

Forward Essay of Amie Potsic's *Seeker:*
An Extraordinary Photographic Odyssey in the Holy Lands

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From its earliest years in the 19th century, photography was generally more open to women as a means of employment and of personal expression than the other traditional arts. Many women worked making prints or as colorists of black-and-white pictures for commercial studios. But very few made pictures for broad public consumption. In the 19th century well-known female imagemakers were few and far between. When asked to name a 19th-century female photograph many might know Julia Margaret Cameron. And those familiar with the history of photography might mention the work of Anna Atkins and Lady Clementina Hawarden, but rarely many other women. How many have heard of, for instance, Charlotte Prosch, New Jersey's first female daguerreotypist?

By the beginning of the 20th century, many more women made their mark: Imogen Cunningham, Gertrude Käsebier, Anne Brigman, and Tina Modotti, just to name of a few of the best known, plus there were many others in Europe. Women's participation in photography increased rapidly throughout the 20th century, though they were still underrepresented in many ways, as the Guerilla Girls have aptly pointed out. Naomi Rosenblum's book *A History of Women Photographers*, first published in 1994, revealed just how many women, all over the world, made contributions to photography.

There have certainly been intrepid women photographers, Margaret Bourke-White and Dorothea Lange among them. And not many people of any gender have faced danger and brought back such searing images as photojournalists Carol Guzy or Lynsey Addario.

There are others of course, but not many women have made solo photography treks without institutional backing. One young woman to take such a journey was Ruth Orkin.

From September 2023 through January 2024, the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson in France hosted the exhibition *Ruth Orkin: Bike Trip, USA, 1939*. To quote from their website:

In 1939, at 17 and still living with her parents in Los Angeles, Ruth Orkin decided to cross the United States solo, from the Pacific to the Atlantic. She traveled less by bicycle than with a bicycle, crossing long distances by car, train, and bus, using her bicycle to explore big cities: Chicago, Philadelphia, Washington, New York, Boston, and San Francisco.

Over a four-month period, she took 350 photographs: urban scenes, numerous self-portraits and striking compositions framed by her bicycle. In each city she visited, local newspapers covered her story, interviewing and photographing her. With the unexpected publicity, she was invited everywhere, given tickets to shows, and even received a new two-wheeler.

In 1996, at the age of 23, Amie Potsic undertook a parallel kind of journey, not through her home country, but through India and Israel, where women traveling alone were unusual, perhaps not always welcome, and faced potential danger. Abandoned suddenly by her traveling companion in India, Potsic took the audacious step to continue on by herself.

While there was no press coverage of her trip, like Orkin, Potsic met many people and was invited into homes and was witness to some of their personal ceremonies.

In India, Potsic's view is not the sweeping vista, though there are a few such pictures. Rather, she gets close to her subjects, not hiding behind her camera but using it as tool of introduction. Whether photographing architecture, markets, the spectacle of religious ritual, the cacophony of the street, or people bathing in the Ganges, she captures an intimacy that leads to a very human connection for the viewer.

Interestingly, in Israel, where Potsic might have felt more at home, her view is more distant, the stance more of an observer than a participant. Here there are several stunning landscapes; and views of Orthodox men in their black hats and long black coats praying at the Western Wall; a burned-out bus - the victim of a terrorist attack; an Arab store with a poster of PLO leader Yasser Arafat; Christian monks; and interiors of synagogues, churches, and mosques. Close-up portraits are fewer, perhaps a reaction to a very different idea of personal space, especially between men and women.

Looking back almost thirty years ago and then forward to today, it is notable how many things have stayed the same and how different the world is now for both India and Israel. Potsic's photographs lead us to confront the many issues these countries faced, to imagine the possibilities that lay before them, to celebrate where progress has been made, and to rue the myriad problems they both still confront. For a young photographer, that is an outcome I doubt she would have considered possible when she took her first step alone into a year-long remarkable journey.