

Profile

In 1959, a young, virtually unknown photographer traveled to Africa for the first time - and promptly fell under its spell. In a letter to his parents written from a village in South Africa where he was staying, he wrote, "Dusk has passed. A half moon hangs in the sky - the only light. From the darkness comes sounds of talk; of soft laughter; of penny whistles and Kwela music. Only roofs of straw huts penetrate the blackness. Never have I seen such stars Here, life is so pure, so simple."

The photographer was Pete Turner, and the photographs he took in that small village, of the Ndebele tribe, helped to launch his career. "They were published in Horizon magazine, in this wonderful eight -page essay called "Brilliance in the Bush" that won all sorts of awards," he says. At about the same time, Look published a photo essay on the Ringling Brothers' Circus that Turner had shot just prior to his trip to Africa. "It was like hitting a home run," Turner says. "All of a sudden my name started to get around town pretty big."

In the years since then, Turner has shot assignments in virtually every corner of the globe, but Africa continued to call him back. This year, Graphis is publishing Pete Turner African Journey, a celebration of Turner's continuing love affair with the continent and its people.

"It's a book I've always wanted to do, but it was my wife, Reine, who came up with the concept," the photographer says. "It's really about all my trips to Africa, from my first trip in 1959. So it covers about 40 years, which is a lot of time.

"I feel incredibly lucky, not only to have been able to do the book, but because Massimo Vignelli designed it, and then Gordon Parks wrote the most touching and marvelous introduction," says Turner. "I actually wrote the foreword--with the help of about a hundred of my friends."

What is it about Africa that kept calling to Turner? "That first trip was very eye-opening for me. Everything I saw and photographed was just incredibly exciting, and I think you always want to go back to those roots. . ." he says. "There's something about Africa that just grows on you--it's such a wonderful place. You start working there and you just don't want to leave. I don't know if that explains it or not. . . ."

Another of Turner's passions, of course, is color. It's almost impossible to think of a Pete Turner image without thinking of intense, deeply saturated color. Color so vibrant and clear photographer Jerry Uelsmann once remarked, " 'Pete, you shoot pictures with colors that people want to lick right off the screen .

"I don't know what it is. I love black and white photography, but somehow I got seduced by color," says Turner. "I remember going to the art supply store as a child and looking at watercolor paint boxes and thinking, 'These are really beautiful.' " Turner's love of photography dates back nearly as far as his passion for color. "I can't imagine life without being a photographer," he says. "I think I was taking pictures even in grade school."

One of the things that pulled him to photography was the idea that as a photographer, he could travel. "I remember thinking, 'Gee, if you're a photographer, you seem to be able to go everywhere and see interesting things and see things that are happening.' " He also had a passion for chemistry and, as he puts it "chemistry and optics made a good mix."

Fortunately photography seemed to embrace Turner as ardently as he embraced it. He attended Rochester Institute of Technology and, upon graduation, he was almost immediately drafted into the Army. But even his stint there seemed to support his career in photography.

Unlike most inductees, Turner was given an opportunity to use his photographic expertise. The Army had just begun to experiment with Type C prints, an inexpensive, but at the time virtually unknown, alternative to dye transfer. When Turner was asked if he could work with this new process, he enthusiastically lied.

"I said something like, 'You bet, Sir, you bet!' he recalls. "Now, I did have a good technical background, but I didn't have that much training with Type C, so I made a couple of phone calls to my teachers and learned how to do it." A week later he was running a million-dollar lab.

It was in 1959, fresh out of the army, with only a handful of paying jobs to recommend him, that he landed the assignment that launched his career: the Airstream Trailer Company and National Geographic magazine hired him to record the progress of 43 silvery Airstream Trailers on their journey from Capetown to Cairo - a seven-month assignment. For Turner, it was like manna from heaven.

"It seemed like the best assignment a person could get," he says. "A lot of people couldn't just leave everything for seven months, but I had just gotten out of the Army so I didn't mind at all."

He doesn't recall being daunted by the assignment. What did make him a little nervous was the idea of driving across the continent. "But the Airstream people took care of that," he says. "They built--what would you call it today? A recreational vehicle?--equipped with everything I could need. It had all sorts of gas tanks so you could go miles and miles without stopping. They even built a special compartment around the water tank where I could store my film and keep it cool."

Airstream used the images in ads and promotional material. But the photo essay in National Geographic never materialized. As Turner recalls, they only used a few images - which they ran fairly small. They must have liked what they saw, however, because they offered him a staff position - which he ultimately turned down.

"I knew I was at a fork in my life," he says. "It was a wonderful opportunity and I knew if I took it, I'd do travel and that type of work." But he also knew, given the size of the magazine, that his images weren't likely to run much larger than 5" x 7", and that made a difference to him. "The beauty of magazines back then was that so many of them were big. Magazines like Life, Holiday, and Look just turned me on because they had so much [pictorial] real estate. So I took a gamble that as a freelancer I could survive and grow, and be able to do more than just one thing."

It was about this point that fate stepped in, with what could only be interpreted as an encouraging nod: Horizon ran the award-winning eight-page photo essay on the Ndebele and Look published the story on the Ringling Brothers' Circus that Turner had shot two years earlier. Soon, Turner was also working for Holiday, Esquire and Sports Illustrated, to name just a few.

His relationship with then-*Esquire* editor Harold Hayes was particularly rewarding. One of his first assignments was on sophistication, a topic Turner felt he knew nothing about. Hayes, however, insisted. "Harold said to me, 'Don't worry about it, Pete, I'll give you the subject matter and you just do whatever you do,'" says Turner. "There was just a great deal of trust. And I think that's true of all great editors; there's that trust and this wonderful rapport. And it doesn't have to be a lot of dialogue. It's just there ... Harold was that sort of editor. He was very special."

One of the most thrilling photo essays he did for *Esquire* was one he suggested himself, in 1973. "I saw a small item in the *New York Times* about a volcano erupting in a small town in Iceland, so I called Harold and proposed a story on it," says Turner. "I was on a plane that night and when I got there I was met by an Icelandic writer." The volcano, meanwhile, was in full eruption and Turner spent about 26 hours on Heimaey documenting its effects on the town--which was as surreal for the inhabitants as it was for him "It was like a science fiction movie, but taking place in the middle of a city," he says. "Initially, they called the Fire Department, which of course didn't work out too well."

The images are eerily beautiful. In one, a plume of brilliant yellow and red light arcs across the crest of a hill. The night sky is cobalt blue and the white clapboard houses nestle cozily into the valley in the foreground. The only hint of menace is the glowing dark red lights on the "hill" itself, which is, of course, the lava flowing down the sides of the volcano. "What was happening is these flames would go back and forth above the town and there was all this black ash raining down--in one photograph it was so deep it looked like black snow," Turner says.

Devastating though this was for the townspeople who lost their homes, it was the fact that the volcano did erupt in a town that made it so exciting for Turner. "All photographers love volcanoes. They're beautiful and colorful," he explains. "But with most photographs of volcanoes, there's just vegetation in the foreground so you don't get a sense of how huge it is. Because this was happening in a town, you had a sense of scale."

Several years ago, Turner went back to the island, to photograph in the same spots he'd photographed during the eruption. "That was incredible too, to see the changes that have taken place," he says. "There was green grass where there was just black lava before, but they've rebuilt everything exactly the same."

During the first decade of his career, Turner also began shooting stills for movies. In 1962, he photographed Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton on the set of "*Cleopatra*." A year later, he photographed Ava Gardner filming "*Night of the Iguana*." In 1967, he went to Taiwan to photograph Steve McQueen and Richard Attenborough in the movie "*Sand Pebbles*."

"There was a market then for that type of work," says Turner. "The publicity people from MGM for instance, would come to you and say, 'Hey, Pete, would you be interested in going to work on "*Cleopatra*?' " - and then they would pay you to go over. Then a magazine like *Look* or *Esquire* would hear that you'd be working on the set and they'd jump on the bandwagon. It was a good deal for everyone, and I used to love it. It was a lot of fun."

Turner continued to shoot for magazines throughout the 60's, but early on he made a decision to expand into advertising, as well. In fact, he shot his first major ad campaign, for ESSO, in 1962. By the end of the decade he was shooting for DeBeers, Chrysler, Seagrams, AT&T, KLM

and Portugal Airlines. He opened his first studio in New York in 1966. By 1968, he'd moved his base of operations to a studio in Carnegie Hall. It was around this time that he also began to pursue more conceptual photography, some of which harked back to the work of two Surrealist painters, Yves Tanguy and Giorgio de Chirico.

"They both had a major influence on my work--not in an imitative way, but as a source of inspiration," Turner says. "I thought Yves Tanguy was wonderful. I really related to his paintings, and I think "The Shapes of Things To Come" has some of the same inner quiet I saw in his work. I also have a series of doorways that reminds me of De Chirico."

In 1967, Turner had his third group show at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. One of the images included in it was his now world famous Giraffe, taken in 1964 in Amboseli National Park in Kenya. But in 1967, it was the cause of much controversy. "Nobody was using primary color photos," says Turner, "And the giraffe is a combination of magenta and red, a very powerful image that manipulated color far beyond what color photographers were thinking they could do at the time."

Throughout the 70's, Turner continued to shoot a lot of advertising, adding to his roster of clients such names Benson & Hedges, Goodyear, United Airlines, Union Carbide and GTE. He also continued to shoot for magazines and to add to his personal archive, and was licensing stock through his own studio. That changed in 1974 when he became one of the first photographers to join The Image Bank.

"The timing was perfect," he says. "The Pete Turner Studio was supplying stock for all sorts of requests and it was beginning to interfere with my main business." He also liked the vision of TIB founders Stanley Kanney and Larry Fried. "They wanted to upgrade the stock industry to the level of assignment work being done, so they didn't want outtakes, they wanted personal work," Turner says. They also wanted well-known photographers with well developed--and well organized stock files. Turner fit the bill perfectly.

Turner also continued to shoot movie stills, but he made a notable departure from the genre in 1978, when Steven Spielberg hired him to shoot the special effects stills for "Close Encounters of the Third Kind." "The funny part was Steven was very much attracted to a photograph I had taken of a road in Nevada," Turner recalls. "I worked on the film for at least a year and a half, and I think we still ended up with that road, or some variation of it [in the movie poster]." That same year Turner also returned to Africa - with Harold Hayes, who was no longer with Esquire--to photograph the Serengeti.

The 80's began with a bang. In 1981, Turner was recognized by the American Society of Magazine Photographers (now the American Society of Media Photographers) and given the "Outstanding Achievement in Photography Award." During the same decade, his work became part of the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the International Center of Photography, both in New York. Today his photographs are in the permanent collections of museums worldwide, and he's received over 300 awards from design and photography groups, including the Professional Photographer of the Year Award from PMDA earlier this year.

In the early 90's, Turner made another change in his approach to business, building a new studio - as well as a new home - in the Hamptons on Long Island. From this new and very lovely base of operations, he still continues to shoot ad campaigns, add to his prodigious photography

archive, and to travel. In the past five years, he's been to Namibia and South Africa, to Chile and Patagonia, to Southeast Asia, and in 1999, to Greece, where his son Alex (a successful commercial director who's made his first foray into film directing) was married. What is it that keeps Turner's passion for photography alive?

"I think it's what I said earlier, this idea that you're always seeing new things. That's one of the reasons I love to travel. To see new things. . . . But I also notice that I'll have a project in mind, and out of that other things develop--that's true of both assignment and personal work. And I think that's the beauty of the medium."

He concludes. "I think that it is important to grow in photography: You have to have a goal, and yet you have to stay constantly open to new experiences. And then, of course, sometimes you get lucky too--and things just happen."

His advice to young photographers could also sum up his personal secret for success. "Shoot for yourself, to please yourself, and have ongoing projects that you personally want to shoot. Because that's what will draw people to your photography. That passion. You've got to have something inside you that gives you a personal vision."