

IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER



📷 SARA MELOTTI ✍️ LISA CLATWORTHY

When you think of beauty photography, do you imagine retouched images of models with faultless skin, bright eyes and perfect teeth? Well it's time to think again, as fashion photographer Sara Melotti did when she set out to discover the beauty within

The Pirelli calendar with Serena Williams was completely different – that made me very happy,” says Sara Melotti over the phone from her New York base. “Finally we’re starting to go beyond appearances. I have no problem with fashion; I think it’s a beautiful form of art which allows you to express yourself. Fashion is not the problem. It’s the way the media has used images of women.”

Melotti is no stranger to the airbrushed, unattainable images that are held up by society, media and big brands as the ideal look for women. Indeed as a fashion photographer, she’s been helping to make these images for the past three years. As she points out

though, “they’re not real. Models are models because they’re the one per cent of the population with those physical traits, so they’re already not common. Then they spend a few hours in hair and make-up, they come on set and I position them, and then there’s Photoshop. At the end, the girl in the picture doesn’t even look like the girl in the picture. It’s fake, yet those are the images we look up to.”

It’s been a gradual process for Melotti, pinpointing her unease with the way her images are sometimes used. But once she reached this point, she says her reaction was immediate: “I’m an optimist and an activist, so I don’t just sit and think about things, I do my best to change them.”

Melotti’s idea for bringing about this change was to begin a personal



photography project she calls the Quest for Beauty. This would see her visit different countries and cultures all around the world, photographing women in their own everyday environments, without any of the trappings of the fashion industry.

"It's all about beauty being within, that's what beauty really is and that's what I hope I'm going to be able to show," she explains. "The project is my first step to playing my part. I feel it's the right time, because, for

example, in France they just passed a law to say that no model can be under a specific weight. Sometimes I've been shooting and looking at how skinny the model was I almost felt sick. It's really heartbreaking."

Melotti only began taking her Quest for Beauty images in the autumn, but has already shot in seven countries; the day after we spoke she was heading for Mexico and Cuba on a three-week visit. She hopes to visit around 14 countries before the end of the year, including

"I DON'T WANT TO DECLARE WAR ON ANYONE, I JUST WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD"



Sicily, France, Ethiopia, Madagascar and India, all while still shooting fashion work, partly to fund her project, and partly because her beef isn't with fashion per se.

"This is not a war against fashion. I love fashion, it inspires me, I just don't like the way women's images are used," she says. She's also unhappy about the way models can be treated in the industry, recounting a time when she overheard a 15-year old model being berated by a grown man for "gaining a few pounds. It broke my heart."

The premise of her quest is simple: "I really see beauty in everybody – as long as you're a good person and you're nice to people. We should start

PREVIOUS SPREAD: Sara Melotti began her quest visiting (left to right) Morocco, the Italian Alps, Vietnam and New York

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP AND BOTTOM: Very different cultures, from the fields of Vietnam to the pastures of the Alps

THIS PAGE: Morocco presented a cultural challenge for Sara, with women not wanting to be photographed

to recondition our thinking and stop thinking 'that model look is how we should look', because that's not real.

"When I started I was a little scared because I don't want to declare war on anybody, I just want to change the world. I want a place where everyone can feel happy and good about themselves."

On location

Melotti's first destination was the Alpine village from where her dad hails. Next she travelled to Morocco, where it wasn't just the language that was a barrier. "Morocco was difficult because of the culture; women didn't want to be photographed. So the first four days in Marrakesh I got nothing and I started to panic.

"I went back to my riyadh, not happy about not having any good pictures. The manager said he had the next day off, and asked if I wanted to go with him to his village in the mountains. So I did.

"I've seen poverty before with my own eyes, but seeing his village – the people are so poor. The people there have nothing, yet they are so happy, the women especially. It's an oppressed culture, yet they are so happy. I found the same thing in Vietnam; the kindness of the women there was beyond beautiful.

"When I asked them what is the most beautiful thing in the world for them, they couldn't really grasp the concept of beauty. It was fascinating to realise how this doesn't matter. These are women ▶



ABOVE: Women in traditional dress in Vietnam pose for Sara's camera.

FAR LEFT: A portrait from the Alps. By using an 85mm f/1.2 lens for all of her pictures, Sara gets a consistent style throughout the project.

MIDDLE LEFT: A friendly face from Vietnam

LEFT: Shooting on the New York Subway

RIGHT: On the streets of Hong Kong



“THIS IS NOT JUST PHOTOGRAPHY. I AM ON A QUEST... TO FIND THE MEANING OF BEAUTY”

who can't read or write and their lives are in this little village. They're not touched by magazines or advertising.

“It's amazing to see how beauty has become a man-made concept. It didn't used to be like that.”

“Beauty, to me, is more of a feeling, because when you look at something and go ‘wow!’, it's because you feel something inside.”

On her trips, Melotti usually asks women she meets on the street if she can photograph them, but on occasion she's contacted people beforehand, such as in Hong Kong. And in New York, she's photographing her friends, and planning to include herself.

“I think I should do a self-portrait for the New York segment too. I want the picture to be something that represents me; I want all the women to be themselves so I try to represent them as best as I can. That's a big responsibility.”

For all the images, she uses her Canon EOS 5D Mark II and 85mm f/1.2 lens – no lights, no props, no stylists. It's a world away from the constructed images, with a whole team on set, that she's used to creating for her fashion work.

“This project is all natural light. I use whatever is available. Some pictures are just snapshots, some I pose the women for, but it's not constructed, they are where they are and everything around them was there already,” she says.

“I like the connection you make with the subject, it's so human. It was something I was completely lacking in

fashion. The model is human but there are so many people on the set you just can't connect, you just do your job.”

“I made unique human connections with these women. It's beautiful, and now I can't get enough of it. Even if I can't communicate with a common language, there's this pure human connection.”

If she could afford to, Melotti would like to travel with a guide and a translator on each of her trips, to help her meet women from different walks of life and to help with the other aspect of her project. As well as taking the photos, she also asks her subject five questions – when they have a common language, that is. Perhaps the most pertinent is, ‘what is beauty?’ The very question that her project seeks to answer. For her, beauty is within all of us.

What is beauty?

“The most important aspect of this quest is rediscovering that beauty is within,” she explains, “rediscovering that beauty is accessible to everyone and that the most beautiful thing in the world is to be ourselves. We're all unique and gifted; by not bringing that out we are depriving the world of something beautiful.”

While her fashion work is currently funding this personal project, Melotti is hoping to start a Kickstarter campaign too. Not only would this help her afford the travel costs and enable her to spend longer in each destination, it would also mean she could afford the services of translators and guides. She's



also considering an exhibition when she's visited ten countries and self-publishing a book containing photos from the project and the answers to her questions. “Some of these women's stories just need to be told,” she says.

Melotti's quest is appropriately named: it's an adventure with a noble cause. An exploration of what beauty means away from the relentless attempts at persuasion by the advertising industry. Changing the world will not be an easy task, and certainly not one Melotti can accomplish by herself, but it's difficult not to admire the conviction with which she approaches the task.

“This is not just photography, this is an actual quest,” she says. “I am on a quest to find the meaning of beauty.”

OPPOSITE PAGE: Old faces and young faces, from Hong Kong and Vietnam

ABOVE: When in Morocco, getting out of the city and into the villages afforded better picture opportunities

RIGHT: Sara Melotti at work, shooting portraits in Morocco



Since graduating from art school in Italy, Sara Melotti is based between New York and London, and shoots fashion for magazines and commercial clients.

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