

elliott erwitt

Born in Paris to Russian parents, and educated in America, Elliott Erwitt took up photography before being drafted into the US Army in 1950. He made his name with photo-essays on barracks life in France then joined Magnum and travelled the world, capturing famous faces and places and producing quirky studies of dogs. More recently, he has made award-winning films.



John O'Mahony
Saturday December 27, 2003
The Guardian

Elliott Erwitt's flat affords one of the most startling views in New York. Perched on the eighth floor of one of the blocks that surround Central Park, its bay windows frame a panorama of glistening reservoir, sculpted hills and a lattice-work of pathways populated by ant-like joggers. At night, it all lights up into the glittering cliché of a Manhattan skyline, with Park Avenue twinkling against the darkness.



Even more impressive are the contents, the accumulated souvenirs of a thousand assignments. Greeting visitors by the lift is a giant moose head picked up in Alaska, its antlers adorned with cheerful green tinsel. Beside it is a life-size replica of a Japanese policeman that once duped motorists into good behaviour, and a sign reading bluntly: "Danger de Mort." In the centre of the room, commanding shameless prominence, is an Asian idol with an obscenely phallic snout: "He's a sex-god," says Erwitt with a chuckle, "but he looks like Richard Nixon from a certain angle."

Most important, however, for Erwitt's work is a far less ostentatious collection, which he keeps locked away in a drawer in the corner. This is the photographer's assortment of bicycle horns, ranging from a large ornate Pedicab tooter to the swirling brass bulbs of an antique bullhorn to simple versions that might be found in any bike store. "It's almost embarrassing," he shrugs, "but I do have one trick for taking portraits on commission. I carry one of these little bicycle horns in my pocket, and once in a while, when someone is sour-faced or stiff, I blow my horn. It sort of shatters the barriers. It's silly, but it works."

This same self-deprecating phrase could perhaps be applied to much of Erwitt's prodigious output, spanning a 50-year career. Purveyor of the "non-photograph", he combines a deceptively casual approach with an unrivalled, sometimes gloriously silly, visual sense of wit. Even those who don't recognise Erwitt by name will know his infamous dog photographs, collected in books such as *To the Dogs* and *Son of Beach*, often comparing bulldogs and poodles to their jowly or primped-up owners. One famously minimalist example simply shows a woman's crossed legs upstaged by her pet's eager paws protruding from beneath a coffee table. "There's not a sitter in his gallery who does not melt the heart," wrote PG Wodehouse of Erwitt's canine subjects, "and no beastly class distinctions, either. Thoroughbreds and mutts, they are all there."

Erwitt has also produced a huge body of diverse work, from famed portraits of Marilyn Monroe and Simone de Beauvoir to the infamous "Kitchen Debate" picture of Nixon and Khrushchev engaged in a vigorous argument, to photo-essays from South America and eastern Europe. He generally works with two cameras, one for his main assignment and one for taking his own "snaps" as he calls them (one of his earliest employers nicknamed him Snapz Picasso because of this habit). His technique is faultless, but he always stresses that the instinct that creates great photography is casual and uncontrollable: "I'll always be an amateur photographer," he says, pointing out that the word amateur comes from the Latin for "to love". Erwitt has managed to balance this with commercial and advertising assignments for *Life* and *Holiday* magazines: "Elliott has to my mind achieved a miracle," says Henri Cartier-Bresson, "working on a chain-gang of commercial campaigns and still offering a bouquet of stolen photos with a flavour, a smile from his deeper self."

While criticism might seem churlish in the face of Erwitt's gentle humour, there have been whispers that his work is "lightweight", "flippant", even "inconsequential". But with 19 books to his credit, including a new paperback edition of his career-spanning *Snaps*, he remains one of the most popular and celebrated photographers in the world. "He's not only talented but extremely intelligent," says John Szarkowski, director emeritus of the Museum of Modern Art's photography department, "and, as we know, in our world intelligence often passes for wit - if you tell the truth, people think you are being funny, and in consequence he is one of the few photographers whose work is also identified by extraordinary wit."



If his photography is light and ironic, Erwitt himself can be gruff and even a little prickly. In his brightest moments, however, often at family gatherings and on holidays, he can be funny too: "I've always thought there was something rather Chaplinesque about Elliott," says his friend, the writer Helen Ungerer. "He has a very quirky sense of humour." But for the most part, he's happy to leave the talking to his band of eloquent friends - among them Arthur Miller and fellow photographers Henri Cartier-Bresson and Robert Capa - while he prefers to fade into the background: "He is virtually inarticulate, as you probably discovered," says his friend, the writer and journalist Murray Sayle. "He's not an intellectual - he never had much education in any country." According to Erwitt's wife, Pia, daily life can pose certain challenges: "He is a tough cookie to deal with if people aren't used to him," she says. "Now that I know him I feel for everyone who is a

little intimidated because they don't know how to handle him. It is like when people think that comedians are funny people and they are not."

His reticent nature has not stopped Erwit, impishly handsome in his younger years, from accruing a considerable stock of beautiful wives: his first, Lucienne, was the inspiration for a tender early photo-essay series following her pregnancy and the birth of their first child, Ellen; his second, Diana, was a Swedish-Irish American he met on assignment; his third, Susan, was a Texan from whom he separated on the bitterest terms; his fourth and current wife, Pia Frankenberg, is a German film-maker who fell in love with Erwit when making a documentary about him.

"All of my marriages lasted seven years," says Erwit with a resigned shrug. Some friends see the failure of his relationships as a consequence of his lifestyle and even of his vision: "Photographers are by definition interested in the surfaces of things; that is all you can photograph," says Sayle. "And what do we call people who are only interested in the surfaces of things? Superficial! Or to put it another way, Elliott could never get past what they looked like. That kind of relationship isn't going to last very long."

Certainly, when it comes to discussing his own work, Erwit's tight-lipped nature

is apparent: "If you want to understand the art of Elliott Erwit, the last person to turn to is Elliott Erwit," says writer and friend Wilfred Sheed. "Not that he can't talk, it's just that like Harpo he won't - at least about the mysteries of creation. In short the master of the non-photograph is also a master of the non-interview." Overall, Erwit believes photography criticism is pretentious and particularly lambasts the idea of photography courses: "A waste of time," he scoffs. "A visual sense is something you either have or you don't." (This is despite studying photography and film himself.)

Photography is less an art than a craft, he says: "I think all photographic assignments are logical problems that have logical solutions. Technique is a myth that can be exploded by reading the literature that is available, whether it's on the Kodak film box or in an instruction booklet. Photography is really very simple. Making pictures is a very simple act. There are no great secrets. My absolute conviction is that if you're working reasonably well the only important thing is to keep shooting. Commercial or fine art, it doesn't matter. Nothing happens when you sit at home."

Elliott Erwit was born Elio Romano Erwitz in Paris on July 26, 1928. His mother, Eugenia, came from a family of wealthy Moscow merchants who, "like all good girls from such families, was sent around the world from the age of 17 or 18 for the sake of experience". In transit, she met and fell in love with Boris Erwitz, an architecture student originally from Odessa; they were married in Trieste. After the 1917 revolution, Eugenia convinced a reluctant Boris, who was and would remain a committed socialist, to leave Russia for good, settling first in Rome and then moving on to Paris. With their new baby, they then retraced their steps and settled in Milan, where they remained for the next 10 years and where young Elio began school. Even this, however, seemed to offer little in the way of stability: "When I was four my parents separated in Milan in rather acrimonious circumstances, to put it mildly," he says.



Another one of Erwit most popular photo's is actually of his close friend Robert Frank, dancing with his wife in Valencia.

Alarmed by the rise of fascism, the Erwitz family, temporarily reunited, were forced to move again, first to France and then, on the eve of the second world war, to the United States: "Actually we left on September 1 and war was declared on the third," he recalls. "It was the last boat to leave."

When he arrived in America, Elliott Erwit, as he would henceforth be known, spoke no English whatsoever, but was enrolled in Public School 156 in New York City and left to fend for himself. Despite the obvious obstacles, he managed to thrive, and by the time of graduation, was bored enough by lessons to be skiving off to the Museum of Modern Art to peruse the Picassos and Magrittes. Most of the time, he lived with his father on the upper west side of Manhattan, not far from his current Central Park apartment, and visited his mother at weekends.

A few years later, his life was thrown into flux once more when his erratic father, now a less than successful door-to-door salesman, decided to uproot and move to California. Driving all the way, they hawked wrist-watches in small towns to survive, finally riding into Los Angeles in the summer of 1941 and settling in a modest house in Hollywood.

Boris Erwit continued selling watches while Elliott attended Hollywood High. It was here that he "accidentally" took up photography. Attracted more by its gleaming appearance than by its ability to take photographs, he bought a chrome-plated Argos camera. However, he was soon hooked and converted his laundry-room into a dark-room. Later, with funds raised by engraving Boris's watches, Elliott upgraded to a \$200 Rolleiflex, his first "real" camera. The subjects that he initially attempted were the people he found around him - neighbours, pedestrians in the street, surfers flexing their muscles on the beach. However, from the start, he divided his time between taking his own photographs and, to make a living, shooting weddings as well as printing pictures of film stars.



Erwit's love of dogs is well known. Mixed with the influence of his great friend and mentor Henry Cartier Bresson to capture the decisive moment, this has often helped create the legendary humour in his photographs.

After a few years, Boris had been pushed to the edge of a financial precipice by Californian alimony laws and headed off to sell his wares in New Orleans. At 16, Erwit was left behind to fend for himself, picking up the lease on his father's one-storey frame house on Fountain Avenue, where he took in boarders for \$6 a week. "Those were times when we were down to one meal a day," his friend, the late Eugene Ostroff has said. "We knew somebody who owned a pet shop and he sold horse meat. When we were able to get enough money together we'd buy some horse fillets, get a few bottles of wine and have a banquet." Erwit says: "We were pre-beatniks. The house had a personality all of its

During this period Erwitt began experimenting with unusual photographic processes: "He was trying out a new whirlpool washing technique," Ostroff said. "He would put a roll of freshly developed film in the toilet and flush every 10 minutes. He stopped when a roll of film got away from him."

In 1949, Erwitt headed for New York, convinced that his destiny lay in becoming a professional photographer. He met Valentino Sarra, who arranged for some of his first commercial jobs at the Sarra studio. Their main client was Rheingold beer (a new Miss Rheingold every month). Shortly afterwards, he also met Capa, who helped the young photographer establish more contacts, which led to an assignment in Pittsburgh for the Mellon Foundation, one of his first big photo-essays.

With the outbreak of the Korean war, Erwitt was drafted as an anti-aircraft gunner. "Half of the young men who joined as gunners never came home," he says. But there were no places left in that regiment and Erwitt was assigned as a photographer to a unit based in France. However, he took his own photographs of barracks life, which he entered in a competition run by Life magazine for young photographers, under the title of "Bed and Boredom". In stark contrast to the usual blood and guts emphasis of war photography, Erwitt showed soldiers lounging around, trying to fill time, and he won the second prize and a cash award of \$2,500. During his time in France he also picked up a number of commissions from US newspapers, while also taking trips to Spain and Amsterdam to pursue his own projects.



While his career was beginning to take off, his personal life was also gaining momentum. Stationed in Verdun, in the unlikely setting of the local American Express office, he came across a young Dutch woman named Lucienne van Kam, who was working there. They fell in love somewhere in the middle of Erwitt's contorted travel arrangements for a trip to India, and Louie, as she was known, was soon pregnant with their first child. Thanks to some connections and an assignment in Bermuda, where they were hastily married, Louie was able to bypass the strict immigration laws and was granted a visa to the US, where the young couple moved into a \$60-a-month apartment on Manhattan's upper east side in the summer of 1953.

It was here that some of Erwitt's most intimate portraits were taken, a collection that remains to this day one of his best: the heavily pregnant Louie lying asleep on the bed with two kittens; or prostrate, with her belly protruding. Erwitt followed Louie's pregnancy photographically right into the delivery room, with Louie clasping her stomach and then holding the new-born child.

Capa had promised Erwitt a job on his release from the army, so one of the first things he did was drive to the New York office of Magnum, the photographers' collective founded by Capa, Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David Seymour on the principle that a photographer should retain the rights to his work after publication.

Erwitt's first major commission after he signed with the agency came in 1954, a photo-essay on children for Holiday magazine. This resulted in another of his early memorable photos, a shot of a young boy in a small town in Wyoming who lived with his grandparents and whose cowboy father was coming to visit. Erwitt captured the pair in an offhand embrace, with both on the edge of tears. It wasn't quite what Holiday was looking for ("too sad" was the verdict) and never ran, though it still features in his books and exhibitions.



Back in New York, he picked up work photographing celebrities such as Jack Kerouac and Roald Dahl. Through Magnum he became set photographer on a number of films, including *On the Waterfront* and *The Misfits*, where his studies of Marilyn Monroe on the verge of collapse have a wrenching poignancy. Other film stars in his portfolio were Humphrey Bogart, Grace Kelly, Marlene Dietrich and Vera Miles (with an avuncular Hitchcock looking on). Assignments took him to Nicaragua, Hiroshima, Pakistan and Mexico.

However, his reputation was secured by a number of landmark assignments during the late 50s and early 60s, all of them courtesy of his homeland, Russia. The first took place in the summer of 1959 when Erwitt was sent to Moscow to get pictures of an industrial fair. By coincidence he arrived on the same day that vice-president Richard Nixon was due to appear with Communist party chairman Nikita Khrushchev. In front of a model kitchen, which had been assembled by Macy's department store, Khrushchev launched into the infamous "kitchen debate" with Nixon.

"It was ridiculous," Erwitt recalls. "Nixon was saying, 'We're richer than you are', and Khrushchev would say, 'We are catching up and we will surpass you.' That was the level of the debate. At one point Nixon was getting so irritating I thought I heard Khrushchev say in Russian 'Go f*@k my grandmother'." More importantly Erwitt got a snap of Nixon belligerently prodding Khrushchev in the lapel, which later appeared on posters during Nixon's presidential bid.

The second high point also involved a trip to Moscow where Erwitt was on assignment for Holiday magazine when the first Sputnik was launched; his photographs of a lecture at Moscow's planetarium appeared on the cover of the New York Times magazine.

Up to that point, no western journalist had managed to get pictures of the October anniversary parade but Erwitt tagged along with a Soviet TV crew and managed to pass five security lines, setting up his camera right by Lenin's mausoleum: "Although I was questioned by a guard, I was able to convince them that I belonged to the parade. I shot three or four quick rolls and then

paced to my hotel room a few blocks away, where I processed them in the bath."

The third key assignment took place in 1966 when Erwit was again in Moscow, on an assignment to photograph President de Gaulle for Paris Match. After growing tired of the staged publicity, he returned to his hotel room. However, he immediately grew anxious that he had given in so readily and returned to find that De Gaulle and the Soviet leadership, including President Leonid Brezhnev and prime minister Andrei Kosygin, had retired to an inner meeting room where Erwit was given free rein to photograph them in the most casual of settings. "They didn't question my presence because I acted natural." The picture again made the cover of Paris Match and was run worldwide.



By now, he was beginning to display a flair for photojournalism, and took the photo of Jacqueline Kennedy at the JFK funeral, where her tortured face can be seen through the veil. Erwit also built up a long-running relationship with several organisations, including the Irish Tourist Board, for whom he took many of the photographs that defined the Irish image abroad: winding Connemara roads, stone-ringed fields on the Aran Islands, and rugged shorelines.

He was in Tel Aviv in 1962, where he photographed Martin Buber; Hungary in 1964, where he photographed geese and girls in traditional dress; Poland in 1964; Cuba in 1964, where his subjects included Che Guevara; back in the US in 1965, for Lyndon B Johnson; Italy in 1965 for Antonioni and Pope Paul VI. In 1968, he paid a visit to nudists in Kent, which would become something of a preoccupation throughout the 70s and feature in his films during the 80s. In 1968 he went back to Moscow, and then on to France and the Ile du Levant, this time for French nudists, back to Ireland and then on to Japan in 1970, where he took some of the last pictures of the writer Yukio Mishima.

Throughout this period, Erwit's personal life was continuing to go through a cycle of painful revolutions. The relationship with Lucienne had long since broken down and they divorced in 1960. Three years later he met Diana Dann, whom he married in 1968 only to break with her by the mid-70s. On another assignment for a business magazine in San Francisco, he encountered a young Texan named Susan Ringo and married her in 1977. The relationship ended acrimoniously in the mid-80s.

During this turmoil, his career continued to blossom and in the 70s and 80s it took another turn as he went from still to moving images: "He called me up and said he had this commission to do a series of funny television documentaries," says Sayle. "First, a pilot to be called The Great Pleasure Hunt - the idea was that the central figure would wander around the world searching for pleasure. We went to an au-berge in the Shihimoda peninsula where we knew there was a bathtub of solid gold that was worth \$2 million. We just arrived and made up the piece on the spot."

This was the beginning of a series of programmes for HBO, which would eventually include absurdist narratives about playing polo on elephants in Nepal, a black-tie safari in Africa and a film about hunting truffles in France. Others included Beauty Knows No Pain (1971), Red, White and Bluegrass (1973) and the prize-winning Glassmakers of Herat, Afghanistan (1977).

In the 1990s, Erwit returned full-time to stills photography. At the age of 76, he has perhaps achieved most of what he set out to do when he left California in 1949. Even if there are hidden ambitions, characteristically he isn't divulging much: "All I want really is more of the same," he says, "I'd like to do more exhibits and books. And I'd like to get more advertising work. I have very expensive overheads and alimony payments. Of course I could sell up, but I really would like to keep it all going as long as I'm perpendicular. I'm not complaining. The simple fact of keeping going is a lot of fun most of the time."



Not many of Erwit's pictures are constructed. He says "if they are posed it will be obvious". This is his daughter at the Metropolitan Museum

Life at a glance

Born: July 26, 1928, Paris.

Education: 1943-45 Hollywood High School; '44-45 photography in Los Angeles City College; '48-50 film at School for Social Research.

Married: 1953 Lucienne Van Kan (divorced '60); '68 Diana Dann (divorced '75); '77 Susan Ringo (divorced '84); '95- Pia Frankenberg.

Collections include: 1974 Son of Bitch; '78 Recent Developments; '84 The Angel Tree; '88 Personal Exposures; '91 On the Beach; '94 Between the Sexes; '99 Museum watching, Dogs, Dogs; 2001 Snaps; 2003 Handbook.

Films and documentaries

include: 1971 Beauty Knows No Pain; '73 Red, White and Bluegrass; '77 Glassmakers of Herat, Afghanistan.

