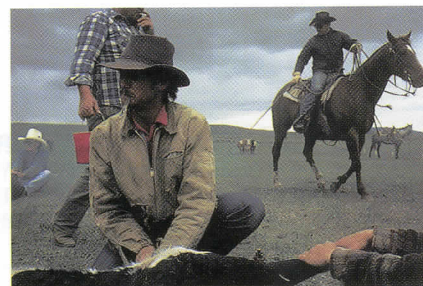
MASTER CLASS

STAYING COMPOSED

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC PHOTOGRAPHER SAM ABELL DEMONSTRATES HOW PATIENCE CAN PAY OFF WITH THE PERFECT FRAME.

BY RUSSELL HART



Utica, Montana, May 1984
"All the elements for a finished photograph are present in the first frame (at left, top). Of these the most important is the deep background where prairie and sky meet on a clean and graceful horizon," says Abell in his new book. "On this foundation the photograph is built. I concentrated the composition on one cowboy and the action around him.

"I was after a layered picture and thought circumstances were best for this when, in frame two (middle), the calf was branded, but layering depends on separation of elements that didn't exist at the top of the frame. Without moving, I turned my attention to the horse and rider and swung the composition rightward as they moved off. A man approached from the left carrying a bucket, spoiling the exit of the rider (bottom). I recomposed on the cowboy and made the final frame as a new tableau of cowboys appeared in the distance and the bucket swung to the edge of the frame (above). My colleagues like this picture for its complexity, but I want something more in it. I want the branding iron."

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Standoff, Alberta, 1984 and 1985 "My yearlong search to find bison skulls for the concluding photograph in an essay on the life of Charles M. Russell ended on a dry Canadian prairie. After photographing the skulls in the grass (left), I considered my work finished. But the results were flat, and I persuaded my editor, David Arnold, to send me back six months later. Conditions the afternoon I arrived were harsh and marginal—bitter cold and only moments of light left. As I framed the still life, a bull bison unexpectedly strode into the background, animating the picture in a way Russell himself would have appreciated (below). From an early age I've made photographs a certain way: compose and wait. The pleasure of working this way goes back to outings with my father and his advice on how to see ('Look for strong diagonals').

"Growing up and photographing in Ohio gave me the idea a place could be known by seeing its structure. The structure of Ohio was straightforward and strong. The world was divided by a level line that split the world equally—above and below, near and far, known and unknown. When I left Ohio for those unknown places the structure of it stayed with me. A level line is at the center of my seeing and gives to deeply different places a common ground."

"I once saw a man reading *National Geographic* on an airplane, just thumbing through a story I'd spent a year shooting," says photographer Sam Abell. "I'd taken 25,000 pictures for the story, and in the end, eight were published. I wasn't sorry it was eight, because they were all good ones. So I knelt down in the aisle beside the man and said, 'Friend, slow down.' And I started telling him some of the background behind each picture."

Slowing down is fundamental to Sam Abell's photography. Abell himself seems constitutionally unhurried, his speech so measured you can practically hear the thought behind each word. That character is in keeping with *National Geographic* assignments, which give photographers months rather than days to shoot a story. But such deliberation is also at the core of Abell's success as a teacher, one who is in great demand on the photo-workshop circuit. "Sam's got just ten slides in his lecture," says photographer Chris Rainier, "but they're his most profound slides. He talks for an hour, and you're practically in tears."

The man on the airplane was thumbing through a 1984 *National Geographic* story that Abell had shot on the life and times of cowboy artist Charles M. Russell. The story's final image—of dead buffalo buried up to their necks in snow—is a perfect example of Abell's

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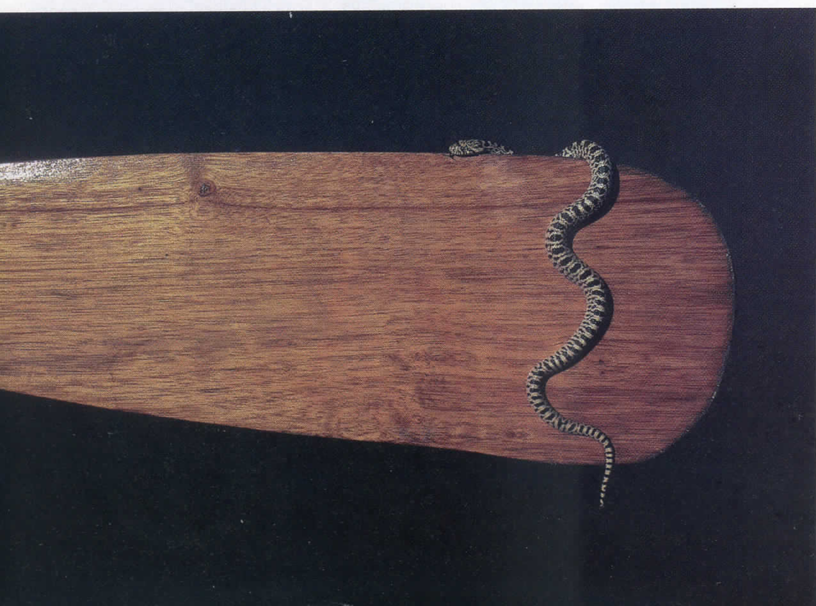
Missouri River, Montana, 1976 "We encountered a water snake attempting to swim across the river and my cousin Craig gathered it onto his canoe paddle. My first instinct was to photograph the snake and paddle in such a way that they linked to the landscape of the river and the countryside (above). I then concentrated on the snake and paddle only, exposing in such a way that the color and texture of the river darkened and disappeared (below).

"A canoe is a place. Often it is more of a place than the scenes it passes by. I felt that at 12 when I first slid a wooden canoe onto still water and got in. Within its secure and subtle shape I could quietly go places. It was as transforming to me as a camera, which came into my life at the same time. Twenty years later I spent a year canoeing with my camera. The resulting essay is a meditation on stillness, something canoeing and camera work have in common."



approach. On his third trip to Montana for the story, already a year in the making, Abell took a series of photographs of buffalo remains just across the Canadian border before returning to the magazine's Washington, D.C., headquarters. Disappointed by the buffalo shots, he convinced his editor to send him to Montana (*Geographic* photographers call it a "go-back") six months later, in the dead of winter. "I went back to the same spot," says Abell, "but this time the remains were covered with snow." Visually, the snow simplified the subject and added a stark symbolism. Better yet, while Abell was trying different ways of composing the scene, a live buffalo wandered into the background. (Good things come to photographers who wait.) He quickly pressed the shutter button and the image was complete. "It took a year and a half to get that photograph," he says.

The picture is reproduced side by side with its older outtake in Abell's sumptuous new book, *Sam Abell: The Photographic Life* (Rizzoli, $60) and in a major retrospective at the University of Virginia Art Museum (on view through September 15, then traveling). Edited and curated by Abell's *National Geographic* colleague Leah Bendavid-Val, the book and show both include a section devoted to telling the story behind many of his

Brigus South, Newfoundland, 1970 "These frames are from the 17th roll of film from my first extended assignment. Handling situations was something I was learning, and on this morning I felt in the way of the fishermen. The routine of the men, father and son, was based upon a close rhythm of work. There was no place in it for a photographer. But I worked as intently as they, and this, at least, they understood. We were both seeking something. I was after a layered photograph that gave equal emphasis to both men. The composition was resolved when the son turned toward me and, simultaneously, a swell lifted the father's dory briefly above the horizon.

"When I made these photographs I was 27—on the road living the photographic life. Before, if I imagined the process of photography at all it was pleasantly. But the reality of field work woke me from that reverie. Seeking the picture is the complex process that dominates documentary photography, and in the seeking there is often a story. The story varies. At its best it is a magical process; at its worst it is bitterly frustrating—you see the picture, but you can't get to it."

most compelling images. Outtakes are often included, sometimes just subtle variations of the final shot, illustrating how Abell finessed his point of view, perspective, and framing while shooting a single roll of film. In other cases, such as the buffalo shot, the variations are more spaced out in time as Abell returned repeatedly to the same subject and saw new ways to compose it, or found it in a better light, or simply caught it at a more revealing moment.

Yet Sam Abell's pictures are less about specific moments than those of his talented *National Geographic* colleagues. They have an overarching graphic power that somehow captures the soul of a place. "Most documentary photography pursues content," says Abell. "But I tend to pursue the form of a thing and then bring the content into that." Ever self-critical, Abell doesn't necessarily see that habit as a virtue. "I think sometimes I go to the point where in trying to find the best structure, I actually risk losing the moment," he says. "And I know other photographers who consider that unforgivable." If the pictures here are a measure of Abell's sin, we think he should be forgiven. ■

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