

Explore U.S. National Parks through National Heritage Museum exhibit

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GHS

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LEXINGTON — Born in Paris of Vietnamese parents, Quang-Tuan Luong has seen America the beautiful through the fresh clear eyes of a discoverer.

As a photographer, he combines Kit Carson's passion for exploring, Alfred Bierstadt's infatuation with lush panoramas of the West and Teddy Roosevelt's belief natural treasures should be preserved in national parks.

These separate strands of Luong's artistry come together in "Treasured Lands," a gorgeous exhibition of his color photos of all 58 national parks in the U.S. at the National Heritage Museum in Lexington.

At the simplest level, his 58 large-format images celebrate, like Walt Whitman's lyrical poems, a land of natural wonders so varied and vast they have become part of our national character.

Subtitled "The Fifty-Eight U.S. National Parks in Focus," it runs through Oct. 17.

After a long, dreary winter, the spectacular beauty of the different natural habitats Luong has captured should thrill visitors and inspire them to follow in his footsteps.

He did some hard traveling to get these photos.

For 15 years, Luong has kayaked Alaskan waters and scuba dived the coral reefs of Trunk Bay in Virgin Islands National Park. Most of the time, he lugged a 75-pound, tripod-mounted camera across the scorching sand dunes of Death Valley and to the summit of Mount McKinley.

"For the past 15 years, I have been privileged to travel, trek and climb in some of the most remote and beautiful corners of the Earth. My goal has always been to bring back wonders I've seen to people who can't get there," Luong said in a statement introducing the exhibit.

His large-format photographs transport viewers to simmering lava at Hawaii Volcanoes National Park and the bat-infested caves of Carlsbad Caverns, to ancient Pueblo cliff dwellings in Mesa Verde National Park and the rocky, surf-pounded coastline of Acadia National Park in Maine.

Luong's custom-built wooden camera uses 5-by-7-inch film which records 25 times the detail captured in an ordinary 35 mm frame. He uses lens ranging from 90 mm to 720 mm but for more than half his shots uses a Schneider Super-symmar XL 110/5.6 which produces rich colors and precise details.

Luong took his first photos of the U.S. as an inspired hobbyist. Over the years he has grown into a much-acclaimed professional whose epic style suits his grand subjects.

Looking through his viewfinder, Luong seems to discover pristine panoramas with the eyes of Adam, awaking in Eden.

Rather than snap pretty snapshots or Hallmark greeting cards, he aims to take photos that evoke a natural world undefiled by humans.

Shooting mostly from a middle distance, Luong usually composes images that emphasize the vast scale of his natural subjects.

In a 1996 photo, the Grand Tetons soar 7,000 feet above Snake River, shining in the morning's first light. Like a house-sized diamond, a translucent iceberg floats a few hundred feet offshore in Muir Inlet of Glacier Bay National Park.

Sure enough, in these 58 photos Luong shoots tall mountains, roaring rivers, huge forests and flowering meadows, all of nature's familiar characters. But, it's not the Men's Journal or Outside magazine school of brawny dudes or backpacking babes frying trout over the campfire in the golden sunset.

Thankfully, not so. In all of Luong's national park photos, there is not a single human riding a mountain bike, climbing a rock face or trapping grizzlies.

Instead, like English Romantic poet William Wordsworth, he freezes those moments when Nature with a capital "N" seems "apparall'd in celestial light / with the glory and freshness of a dream."

Viewing a gallery full of such large spectacular scenes, a retired couple from Watertown shook their heads, they said, at the "sheer beauty" and expressed concern that human carelessness and greed threatened it.

They also wondered how a man of Luong's unusual background grew into the photographer whose art commemorates an American institution like its national parks.

It's a good question, like why did Monet paint haystacks?

Luong left his war-torn homeland to grow up in a city of ancient architecture often identified with the faded glory of the past. He studied science and earned a doctorate in computer technology and artificial intelligence at the University of Paris.

Luong first visited the United States, expecting to stay a few years to explore Yosemite and climb mountains.

A viewer might reasonably ask how this atypical upbringing shaped his impressions of his adopted home. Rather than shooting minimalist, analytic scenes, he favors epic views from the middle distance, tending mostly toward the spectacular.

Look, for example, at the photo titled "Reflection Lake, Mount Rainier National Park, Washington."

The massive, slumbering volcano rises above a thick yellow and purple matting of wildflowers. Luong frames the mountain's ice-capped peak as a place for the gods and holy men, not crosscountry skiers.

In wall text accompanying the image, he recalls waking at 4 a.m. in August 2000 "to catch the first light of sunrise." "On my fourth visit, I was rewarded with the sight of fog rising up from Reflection Lake, as the scent of wildflowers permeated the air."

The brief vignettes accompanying each photo reveal more about Luong's adventures getting his photos than sharing any technical tricks that went into making them.

For example, while making a 10-day kayak trip through Glacier Bay National Park in 1980, he wrote: "We started to paddle at dawn, stopping only to cook on a beach downstream so the camp would not have bear-attracting smells. I retreated to my tent but couldn't fall asleep. I felt so excited by the possibilities, energized by the lingering half-light of the Alaskan summer. I wandered around the tidal flats until I saw this translucent iceberg lying more than a hundred feet away in the water."

Luong's memories are fine but amateur and professional photographers might want more information about how he managed to keep both his foreground and backgrounds in focus.

And several viewers wanted to know whether he'd digitally enhanced or manipulated his photos tones and colors, artificially intensifying nature's palette beyond what he actually saw.

These are minor caveats in a show in which Luong's photos remind viewers that Eden, like beauty, is in the eyes of beholder.

THE ESSENTIALS:

The National Heritage Museum is supported by the Scottish Rite Freemasons in the Northern Masonic Jurisdiction of the United States.

The museum is at 33 Marrett Road, Lexington, at the corner of Rte. 2A and Massachusetts Avenue.

Hours are 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday and noon to 4:30 p.m. Sunday.

Admission and parking are free.

For further information about the National Heritage Museum, call 781-861-6559 or visit www.nationalheritagemuseum.org.

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