



It all clicked: Todd Gipstein's life in photography



One of Todd Gipstein's early black-and-white photos taken at Union Train Station in New London. (Photo courtesy of Todd Gipstein)

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A quarter century ago, Todd Gipstein was on assignment for National Geographic magazine to photograph a trove of historic artifacts being unveiled for the first time by a Connecticut salvage company in Southampton, England.

As it turns out, a noteworthy English woman named Edith Haisman, then in her 90s, was to be at the same event in search of a pocket watch that had been lost for decades. But this wasn't any watch, and it wasn't any either.

Haisman, who died a few years later at age 100, had been a traveler with her parents on the RMS Titanic at age 15, when it hit an iceberg and started taking on water. Her father, dressed in an Edwardian dinner jacket and holding a cigar in one hand and a Brandy snifter in the other, put her on a lifeboat and was never seen again, according to her New York Times obituary.

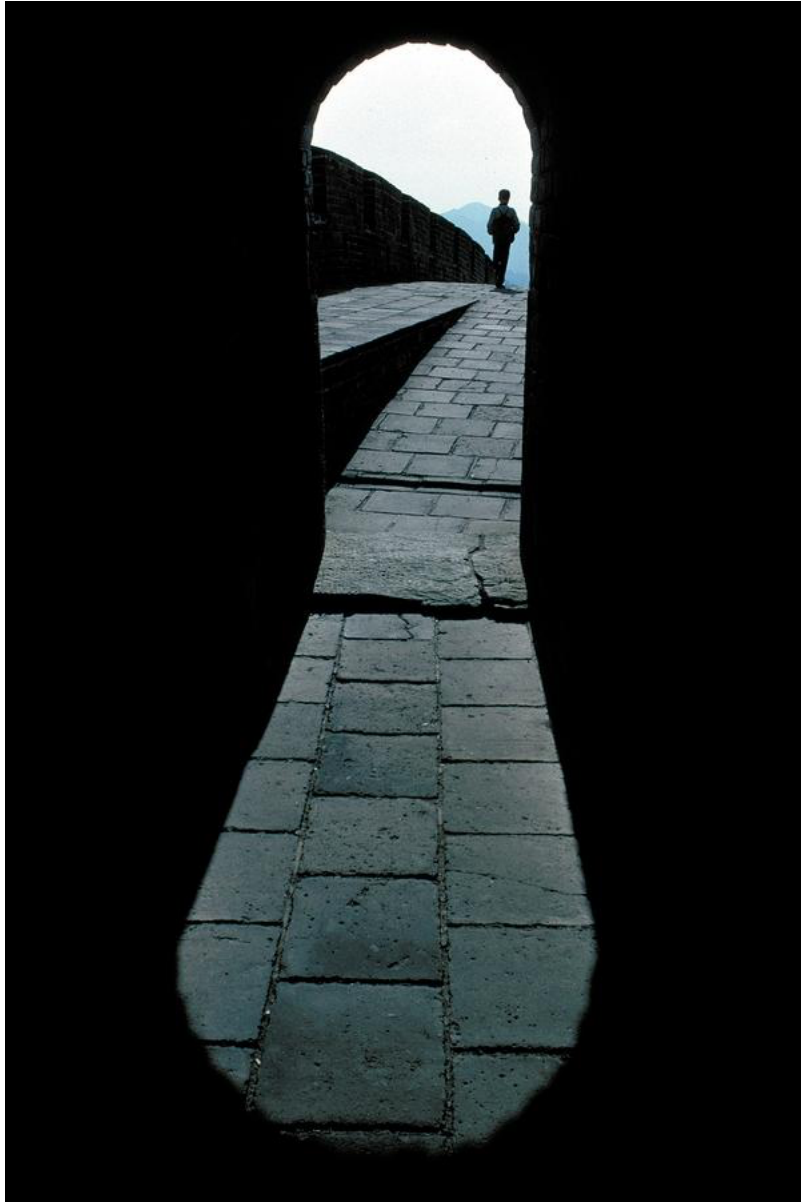
More than eight decades later, explorers of the Titanic wreck site found the watch, along with other objects, and were holding an orientation show to tell the story, Gipstein said during a lecture this month at the Lyman Art Museum. The frame he liked best showed the woman cradling the watch in a fragile, discolored hand.

"Photography is not something you do; it's something you are," Gipstein told a group of about 50 at the lecture. "Just being in the moment of life, to share with other people."

Gipstein's Jan. 9 talk, titled "The Mind, Eye & Heart of a Photographer's Perspective on Life," was the first of a three-part series the photographer is giving at the Lyman Allyn. Others are scheduled for Feb. 13 and March 6.

Gipstein, who grew up in New London and now lives in Groton, said he was given a camera at age 12 by his mother, the late Edith "Fuzzy" Gipstein, a longtime lecturer at the Lyman Allyn for whom the lecture series is named. The Day published his first photo at age 13, a shot of a firefighter that he called his first and last foray into the world of newspaper photojournalism.

He went on to college at Harvard University but never took a single photography course. Instead, he turned his camera lens on Union Station in New London during his time at home, and his slide-show images set to music helped inspire preservation efforts after the 1886 Henry Hobson Richardson landmark was saved from the wrecking ball.



Gipstein waited a long time to get the composition of this photo at the Great Wall of China. (Photo courtesy of Todd Gipstein)

"It was kind of a cool building," he said, showing off some early images.

Gipstein, the founder of Gipstein Multi-Media who also has four novels to his credit, would later go on to work for National Geographic as director of multimedia, photographing famous people such as explorer Robert primatologist Jane Goodall, anthropologist Richard Leakey and deep-sea adventurer Jacques Cousteau.

"I am a real generalist," he said. "I've done every type of photography there really is. I love to shoot all sorts of different things."

Photographers, he said, have to be immersed in moments. The key, he said, is to see what is happening and anticipate what is to come.

"A lot of it is just waiting a little bit for something to happen," Gipstein said.

Changing angles is important, too. He pointed to one shot taken in Gdansk, Poland, that became much better when he took the picture into the sun (something most people are told never to do but which he ignores), creating a silhouette.

"Silhouettes bleed out the details," he said. "It becomes more symbolic."

Gipstein also likes to get down on the ground a lot, providing a seldom-seen perspective. Of course, it can also lead to messy artifacts on clothing, as happened during a trip within the past few weeks to Antarctica to shoot penguins that leave feces everywhere.



Edith Haisman holds a pocketwatch that her father wore as he went down with the RMS Titanic in 1912. (Photo courtesy of Todd Gipstein)

"I'm the poo-meister," he laughed. "You want to get certain shots, you have to get dirty."

Photographing wildlife requires being prepared, observant and patient, Gipstein said, and photographers must really "work the scene" to get the most out of it.

"Every scene offers you wonderful things to shoot," he said. "I don't worry about the ones I miss; I worry about the ones I take."

His joy in taking good nature photos, however, is dwarfed by excitement over human interactions, the "quiet dramas" and "everyday heroes" that spring to life almost everywhere if one knows how to look.

He pointed to two slides, taken on either side of the world six months apart, showing children in China and Peru using slanted walls as slides on which to play, each culture deriving the same giddy pleasure from a simple

He quoted the artist Pissarro: "Blessed are they who see beautiful things in humble places where other people see nothing."

"Photography is often about where you look," Gipstein said.

He pointed to some St. Patrick's Day Parade photos he took a few years back in Mystic, after he saw a clown waving upward and traced his gaze to a rosy-cheeked little girl who looked like a plaster doll sitting in the crowd. The resulting image stands alone, without a definite time or place.



Todd Gipstein with wife Marcia in Antarctica. (Photo courtesy of Todd Gipstein)

"Photographs don't have to have a context," he said. "It has to have its own meaning and content no matter where you take it."

The art of photography involves seeing things in different ways, whether super close or put in a larger context.

For instance, shots of an antiwar protest are often stronger when isolating on a single person rather than taking a picture of the totality of the chaos.

On the other hand, pictures he has taken of polar bears are often stronger when they are shown in the context of a vast expanse of ice.

"You have to analyze a situation and say, 'What is this all about?'" he said. "How can I give it emotional weight?"

Gipstein said that while he didn't study photography in school, he did spend much time under the influence of art, ranging from impressionism to cubism to watercolors and including such masters as Vermeer, O'Keeffe and Miro.

But what he always returns to in his photography is catching subtle, face-to-face encounters of everyday people in their "moments of unguarded honesty." To do so, he doesn't stand behind bushes using a telephoto lens; instead, he tries to blend into a scene, becoming a trusted chronicler.



"Greek Friends," shot in a tavern, shows the joy of old friends meeting. (Photo courtesy of Todd Gipstein)

He did the same on his mother's last birthday, a difficult time because of her declining health. Still, he managed to find one moment when Fuzzy was back to being her unbridled self, "a force of nature," as he and others describe, capturing her indomitable spirit, "a lifetime of photography in one shot."

And it all came back to that simple gift from his mom nearly half a century ago.

"It was a gift that opened up a world to me," Gipstein said. "Photography is the gift you give yourself that you share with other people."

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If you go

Who: Lectures by photographer Todd Gipstein

Where: Lyman Allyn Art Museum, 625 Williams St., New London

When: 5:30-7 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 13

Subject: "Views of the World": Photographs, stories and films from places as diverse as Cuba, Antarctica, Africa and Israel. Journey with him to the far corners of the earth and see the world and life — through his eyes.

When: 5:30-7 p.m. Wednesday, March 6

Subject: "Telling Stories: Media with a Message": Short films done for National Geographic and others that explore a wide range of subjects, from civil rights to war to world cultures to our notions of beauty.

Cost: \$10 per lecture for members, \$15 for non-members

RSVP: 860-443-2545, ext. 2129