

1975



1933

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# FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY: SIX DECADES

# FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY AN ART OF DEMOCRACY

By Gene Thornton

We live in strange times. Everyone is for the people and against the elite, but when art is produced for a broad and general public it is despised even by its makers.

Fashion photography is an art produced for the public. In magazine and newspaper reproduction it is seen by millions of people around the world, but nobody takes it seriously. Most people think there is something silly about all those elongated ladies preening beside Chinese vases or cavorting with elephants or lounging about in slaughter houses or shower rooms. Even great fashion photographers like Edward Steichen and Richard Avedon prefer to be known by their work in other fields.

It is especially difficult to take fashion photography seriously as art. The normal life span of a fashion photograph is a day or a month or a season, after which it is thrown out with the trash, while art is for eternity. Art belongs in museums, while fashion photography belongs in the mass media. Fashion photography is reproduced in hundreds of thousands of copies, while art is produced in limited editions, often in editions limited to one. Art is so expensive that only the rich can afford it, while fashion photography is practically given away.

Last but not least is the question of intent. Art is deeply concerned with the higher things of life, with expressing the hopes and fears of humanity, with truth, with beauty, with the good, while fashion photography (*let us be frank about it*) is only made to sell clothes.

The truth is that fashion photography is not art but commercial art, and everyone knows what that means. It means that people do it for money, not to satisfy their creative urges. It means that they do it to please a client or the public or anyone else but themselves. It means that they do it to express the ideas and attitudes of the client rather than their own.

It is true that this distinction between art and commercial art is scarcely 200 years old and can seldom be applied to art made before 1800. Tiepolo's painted ceilings, El Greco's altarpieces and Michaelangelo's Medici tombs were made to order for clients by artists who made a living from their work. So were the windows of Chartres Cathedral, the sculptures of the Parthenon and the paintings in the tombs of ancient Egyptian kings. They were all made to express the ideas and aspirations of the clients who paid for them, not of the artists who made them. Yet nobody thinks of them as commercial art.

For our time, however, the gulf between fine art and commercial art is deep and wide, and fashion photography is on the wrong side of the line. It is not made to satisfy artists but to sell clothes. It is part of a multimillion dollar industry without which it would not exist, and its ultimate audience is not a Medici Pope or the Most Christian King of France or even the critics of *The New York Times*, but a large and miscellaneous general public that probably does not have any formal training in art appreciation and certainly is not thinking of art at the moment of looking.

There is, however, one thing to be said for fashion photography as opposed to the kind of art that is normally seen in museums and galleries. It plays a more important part in our lives. Painting, sculpture and art photography are very important to the handful of people who care about them at all. However, despite all the efforts of critics, curators and collectors, they are not very important to anyone else. Most people get all the pictorial art they want from movies, television and the kind of photographs that appear in newspapers and magazines. You cannot make them prefer the art of the museums even if you make a circus of it.

Fashion photography, however, is a kind of pictorial art the people enjoy without being told that they should. Like movies and television, it is seen by millions of people who never enter museums (as well as by most of those who do) and it plays a part in setting standards of taste beyond the wildest dreams of a museum director. For this reason, if for no other, fashion photography deserves some serious thought.

There is, however, another reason for taking fashion photography seriously, and that is because of its very great success in expressing the ideals and aspirations of its time and place. Precisely because it is commercial art, it must appeal to the public. And in order to appeal to the public it must express public dreams and aspirations (rather than the private dreams and aspirations of the artist). Thus, even though it is commercial art—or rather, precisely because it is commercial art—fashion photography performs what has traditionally been one of the principal functions of the art of the museums: it gives pictorial expression to the dreams and ideals of its age and place.

We are so used to fashion photography in America today that we forget how brief its history is and how limited its geographic spread. It did not exist in the China of the Sung Dynasty and it does not exist in China today. It did not exist among the Hottentots or the Eskimos or the ancient Greeks. Fashion photography—or rather, the hand-drawn fashion illustration from which it developed—only came into being in Western Europe and America in the 18th century, when modern middle class democracy was being born. It was not needed in the aristocratic societies of earlier days, when beauty was the prerogative of the few and sumptuary laws required that the finest materials and most complicated cuts be reserved for the ruling classes. Nor is it likely to survive into the equalitarian societies of the future, where (if the People's Republic of China is any indication) everyone will have to dress the same. It can flourish only in societies where everyone is free to dress as he or she pleases, though not everyone can afford the very best, and where there is a positive stimulus for the vast majority to try to keep up with the famous few.

It is, in short, an art of democracy, as we of the middle classes understand the term, and it expresses a dream and ideal that exist only in our kind of world. In the days when Europe was ruled by emperors and popes, painting and sculpture gave expression to aristocratic ideals of piety, honor and glory. Today in the middle class democracies of Europe and America fashion photography expresses the democratic ideal that everyone has an equal right to be beautiful and glamorous.

By "everyone" is meant precisely that: everyone. The older fashion magazines seem to think of themselves as addressed to a kind of modern aristocracy. But the dream and ideal of fashion photography include everyone: not just kings and queens and society ladies and movie stars, but bricklayers, typists, ad space salesmen, art historians, busboys, salesgirls and presidents of the local Rotary Club.

It is, of course, an ideal, not an actuality. The grace and elegance of a high style fashion photograph is far beyond the means of ordinary working men and women, and always will be. It is even beyond the means of television talk show hosts and the wives of multimillionaires. Nature forbids it when the economics does not, and in any case, it takes more time and work than most people have patience for.

In every age, however, art has always expressed ideals more readily than actualities. No classical Greeks actually looked like the Apollo Belvedere or the Venus of Praxiteles, and no medieval Christians were as pious as the stained-glass saints in the cathedral windows. The ideal of universal elegance expressed in the modern fashion photograph is merely a dream, like Don Quixote's ambition to reach the unreachable stars, an impossible dream that frequently leaves its devotees all battered and covered with scars. It is, however, a dream of democracy, and it is altogether appropriate that it should find its most perfect expression not on the walls of churches and palaces, where the dreams and ideals of former ages found expression, but in the pages of magazines that are readily available at any corner newsstand at a price that nearly everyone can afford.

Why then a museum show of fashion photography? One good reason. Nobody ever knows that art is art until it has been removed from its everyday surroundings and placed in a museum or gallery. A madonna in a church is an object of worship, but a madonna seen in a museum is an arrangement of shapes and colors characteristic of a particular time and place. The same thing is true of a fashion photograph. In the pages of a fashion magazine it is part of a campaign to sell clothes. But when it is torn from the magazine and hung on a wall with other fashion photographs, it begins to reveal qualities of style and expression that survive the loss of its original function. It becomes, in short, art as the term is understood today: something made not for use but purely for aesthetic contemplation.

So let us look at the fashion photographs in this exhibition, the largest collection of fashion photographs ever shown on historical principles, to see what we can see. As we move through six decades of fashion photography we naturally see hemlines and necklines going

up and down and all sorts of other changes in fashion itself. We also see changing fashions in models and settings. The graciously smiling society lady of the '10s and the '20s was posed in rooms of truly regal splendor. In the '40s and '50s, however, she gave way to the pert little rich girl next door lounging around her daddy's swimming pool, who in turn has been replaced by today's jet set adventuress voyaging toward the wilder shores of love.

More to our point, however, are the changing ways of photographing clothes which this exhibition reveals, ways which often reflect changing styles in the larger world of art and photography. In the first decade of this century, when photography began to replace drawing as the principal means of illustrating clothes, fashion photographs were merely record shots of models wearing clothes. There was no attempt at glamor or atmosphere, no attempt to express the impossible dream. In 1913, however, when Baron de Meyer began photographing for *Vogue*, fashion photography started into life. De Meyer was a celebrated art photographer whose romantic studies of grand and beautiful ladies were exhibited in the photographic salons of the period and reproduced in the pages of Alfred Steiglitz's magazine *Camera Work*. When de Meyer began working for *Vogue* he posed his models like aristocrats in the paintings of Van Dyck and Reynolds and photographed them in the soft and shimmering lights then fashionable in salon photography.

De Meyer was succeeded at *Vogue* by Edward Steichen, who kept the elegant poses while gradually introducing the hard outlines and dramatic lighting of modern photography. He in turn was followed by Martin Munkacsy, who, at *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1930's, revolutionized fashion photography once again by taking it out of the studio into the street and bringing to it the live-action drama of news photography. Cecil Beaton introduced the incongruous juxtapositions of Surrealism. Toni Frissell discovered the glamor of the healthy American girl and Guy Bourdin introduced high fashion and low life to one another. As one photographer succeeded another—or rather, since fashion photography is scarcely 70 years

old, as one photographer after another introduced new ways of photographing clothes into the shared pool of ideas and approaches—a strange thing was seen to occur. Fashion photography, though only commercial art, began to acquire something remarkably like the period and personal styles of the fine art of the museums.

They were not, perhaps, true period and personal styles. The aim of fashion photography, one must remember, is neither self-expression nor cultural commentary but selling clothes, and whenever a fashion photographer gets carried away by an urge to higher things (which happens more often than one might suppose) there are always editors, account executives and manufacturer's representatives around to recall him to his duty.

However, there is always a need in the fashion industry for new ways of showing the same perennial product, clothes, and there has usually been on the industry's highest level a handful of editors, publishers and art directors who understood that need and knew the best way to meet it: by hiring talented people with ideas of their own and then giving them their head. Thanks to these modern Medici of the mass media—to Condé Nast, Dr. M. F. Agha, Edna Woolman Chase, Carmel Snow, Nancy White, Diana Vreeland, Alexey Brodovitch, Alexander Liberman—fashion photography is full of variety. No one is likely to mistake the static splendor of the early masters for the live-action realism of their successors or to confuse the hard-edged monumentality of William Silano with the delicate impressionism of Sarah Moon.

Fashion photography, then, by its very nature, and without ever aiming to be more than it is, has three things in common with the fine art of the museums: personal styles, period styles and the ability to express the dreams and ideals of the time and place that produced it. Someday we may begin to understand how this can be. Meanwhile, we must acknowledge what this exhibition so amply demonstrates, that fashion photography is a representative art of the 20th century with at least as valid a claim to be taken seriously as the painting and art photography of the museum.

THIS EXHIBITION HAS BEEN MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH GENEROUS GRANTS FROM:  
THE NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS, THE JOE AND EMILY LOWE FOUNDATION, BARRY WINSTON, INC., DUGGAL COLOR PROJECTS, INC., EXQUISITE  
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THIS EXHIBITION WAS ORGANIZED BY THE EMILY LOWE GALLERY, HOFSTRA UNIVERSITY, HEMPSTEAD, NEW YORK  
OCTOBER 30-DECEMBER 14, 1975