

Photographer Karl Larsen sues ABC over Paris Hilton photo



Copyright 2007 Karl Larsen

Karl Larsen

Karl Larsen captured the famous shot of Paris Hilton sobbing in the rear of a patrol car in June 2007.

The shot of Hilton crying in a patrol car was shown on '20/20' but was wrongly credited to Nick Ut, who took a similar photo and is known for his shot of a napalm victim in Vietnam.

By Harriet Ryan
January 20, 2009

When it came to describing the role Paris Hilton has played in his life, photographer Karl Larsen did not fear the overstatement.

"I am Leonardo da Vinci and she is Mona Lisa. Or I am Michelangelo and she is the Sistine Chapel," he said.



Paris Hilton

Larsen took what many consider the most famous photo of one of the world's least camera-shy women: His June 2007 shot of an anguished Hilton weeping in the rear of a patrol car as [deputies hauled her back to jail](#) to serve out a sentence for repeatedly violating probation on a reckless driving conviction.

FOR THE RECORD:

Photographer's lawsuit: An article in Tuesday's California section about a suit filed by photographer Karl Larsen referred incorrectly to the day he sought pictures of celebrities at inaugural events in Washington, D.C. Larsen was shooting photos there on Sunday. —

The picture made Larsen a minor legend in the paparazzi world because of his tremendous beginner's luck -- he snapped it his first day working as a tabloid photographer -- and because of the mint it earned him and his agency.

"Let's just say that in one five-hundredth of a second I made more than I made in my 2006 tax return," said Larsen, who photographed rock acts before wading into the celebrity arena. He declined even to ballpark the money he made on the Hilton photo, protesting, "It's like you're asking David Copperfield how he makes the girl disappear."

Larsen spent Monday trolling chilly Washington, D.C., for celebrities attending the presidential inauguration. But thanks to a federal copyright suit he filed last week, his mind was never far from the sunny day a year and a half ago, when he charged into

the media scrum outside Hilton's West Hollywood home and came out with his masterpiece.

The suit filed in Los Angeles alleges that an episode of the ABC program "20/20" about the paparazzi industry presented his photo of Hilton as the work of Nick Ut, a veteran Associated Press photographer.

Ut, who won a Pulitzer Prize for his photo of a young napalm victim in Vietnam, was standing near Larsen as the cruiser rolled by. Ut took a similar photo that both he and Larsen say was of a lesser quality.

"My flash didn't fire," Ut acknowledged. "His picture was better."

Ut wasn't consulted for the episode of "20/20," but a journalist interviewed on the program remarked on the disconnect between Ut's sobbing subject in Vietnam and the crying heiress he photographed 35 years to the day later, saying, "It's like, well, congratulations. This is what civilization has come to."

"That's a great story for the television program, but they didn't use his photo," Larsen said. "They used mine."

He said that afterward, ABC agreed to pay him \$2,000, an amount he found insulting.

"They are a big corporation that thinks they can just steal people's artwork," Larsen said.

An ABC spokesman confirmed that the network was served with the suit, but declined to comment.

harriet.ryan@latimes.com