



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILLIAM G. HARTSHORN

William G. Hartshorn

PICTURE PERFECT POSTCARD

BY JARED SMITH

Translating the frenetic energy of a live moment into a discrete still frame is arguably one of photojournalism's central and most challenging objectives. The photojournalist's livelihood is predicated on being in the right place at the right time, with the right amount of photographic acumen to get the shot. This type of photography calls our attention to the temporal element that imbues it with its drama.



Las Vegas strip—the exemplary imagery of postcards making any amateur’s effort to capture famous landmarks fall short. These standard-setting postcards are often Hartshorn’s work.

Beyond absorbing lessons from a family of artists, Hartshorn has had the unique privilege of having his primary photographic influence, David Muench, as his mentor. “I always saw him in *Arizona Highways*, and he was one of the people who I would always follow in the magazine and try to get to some of the locations that he had been to,” says Hartshorn. “He really got me going on this whole thing with depth-of-field, and I really try to create that

When we look at landscape and outdoor photography, on the other hand, images of immovable mountain ranges or serene coastlines, ephemerality does not come to mind, but rather, a resolute timelessness. William G. Hartshorn, however, would have you believe otherwise. His understanding of each image of a cascading waterfall or city skyline as a distinct moment in time that will never be recreated counters the thinking that landscape shooting enjoys a surfeit of opportunities to achieve perfection. According to Hartshorn, landscape photography is just as contextualized by time as any other type of shooting, and it is precisely this aspect that makes it so difficult to do well.

Since he was a boy tagging along with his grandfather on outdoor excursions, Hartshorn has always been attracted to color, and like so many accomplished shooters, much of his time is spent in near darkness when the long light of the sun washes the sky in the brilliant warm hues of sunrise or sunset. Ironically, shooting during these times requires a great deal of setting up or taking down, with little or no light at all as a guide. But Hartshorn insists that fumbling with equipment in the half-light pays dividends, as it did when he captured Guanajuato, Mexico, in the twilight (above), framing a mosaic of variegated houses and buildings nestled beneath a vigilant full moon.

Hartshorn’s keen attunement toward color and composition is, in part, hereditary: “My family has a very strong background in art. My father is a graphic artist; my grandmother and my great grandfather



were paint and pastel artists. I’ve always been attracted to color.” His photography is easily distinguished by this congenital fascination with color; it’s the luminous display of hues that differentiates his images from the thousands of other postcard images of the Los Angeles skyline, the majestic Yosemite Valley or the solemn Big Sur coastline.

The mention of postcards here is not merely rhetorical. The picture postcard industry has consistently turned to Hartshorn as a reliable, go-to photographer for any needed images. For the past 30 years he has been part of the reason why people hesitate to snap a classic shot of the Golden Gate Bridge, the Lone Cypress or the

same emotion in my images—whether I’m on the coast or whether I’m out in the desert or Yosemite.”

Scouting out picturesque locations for his assignments has taken Hartshorn all over the United States as well as into Mexico and the Caribbean, though his biggest current market remains throughout the West and the Pacific coastline. Being a “scape” photographer often means an itinerant lifestyle, hunting down the ephemeral, or, as Hartshorn often says, “that one special moment in time.”

When you look at his work in postcards, calendars or books, Hartshorn’s images convey that impossible, once-in-a-lifetime quality. For him, it’s about seeing each day



and each moment anew, regardless of location. "It's amazing what one day can do to change an image," he says. Having taken more than 50 trips to Yosemite National Park, he has set up in the same location, to catch the same waterfall, at the same hour of day dozens of times. Every shoot yields something unique. One such singular image, "Mystic Rainbow" (left), has been selling for the past 30 years.

When it comes down to it, there are two important keys to Hartshorn's photography: patience and a great tripod. "One of the things I really emphasize is to have a solid tripod and to get yourself set up and really be prepared for your image," he says. Capturing the kind of landscapes he does requires sometimes unwieldy contingencies, which is where patience and planning come in. Still, Hartshorn recognizes the role that serendipity plays as well: "It's all about being in the right place and the right time, but you definitely have to have a little luck when you are taking these photos."

One piece, "Malibu Pier" (below left), illustrates precisely this kind of lucky gathering of the elements that he is so adept at framing. In our digital age, detractors might attribute the success of this image—its soft-ocean-producing long exposure, statuesque sea heron and amber-sunset backdrop—to basic post-production compositing and a little Photoshop magic. But how would they account for the fact that it was produced in-camera on film? "I took about six pictures of probably 30 seconds to a minute," Hartshorn recalls, "and my first five shots had the bird's head moving back and forth, so those images are kind of blurred. But my very last picture... the bird just kind of honed in on whatever he was looking at. I clicked my shutter—I was on for probably 35 to 50 seconds—and the bird stayed still. I clicked the shutter off and the bird flew up into the air, dove into the water, made his catch and flew off."

Because of moments like these, Hartshorn sees his photography as a highly spiritual endeavor. "It's all about trying to get your inspiration within the image," he says. Whether he is chasing a storm or watching a dramatic sky, "One of the biggest things that motivates me is the environment—the sky, the clouds, the color."

With an acute awareness of the ever-changing surroundings, a given locale's photographic potential is inexhaustible, which is why today, after 30-plus years of documenting the continent, Hartshorn is more focused on sharing his passion through his work. "Being able to share my images with people is my biggest goal," he says. He is equally proud that



his postcards, calendars, books and posters have reached so many people who are unable to get out of the house and experience the beauty of our National parks and coastlines. "My mother was in a wheelchair for the last 10 years of her life, so she kind of lived vicariously through me with my photography. So that's another avenue that I try to offer for people, to give them a chance to see things and to view things that possibly they can't get to."

Hartshorn is also devoted to teaching others about finding those special moments of time through his adventure workshop series and lectures. "When you first start out, sometimes you can be a little independent and a little selfish, but as you get older and more advanced you are more appreciative of the landscape and the things around you. It's nice to be able to share it with people, to give them a feel for what it's all about," he says.

That being said, Hartshorn is pretty tight-lipped about the locations of his photographic adventures, which is a practice carried over from his days as a surfer: Secret spots are best kept as secrets. That kind of privileged information requires adventure. "Some people don't understand the aspect of planning, getting to a location, patiently waiting for the light, looking, searching and exploring," he says. "The only way you can find and compose a good image is by getting out and exploring various locations and looking for what excites you."

To see more of William G. Hartshorn's images and for more information about his adventure workshops, visit www.wghartshorn.com and www.mastersofimaging.com.



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William G. Hartshorn's Camera Bag:



Cameras: Canon 5D,
Canon F1

Lenses: Canon
24-105mm, 17-40mm,
70-300mm

Tripods: Bogen Tripod
(primary) and Manfrotto

mini-tripod

Software: Photoshop CS5

Bag: Tamrac Limited Edition Bag

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