



Italy: In the Shadow of Time

by Linda Butler



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Commentary

It's probably not very politic for me to admit this, but this image by Linda Butler is one of my favorite images from our entire history of publishing *LensWork*. In fact, this image was the cover of *LensWork* #24, back in February 1999.

I've spent considerable time with this image trying to figure out why it connects with me so strongly. Understanding such connections can be useful in our own efforts to make impactful images. But of course, *why* is often a difficult question to answer.

Perhaps the key to this image is the simple and obvious gaze from the main figure aimed directly toward us. It is impossible to avoid. The facial expression — although a caricature — is so intense, so serious, so filled with pathos. How can we not look back, almost poised to begin a conversation?

Then there is the crowd of “humanity” that presses in from behind that main figure. There is something very Orwellian — think *1984* — about that sea of disconnected faces, each with a gaze that isolates it into its own world. That crowd is clearly not an artifact of a long lens with optical compression — like some crowd shot from a New York sidewalk. We know these marionettes are literally touching each other they are crowded so tight.

And they *are* marionettes, each with their strings that they are powerless to resist. They wait, frozen in this photographic composition, waiting for life

from above, resigned to their mechanical fate. Have I psychologically projected my own feelings enough to make my point?

And *there* is the answer. *What* I psychologically project is not important, but *that* I psychologically connect with this photograph is everything.

Photographic subjects can quickly be divided into two groups — photographs of our fellow human beings, and photographs of everything else. Those of another human being are often dominated by the emotion the subject projects for us to see. Those of everything else — rocks, trees, skies, buildings, and marionettes — require us, as viewers, to project *our* emotions onto the inanimate. Without that emotional projection, the photograph is just another rock, tree, sky, building, or thing. It is the skill of the photographer and their use of all the photographic tools at their disposal — composition, lighting, timing, subject selection, camera position and settings, and even text — that will nudge us to project our emotions and connect with the photograph. This is precisely why each of us react in our own way to any given photograph. We associate, recall, and ultimately project our feelings based on our own life experiences. This is precisely why the concept of “the best” in photography is so silly.