

IRVING PENN

MORE THAN SIX DECADES OF
FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

The Nicola Erni Collection is celebrating the American Irving Penn (New Jersey 1917–New York 2009) in a show of more than seventy of his fashion photographs taken over a period of nearly seven decades.

Irving Penn was one of the most important and influential photographers of the 20th century. Best known for his fashion photography, Penn’s oeuvre also encompasses portraits of celebrities and luminaries; ethnographic photographs from around the world; nudes; Modernist still lifes of refuse, food, skulls, bones, bottles, metal, and found objects; and photographic travel essays.

In 1943, Penn was hired by *Vogue* under the famous art director Alexander Liberman. This was the beginning of an almost seventy-year-long working relationship with the magazine. With more than 150 cover images, a vast number of fashion sittings, portrait sessions, and still lifes, Penn defined *Vogue*’s visual language. Many of Penn’s works taken on assignment were later shown at museum exhibitions.

1950 Paris Collections

Penn was commissioned by Alexander Libermann in 1950 to photograph the Paris collections—a bi-annual highlight for the magazine. Although by this time the commercial and advertising world favored color prints, Penn was told to come back to New York with black-and-white photographs for a magazine story which was then called “The Black and White Idea.” In order to capture the haute couture garments in fall 1950, *Vogue* secured a studio space for Penn in Paris for ten days, where he enjoyed the light of Paris as he had imagined it, “soft but defining.”¹

It was with the photographs from the 1950 Paris collections that Penn established his signature style in fashion photography and created a landmark in the history of fashion photography. Using such aesthetic stylistic devices as reduction, clarity, and plain backgrounds in his pictures, Penn succeeded in presenting fashion in a proper light and capturing its perfect silhouettes. In *Cocoa-Colored Balenciaga Dress (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), Paris (1950)*, Penn focuses on the sharp details, the clear silhouette, and the texture of the dress against a neutral backdrop.² The model’s feminine pose further accentuates the garment’s design and every minute detail, including the weave of the coat and the netting of the veil.³

In one of Penn’s iconic fashion photographs he depicts the model Jean Patchett during the legendary Paris fashion sittings. This picture was ultimately used on the cover of *Vogue* in April 1950. This geometricized, high-contrast image reveals a beautiful dress by the French fashion designer Christian Dior, whose New Look collection of 1947

shook the world and brought women’s fashion back to life. Dior’s New Look was just as much fashion as a social revolution: lavish fabric in a period of austerity; a return to femininity after its oppression; a sense of glamour after the depression. Penn’s manner of setting up the photograph, depicting the model with her hands on her hips, front on, as well as the reduction of colors to an almost pure black and white, perfectly matched Dior’s new design ideas which focussed on volume, shape, and texture.

Many photographs taken for *Vogue*’s coverage of the 1950 collections isolate a single detail of a garment to echo the designers’ dedication to perfection. In *Molyneux Pocket Detail (Version B), Paris (1950)*, Penn only shows a pocket detail, instructing the model to put her hands in it so that the shape and volume are highlighted.

Fashion Photographs in the 1960s and 1970s

In the early Sixties, fashion made an unprecedented break away from lady-like elegance toward a youthful ideal. This “youthquake” led to a demand for informal but stylish clothes and self-expression became paramount. The miniskirt was a potent symbol of change that defied the Old Establishment—*Tiny White Skirt, New York (1967)*. The Sixties was a time when hair ruled: bouffant hair-dos, false hair, wigs, false eyelashes. The Nicola Erni Collection is showing two photographs which perfectly demonstrate these design and fashion must-haves of the time: *Marisa Berenson in Veil, New York (1968)*, and *Lauren Hutton, Beauty Head, New York (1967)*.

Even in the 1960s, Penn remained faithful to the style he had established earlier, such as giving stage directions to achieve statue-like postures. Famous colleagues of his such as Richard Avedon could make their models leap about and laugh on the street or be photographed in bars as much as they liked—all this left Penn completely unfazed. For him, there was only one *leitmotif*: elegance! Searching for erotic undertones in Penn’s work is in vain. The coolness in the facial expressions of his models seems to reinforce the photographer’s dedicated quest for perfection.

Penn’s interest in being considered an art photographer arose in the early 1970s. A lack of commercial work forced him to close his studio in New York but he continued to photograph the launch of the New York collections and work on assignments for *Vogue*. At the same time he sensed that there was a growing interest in art photography on the art market.⁴ This encouraged him to turn his focus from the printed page to the photographic print. With his perfectionist attitude he managed to become one of the finest platinum-palladium printers of the 20th century. To achieve such a masterly quality in his fine art prints, he tested over

¹ Cf. Irving Penn, *Passage: A Work Record*, New York 1991, p. 80

² See <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/exhibitions/IrvingPennArchives/fashion>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Cf. Colin Westerback, *Irving Penn: Carrier in Photography*, exh. cat., The Art Institute of Chicago 1997, p. 19

100 different types of paper and worked on a method of bonding the thin paper he had selected to an almost equally thin sheet of aluminium or steel before the photograph was printed. Some of the finest examples, which are simply breathtaking in their unique and rich tonality and deep textures, can be seen in this exhibition: *Woman in Boumous*, *La Bahia Palace, Marrakech* (1951). Penn also made silver gelatin and color prints with the same dedication to the subject.

In 1977, Penn collaborated with Diana Vreeland, former *Vogue* editor and muse-in-residence at the Metropolitan Museum’s Costume Institute (1972–89), to publish a book of photographs of vintage couture called *Inventive Paris Clothes 1909–1939: A Photographic Essay by Irving Penn*. These photographs capture Paris fashions which appeared in Vreeland’s exhibition “The Tens, The Twenties, The Thirties: Inventive Clothes 1909–1939” at the Metropolitan Museum’s Costume Institute, December 14, 1973–May, 1974. Works by Poiret, Vionnet, Callot, Molyneux, Paquin, Chanel, and Schiaparelli are among the early 20th-century French couture masters included in this survey of fashion, which brought the period from the Belle Epoque to the modern day to life. Atypically for Penn, the haute couture dresses were photographed on mannequins, thus making it possible to use more intensive lighting or longer exposures than live models would have been able to endure. For Penn, the exquisite museum fashion collection and mannequins became an inspiration which linked fashion and still life photography. Penn’s masterly pictures—using a simple painterly background and concentrating on literal details, glamorous shapes, and one-of-a-kind designs—capture the flavor of the times. This is echoed at its utmost in Penn’s *Vionnet Chicken-Wire-Dress, New York* of around 1936.

Issey Miyake: 1983–1990s

In 1983 Penn was given an assignment to photograph Issey Miyake’s clothes for an editorial feature in *American Vogue*. The Japanese designer was completely struck by the resulting images, claiming that he then saw his designs suddenly in a new light. This marked the beginning of a long and fruitful collaboration. In two decades, Penn photographed all of Issey Miyake’s biennial Paris collections, resulting in more than 200 photographs.

What made this relationship last so long? One reason is that Penn’s images communicated the essence of Miyake’s designs. Penn defined the designer’s futuristic and geometric forms by placing them against a white background and using strong lighting. The architecture of the garment

became explicit. Penn was keen to see the outlines, profile, and silhouettes. Through his lens, the texture, shapes, and forms went beyond clothing and instead were transformed into the realm of art (*Issey Miyake Seaweed Dress, New York, 1937*). As in Penn’s earlier works, the model’s pose brings out the shape and structure of the dress. To keep an unbiased view, Penn never actually attended an Issey Miyake fashion show, while Miyake never attended any of Penn’s photo sessions. Their collaboration was based on complete creative trust.

For Miyake, the crux of this collaboration was inspiration and surprise. As Miyake later commented: “Through his eyes Penn-san reinterprets the clothes, gives them new breath, and presents them to me from a new vantage point—one that I may not have been aware of, but had been subconsciously trying to capture. Without Penn-san’s guidance, I probably could not have continued to find new themes with which to challenge myself, nor could I have arrived at new solutions.”⁵

Fashion Photographs: 1980s–2008

Over the last three decades of his creative work, Penn also kept to his signature style: emphasizing silhouettes, volume, and textures. Lavish haute couture dresses by Yves Saint Laurent and the embroidered Braque Cubist cape, for example, or Christian Lacroix’s opulent designs and Chanel’s beautifully handcrafted feather headdresses, as well as Galliano’s elaborate gowns inspired by the Belle Epoque are captured in breathtaking pictures which transform them into works of art.

This stunning collection of Penn Fashion photographs does not only feature classic, blockbuster images, but also rare and unpublished fashion photographs. Having been put in touch with the Penn Foundation, Nicola Erni was granted access to the mesmerizing archive and world of Penn’s fashion pictures. Seeing his fashion photographs from the late 1940s through 2008 in large groups of works exhibited in a private museum is a very rare privilege. Most amazingly, Penn’s photographs were as exquisite and breathtaking in the last year of his life as they were in 1943 when he started contributing to *Vogue*. The exhibition is a composition of first-class works of art which highlight the elegance and grace of Penn’s skill—intoxicating indeed.

Ira Stehmann

⁵ Ibid., pp. 45, 46

1947–1949



Women in Wartime (Dorian Leigh and Evelyn Tripp), New York, 1948, gelatin silver print



Girl Drinking (B) (Mary Jane Russell), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Man Lighting Girl's Cigarette, New York, 1949, platinum palladium print



Crescent Bicornie Hat (Evelyn Tripp), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Sophie Malgot, New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Bicornie Skimmer (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Christmas Gift Fashion - Jean Patchett, New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Velvet Helmet Hat (Sue Jenks), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Fashion Photograph (Jean Patchett) (A), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Fashion Photograph (Jean Patchett) (B), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Dovima and Leon Danielian, New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Mary Jane Russell and Leon Danielian, New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Vogue Christmas Cover (Jean Patchett), New York, 1949, gelatin silver print



Vogue Cover, New York, 1948, gelatin silver print

1950 PARIS COLLECTIONS



Vogue Fashion Photograph (Jean Patchett) (I), New York, 1950, gelatin silver print



Fashion Photograph (Evelyn Tripp) (A), New York, 1990, gelatin silver print



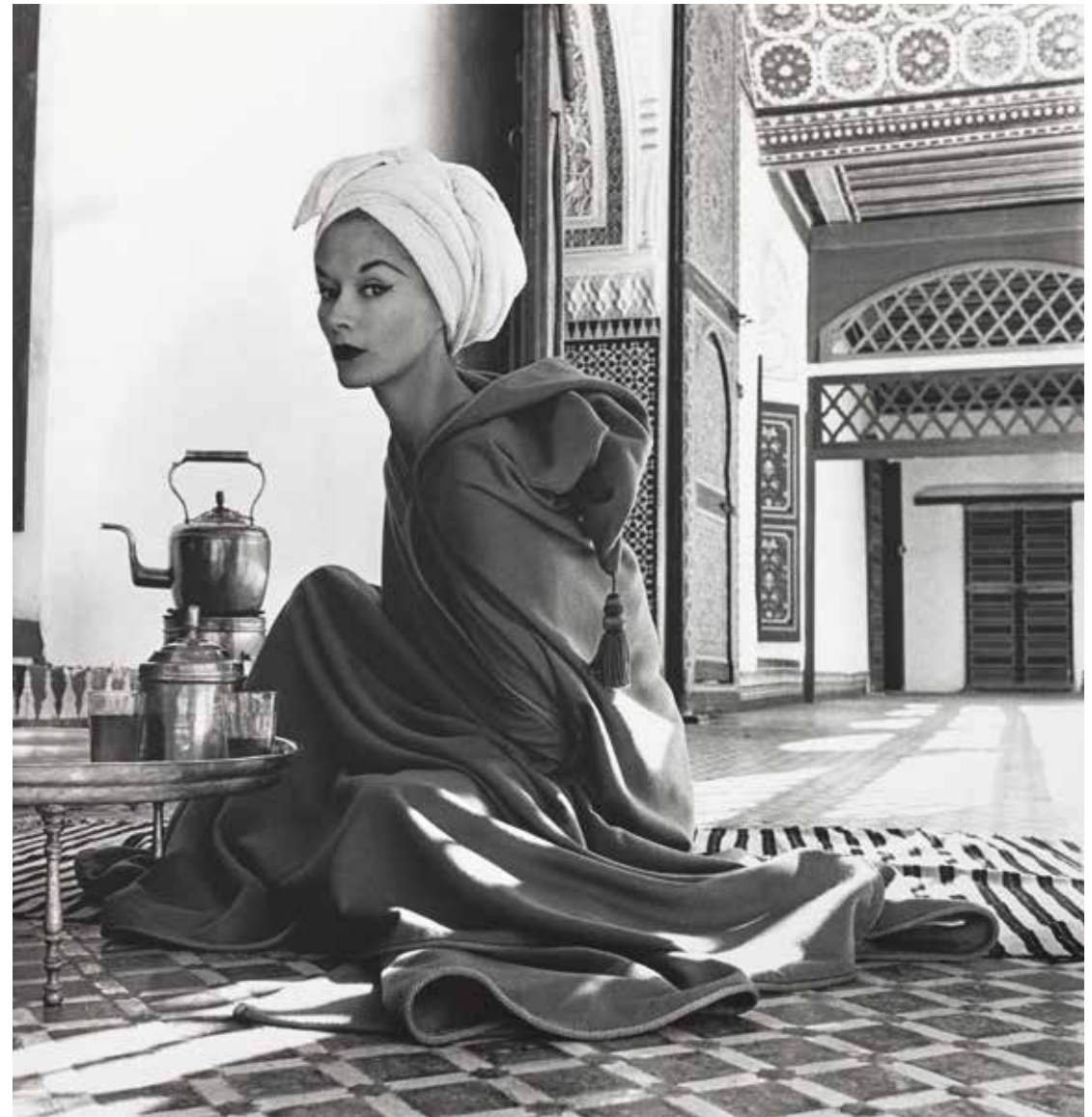
Large Sleeve (Sunny Harnett), New York, 1951, gelatin silver print



Dior Fur Scarf (Jean Patchett), New York, 1950, gelatin silver print



Cocoa-Coloured Balenciaga Dress, Paris, 1950, platinum palladium print



Woman in Boumous, La Bahia Palace, Marrakech, 1951, platinum palladium print



Woman in Balenciaga Coat (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), Paris, 1950, gelatin silver print



Balenciaga "Little Great Coat" (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), Paris, 1950, gelatin silver print



Molyneux Pocket Detail (B), Paris, 1950, gelatin silver print



Schiaparelli Coat (Bettina Graziani) (B), Paris, 1950, gelatin silver print



Black and White Fashion with Handbag (Jean Patchett), New York, 1950, platinum palladium print



Black and White Vogue Cover, New York, 1950, platinum palladium print

1960s–1970s



Long Hair With Bathing Suit (Birgitta Klercker), New York, 1966, gelatin silver print



Black Bathing Suit (Bettina Klercker), New York, 1964, gelatin silver print



Tiny White Skirt, New York, 1967, gelatin silver print



Transparent Dress, New York, c. 1966-1968, gelatin silver print



Vogue Fashion Photograph, Yves Saint Laurent, Paris, 1969, gelatin silver print



Figure with Black Hat (Editha Dussler), New York, 1966, gelatin silver print



Beauty Head (Lauren Hutton), New York, 1967, gelatin silver print



Gold Accessories (Lauren Hutton), Paris, late 1960s, gelatin silver print



Marisa Berenson in Veil, New York, 1968, gelatin silver print



White Fur Stole (Veruschka von Lehndorff), New York, c. 1967-1968, gelatin silver print



Grès Turandot Dress (Veruschka von Lehndorff) (A), Paris, 1967, gelatin silver print



Wilhelmina in Hooded Cape, New York, 1966, platinum print



Balenciaga Rose Dress, Paris, 1967, gelatin silver print

1980s



Fendi-Lagerfeld Coat With Hat, New York, 1983, gelatin silver print



Vogue Fashion Photograph (Big Pink Satin Bow), Yves Saint Laurent, Paris, 1983, gelatin silver print



Yves Saint Laurent, Embroidered Cubist Cape with Braque Inspired Design, Paris, 1988, pigment print



Yves Saint Laurent (Katoucha), Braque Inspired Fashion, Paris, 1988, platinum palladium print

1987-1998 ISSEY MIYAKE



Seaweed Dress by Issey Miyake, New York, 1987, platinum print



Pancho and Apron Belt by Issey Miyake, New York, 1987, platinum print



Young Woman in a Net by Issey Miyake, New York, 1993, platinum print



Lacquer Pleats by Issey Miyake (Egyptian), 1990, platinum print



Single Issey Miyake Warrior, New York, 1998, platinum print



Young Woman with Face Hidden by Issey Miyake, New York, 1998, platinum print



Two Issey Miyake Warriors (B), New York, 1998, platinum print

INVENTIVE CLOTHES



Vionnet Chicken-Wire Dress (c. 1936), New York, 1974, gelatin silver print



Vionnet Long Robe (1932-35), New York, 1974, platinum palladium print



Vionnet Dinner Dress (c. 1936) (B), New York, 1974, gelatin silver print



Schiaparelli Jacket With Tinsel and Glass (1939), New York, 1974, platinum palladium print



Vionnet Dress with Fan (1925-26), New York, 1974, platinum palladium print



Chanel Sequined Suit (1926), New York, 1974, platinum palladium print



Callot Swallow-Tail Dress (c. 1919), New York, 1974, platinum palladium print

1990s



Woman in Feather Hat (B), New York, 1991, gelatin silver print



Chanel Feather Headdress (B), New York, 1994, gelatin silver print



Christian Lacroix Duchesse Satin Dress, Paris 1995, platinum palladium print



Corset by Karl Lagerfeld for Chanel, New York, 1994, platinum palladium print



Flower Hat by Philip Treacy, New York, 1995, platinum print

2000 – 2008



Takahashi Design for Undercover, New York, 2006, pigment print



Rei Kawakubo Designs for Comme Des Garçons, New York, 2006, pigment print



Galliano Washed Velvet and Silk Organza Coat with Silk Chiffon Dress, New York, 2007, pigment print



Christian Lacroix Haute Couture (Caroline Trentini), New York, 2008, pigment print



Nina Ricci Black Silk Chiffon Evening Dress with Embroidered Ostrich Feathers, Olivier Theyskens Design, New York, 2007, pigment print



John Galliano Silk Wool Jacquard Jacket with Red Feather Headpiece, New York, 2007, pigment print



Chanel Haute Couture (Caroline Trentini), New York, 2007, pigment print



Balenciaga Yeti Coat (A) by Ghesquière, New York, 2005, gelatin silver print



Jean Paul Gaultier Couture (Nicole Kidman), New York, 2004, gelatin silver print



Chanel Couture, Lagerfeld's Mannish Tweed Jacket (Nicole Kidman), New York, 2004, gelatin silver print



Ball Dress by Olivier Theyskens for Nina Ricci, New York, 2007, gelatin silver print toned in selenium



Valentino's 1985 Dress with Feathered Lace Back, New York, 2007, gelatin silver print



Christian Lacroix Design (Elise Crombez), New York, 2003, gelatin silver print



Galliano Design for Dior Couture, New York, 2003, gelatin silver print