

Elliott Erwitt, Whose Photos Are Famous, and Often Funny, Dies at 95

His camera could freeze moments in history, but he also had an eye for the humor and absurdity of everyday life. Dogs were a help there.

By Richard B. Woodward

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Photographers with a comic outlook on life seldom win the acclaim granted to exalters of nature or chroniclers of war and squalor. Elliott Erwitt, who died at 95 on Wednesday at his home in Manhattan, was an exception.

For more than six decades he used his camera to tell visual jokes, finding material wherever he strolled. His sharp eye for silly, sometimes telling conjunctions — a dog lying on its back in a cemetery, a glowing Coca-Cola machine amid a public display of missiles in Alabama, a mangy potted plant in a tacky Miami Beach ballroom — earned him constant assignments as well as the affection of a public that shared his sweet, Chaplin-esque sense of the absurd.

He published more than 20 books, and his black-and-white prints are in photography collections throughout the world. His daughter Sasha Erwitt confirmed the death.

Most celebrated for his witty snapshots of dogs, published in books with titles like “Son of Bitch,” “To the Dogs,” and “Woof,” Mr. Erwitt captured them as solitary animals with their own obsessions as well as personable interactors with humans.



New York, New York, 1974. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos



New York City, 2000. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos

In an essay for Mr. Erwitt's "Dogs Dogs," P.G. Wodehouse wrote: "There's not a sitter in his gallery who does not melt the heart, and no beastly class distinctions, either. Thoroughbreds and mutts, they are all here."

The popularity of Mr. Erwitt's canine candid photos obscured the diversity of his work. He never specialized and always freelanced. A lifelong member and one-time president of Magnum, the esteemed collective of independent photographers — a co-founder, Robert Capa, invited him to join in 1953 — Mr. Erwitt took all kinds of assignments, from fashion to politics



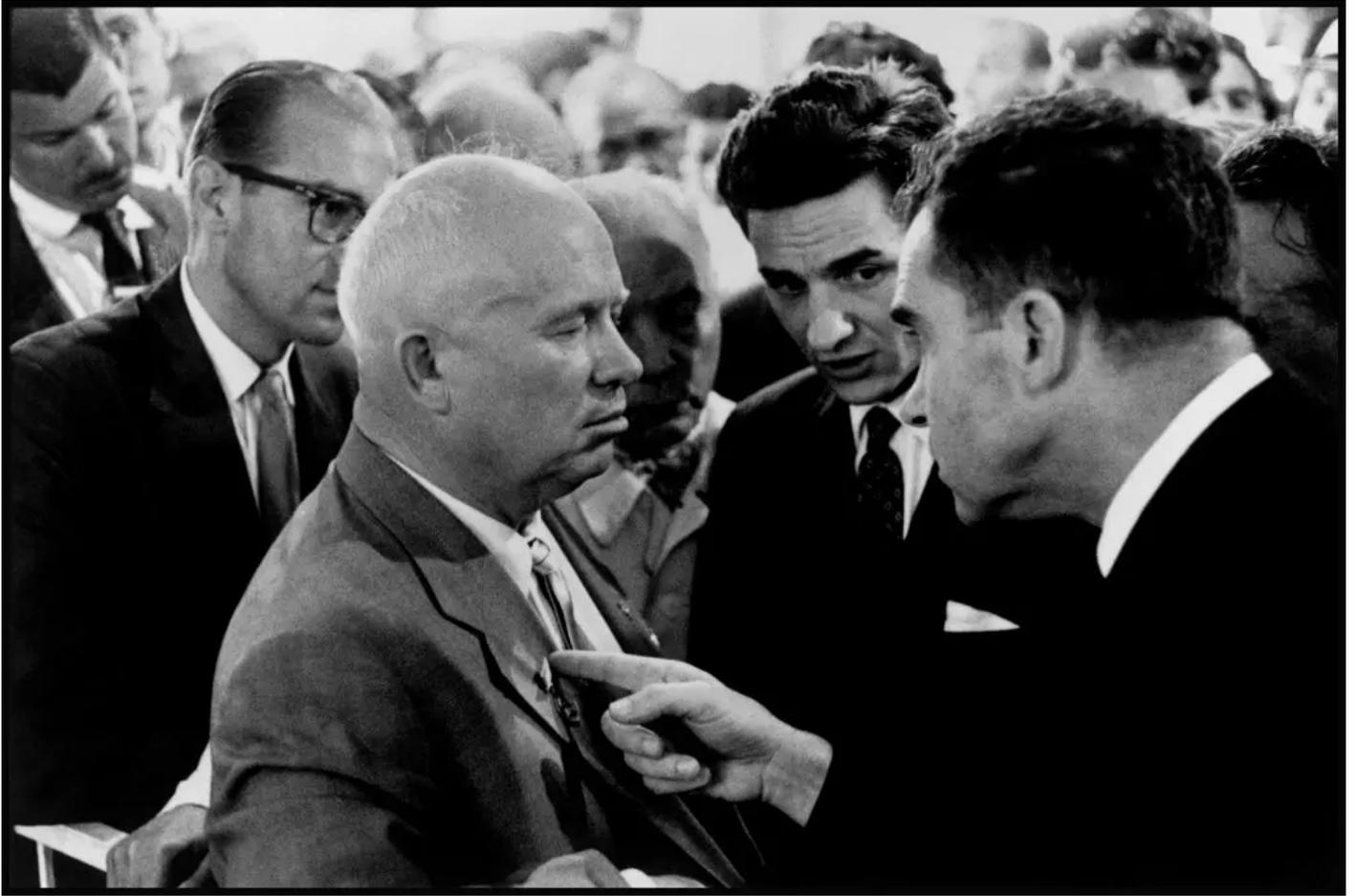
Marilyn Monroe, 1956. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos

He photographed celebrities (Humphrey Bogart, Jack Kerouac, Marilyn Monroe, Che Guevara) for Life, Look, and other magazines, and he did travel campaigns for Ireland and France.

A number of his images became famous. One of his most well known shows a veiled Jacqueline Kennedy holding a folded American flag during President John F. Kennedy's burial at Arlington National Cemetery in 1963.

Even better-known is one from 1959, of Vice President Richard M. Nixon poking Soviet Premier Nikita S. Krushchev in the chest during the so-called Kitchen Debate in a Moscow exhibition of American products. (The picture was turned into a poster by

Republicans in the 1960 campaign, enraging the staunchly anti-Nixon Mr. Erwitt. “It was used without my permission,” he later said. “I was angry, but I couldn’t do anything about it.”)



Moscow, July 1959. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos



Arlington, Virginia, Nov. 25, 1963. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos

Another memorable photograph, from Edward Steichen's landmark photo exhibition "The Family of Man" (and subsequent book) at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, was titled "Mother and Child." Taken in 1953, it shows a woman on a bed looking into her baby's eyes while a cat coolly surveys the scene. The baby was Mr. Erwitt's daughter, Ellen, and the woman was his first wife, Lucienne Matthews, who died in 2011.

Museums exhibited his work from the 1960s until his death, and over the years he received one-man shows at the Museum of Modern Art, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Modern Art in Paris and the Barbican in London. In 2002, a comprehensive retrospective was mounted at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid.



Berkeley, California, 1956. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos

Elio Romano Ervitz (“Romano, because my father had once attended the University of Rome” and “liked it”) was born on July 26, 1928, in Paris, the son of a Russian Orthodox Jew (there were many Talmudic scholars in his family) and his Russian wife. They had fled to France after the 1917 Revolution.

In an autobiographical essay in his book “Personal Exposures” (1988), Mr. Erwitt wrote that his father, Boris, had never lost faith in socialism and had blamed his wife, Eugenia (Trepel) Ervitt (“embarrassingly rich as a young girl”), for the couple’s exodus from “the Promised Land of the Soviet Paradise.”

After moving the family to Italy, his father found Mussolini’s regime intolerable and shuttled everyone back to France in 1938. Although Boris and Eugenia had separated in Milan when their son was 4, the three left together on a boat for the United States a year later, a few days before World War II began.

Elio Ervitz became Elliott Erwitt in New York but continued his peripatetic life. After two years living with his salesman father on Central Park West in Manhattan, father and son drove across country to Los Angeles in 1941, the two selling wristwatches in small towns en route to pay their way.

A few years later, his father was off again, this time selling his wares in New Orleans and leaving his 16-year-old son to fend for himself. Boris later traveled to Japan to be

ordained as a Buddhist priest and returned to practice his adopted religion in Manhattan.

Mr. Erwitt credited “shyness” — he had arrived in New York speaking no English — with making him a photographer. He began seriously taking pictures in Los Angeles with an antique glass-plate camera when he was 16, then upgraded to a Rolleiflex.

“My dentist was my first customer, then people’s houses and children, then the senior prom,” he wrote. Photos of movie stars also sold well.

After graduating from Hollywood High School, he studied photography at Los Angeles City College, took a job in a commercial dark room and hustled for work. In 1949, he headed back to New York, where he met Capa and Steichen, studied film at the New School for Social Research and enjoyed a nascent professional career before the Army drafted him during the Korean War.

While serving in 1951 with an Army Signal Corps unit in France, he took a picture of soldiers killing time in the barracks. By his account, the photo changed his life. Submitting it to a Life magazine contest, he won a prize, and the photograph was published as “Bed and Boredom.” With the \$2,500 check (“an astronomical amount at the time”), Mr. Erwitt bought a car and nicknamed it “Thank you, Henry,” after the Time-Life publisher, Henry Luce.

The unheroic and the offbeat had already become signature motifs for Mr. Erwitt. He made his first dog-related pictures in 1946, for a fashion story about women’s shoes for The New York Times Magazine.



Mr. Erwitt in 2010. In 1951, while serving with an Army Signal Corps unit in France, he took a picture of soldiers killing time in the barracks. By his account, the photo changed his life. Jemal Countess/Getty Images

One image from that assignment, of a panting Chihuahua in a sweater on a sidewalk next to a woman in sandals, was featured in many exhibitions.

“I decided to photograph from a dog’s point of view because dogs see more shoes than anybody,” he reasoned.

Mr. Erwitt tended to use a view camera for advertising jobs while reserving his 35-millimeter for personal shooting. Henri Cartier-Bresson was one of many who were astonished that his friend was so easily able to do both kinds of work.

“Elliott has to my mind achieved a miracle,” Mr. Cartier-Bresson once said, “working on a chain-gang of commercial campaigns and still offering a bouquet of stolen photos with a flavor, a smile from his deeper self.”

Speaking four languages, a facility that allowed him to find regular work in Europe during the 1950s, ’60, and ’70s, Mr. Erwitt relished the freelance life.

“Some people can’t stand the insecurity, but I’ve never been overly bothered by it,” he wrote in 1988, adding that his unstable income stream was harder on his wives and girlfriends than on him.

Mr. Erwitt was married and divorced four times: to Lucienne Van Kan, from 1953 to 1960; to Diana Dann, from 1967 to 1974; to Susan Ringo, from 1977 to 1984; and to Pia Frankenberg, from 1998 to 2012.

In addition to his daughter Sasha, from his third marriage, he is survived by another daughter from that marriage, Amelia Erwitt; two daughters from his first marriage, Ellen and Jennifer Erwitt; two sons from his first marriage, Misha and David; 10 grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren. He lived on the Upper West Side of Manhattan for about 60 years.

In the 1970s, Mr. Erwitt was among the first to benefit from the art market’s interest in contemporary photographs as an investment. Brokers bought prints in bulk for tax shelters. “That windfall bought my house in East Hampton,” he said.

“Photographs and Anti-Photographs,” published in 1972, was the first in a string of Erwitt books. During this time he also produced and directed a series of short film documentaries: “The Many Faces of Dustin Hoffman” (1968), “Beauty Knows No Pain” (1971), “Red, White and Bluegrass” (1973), “The Glassmakers of Herat, Afghanistan” (1977), and “The Magnificent Marching 100” (1980). He continued making films in the 1980s, producing a series of 18 short comedies for HBO.



Paris, 1989. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos



New York City, 1955. Elliott Erwitt/Magnum Photos

But his goofy and agile still photography will undoubtedly be his best-remembered legacy. Along with dogs, nudity tickled him, and he found as much material on public beaches as on the streets. The human comedy activated his eye, even if he was hard-pressed to explain his process of seeing.

“You can take a picture of the most wonderful situation and it’s lifeless, nothing comes through,” he observed. “Then you can take a picture of nothing, of someone scratching his nose, and it turns out to be a great picture.”

The gentle humor of his pictures did not prevent him from maintaining a brusquely anti-intellectual stance toward what he did.

He was wary of interpretation. “In general, I don’t think too much,” he wrote. “I certainly don’t use those funny words museum people and art critics like.”

He believed photography was “a lazy man’s profession” that required only “modest ability.” The mystery of how he did what he did could not be explained, even by himself, and that seemed to please him. He concluded that “ideas, wonderfully entertaining as they can be in conversation and seduction, have little to do with photography.”

Richard B. Woodward, a longtime art and photography critic in New York, died in April. Alex Traub contributed reporting.