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CIVIL LENS

Atlanta museum hosts Charles Moore's famous photos

by Katherine Duncan

As the son of a Southern Baptist minister, photographer Charles Moore was drawn to the deep, resonant voice of the Rev. Martin Luther King when he first heard King speak in a small country church in Montgomery in the late '50s.

In 1991, the Ames, Iowa, *Daily Tribune* ran a photo of Moore speaking to students at the local middle school. Its caption read: "Moore is the *Life* magazine photographer who documented the civil-rights movement in the South during the 1960s."

Moore, now a resident of Asheville, might humbly dispute the oversimplified notion that he is the photographer of the civil-rights era. Nevertheless, that's how he's often perceived: Photographer Matt Herron, for instance, notes that Moore's images have been "reproduced endlessly in books, magazines, television documentaries — wherever an editor has found the need to evoke the pain, confusion or the total inability of one human to establish connections with another" during a difficult period in American

history. And historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. credits certain of Moore's photos with doing "as much as anything to transform the national mood" about racial discrimination and segregation prior to the passing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Moore's humanism, in fact, wails through photographs that are both arrestingly direct and timeless. His photographic work during the civil-rights era began as he was trying to carve out a living working for the *Montgomery Advertiser* in the late '50s. Moore's split-second instinct for capturing pivotal action yielded an image of Martin Luther King being booked by Montgomery police after attempting to enter a courtroom alongside activist/minister Ralph Abernathy. Picked up by the Associated Press wire service, Moore's photograph took the nation by storm, leading the way for a series of his pictures that chronicled the erupting civil-rights movement on the pages of *Life* and other major magazines.

This historic photo is one of two by Moore that are currently being featured in a voluminous, one-time exhibit in Atlanta titled "Picturing the

South: 1860 to the Present." Curated by Ellen Dugan and tailor-made to coincide with the Olympics, "Picturing the South" is on display at the High Museum of Art's Folk Art and Photography Galleries through Sept. 14. The accompanying catalog suggests an awe-inspiring and poignant journey through more than a century of images — spanning years of slavery, war and activism — all illuminating the fact that much of the South's history centers around racial conflict and contrast.

Moore's other photograph in the exhibition also retains its sting: In it, we see the backs of nameless white firemen — whose uniforms sport the letters "BFD," identifying them as part of the Birmingham Fire Department — as they blast black demonstrators with powerful hoses, the unforgiving water pressurized to 100 pounds per square inch. The peaceful demonstrators' bod-

ies are blurred by a veil of water — a chilling symbol of the walls of paranoia and fear built up in the South's rapidly changing racial climate.

Before taking his first newspaper job in Alabama, Moore trained at the Brooks Institute of Photography in California. But his earlier training as a visual artist and his time spent as a Golden Gloves boxer are equally apparent in his work: Many of his finest compositions were created under the most difficult of circumstances, some when Moore was being physically threatened or even arrested.

Moore was justifiably famous among his contemporaries for being able to keep on top of the action. Herron recalls: "I can still picture him sprinting from the roadside to freeze a line of marchers within the defining frame of a rocking chair, a porch railing, a black onlooker." Moore's artistic sensibility and quick-

and-gutsy nature enticed *Life*'s Miami Bureau to hire him, and Moore was soon chronically-ly other violent situations, including Vietnam and the Dominican Republic's civil war.

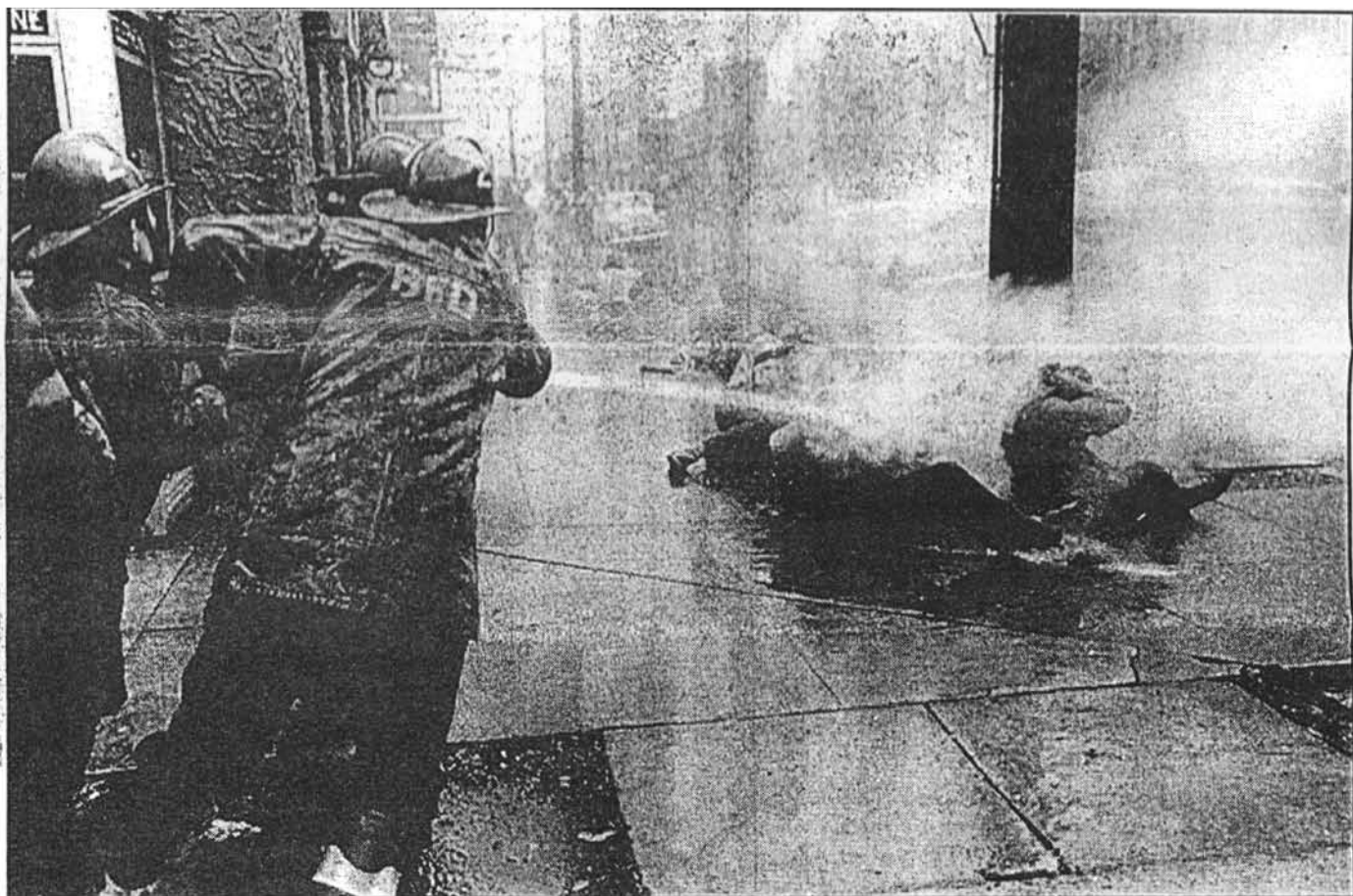
Over 30 years later, Moore's eyes still become impassioned as he talks about his series of photographs depicting a drenched black demonstrator recoiling — with a look of indignant shock — from the force of the Birmingham firemen's hoses. Issues of human dignity and equality remain undeniably close to Moore's heart — whether they were played out in Birmingham in the late '50s, or are now part of daily life in Bosnia and other trouble spots.

"The greatest satisfaction that I could receive," Moore says warmly, "is to know that my photographs have had some positive impact on our society. My greatest desire is that they continue to encour-

age people in working to promote better race relations."

Today, Moore's life is consumed with ideas for books, interviews for television documentaries, lectures to students, and western North Carolina nature photographs. He talks with great enthusiasm of creating a book about this region — one filled with images which depart dramatically from his lifetime's work of shooting unrest and violence. Moore's flawless composition, wide-angle approach and involvement with his subjects will no doubt yield pictures that, once again, draw the viewer deep into his compassionate world — one which never caters to the expected.

For more information on "Picturing the South: 1860 to the Present," on display at the High Museum of Art's Folk Art and Photography Galleries in Atlanta through Sept. 14, contact Wilma Sothern at (404) 733-4436.



CHARLES MOORE, Firemen blasting demonstrators, Birmingham, Ala. May 3, 1963. © Charles Moore