

# DAVID SEIDNER

ELEGANCE AND BEAUTY



Madame Grès, Paris, 1990, C-Print

American-born David Seidner (Los Angeles 1957–Florida 1999) is known for his inventive and elegant fashion photography as well as formal portraits. At the age of seventeen he moved to Paris. An amazing career lay ahead—by the age of nineteen, his fashion pictures were already being published on magazine covers. His first solo exhibition was held only two years later in Paris, followed by a show at the Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art the year after.

In the 1980s, he was under exclusive contract with the house of Yves Saint Laurent. However, his commercial work also included advertising campaigns for Dior, Ungaro, Lanvin, and Bill Blass, to name just a few, and he contributed regularly to the fashion pages of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Harper's & Queen*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *Vanity Fair*. Commissioned by the newly opened Musée des Arts de la Mode, Seidner photographed costumes from the collection in the Louvre for their opening exhibition and catalogue in 1986.

Seidner's creative output was immense. The current exhibition encompasses thirty-one of his signature images. On show are some highly sophisticated, colorful, and lush fashion shots, formalized as refined compositions with strongly defined calligraphic bodies and multiple exposure pictures, as well as photographic experiments using mirrors and broken glass—in which models and dresses are only shown as reflections in the shards (*Patou/Cynthia Antonio, c. 1986*).

Today, Seidner's works are very rarely found on the art market. This is due to the fact that Seidner died at an early age and also at a time when the photographic market was still developing. Printing and editing photographs were not common practice among photographers. In 2009, the Seidner Archive was bought by the International Center of Photography (ICP) in

New York. Collector Nicola Erni was given access to this archive at ICP and offered the chance to buy doublettes of his signature images. Prints from the famous series "Paris Fashion 1945" were made for the Nicola Erni Collection from digitized transparencies by David Seidner. The prints' quality in color and tone is very subtle and evocative. Captured in these magnificent and silent photographs are dolls wearing the fashion of Patou, Madame Grès, Fath, Rochas, and Balmain, each displayed in the run-down interior of an abandoned theater set. The detailing of the hats, jewelry, and accessories, and the craftsmanship which went into creating each gown and suit, is astonishing indeed.

What were these dolls made for in the first place? In 1944, the French couture industry had reached an all time low. The Chambre Syndicale de la Couture Parisienne therefore decided to revive its international reputation with a small exhibition entitled *Théâtre de la Mode*. The exhibition organizer enlisted major fashion designers, including Jeanne Lanvin, Lucien Lelong, Elsa Schiaparelli, and Pierre Balmain, to create outfits for small, wire-framed dolls, one third the size of normal mannequins.

The exhibition of over 230 dolls, displayed in artist-designed sets, opened in Paris in 1945 at the Museum of Decorative Arts and attracted a remarkable 100,000 visitors. Subsequently, the dolls toured Europe and America. The last stop of *Théâtre de la Mode* was San Francisco, where the mannequins remained until the early 1950s, when they were acquired by the Maryhill Museum of Art. They went on a second tour in the 1990s to Paris. For the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original exhibition, the Musée de la Mode in Paris resurrected the dolls, and because of Seidner's pioneering work with French fashion and historical gowns, he was asked to photograph them. There is an incredible beauty in the way

Seidner positioned them in different poses as if they were real women, yet they still appear surreal and their theatricality is emphasized through their “silence and isolation.”

In the 1990s, when trash aesthetics and anti-glamour photography in fashion prevailed, Seidner stuck to depicting his models in the most elegant way possible. No traces of sex or grunge, so typical of that time, can be found in his body of work. Instead, he focussed on beauty and underscored it through fragmentation and distortion (*Francine Howell, Harper's and Queen, 1987*). Using this technique he also enhanced a feeling of movement.

Showing models in couture dresses as reflections on shards from a broken mirror, Seidner exhibits his knowledge of Cubist art. As in Cubist paintings of some eighty years earlier, he deconstructs his subject, looks at it from different angles, and reassembles it in a new way to point out its beauty.

An acid-green silk dress shows how incredibly talented Seidner was at capturing the perfect moment, working with light and translating classical sculpture photographically (*Yves Saint Laurent, Ahn Duong, 1986, p. 83*). By placing the model against a black background he enlightens the sharp profile and stresses the stunning elegance of the taut arms. He works with long exposure times, allowing the model to forget about the fact that she is being photographed at all, and asking the camera to capture the model as if they become so obsessed with putting all of the ingredients together: the movement of the head; the movement of the shoulders; the angle of the hips; the way the knee is; the way the foot is in relation to the other foot ... that they become unaware, almost, of being photographed.”<sup>1</sup>

By combining elegance and beauty, formal classicism and individual creativity, with a notorious perfectionism and invention, as well as incorporating his profound knowledge of art history, David Seidner created a legacy of striking images which will be admired by many generations to come.

Ira Stehmann



Yves Saint Laurent, Cibachrome print



Robert Piguet, Marcel Dhorme, Paris, 1990, archival print



Marcelle Chaumont, Paris, 1990, archival print



Lucien Lelong, Paris, 1990, archival print



Robert Piguet, Raphaël, Pierre Balmain, Paris, 1990, archival print



Henry à la Pensée, Jacques Fath "Longchamp fleuri", Pierre Balmain, Paris, 1990, archival print



Lucien Lelong, "Faience", Paris, 1990, archival print



Jean Patou, "Nocturne", Paris, 1990, archival print



Balenciaga, Paris, 1990, archival print



Lucien Lelong, Paris, 1990, archival print



Jean Patou, "Fleurs du mal", Paris, 1990, archival print



Martial & Armand, Paris, 1990, archival print



Lara Harris, 1985, C-Print



Azzedine Alaïa (Betty Lago), 1986, gelatin silver print



Azzedine Alaïa (Betty Lago), 1986, gelatin silver print



Azzedine Alaïa (Betty Lago), 1986, gelatin silver print



Unknown (tuxedo with hat), Fujichrome print



Unknown (fur trim), Cibachrome print



Model with b/w dress, Cibachrome print



Unknown (white dress with black fan), Fujichrome print



Unknown (fuschia dress), Fujichrome print



Yves Saint Laurent, *Black Dress/White Card*,  
gelatin silver print



Valentino (Simonetta Gianfelici), 1984,  
gelatin silver print



Chanel (Betty Lago), 1985, gelatin silver print



Francine Howell, *Harpers and Queen*, 1987, C-Print



Yves Saint Laurent (Ahn Duong), 1986, C-Print





*Daniella Stinea, Hat by Jacques le Corre, 1987, Cibachrome print*



*Victor Edelstein (Francine Howell), 1987, Cibachrome print*



*Patou (Cynthia Antonio), Vogue Italy, 1987, Cibachrome print*