Photographer: Nick Ut
Born 1951

Reflections

Is it ever wrong to take a picture? Should Nick Ut have taken this photograph?

Why do you think that this particular photograph had such an impact on public opinion?

What is it about this picture that makes it so effective and emotive?

Why is it so important for us to understand the social and cultural context of photography?

Photograph: Napalm Girl
Vietnam
1972

Contextual information

Understanding the social and historical context of photographs from the past is important to get an understanding of what one is seeing.

For instance, today chemical warfare is rarely seen anywhere in the world (aside from the recent claims of its use in Syria), but in the 1970s napalm was used on a regular basis in Vietnam, resulting in the iconic image of the running child whose clothes had been burnt off, taken by Nick Ut in 1972.

This picture was one of those that really showed the horrors of war and helped to start turning the tide of public opinion against the Vietnam War.

The picture itself was taken by 21-year-old photographer Nick Ut, who although young had been working as a war photographer for five years, following in his brother’s footsteps, who had died in 1965.

He saw the planes come over and drop a mixture of white phosphorous and napalm on one of the Vietnamese villages and this was the immediate aftermath. Straight after taking this picture, he put his camera away and helped the girl, called Kim Phuc, to get to a hospital. He became friends with her and they remain friends to this day. She now lives in Canada and works as a UN Goodwill Ambassador.