

A Picture Is Worth a Thousand Words: An Interview with Virginia Photographer Pierre Courtois

by Lydia Williams

Pierre Courtois is well known by all those who attend the Virginia Library Association's annual conference in the fall and the Paraprofessional Forum's annual conference in the spring. Most often seen with an impressive camera in hand, he is the man who has been capturing the history of VLA during the past decade. Courtois has become very much a part of the organization, and as a result of his observations over the years, he could probably write something about the organization and its members. Those who see him at the conferences, and sometimes at the Library of Virginia (LVA), have come to view him as a dear friend and colleague in the world of libraries. This most unobtrusive and quiet photographer has a very limited amount of time to socialize with the individuals within the organization, so it seemed that an interview would provide an opportunity to get to know Pierre Courtois.

Information taken from his website gives some background on the photographer. Originally from Paris, France, Courtois studied photography at the University of Paris 7 and also attended the *École des Beaux-Arts*. He worked in the film and television industry in Paris before coming to the United



Pierre with his wife, Leslie. From the collection of Pierre Courtois; reproduced with permission.

States. Courtois has over twenty years of experience in event and portrait photography in the central Virginia area, and his work has appeared in national and international publications. He is a full-time senior staff photographer for the Library of Virginia. Courtois lives with his wife and assistant photographer, Leslie Courtois, in Richmond, Virginia.

VL Pierre, would you share the story of how you came to live in Richmond?

PC My first marriage brought me to Richmond in 1986. My in-laws were from Richmond, and my first wife and I decided to move from Paris where we were living to be closer to them. We have a daughter who was born in France, but who was quickly becoming more American than French. When we eventually divorced and I retained custody of my daughter, I decided to stay in Virginia to prevent her from having to go through another big change. It all turned out for the best because by staying here, I met my wife, Leslie, who changed my life.

VL Could you share the story of how you became the photographer for the Library of Virginia?

PC When I came to Virginia, my education was in television, filmmaking, and photography, but in France I was mainly in the television business. I wasn't able to find a job in this field in Richmond, so I did a lot of different kinds of work until I could find something related to my background. Eventually in 1989 I met Ed Aunins, who was working at the Library of Virginia. He offered me an opportunity to come and interview for

a job as an assistant photographer. I got the job and started working under the head photographer at the time, Mark Rainer. Mark later moved to the west coast, and I took over his position.

VL What has been your most interesting assignment/job during your career as a photographer for the Library of Virginia?

PC From a photographer's point of view, the best assignment at the library was by far the celebration for William Styron in 2001, I think. That was the first time that I used a digital SLR camera for an LVA event. I was using it at that time for the governor's events, and I thought that I should go digital to cover this important celebration. The library was wonderfully decorated and illuminated with colored lights, and the tables were beautifully laid. The women were dressed in fancy evening gowns, and the men were wearing tuxedos. The whole scene was surreal and populated with national and international celebrities. This was by far the most beautiful event that the Library of Virginia has ever organized. It was technically a challenge to shoot with the many different light sources, but I really wanted to capture the feel of the evening. I had a blast and was pretty happy with the results.

VL What do you enjoy most about being a photographer for the Library of Virginia?

PC I needed a stable job with a regular schedule, as I was raising my daughter on my own for a few years. By working for the LVA I had all of that, plus I was working in a great cultural environment. My work here is very diverse. On any given day, I could be copying material from the collection for patrons; photographing artwork such as sculptures or paintings, architecture, street scenes, etc.; or photographing special events at

the library. I am also on call for the governor's office as a sub for the governor's photographer. I have had the opportunity to meet thousands of people, including politicians, educators, writers, librarians, and artists, and have been a part, of course from a different angle, of a multitude of events. I also have had the opportunity to get a personal education after having listened to hundreds of lectures, workshops, and conferences. I have had the possibility to practice my art while being exposed to a great richness of information.

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VL I know that you and your wife own and operate your own photography business. What information would you like to share regarding this enterprise?

PC My wife Leslie is the paper conservator at the Library of Virginia. When she has time during weekends and evenings, she assists me when I get an assignment that I cannot do alone. She is a great artist, and she has a great eye. I love working with her because I think she has better judgment than I do. My side of the business is more often working for other state agencies or political organizations covering conferences, meetings, etc., but I also work for private businesses and individuals. One of my favorite regular assignments is the VCU French Film Festival. I also do weddings, family reunions, portraits, and any kind of typical photographic work.

VL The digital age has changed everything in the world of photography. How has the digital age changed your work and career? Do you miss the darkroom and the process of developing negatives?

PC Coming from the moving images field, I was used to looking at a video screen to do my work. After spending hours day after day in the darkroom mixing chemicals and breathing fumes, I was ready for the digital era. As we all now know, digital technology has largely surpassed that of traditional film. This doesn't mean that it is easier now to take pictures. The fundamentals of photography have stayed the same. Aperture, shutter speed, depth of field, film speed, all the traditional camera and light settings have stayed the same; just the medium has changed. However, the processing of the image is now very different. The possibilities in rearranging an image on a computer are infinite, while they are much more limited in the darkroom. At first I thought digital processing would be faster, but I was wrong. I think I spend more time in front of the computer than I did in the darkroom, but I feel that I have more control from capture to finish. Even though I believe that the work of a photographer is harder now and more challenging, I still prefer digital photography to traditional methods. Another advantage of the digital era is the possibility of storing, retrieving, and transferring images very quickly around the world. Modern photographers can be on one side of the planet and transfer the pictures to the other side in seconds, as long as they have a camera and a laptop hooked to the Internet.

VL In the context of creating images with an artistic flare, do you feel this ability has changed with the use of new technologies?

PC I don't believe that the new technologies interfere with

creativity; in fact, they bring more tools to materialize one's imagination. For centuries, drawings, paintings, and sculptures were used by artists to express their own vision about their environment and their imagination. Then, along the years, new tools, new colors, and new media gave them a larger array of tools to express themselves. Now, digital technology is just another tool that gives the photographer or artist the ability to innovate and look in new directions.

VL Professional writers say they always keep a pen and pencil nearby to record random inspirational thoughts and ideas for a book or poem. Are you always on the alert for and prepared to capture the perfect or most unique image?

PC I must not be a real or pure photographer. I used to have a camera handy in case I wanted to record something that happened or to capture something beautiful that I encountered, but it never happened this way. I used to travel around the world when I was younger, mostly in third world countries. The first time I traveled, the locals would see my camera and call me "tourist." My goal was to be accepted as one of them for the time I was there, so I could learn more about them and understand their culture. That first time was the last time, and I never brought a camera on my subsequent travels. I enjoyed it a lot more and got to see and meet people in a way that wouldn't have been possible equipped with a camera, which makes one appear as an intruder. I like to take pictures of people, but I always prefer if they agree with it. Now, if I see a wonderful landscape or a fantastic sunset, I may think, as a lot of us do, "I wish I had a camera!" But I can always come back later and wait for a similar event to happen.

VL How would you best describe your artistic style?

PC It is very hard for me to describe my artistic style since I never considered myself an artist. I feel that my photographic work is related to recording events or things in a journalistic way, to keep them intact as they happened for historic purposes. Of course, not in the way some wedding photographers pretend to cover weddings in a photojournalistic way by giving their customers crooked pictures meant to look like celeb-

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rity photographs taken in a hurry at the Oscars. For me it is a more realistic approach, and I always try not to have my pictures crooked if possible. I do try to make beautiful images in wedding or portrait sessions by playing with light and shadows, colors and tones. But I still think that a photographer's work is the same as that of a plumber or carpenter—it is a skilled trade that we have to learn well in order to create both functional and sometimes wonderful images.

VL During your career as a photographer, is there one special photograph that you treasure above all others? Could you tell me something about this photograph and why it is special to you? (Thank you for sharing this special photograph with readers.)

PC There is one photograph that is most important to me. It is

not the most spectacular, or the most artistic or most original, but it represents a great heartfelt memory for me. Every time I look at it I recall the place and the moment, I remember setting the light, putting the film in the camera, framing the scene. I remember my life at that moment in great detail, and my emotions, the people around me, and especially the subject. I was taking a picture for a brochure for the LVA and we needed to have a child sitting in the library reading a book. This child was my daughter when she was five or six years old. It was a very big event for her, and she did it so well.

VL Please share your funniest experience related to a photography assignment.

PC There is an assignment that I do every year that is more fun for me than anything else. It is the social at the VLA Paraprofessional Forum Conference. Since the first year it started, I have never missed this event. It is so much fun to see people enjoying themselves dancing and laughing with such heart. This is my "three stars" event of the year. It may be easy for me because I am one of them.

VL What is the most difficult aspect of being a professional photographer?

PC I think it is the risk of disappointing someone. Being afraid my work on an assignment won't be acceptable to the client, or missing some of the most important shots.

VL Do you have some tips for aspiring photographers?

PC I would recommend that someone who wants to be a photographer consider the differences between pursuing photography as a strong hobby and becoming a professional photographer. The first option allows you to be free to choose your subject and



Pierre's daughter, Sally, is featured in this photo, which he ranks as his favorite taken during his career. Reproduced with permission from Pierre Courtois and the Library of Virginia.

gives you more opportunity to develop a personal artistic style, while professional photographers don't often choose their subjects and must interpret the ideas and style of creative directors and cli-

ents. But one thing that shouldn't be forgotten is that a solid education in photographic technique is the most important thing to have before creativity. A professional photographer has to know and

learn new technologies and apply them as soon as they arrive on the market in order to be competitive. This means continuous learning, which is great! **VI**