

The forgotten ones

Matthew Butson of the Hulton Archive regrets the way some of the greatest photographers slip through the net of history – Nahum Sterling Baron among them



The British have never really sung the praises of their photographic sons as perhaps other countries have. There are far too many photographers whose work is sadly overlooked or forgotten, only occasionally to be 're-discovered' at some point long after their death. One typical example of this is Nahum Sterling Baron, known simply as Baron. Though the son of an Italian Jew from Tripoli, Baron was quintessentially English and, at the time of his death in 1956, was regarded as one of the rising stars of portraiture in the UK. The archetypal English 'gent' in his customary tweeds and brogues, Baron shot everyone who was anyone between 1945 and 1956 – Elizabeth Taylor, Marilyn Monroe, Tito, Franco and Dietrich to name but a few. His easy-going, affable style, together with his great love of life, marked him out from other photographers of his generation and he developed close, personal friendships with a number of his sitters.

His fame started to rise in the mid 1930s when he developed a passion and considerable talent for

Above Considered one of the greats in his lifetime, Baron has now been largely forgotten

Below Baron's ability to put his subjects at their ease was one of his greatest skills



photographing the ballet and he soon became a regular at the Sadlers Wells company.

Shortly after the war he focussed primarily on celebrity and society portraits and, for this piece, I have selected one of his most famous subjects – Marilyn Monroe.

Baron's tools of the trade were fairly standard with perhaps one exception. The majority of his outdoor work was shot on a Rolleiflex but, for his studio work he stood by his trusty, though somewhat ancient and incredibly bulky, Kodak Century plate camera. The Monroe shots were taken on both small and medium format cameras. Worried about the fading light, he took no chances and the relatively few shots taken in Palm Springs, California in 1954 were captured on a range of equipment. He used his beloved Leica (a present given to him by his mother when he was 28), two pre-loaded Rolleiflexes – one for black & white and one for colour – and a Speed Graphic which he'd picked up while in the US. He sometimes used the Speed Graphic so he could retouch the negatives although his style tended to be very 'straight', preferring to capture his subjects 'warts and all' with minimum retouching.

Baron tended to work quickly, usually due to the impatience of his subjects, and often engaged in conversation during his shoots which generally put them at their ease. Obviously captivated by Ms Monroe, he later remarked that 'she fell automatically into a liquid position which no photographer could possibly invent for her...' The session shows Marilyn in her prime – before the scandal, drugs and depression of later years – and Baron's images capture her child-like quality and aura of innocence perfectly. This is as much to do with his relationship with the subject as it is his compositional or technical skills – although with fading light and limited time these qualities too are in evidence. Baron regarded this session as one of his most memorable shoots. ○

Opposite Marilyn in her prime – Baron regarded her as a complete natural in front of the lens

