

Portrait of an Artist

A Life in Pictures

Over half a century George Daniell has focused his camera on subjects as diverse as Sophia Loren and Grand Manan. Article by Carl Little.

PHOTOGRAPHER George Daniell first met Maine late in the summer of 1937. Like many an artist before and after him, from N.C. Wyeth to Alan Magee, Daniell was fleeing the big city — in his case, a sweltering New York — and its seemingly requisite grind. Attending classes at the Art Students League when he wasn't in his photography studio taking someone's portrait, Daniell heard about the artists' colony at Ogunquit and decided to head north. He might have been heeding the wisdom of the telephone lineman in E.B. White's *Stuart Little*, who tells the wandering mouse, "There's something about north ... something that sets it apart from all other directions. A person who is heading north is not making any mistake, in my opinion."

Once in Maine, Daniell sat in on painter Bernard Karfiol's classes at the Ogunquit School of Painting and Sculpture. But soon he was asking around about other spots in the state where an artist might find what Rockwell Kent called "material for art." The name Monhegan kept coming up as a likely prospect. Situated well out in the Atlantic, it just might provide the solitude Daniell was searching for — and, almost more important, relief from the cursed hay fever from which he suffered every summer.

"And what I found," Daniell wrote fifty years later, after a return trip to Monhegan reignited memory, "was beyond my expectations: a dramatic, whale-shaped island rising steep and black from the ultramarine sea, so paintable it hurt, so painted, dabs of color were visible on the jutting rocks, where the inhabitants were unhurried and friendly, automobiles nonexistent, and



the air divinely filtered." What was to be a week's visit at most stretched into a month. Although Daniell did not "go native" as Kent had back in his teens, he was indelibly marked by what he saw. His "love affair with Maine," as he calls it, had begun.

EIGHTY years old this year — "I can't believe I am," he states with genuine surprise — George Daniell has done a lot of living since that momentous trip to Monhegan. During a sixty-year career which took him twice around the world, he has established himself as a photographer of lasting talent and considerable vision. *Time*, *Life*, *Scribner's*, and *Coronet* have published his portraits of artists, actors, and poets. His work has been the subject of numerous one-man

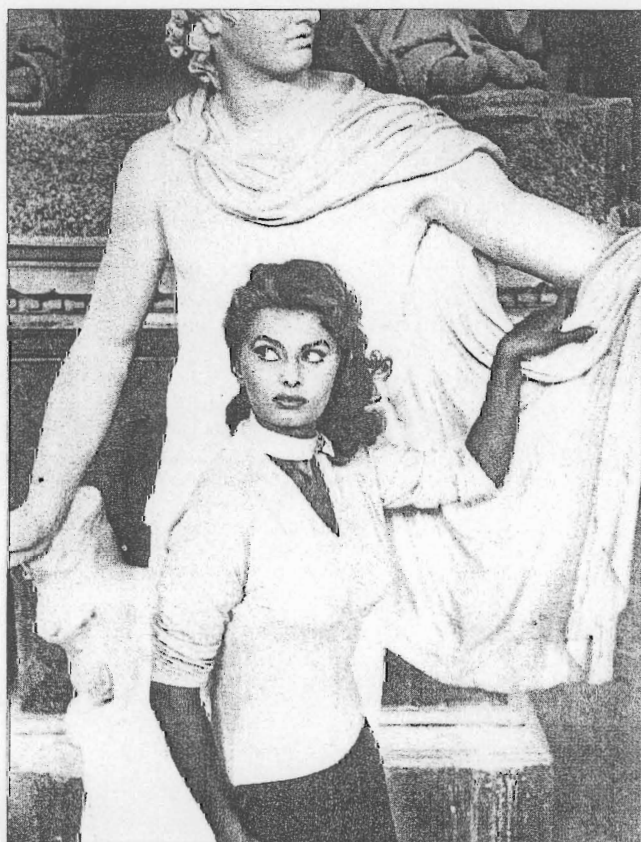
Comfortably ensconced in his modest home near Mount Desert Island, George Daniell is surrounded by the photographs and paintings he has made over a lifetime. A black and white self-portrait of 1936 (opposite), matched against a color photograph taken this year, suggests the intensity and confidence with which he tackled the career that has spanned more than fifty years and several continents.

Color photographs by Douglas Merriam

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GEORGE DANIELL



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Portraits
"The Rugged &
"Internationals"
Celebrities"

Daniell's subjects ranged from rugged, self-possessed herring fishermen to glittering international celebrities. "Feeling in" the Weir (top) is from a powerful series on dorymen of Grand Manan, New Brunswick, that was syndicated in newspapers throughout the United States and Canada in the late thirties. The portrait of Sophia Loren was made at a Rome movie loft in 1955, when the starlet was eighteen.

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shows in New York, Key West, and all over Maine, and several of his prints are in the permanent collection of Manhattan's Museum of Modern Art.

TODAY, Daniell maintains a house and studio on Oak Point Road in Trenton, just a few miles from the bridge to Mount Desert Island. He and his longtime companion, the late painter Stephen Dorland, found their home through an advertisement in *The New York Times*: "Farmhouse, twenty-two acres, on the water, \$4,500." The gray clapboard house and its grounds are currently a work in progress: trees and small brush have been cleared for a small pond and summer pavilion; and inside, the remodeling Daniell started several years ago, when he connected the house to a backyard barn, has entered a new phase. Walls are coming down to expand the darkroom and studio, and an informal gallery has been revamped.

Amid the disarray that goes hand in hand with such renovations, Daniell still manages a smile. White-haired, steady of eye, he wears a somewhat enigmatic visage, his six-foot frame comfortably settled in an armchair. He faces the toll which age inevitably takes on the body and spirit with vigorous aplomb, shrugging off the stroke a few years back which left him only partial use of his right arm.

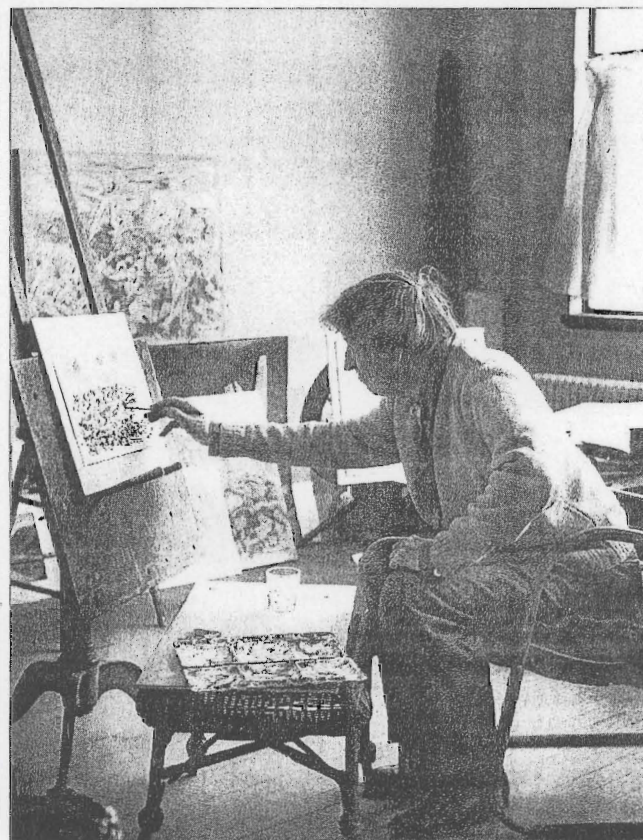
Daniell's first visit to Mount Desert age inevitably takes on the body and



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Island came in 1951, on his way back to New York City after a quick visit to Cape Split, in South Addison. He had gone there to photograph John Marin — the “Ancient Marin-er,” as he sometimes signed his letters in his later years, and the best-known American landscape painter of his day. Taking a detour through Bar Harbor, Daniell found himself driving along a fogged-in Ocean Drive. He was, he now confesses, put off by the austere look of the landscape. As a camera artist, Daniell lives by light, especially unadulterated sunlight, so it’s no wonder he wasn’t thrilled by the shrouded demeanor of the island that day. Later he would thrive in these same climes, packing his camera and watercolors off to the Beehive, to Somes Sound, to Schoodic Point, delighting at the multitude of motifs this part of Maine has to offer the eye.

Daniell’s recollections of John Marin are not the stuff of chatty memoirs. Photographing the master both at his home in Cliffside, New Jersey (the initial meeting arranged by Marin’s dealer, the legendary Alfred Stieglitz), and in South Addison, Daniell spoke little with the painter. The truth of his portraits confirm the concentration he brought to these sessions: Marin is not posing in the pictures, he is really painting. Recognizing the verity of Daniell’s portraits, the National Gallery of Art in Washington featured several of them in their recent Marin retrospective.



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The ambiance and brio of an Italian sidewalk scene are captured vividly in On the Via Veneto, shot in Rome in the fifties. Reactions to actress Danielle Scottie as she strolls to work range from bemusement to admiration. Artist John Marin scarcely acknowledged Daniell’s presence in his studio in 1951, allowing the photographer to capture the Maine master’s characteristic preoccupation.



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An accomplished painter himself, as shows at the West Side Gallery in Southwest Harbor the past two summers have affirmed, Daniell is far better known as a photographer, and for good reason: since his first youthful Kodak shots of his family at their home in Yonkers, New York, in the mid-1920s (Daniell was born there in 1911), he has, to a certain extent, photographed the world — and a goodly handful of its inhabitants, both renowned and anonymous.

* A believer in strong contrasts, Daniell has excelled in the black-and-white medium, bringing a sense of clarity and grace to his subjects, whether it be the prow of the ill-fated *Andrea Doria* docked in New York City or the bronzed visage of Sophia Loren standing among prop statues. The latter photograph was taken in Rome's Cinema City in 1955.

* Portrait

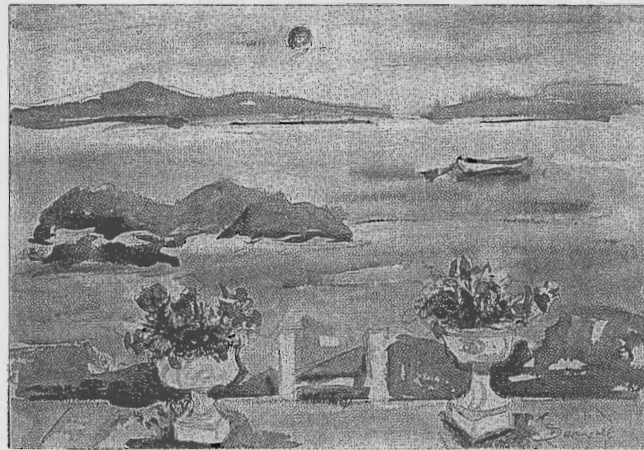
Daniell's forte has always been portraiture, a genre he first began to practice as an undergraduate at Yale where a number of his professors sat for their pictures — and actually paid for the privilege. A gallery of the faces that Daniell has captured with his camera (he traded in his folding Kodak for a more versatile Leica, purchased on his first visit to Europe in 1933) includes Audrey Hepburn, W.H. Auden, Lena Horne, Tennessee Williams, Georgia O'Keefe, and a ten-year-old Robert de Niro, holding a large white rabbit in his arms — a far cry from the "raging bull" he would later portray on the screen.

Yet Daniell's is a democratic camera vision: among his strongest images of humanity are the photographs he took in 1938 of the herring fishermen on Grand Manan Island, off the coast of New Brunswick. Hauling a dory up the shingle, entering the confines of the weir, these men have a built-in nobility that recalls the figures in Marsden Hartley's well-known depictions of the Nova Scotian fishing family which he painted during the same period. Daniell's Grand Manan photos and their accompanying text were syndicated in newspapers throughout the country — a point of pride for him to this day.

LIKE the Lewiston-born Hartley, Daniell traveled much of his life, and drew inspiration from his visits to Tangiers, Tahiti, the Tyrol, to name but three of his many destinations. Although settling in Maine in the late fifties did not represent, as it had with Hartley, a "return of the native," he shared the latter's need to

remove himself from the dizzying, stressed-out existence of a city dweller. Asked how it felt to set his sights on Down East Maine after having photographed the world, Daniell claims no hardships: this neck of the woods he finds fascinating. True, views of mountains and the sea "don't keep you warm in the winter," but he has managed to find his own way, with camera and brush and pen always close at hand.

On Mount Desert Island he discovered Edith Hamilton, the acclaimed classicist, who summered for much of her life in Seawall; and Consuelo Cloos, an opera singer and "legend manquée," whose Colette-like features inspired Daniell to make many portraits. He also photographed



A lifelong painter as well as photographer, Daniell has begun to exhibit his Maine watercolors, including this view of Stonington Harbor, painted in 1985.

the artists John Heliker and Robert Lahotan in their studios on Great Cranberry Island.

And fellow photographer Berenice Abbott, how did Daniell come to meet her? Admiring some of his photographs in a New York gallery, Abbott expressed a desire to meet the man who'd made them. When eventually they did meet, at Abbott's first Maine home, in Blanchard, they "clicked right away," recalls Daniell — not their cameras, mind you, but their personalities. Later, Abbott came down to Trenton for Thanksgiving dinners, and Daniell visited her at her house in Monson, where he took a series of pictures of the *grande dame* of American photography seated at a simple desk, looking at slides, or feeding her cat, Butch, with a large wall-relief moose by Bernard Langlais looking on.

Daniell describes his friendship with Abbott as that of "two recluses meeting." Indeed, for all his worldliness, Daniell often speaks of himself as one who is perfectly satisfied living outside the mainstream of society. Yes, he goes to art-show openings on Mount Desert Island and elsewhere, and he has many friends

whom he visits and who visit him. But he's never happier than when at home in Trenton, engrossed in some armchair traveling — he frequents the Northeast Harbor Library, where he finds the pictorial travelogues he so much enjoys — or jotting down a new poem.

DANIELL continues to photograph today: besides the color snapshots he takes as aides-mémoires for his paintings, he also practices portraiture from time to time. He is assisted by Tom Colbeth, a University of Maine at Machias graduate who is learning the profession from the master.

In the course of a recent visit, Daniell displayed with obvious satisfaction a group of drawings he'd just completed. There was a charcoal sketch of the Claremont Hotel in Southwest Harbor, where he sometimes goes to enjoy a good rocking chair; views of Hancock Point and Bar Harbor; and a very gestural homage to the dancer Isadora Duncan. The pieces are simple yet strong, reflecting Daniell's "back-to-basics" approach to returning to art after time away.

And the state of the State of Maine? Although it has become "homogenized," in Daniell's opinion there's still "plenty of character left, plenty of Mainiacs." He enjoys the increase in artistic activity in his vicinity, all the new galleries, both commercial and public, which have opened up, including the recently completed fine-arts gallery at the University of Maine at Machias. At the same time, he blesses the oftentimes awkward geography of Maine, in particular those many peninsulas that remain off the well-beaten track of influxing tourists.

The year before he first arrived in Maine, Daniell made a telling self-portrait. In this 1936 photograph we see a young man full of confidence, his sight fixed on his own camera, which shoots him from the shadows. The accoutrements of a portrait photographer surround him — high-wattage lamps and a bulky, shrouded camera. In an autobiographical sketch he wrote many years after this photograph was taken, Daniell states, "So many people and places have haunted me." Here, George Daniell is the haunting one. Something in his half-smile, crossed arms, and sure stance tells us he is ready for the world — and eventually, for Maine, which continues to hold a central place in George Daniell's life and art. □

Self Portrait