

ART WORLD

FEATURED
PHOTOGRAPHER

by Chesna Klimek



Art Wolfe is a world-renowned photographer and conservationist based in Seattle, Washington. His powerful images of nature, people, and animals are celebrated around the globe for their artistry, complexity, and impact. Many equestrian enthusiasts recognize Wolfe's work thanks to his iconic images of horses, such as "Spirit Horse," a piece that captures the elegant musculature and sweeping movement of a grey Andalusian tossing its mane before a black background.



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Born to two artists, Wolfe's interest in art is one he has nurtured throughout his lifetime. He discovered his passion for photography on hikes and climbing trips around the Pacific Northwest.

My parents were photographers, doing commercial work and weddings. Even so, they never sat me down and taught me about photography. My dad had a black and white dark room; I tried it once and found it was not for me. However, I was very interested in the oils and canvases my mom had around. Ultimately, I got my degree from the University of Washington in Art and Art Education—my intention was to be an art teacher. And then photography really took over my life. I was an avid mountain climber during my college years and I took a camera on every one of those trips. Soon I realized that sitting down with a paintbrush really wasn't a lifelong career goal. I hustled and got my photos hung in REI and The North Face stores in Seattle, and I started getting magazine assignments, the first being a story on Kodiak bears in 1977 for Alaska magazine. While I have embarked painting and instructional endeavors, namely the Human Canvas, as well as teaching workshops, I have never looked back.

Since the beginning of his career, it is estimated that Wolfe has taken over two million photographs. Each year, he spends as many as nine months traveling, following his work to the far side of the globe and back. Wolfe calls West Seattle home when he's not shooting on location. "I currently live less than two miles from where I grew up," he says. "Since I travel so much, I find staying put in one part of my life anchors me."

Wolfe's extensive travels have given him the opportunity to capture images of horses worldwide. His vivid pictures document





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a species as diverse and adaptive as our own. Within his portfolio, one can discover all manner of horses: hardy equines of the nomadic Kazakhs, carriage horses of New York City, spritely racers of Morocco, untouched Przewalski's horses of Mongolia, and many more. Wolfe describes how his fascination with horses began:

I began photographing equines on my first trip in 1980 to the Serengeti Plain of Tanzania and Kenya, where vast herds of zebras, spirited and wild, cross the open landscape. The drama of movement and dust in the air really affected me. As I have never limited myself to one subject or one genre, my lens naturally turned toward the zebra's domesticated cousin.

It is no surprise that horses are subjects well-suited to Wolfe's artful and journalistic style. His use of light, color, and movement and his mastery of composition create photos that are alive with detail. The texture of a mane, the softness in a horse's eyes, or the sinuous power of limbs in motion are features not missed by Wolfe's keen eye. The moments he shoots with horses can be both scenic and intimate, producing images that invite the viewer to look closer for further exploration. I love their movement and form", says Wolfe, describing his attraction to photographing horses.

I really enjoy taking long exposures, letting the animals paint themselves across the exposure to convey a sense of power and grace. Some of the first horses I photographed were the white horses of the Camargue; they are small, spirited horses that live in a semi-wild state in the Rhone River delta. It was startling to see their brightness in the dark tones of a November day. There is some ancient memory in us as humans that makes the warmth and smell of the horse seem familiar even if they have not been an integral part of our lives."

Wolfe's pictures often challenge perceptions, and his equine photography is no exception. He finds a fresh perspective to depict the animals we know as familiar friends, pets, or partners in work and sport. Many of his images capture what is mysterious and compelling about these beautiful creatures—their wildness, strength, and embodiment of the present moment—characteristics sometimes lost in mainstream equine portraiture or sport photography. Furthermore, his photos encourage viewers to consider the horse in context. He presents







equine subjects as intrinsically connected to the pulse of natural life, with rich human cultures or stunning landscapes as backdrop.

As a person who cares deeply about the environment, Wolfe's love for nature shows in many of his pictures. Rocky mountaintops peek out from behind the fuzzy flank of an

Icelandic horse, hundreds of droplets of seawater splash beneath the galloping hooves of a wild Camargue herd, dust particles rise in the sky to silhouette the form of a saddle horse at work. The natural elements he captures in his pictures are dramatic and detailed, connecting the viewer to that unique moment in time and space. Picture after

picture present a fascinating study of the earth and its inhabitants.

Wolfe also draws inspiration from other artists. "I was galvanized by an exhibit I saw of Johsel Namkung's work at the Seattle Art Museum in the late 1970s," he explains. "I also look to Ernst Haas, Eliot Porter, and



painters such as Georges Seurat, Jackson Pollock, Mark Tobey, and other artists of the Northwest School.” In addition, he believes his background in painting and art theory helped shape his photography.

Wolfe is widely recognized by his peers to be among the best in his field. His career

highlights span decades, and he is the recipient of numerous awards and honors for his photographic prowess. His most notable achievements include the Alfred Eisenstaedt Magazine Photography Award, the North American Nature Photography Association’s Lifetime Achievement Award, the Nature’s Best Photographer of the Year Award, and

five Telly Awards for his internationally-syndicated television show *Art Wolfe’s Travels to the Edge*. The breadth and scope of his work is reflected in how far it reaches—nearly as far as he himself has travelled. His pictures have been published in top magazines including *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian*, and *Audubon*, and his art has been featured on two U.S.



Postal Service stamps. Wolfe's more than 80 books have sold upwards of half a million copies and have been translated into eight languages.

Central to Wolfe's work in the arts is his commitment to advocacy and education. Throughout his career he has found ways to educate others, not only by exposing viewers of his art to environments, species, and cultures of the world they may never have

before considered, but also by sharing his expertise with other photographers through workshops, television programs, and writing. His advice to photographers starting out in the field is thoughtful and practical.

If you have a passion for photography, follow that passion, just don't try and turn it into your sole living and pay all of your bills with photography from the start. That is a very difficult path and one that has burned out many a passionate artist

far too soon. Find a balance in your life, one that allows you to fuel your passion without putting so much stress on you that it becomes a burden and a "job" that eventually burns out. As you start to acquire the tools of your trade invest in the best quality lenses you can buy and a slightly lesser quality camera back that you can afford. Quality glass will last you years, a decade even before you want to upgrade, whereas the camera you buy today will be obsolete in a year or two as manufacturers come out with improved models all the time.