

Pioneer of Color Nature Photography:

## **THE TRIUMPHS OF ELIOT PORTER**

*Shutter Release*, November 2007

Thank Eliot Porter (1901-1990) the next time you admire a book or calendar of colorful nature photography. A generation after Ansel Adams began to portray heaven on Earth in sharp, expansive black-and-white, Porter introduced a more intimate window on nature, in color and soft hues. His was a closer, gentler view of wildflowers, forests, ponds, fallen leaves. . .striving not for the awesome but the transcendental. In many of Porter's iconic images, temperate colors appear as if weaved into a blended fabric, which enhances the serenity. He would later move on to photograph diverse geographies more striking and severe, but skillfully retained much of the quietude and reverence of his original old-forest photography.

In most any bookstore, you will find voluminous editions of nature photography in elegant color, but it was not always so. There was a first: **In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World**, published in 1962 by the Sierra Club, with the contemplative nature photography of Eliot Porter together with selected verses of Henry David Thoreau paired to images of the New England woods.

The book was and remains a sensation. Porter's photographs of the New England wilds were masterworks of composition and colors crafted to evoke a tranquility that beckons and often amazes. In *Maple Leaves in Pine Needles*, New Hampshire, 1956, fallen pale red, orange and green maple leaves rest on dark green pine needles over rich black earth. Essentially two photographs in one, and that is the genius. The leaves are not brilliant, but Porter produced a stunning image by the use of two, overlying contrasts: the leaves over the emerald needles, and the needles against the dark grainy earth. Contrast is delicately but strikingly applied, and the color exquisitely finessed. Differences of style notwithstanding, Porter was influenced by Ansel Adams to the degree that every object of importance in the image—including the rich black earth—is distinguishable in detail, in some areas just barely, which crowns the effect.

### **Technical Innovation**

Porter's splendid color landscapes were not only an artistic but a supreme technical achievement. Until the early 1960s, color photography was not considered an artistic medium. At its best, color had become the norm for splashy news magazines and was transitioning to mass-market photography. Color films and requisite development processes did not offer the dynamic range or overall finesse of black-and-white films that

were considered prerequisites for fine-art photography. Results from color films tended to vary by batch or roll. Bright colors could appear unnaturally intense (which may have appealed to magazine readers). Colors of prints and slides tended to fade in as little as three or four years.

Enter Eliot Porter, and Kodak. In an effort to improve the quality of color films, Kodak had introduced complex emulsions offering wide tonal range but which required a complicated dye-transfer development process. Porter, who had previously mastered black-and-white film processing, worked out a painstakingly complex process of tweaking the new Kodak emulsions to provide a finesse and delicate tonality previously obtainable only from black-and-white films. Otherwise his groundbreaking book of exquisite color imagery would not have been possible. At the time, Porter used a Linhof large-format camera with 4x5 inch negatives to take most of his nature photographs. Color films of that era were too grainy to produce fine-art enlargements or allow for sufficient manipulation at that level in 35mm or medium formats.

Eliot Porter is credited as the first nature photographer to artistically craft color images, in both the taking and development processes, to the degree and finesse that had been achieved by Ansel Adams in black and white. So delicate was Porter's processing technique that a leading photography critic at the time, Weston Naef, wrote that Porter "was captivated by colors that had not yet been named."

## Biography

Eliot Porter was raised in Illinois but became an avid photographer of birds and seascapes beginning at age 10 during summer vacations on the Maine coast. In his early adulthood, Porter took up chemistry followed by medicine, ultimately receiving his M.D. from Harvard Medical School. Photography remained a pastime. He embarked on what looked to be a promising practice in biomedical research. Yet, Porter could not resist the lure of photography. In 1938 at the age of 37, he abandoned his medical career to devote full time to photographing nature.

Several years earlier, Porter had shown a sampling of his photography to Alfred Steiglitz, a leading photographer of that era. Steiglitz dismissed the compositions as "woolly," which can be interpreted to mean not projecting a strong or definitive impression. After seeking advice of Ansel Adams, Porter set to work to master his creative skills. Four years later, Porter paid a return visit to Steiglitz, who was unabashedly impressed, and offered him a one-man exhibition in his New York gallery. Porter's second career was born. For the next decade and a half he would work mainly in black-and-white. He began taking color images in the early 1950s. Porter's defining success, **In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World**, was published when he was 61. The book would remain in print for decades, but was just the start of a prodigious love affair with color photography that would thrive for nearly 30 more years. In Porter's senior years, he traveled to far-flung countries and Antarctica to broaden his portfolio. Among his better-known books were:

**Baja California and the Geography of Hope** (1967)

**Galapagos: The Flow of Wilderness** (1968)

**Down the Colorado** (1969)

**The Tree Where Man Was Born: The African Experience** (1972)

**Antarctica** (1978)

**Eliot Porter's Southwest** (1985)

**Maine** (1986)

**Mexican Churches** (1987)

**Iceland** (1989)

**Nature's Chaos** (1990)

### **His Place in History**

Photography writer and critic Michael More, opining in *View Camera* magazine (July/August and September/October 2003) believes that contemporary avant-garde critics have understated or ignored Porter's achievements in recent anthologies and reviews. Call it the Norman Rockwell phenomenon: Art that is popular through a broad spectrum of society tends to be viewed by critics as uninspired or insufficiently creative, particularly if the artist did not tend to abstraction and was highly productive, notwithstanding consistency of creativity and quality. Through his writings, from which much of the information in this article has been drawn, Michael More has made ardent efforts to uphold the reputation and publicize the accomplishments of Eliot Porter.

Eliot Porter portrayed nature as beautifully graceful and sacrosanct, in a way that appears wholly spontaneous but required careful composition and (for much of his career) a painstakingly complex film development process. Out of this creativity and exactitude came the introduction and popularization of color nature photography as an art form, before the requisite films and processing techniques were really ready. Porter was a pioneering photographer and technician ahead of his time, as well as an artist who put aside a medical career at considerable risk to successfully develop his creative talents after receiving what many would take as ego-deflating criticism. Porter's were triumphs of will and innovation as well as art. Moreover his impact went beyond art, for his works provided momentum to the nascent wilderness preservation and environmental movements that took shape in the 1960s.