

DORIAN ROCKWELL-ESTATE LICENSING COMPANY, NILES, IL



America Wide

O N L I N E

The Kodak Colorama was a shining icon of our postwar paradise, and a larger-than-life tribute to photography. **By Russell Hart**



When New York City's Grand Central Terminal was restored to its beaux arts splendor in the 1990s, America's most famous train station lost a kitschy cultural icon: the Kodak Colorama. Billed as the world's largest photograph, this 18x60-foot backlit panorama—officially a Kodak ad, but really a promotion for photography itself—was mounted on the east balcony overlooking the station's huge central hall. The first Colorama debuted in May 1950, and the picture changed about once a month thereafter for more than 40 years.

In contrast to the visual vocabulary of today's advertising, Colorama photos—the best of which you can see at a smaller scale on Kodak's Website (kodak.com/go/colorama)—weren't cynical in their sentimentality. By showing citizens at work and (more often) play in a postwar paradise, they celebrated the new freedoms of the American lifestyle, especially its growing lust for travel. Early murals almost always included someone taking a picture, as if to suggest that viewers could create an image with the grand impact of the Colorama itself. Colorama photographers (mostly Kodak staffers, including such talents as Ralph Amdursky, Norm Kerr, and Neil Montanus) had a mandate to make the picture-taker's camera big enough in the scene to be identified as a Kodak—though an exception was granted for the ad's first

true landscape, a large-format view of the Grand Canyon by Ansel Adams. When *Apollo 11* astronauts Aldrin and Armstrong returned from their 1969 moon landing, Kodak actually scooped the newsweeklies, mounting a multi-section Colorama of the spacemen's photographs.

Even under normal monthly deadlines, producing the Colorama was a technical feat in which dozens of 20-foot-long strips of Ektacolor print film were exposed with a custom-made enlarger. Once developed, the strips were carefully spliced together. The first murals were shot with an 8x10 view camera custom-fitted with a sliding back that let photographers shoot two side-by-side negatives in reasonably quick succession. Later, an 8x20 Deardorff banquet camera was used for a single panoramic exposure.

Eventually film got so good that smaller formats could be used, opening the door to submissions from Ernst Haas and Eliot Porter, color photography's early champions. Even 35mm slides and negatives were used—a feat requiring a 516X enlargement 150,000 times the area of the original. Such technical virtuosity meant more to photographers than to the countless commuters who viewed the Colorama. Edward Steichen, the everyman of photography, summed it up this way: The Colorama, he wrote, "has everyone in Grand Central agog and smiling. All just feeling good." ■

Top: "Closing Up a Summer Cottage," the September 1957 Kodak Colorama, was art-directed by the great American illustrator Norman Rockwell. Bottom: "Family Camping, Lake Placid, New York," exhibited at Grand Central from July to August 1959, was a masterful display of fill-flash technique by Kodak photographer Herb Archer.

