This is how stock photography is changing biases

Image leaders like Getty and Shutterstock reveal to us how they're paving the way for more diversity in stock photography.

Last year while chatting with Getty Images visual guru Dr. Rebecca Swift on the psychology of what makes particular images popular, the conversation briefly turned to diversity and how to encourage it in the visuals of the stock photo industry.

Rebecca, director of creative insights at Getty, made a key point on how the rise of smartphones and social has already begun a sea change in representation.

"We're all taking photographs of ourselves, so the diversity of people has expanded exponentially," Rebecca explained. "If we're looking at that expansion of humankind, then the kind of homogenous type of person you see in advertising is not going to relate anymore."

Rebecca noted a change she's seen in how close advertising imagery is becoming to the kinds of images we see of real life individuals in news coverage. Where her early days in the stock industry saw photojournalism kept very separate from creative sectors, recent years have seen the two converging, with "advertising imagery getting closer to the documentary", in her own words.

In an example of good timing it was only a few months later that journalistic champion of unsung voices Broadly released their own stock photography platform, the Gender Spectrum Collection, which was billed as the first gender-inclusive photo collection for editorial (ie the likes of *Digital Arts*).

A heady claim, but stock giants like Shutterstock and Adobe Stock have already begun to diversify their image range, with the former's Offset sub-brand launching campaigns to challenge the expectations around sexuality and domestic life, and the latter partnering with the authentic-aiming Stocksy United.

Getty is the latest to join the big guns, and catching up with Rebecca again we learnt more about their Show Us initiative, or #ShowUs if you will, a collection of over 5,000 images designed to subvert beauty stereotypes.

A collaboration with Girlgaze, the global network of 200,000+ female-identifying and non-binary creatives, the move is similar to Adobe's Stocksy partnership, but with the images concerned appearing as Getty Image products as opposed to another brand's.

A big stamp of approval, then, from an established name on less-than-mainstream work, and interestingly the tags for each shot were chosen by their subject (as you can read below).

'Woman, Teacher, Afro-Soul Musician, Vitiligo full figure Model, proud, strong' (Photographer: Jabulile Nadia Newman for Getty; image available here)

"Not only does this allow the subjects to define their beauty in their own language, on their own terms, ensuring they feel realistically represented," Rebecca tells us by email, "it also further challenges preconceptions that can be reinforced by labels assigned to images in stock libraries."

The Show Us collection – which is the world's largest stock photo library created by women of women – is vital to what Rebecca sees as Getty's duty to create visual communications which are more representative of their audiences.

"Anyone who has a role in leading the creation, distribution and selection of imagery has the responsibility to better represent the diverse audiences they are speaking to," she

elaborates.

“Women’s lives are affected by the limitations, exclusions and stereotypes that much of the imagery around us perpetuates. It can affect their health, relationships and the opportunities women are offered – so it’s extremely important to liberate them from these restrictive stereotypes. As the mantra goes: ‘you can’t be what you can’t see’.”

Interestingly, Show Us is also a case of supply meets demand; Rebecca’s role at Getty is to find out what users are responding to, and some statistics from 2018 confirmed for her how press the need was for the initiative.

“The search term ‘real people’ has increased +192% over the past year, ‘diverse women’ by +168%, and ‘strong women’ by +187% , providing more evidence of the demand for a more realistic portrayal of women and beauty,” she tells us.

Going back to Rebecca’s musings on the changing nature of imagery, it’s the whims of advertising that’s fuelling such demand. Kristen Sanger, senior director of contributor marketing at Shutterstock, confirms this when asked about Offset’s new additions to its catalogue such as Real Beauty, Love is Love and Masculinity

“Our customers are increasingly looking for more authentic content, imagery that people can easily relate to – non-staged pictures of everyday life, basically,” Kirsten reveals by email.

“We continue to see this category of imagery infiltrate our everyday lives, which is why advertisers prefer to use authentic-looking content; audiences respond best to visuals they recognise and that resonate with them.”

Photo by Filipe Frazao for Shutterstock

Besides Offset, Shutterstock has also launched a contributor experience in 21 languages, and provided a mobile app that encourages anyone to easily sign up and contribute (even if they don’t own expensive camera gear.)

Getty Images meanwhile plans to donate 10% of all proceeds from the sales of #ShowUs images directly back to funding more photography shoots for future waves of the project, along with the provision of grants for marginalised storytellers in the visual field (previous examples of these include the Women Photograph Grant for female photojournalists, and an ARRAY Grant for minority voices).

“As far as we are concerned Project #ShowUs has no end date and we will continue working on changing and transforming the

media and advertising landscape for good," Rebecca concludes.

Excitingly, Getty is looking to generate ensemble shots in the same vein, which would be useful for journalists like us at *Digital Arts* when looking for a snapshot of a group of creatives at large or in the office (as opposed to a portrait shot).

Diversity after all is about the multitude of people around us at any given moment, living their lives and blending in without fear of being singled out for appearing different. After stock rightfully celebrates individuals for their difference in order to change biases, it will be high time to celebrate that change of bias to reflect the diverse nature of most societies today.

Read next: Has the UK ban on gender stereotyping really changed advertising and marketing?

https://www.digitalartsonline.co.uk/features/photography/this-is-how-stock-photography-is-changing-biases/