aarons: Once Upon a Time." Wine and cheese will be served at 7 p.m., and the talk will begin at 7:30 p.m. For information, call the library at 234-3570.