

Where the spirit meets the soil



Elliot Porter: Yellow Warbler (*Dendroica petechia*), Maine, 1971, dye transfer print, 10.375 x 8.375 inches; Amon Carter Museum, bequest of the artist; ACMAA P1990-52-465

Images courtesy The J. Paul Getty Trust, Getty Publications

The first photograph inside the covers of *Eliot Porter: In the Realm of Nature* is a symphony of textures and colors in a detail-rich closeup of rocks, lichens, and mosses. It's the photographer's 1972 image *Lichen on Round Stones, South Coast, Iceland*. Turn the page for another revelation in texture: *Peeling Birch Bark, Great Spruce Head Island, Maine*, from 1969.

Both front and back covers of the new book, from Getty Publications, hold vibrant landscapes — one looking through aspen trees to a Colorado lake and the other a rather claustrophobic view of the steep rock walls of Dungeon Canyon at Glen Canyon, Utah. Another subject, one that was profoundly important to Porter, can be found in the book's final 17 full-page plates: birds. These are extraordinary portraits of birds, among them crystal-clear pictures of a pinyon jay, a golden-winged warbler, a yellow warbler, and a winter wren, all caught in flight.

The nature photography of Eliot Porter

Porter, who lived in the Santa Fe area for the last half of his life, was one of the pioneers in the use of color photography, and the pioneer in portraying birds and other elements of the natural scene in color. It was his use of the dye-transfer (formerly known as “wash-off relief”) printing process that attracted the attention of author Paul Martineau, an associate curator in the photography department at the J. Paul Getty Museum.

Two other photographers are the subjects of earlier books from Martineau: *Paul Outerbridge: Command Performance* (2009) and *Herb Ritts: L.A. Style* (2012). Why Eliot Porter now? “Because I was interested in the dye-transfer process,” he said. “I had worked on one project previously that featured Guy Stricherz’s dye-transfer work for his *Americans in Kodachrome* portfolio. Also, I’m in charge of the collection at the Getty, and I saw these really beautiful landscapes by Eliot Porter, so I proposed doing an exhibition. We had a show in 2006, and then I worked on this book.

“I like that this book includes Porter’s black-and-white and color work from both New England and the Southwest, plus the birds. It’s very comprehensive, which is unusual.”

Porter was born in 1901 in Winnetka, Illinois, 20 miles north of Chicago on Lake Michigan. He was the son of an amateur biologist father and a social-activist mother. He later wrote of a childhood roaming and exploring the forest, acquiring not just a knowledge of the local plants and birds, but “a feeling for the life out of doors, a sympathy with the feel and smell of the spring woods.” At 11, he began taking pictures with a Kodak box camera.

By 1930, he had a medical degree and was teaching biochemistry and working as a research scientist at his alma mater, Harvard University. He also had graduated to a Leica camera, which he used to capture architectural details and splash patterns in water. Porter wed artist Aline Kilham in 1936; their union lasted more than half a century. Also in the mid-1930s, he met and was encouraged by photographers Alfred Stieglitz and Ansel Adams.

Porter was awe-struck by the clarity of Adams’ prints and subsequently switched to a medium-format Linhof camera. He had a successful exhibition, featuring expertly conceived silver prints, at Stieglitz’s An American Place gallery in New York. Among those black-and-white photographs were two that appear in the new book’s 91 plates: the intimate *Song Sparrow’s Nest*, *Great Spruce Head Island, Maine* and the twilight seascape *East Penobscot Bay, Maine*. Martineau recounts a high compliment the show elicited from Stieglitz: “Some of your photographs are the first I have ever seen which made me feel, ‘There is my own spirit.’”

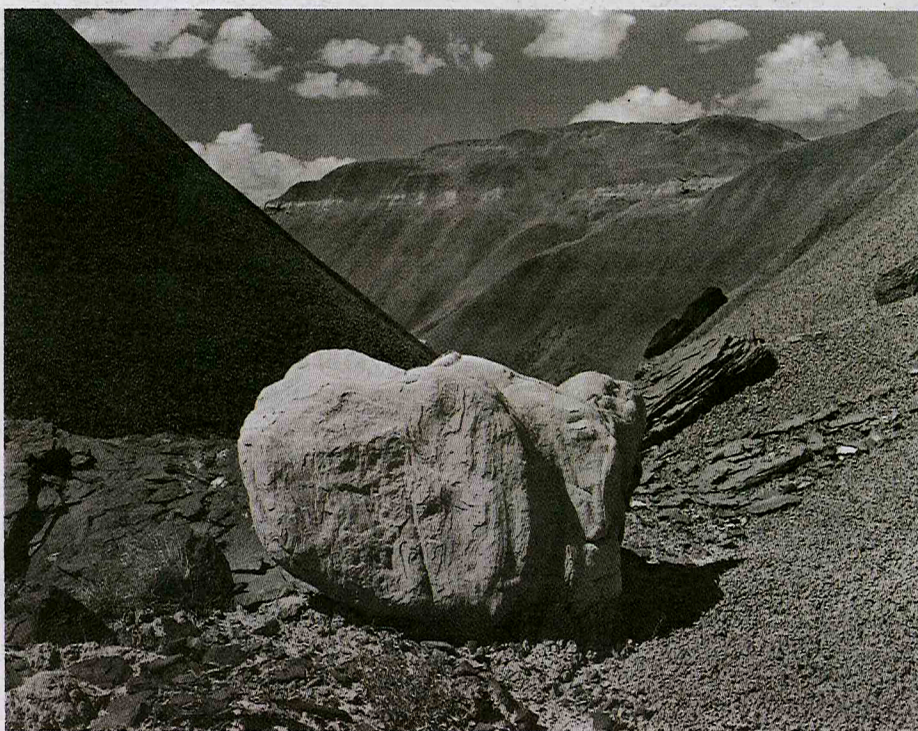
Porter decided to change his career emphasis and to focus on birds, a passion from his childhood. He figured out a way to use fast shutter speeds and synchronized strobe flash to capture the quick movements of birds, which he often photographed from high platforms of his own design. “His great determination to spend all this time to hunt down certain species of birds was impressive,” Martineau said. “He would set up his camera and other equipment and spend half the day there, and if he didn’t find what he wanted, he’d take it all down and then go up the next day.”

Porter taught himself a color-printing process and, with help from a Guggenheim fellowship, had his work featured in *Birds in Color: Flashlight Photographs by Eliot Porter*, an exhibition, curated by Nancy Newhall, at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

He moved to Tesuque in 1946. His images of the natural world tended to emphasize the near, narrowing the scope of landscape photographers like Adams while revealing more of the closely observed patterns and hues in rock, water, leaf, flower, and forest. In 1962, the Sierra Club published *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*, pairing Porter’s pictures with text by the naturalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau — a project idea that Kilham had suggested to her husband some time earlier.

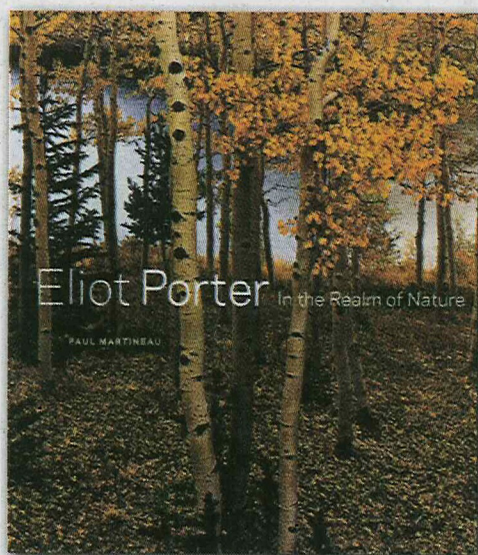
Martineau said the book’s positive reception gave Porter, who was 61 at the time, a renewed sense of confidence. His campaign to have color photography accepted as art — like Stieglitz’s campaign 60 years earlier to have photography itself accepted as art — appeared

continued on Page 44



Eliot Porter: *White Boulder, Black Place, New Mexico*, September 1945, gelatin silver print; 7.5 x 9.5 inches, Amon Carter Museum, bequest of the artist; ACMAA P1990-54-579

Top, Laura Gilpin (American, 1891-1979): *Eliot Porter Setting Up His Photographic Equipment*, 1952, gelatin silver print, 9.5 x 7.5 inches; gift of the artist; Fort Worth, Texas, Amon Carter Museum of American Art; P1978-92-29



Top left, *Poplars with Lichens*, Great Spruce Head Island, Maine, negative: July 7, 1968; print: 1988, dye transfer print, 23.5 x 18.875 inches, gift of Daniel Greenberg and Susan Steinhauser; JPGM 2005.93.29

Birch Tree and Bridge, Great Spruce Head Island, Maine, August 7, 1940, gelatin silver print, 9.4375 x 7.375 inches; Amon Carter Museum, bequest of the artist, ACMAA P1990-54-303-1

Eliot Porter, continued from Page 43

to be a success as well. Accordingly, Porter became less conservative about pigment intensity. His 1962 photograph *Green Reflections in Stream, Moki Canyon Creek, Glen Canyon, Utah* "accentuated the acid-color green in the final print, heightening its brilliance so that it plays against the soft orange and blues reflected in the center and in the dark, muddy terrain," Martineau writes. "Although Porter's colors were never garish, their rich, often jewel-like hues were a surprise to those unfamiliar with the clarity and saturation of the dyes used to make the prints."

Green Reflections in Stream was published in a second Sierra Club book, *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado*, whose images strengthened protest over (but did not stop) the construction of a hydroelectric plant on the Colorado River. Porter's photography was instrumental in the passage of the Wilderness Act of 1964. "His desert landscapes of Utah and Colorado were published in *The Place No One Knew*, and when David Brower, the Sierra Club's director, sent it to all members of Congress, they were so moved that it inspired them to pass the act," Martineau said. Porter was an active member of the club from 1965 to 1971. In 1972, he was gratified to have 75 of his avian portraits published in the book *Birds of North America: A Personal Selection*.

His career encapsulated not only the development of fine color photography but the debates (both artistic and political) about its appropriateness for

various subjects. "One of the interesting things is that for Porter's early black-and-white prints, he had different darkroom recipes, and he would vary them to achieve different tones," Martineau said. "Some of the prints have a reddish or yellowish tone that are beautiful when you see the original prints. I find it very interesting that he was looking for coloristic effects in his black-and-white prints."

By the early 1950s, Porter had slowly begun to phase out his black-and-white photography. One day in the early 1980s, he was surprised when his studio assistant, Janet Russek, said he should do something to bring his black-and-white work back into the public eye. He responded by hiring David Scheinbaum to make three sets of prints of some of Porter's favorite photos of adobe churches, cloud formations, mining towns, and nature abstractions. Those images appear in the 1985 book *Eliot Porter's Southwest*.

The New Mexico Museum of Art is one of five U.S. museums that received contributions of photographs — 166 prints, in this case — from Porter. The photographer died in 1990. ◀

"*Eliot Porter: In the Realm of Nature*" by Paul Martineau was published by the J. Paul Getty Museum/Getty Publications in November. Porter's work may be seen in an exhibit at Scheinbaum & Russek Ltd. (812 Camino Acoma, 988-5116) through Jan. 4.