“A Global View Through a Single Lense,” by JD Hock ’16

Steve McCurry's photography has challenged my preconceived notions of daily life in both nations near and far. McCurry is famous for shooting subjects in colorful series, each piece managing to simultaneously capture the essence of a subject while hinting at far greater depths that beg to be probed further. While best known for his 1984 photograph, “Afghan Girl,” it is McCurry’s “Colors of Cuba” series that has so impacted the lens through which I view the world around me.

Globalization has impacted the entire world, both positively and negatively. While it has opened many doors, connected many people, and created many newfound opportunities, it has also increasingly encroached on individual cultures as if they are endangered species. Globalization thus far has served as a disease, spreading fervently through communities around the world. Recognizing the threat of globalization to culture and tradition, while simultaneously continuing to commend globalization for its immense benefits, Steve McCurry's “Colors of Cuba” has provided me with unsought guidance in being a 21st century global citizen.

Photography is silent, but powerful. Despite just capturing a singular moment, photography displays complex and riveting ideas. Steve McCurry is a world-renowned photojournalist who uses color to express the soul of his picture’s subject. Many photographers believe that a black and white photograph is able to present a subject's soul more powerfully than color, but Steve McCurry believes the opposite. He uses color to not only express the soul of his subject, but to hint at larger, more complex ideas hidden behind the subject. Shooting simple, daily actions and using them to portray major ideas is what makes Steve McCurry so unique and so fascinating. Complexity through simplicity.

Representing just a moment in time, “Colors of Cuba” is able to capture the ultimate point of confliction of modern times. Globalization has no doubt brought upon tremendous positive change, but at what cost? Yes, the world is more connected and so inherently citizens of the world are more global, but what really embodies a global citizen? I strive to be a global citizen. In my studies, my travels, and my thinking, I strive to act and think globally, but what does that mean?

In capturing the full spectrum of Cuba's culture, from idyllic scenes of lovers sharing a bottle of wine, to architecture bursting with vibrant neon hues, to wide-eyed children engrossed in their classroom lessons, McCurry challenges my prior perceptions of Cuba as something of a rogue Communist state. Given the embargoes and contentious history between Cuba and the United States, I expect to open McCurry’s photos and see a radicalized society, posing an imminent threat to the very ideals of democracy that we hold so dear.

In reality, untouched by Americanization and left to its policy of isolationism, Cuba is a museum of sorts, a society stuck behind a metaphorical Lucite cage, at least thirty years behind America’s hyper-modern society. Cuba contains a preserved, historical beauty in a world increasingly transformed by technology, war, and global warming. As the world goes, Cuba stays.

Having not encountered the rise of globalization over the last thirty years, Cuba has yet to lose its unique and treasured culture. Blockaded by the United States, abandoned by the international community, and restricted by the Castro Regime, Cuba has not been able to ride the tides of globalization and lose its untouched identity. Cuba is marveled for its delicious food, vibrant arts, and captivating culture, but so is New York City, a monument of globalization. The allure of Cuba is its unique character and sense of individualism.

Embracing the individual identity of communities, both large and small, has become a principal aspect in my thinking as a 21st century global citizen. Seeking to understand and respect communities and their cultures for what they are and not necessarily for what they could be with an
influx of outside ideas is what I believe a global citizen should do. Steve McCurry’s “Colors of Cuba” has subtly taught me the power of empathy, the ability to understand and then to share the feelings of others.

Understanding, respecting, and sharing describe how a global citizen should think, how a global citizen should act, but mostly, who I am. The power of cultural anthropology has never been as great as it is today. Working to understand the history, culture, and traditions of the communities that dominate the headlines is the only path toward viable solutions. Acknowledging my position as an outsider looking in is critical to maintaining my credibility and showing respect to the communities and cultures that I study and work with.

Steve McCurry’s “Colors of Cuba” encourages me to stop and reflect, an often overlooked but integral part of human development. The physical location of the picture in my house further encourages reflection. Located on the wall of the stairwell leading to my room, the picture catches me as I race between the comfort of my room and the bewildering outside world. It serves as a halfway point between a place of serene sanity and the unpredictable, energized world. The picture’s location in my house serves as a midpoint, a cross between two opposite worlds.

“Colors of Cuba” is not the only work of McCurry that transfixed me; his travels to remote areas of third-world countries allow him to find diamonds in the rough, shining examples of benevolence and altruism stubbornly existing where we least expect it. From the remote mountains of Afghanistan, to the war-ravaged streets of Lebanon, to the body-strewn fields of the Cambodian Civil War, to the open and inviting doorways of Cuba, Steve McCurry’s photography is a reminder that we are not defined by our labels as Americans or Cubans or Afghans. Rather, we are all citizens of a connected world, capable of performing incredible acts of humanity.