Horst: Photographer of Style

Victoria and Albert Museum, London
SEPTEMBER 6, 2014—JANUARY 4, 2015

Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam
SEPTEMBER 26, 2015—JANUARY 10, 2016

Edward Steichen: In High Fashion, The Condé Nast Years—1923–1937

The Photographers Gallery, London
OCTOBER 31, 2014—JANUARY 18, 2015

Guy Bourdin: Image Maker

Embankment Galleries, Somerset House, London
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Catalogues

Horst: Photographer of Style

Edited by Susanna Brown; text by Philippe Garner, Claire Wilcox, and Robin Muir

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Edward Steichen: In High Fashion, The Condé Nast Years 1923–1937

William A. Ewing and Todd Brandow

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This past fall and winter London was the site of three major photography exhibitions that enabled viewers to explore the fashion photograph through the work of three key practitioners over a period of almost a century. In each venue, the fashion image was explored not simply as a document of the time in which it was produced, but as material object, artwork, commodity form, and seductive visual presentation.

The extensive retrospective *Horst: Photographer of Style* was spread over a series of rooms at the V&A and examined the sixty-year career of German-born fashion photographer Horst Paul Albert Bohrmann (1906–99), professionally known simply as Horst. The exhibition traced his illustrious life, from his first artistic success in interwar Europe after he joined *Paris Vogue* in 1931, through his development and success in postwar America, where he gained citizenship in 1943, to his eventual abandonment of photography in 1992 because of failing eyesight. Curated by Susanna Brown, the exhibition provided important insight into the development of fashion photography as an independent genre situated within a complex and collaborative network of models, artists, designers, set builders, technicians, creative directors, fashion editors, and the publishing empire Condé Nast.

Horst's spectacular images, each captured with utmost precision and clarity, were organized roughly chronologically into themes that encompassed haute couture, surrealism, stage and screen, travel, flower studies, the studio, color, interiors, and male and female nudes. Images were contextualized with objects, rare film clips of the photographer at work, sketchbooks, scrapbooks, haute couture dresses,

Horst P. Horst, *Muriel Maxwell*, *American Vogue*, 1939. © Condé Nast / Horst Estate.

and magazine covers and spreads. The exhibition demonstrated not only the wide array of artistic practices and thought processes that constitute the completed fashion image, but also its role as a visual extension of the material object, often providing fashion consumers' only point of contact with high-end designer items. Different sections of the exhibition presented Horst's intersections with Salvador Dalí and the surrealists, his portraits of celebrities such as Marlene Dietrich, Greta Garbo, Rita Hayworth, and Ginger Rogers, and his ongoing professional relationship with Swedish model Lisa Fonssagrives. His artistic representations of haute couture by Vionnet, Schiaparelli, Molyneux, and Lanvin made theatrical use of trompe l'oeil and drew on classical, baroque, and surrealist references through props and décor. The exhibition lighting heightened these effects, casting dramatic architectural shapes onto the dark walls and capturing the viewers' own silhouettes as they moved through the exhibition space.

Memorable images include the now famous, strikingly pared-down monochrome photograph of the bare back of a model wearing the Mainbocher Corset designed by Detolle. Captured in August 1939, this was the last photograph that Horst made in Paris before the outbreak of war. More a detailed study of the body as sculpture, the photograph presents a distinct modernist sensibility and a dramatic diagonal composition that override the need

to provide detailed information about the garment depicted. It demands a powerful response from the viewer, who experiences it not solely through conscious and rational looking, but with an added emotional and visceral dimension that stems from its sensual subject matter and documentation of a world on the brink of change.

But the exhibition also included less well known images, such as those taken after Horst's assignment in July 1943 as photographer for the US army, not to mention images from his postwar travels to Syria, Mexico, the newly established state of Israel, and Iran. While abroad he documented the architecture in Persepolis, in addition to ethnographic-style subjects that might be misread as classifying specific racial and ethnic types. These photographs are particularly fascinating because they show the influence of Horst's keen eye for fashion photography; the same level of detail and appreciation with which he approached haute couture can be seen in the representation of his anonymous Middle Eastern subjects, who are not static and exotic objects but self-fashioned individuals utilizing elements of their own fashionable modes of dress to perform before the camera.

Displayed toward the end of the exhibition were Horst's enlarged series of color photographs, predominantly from *American Vogue* in the 1940s, which provided a dazzling contrast to his earlier black-and-white work. These sleek and glossy images develop an existing interwar American feminine ideal of modern, sporty, and practical fashions and demonstrate Horst's eager exploitation of the new color printing processes available to magazines since the 1930s. They were digitally printed with Epson inkjet printers specifically for the exhibition from the existing original 8 × 10 Kodachrome transparencies, which are held by the Condé Nast archive in New York under the supervision of archive director Shawn Waldron, who worked closely with Brown. Displayed opposite ninety of Horst's magazine covers, they have a magical quality and are testimony to the extensive amount of research required in producing such an informative and vast exhibition.

The exhibition *Edward Steichen: In High Fashion, The Condé Nast Years—1923–1937* differed from *Horst* in that it was much smaller and presented a narrower focus, due in part to the continued space limits of The Photographers Gallery, even in its newly extended

Edward Steichen, *Actress Anna May Wong*, 1930 (*Vanity Fair*, September 1, 1931). Courtesy of Condé Nast Archive, Condé Nast Publications, Inc., New York / Paul Hawryluk, Dawn Lucas, and Rachael Smalley.

home located in close proximity to Oxford Street. American photographer Edward Jean Steichen (1879–1973) is perhaps best known for being the first director of the Museum of Modern Art's Department of Photography (1947–61), where he was responsible for the infamous *Family of Man* exhibition in 1955, which featured 503 photographs from 68 countries and was extensively criticized, perhaps most notably by Roland Barthes in *Mythologies* (1957), for its promotion of an undifferentiated form of universal humanism embedded in US Cold War propaganda. Apart from a short film clip detailing the contemporary re-presentation of *The Family of Man* at the Château de Clervaux in Luxembourg since 2013, the exhibition skirted these contentious issues and focused instead on the evolution of Steichen's fashion career during his appointment as chief photographer for Condé Nast, working on the prestigious publications *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair* between 1923 and 1937.

Organized chronologically, the exhibition guided the viewer through two hundred of Steichen's framed prints, on loan from the Condé Nast Archive in New

York. Curators William A. Ewing, Todd Brandow, and Nathalie Herschdorfer directed the viewer's attention to the extensive post-production of Steichen's work—techniques that involved retouching and cropping as well as writing instructions and final measurements over the surface of the prints—which took place in the Condé Nast laboratory, were approved by the photographer, and were still visible in many of the photographs. Not only did this focus demonstrate the importance of the materiality of the photograph as an object to our understanding and interpretation of these images, it also highlighted that the fashion photograph is rarely the result of a single, authorial vision; rather, it is a reflection of variable internal and external factors such as technical apparatus, editorial policy, and the frequently differing views of those individuals who have a role in its production.

The photographs exhibited spanned Steichen's earlier soft-focus work, with its art nouveau sensibility informed by the romanticized pictorialist aesthetic of the fashion photographer Baron Adolf de Meyer (1868–1946), through to his later and signature modernist approach, which was dominated by sharp, geometric lines and graphic tonal forms. Portraits of notable men such as Herbert Hoover, Winston Churchill, and Cordell Hull rubbed shoulders with actors and actresses such as Adolphe Menjou, Alice Brady, Harold Lloyd, and Marlene Dietrich. A dramatically lit portrait of Anna May Wong from 1930 captures the seductively made-up actress positioned in front of a spotlighted white chrysanthemum and looking outside of the frame. She is dressed in an ornate embroidered gown, her arms are decorated with Chinese glass bangles, and her hands perform an expressive gesture. The whiteness of the flower illuminates the blackness of Wong's bobbed hair, possibly intending to confirm commonplace cultural attitudes regarding the exotic difference of the Chinese-American actress. Yet the camera also eloquently captures the creases and folds of Wong's silk dress in a way that did not merely confirm her stereotype as the female embodiment of the mysterious Orient, but situated her within a strikingly contemporary art deco idiom of sharply delineated forms and crisp outlines. The remainder of the photographs in the exhibition included portraits of the writer Colette, sculptor Jacob Epstein, architect Frank Lloyd Wright, and elegant models including Marion Morehouse and Lee Miller dressed in Schiaparelli, Lanvin, and Chanel. These were mostly executed inside the studio with staged lighting and a large-format camera—a slow technology that demanded that the sitter remain still for a prolonged period of time—though the photographer occasionally ventured outside and depicted models as they posed aboard a yacht or gathered on the sidelines of a racecourse.

Photographic prints formed the main bulk of *Edward Steichen*, and only a couple of display boxes presented a selection of the original fashion magazines within which the images were published. The curators praised the power and beauty of the individual prints and asserted on a text panel that the reason behind this lack of contextual material was that the exhibition concerned "*fashion photography* . . . [and i]f we were curating a show about fashion magazines, or celebrity per se, we would focus on the printed pages of *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*, and show only a few prints for didactic purposes." This apparent severing of the fashion photograph from the material object in which it is produced, published, and widely disseminated would seem to suggest a misunderstanding on the part of the curators. The fashion photograph is not a stand-alone artwork but rather forms part of an overall concept within the fashion magazine through its narrative sequencing and juxtaposition with typographical and illustrative elements, providing the primary commercial vehicle through which viewers read and understand the images.

Despite this odd isolation of the photographs from their original context, as a body of work the exhibition was well informed and demonstrated Steichen's creative use of cleverly angled mirrors, lighting, and unusual viewpoints. These techniques, which may have evolved from his experience as an aerial photographer during World War I, opened up new perspectives on the experimental possibilities of the fragmented body. It is in this capacity that a clear parallel can be drawn between Steichen and Dutch fashion photographer Viviane Sassen, whose sculptural installation exhibition *Analemma* was displayed concurrently on the top floor of the gallery, where it disturbed viewers' expectations and toyed with notions of fantasy and reality through the use of similar tools and props. The juxtaposition of the two photographers' work brings to the fore the representation of women as a series of dismembered

Guy Bourdin, *Charles Jourdan*, *Autumn 1979*. Courtesy The Guy Bourdin Estate / A+C.

body parts, a theme taken up in further detail in *Guy Bourdin: Image Maker* at Somerset House.

The Embankment Galleries are home to the largest retrospective ever held of French photographer Guy Bourdin (1928–91). Although perhaps less well known than his contemporaries Richard Avedon (1923–2004) and Helmut Newton (1920–2004), Bourdin is recognized for injecting an extreme dose of desire and death into conventional notions of perfected beauty and elegance, such as those endorsed by the photographs of Horst and Steichen. Through his dramatic visual storytelling and charged narratives, Bourdin introduced the femme fatale—at once sexualized, liberated, and dangerous, but with the potential for destruction—as a sequence of fragmented bodies. Curated by Alistair O'Neill and Shelly Verthime and spanning the years 1955 to 1987, the exhibition resurrected over 250 items, including previously unpublished contact sheets, transparencies, Polaroid test shots, Super 8 fashion films, working architectural drawings, two-page-spread layouts, paintings, sketches, and full-color prints from the photographer's vast archive, which is held by the Bourdin estate under the careful supervision of the photographer's estranged and only son, Samuel.

Organized thematically, the exhibition opened with "Walking Legs," a series of twenty-two highly polished snapshot-style photographs, never before seen in its entirety, which documented a road trip that Bourdin, accompanied by his wife, Sybille, his son, and a photographic assistant, took in a Cadillac from London to Brighton in September 1979. It is one of the many campaigns that Bourdin completed for (rather than did in collaboration with, since he requested complete freedom and control over his fashion imagery) the French fashion designer Charles Jourdan. The campaign presents a severed pair of bare white mannequin legs and feet, clad in elegant Jourdan shoes and stockings, as they wait at a London bus stop, roam through an English rose garden, and strut along the pier and past the stucco-façade houses of the Brighton seafront. The model herself is mysteriously absent. The series reinforces the importance of the glossy image over the actual product: here the high-heeled shoes appear almost

incidental to the plot, which seduces and intrigues the viewer and successfully subverts the basic commercial remit of fashion photography.

Moving upstairs, the viewer saw hyperrealist glossy Bourdin images in quadruples as a series of vivid film stills that ran the entire length of the top floor of the gallery. It is important to note that Bourdin never intended to showcase these photographs as isolated icons, since his sole concern was the layout of his images on the two-page magazine spread. Nevertheless, they demonstrate that Bourdin was akin to an autocratic film director in his insistence on a narrative, continually questioning how a shoot might be pushed to its limits and demanding the utmost control over all aspects of its production. He was inspired by a notion of fatal beauty comparable to that seen in the female protagonists of 1940s film noir; his photographs construct ambiguous fantasy scenes of simultaneous violence and eroticism, deathliness and fragility. These powerful and undeniably artificial color photographs ambiguously hint at death and decadence but provide no fixed or clear meanings, encapsulating instead the social and cultural anxieties of a self-reflexive postmodern world.

In the artistic and personal text that accompanied the exhibition, the curators labored to demonstrate the meticulous craftsmanship and exceptional attention to detail required in the production and publication of a Bourdin fashion spread in an age of predigital manipulation. In considering the exhibition in its entirety, it was the interesting forays into the photographer's past—his pursuit of an artistic career throughout the 1950s, his previously undocumented affinity for fashion film, and the interesting snippets of his scarcely known personal life—that made the show a success and guaranteed that it would draw crowds.

All three of the exhibitions demonstrated the various manifestations in which evocative representations of the body, clothing, and gesture have constituted layers of meaning within the development of the modern and postmodern fashion photograph, reflecting the broader tastes, attitudes, and conventions of the time in which they were created. My only concern, directed more toward the Steichen and Bourdin exhibitions, is the danger, particularly in such landmark exhibitions that document key practitioners in the history of the genre, of erasing the first point of contact that embodied viewers had with the fashion photograph: that is, through the material object, the fashion magazine. A new direction for exhibitions of fashion photography might encompass a phenomenological engagement with the medium in addition, but not limited, to a celebration of the power and relevance of the exceptional-quality individual prints.

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