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ART & DESIGN | ART REVIEW

## The Met Celebrates Irving Penn, Revolutionary Photographer

By **ROBERTA SMITH** | APRIL 20, 2017



“Still Life With Watermelon,” from 1947, is among the works on view at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in “Irving Penn: Centennial.”

Irving Penn, Condé Nast and Metropolitan Museum of Art

Before I paid much attention to photographers’ credits in fashion magazines, I remember the wonderful shock of the slightly crazed, insuperably elegant photographs of foods or fading flowers that I often encountered in *Vogue*. Exuding an indelible, instantly recognizable style, they were the work of the great Irving Penn — the first modern photographer whose name was fixed in my young brain.

Penn’s images were casual yet exquisite in every way: With their drizzled liquids, spilled spices and other raw ingredients, or their strewn petals, they felt innovative and intimate, as if tossed off by someone who had just exited, smiling. But their contrasting textures and vivid colors, enhanced by the sparkling white seamless background paper, and the wit and poise of their compositions, seemed like art, and almost out of place in a magazine. They evoked the still lifes of Chardin and Manet, but were now and new, with

a refinement of detail and color that only a camera could manage. As I browsed through an issue, I would hope to find their wonderful disorder and their bold scale, which was close to actual size. I pored over them, detail by detail.

Two food photographs, taken in 1947, greet you at the entrance of “Irving Penn: Centennial” at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a crystalline exhibition in which nearly every gallery exhales its own delicious breeze. “Still Life With Watermelon, New York” features a compote of fruit, a rumpled napkin, a loaf of broken bread and even a stray fly atop a lemon, and looks to Spanish and Dutch still life for inspiration, but has some contemporary slovenliness. “Salad Ingredients, New York” is more minimal, spreading about the makings of a salad and its dressing, including a half-used head of Bibb lettuce, peppercorns, salt, an egg yolk, lemon and a little vinegar and oil pooling in two spoons. Leave the mess, take the salad.

This energizing show, which opens on Monday, presents a perfectionist with a curious eye and a strong work ethic who all but obliterated the line between commerce and art by dint of meticulous concentration, an innate classical style and a quiet respect for every subject he took on. These qualities can be seen, and felt, throughout the exhibition, which celebrates the centennial of Penn’s birth in 1917, and also a promised gift of nearly 190 vintage prints from the Penn Foundation, established before his death in 2009.

As the show moves along, it retraces a brilliant, productive career of nearly 70 years, revealing the unwavering consistency of a vision fixed on form and beauty in their many guises: extensive fashion work for Vogue; portraits of cultural luminaries and tradesmen, as well as of indigenous Peruvians and New Guinean tribesmen; nearly abstract close-ups of overly voluptuous nudes; and colossal cigarette butts magnified to suggest Roman columns, tombstones and even corpses.



“Rochas Mermaid Dress (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), Paris, 1950.” Penn married the model that year. Irving Penn, Condé Nast and Metropolitan Museum of Art

Except for his portraits, Penn's images almost invariably ran in color in *Vogue* — as copies of the magazine displayed in vitrines remind us. But he printed only still lifes in color; everything else was black-and-white, perhaps to claim the images for art. More crucially, Penn, like Walker Evans (an important influence), was a master of tone, with an unusual sensitivity to light and its complexities. Not that he wasn't adept with color; the one piece of advertising work here is a spectacular image for L'Oréal. It shows a model's lips brushed with eight different shades of lipstick, as if by a painter.

Penn, whose first ambition was to be a painter, was born in Plainfield, N.J. His father, who emigrated from Russia in 1908 and shortly thereafter changed his name from Chaim Michelsohn to Harry Penn, was a Sunday painter trained as a clockmaker. That combination of artistry and precision seems prophetic, as both Irving and his younger brother, Arthur (who became a celebrated movie director), would make their names using cameras.



Penn saw form and decaying beauty in the everyday, as in "Cigarette No. 37, New York, 1972."  
Irving Penn Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art

In high school in Philadelphia, Penn excelled in art, and then spent four years at the Philadelphia Museum and School of Industrial Art (now the University of the Arts). There he was mentored by Alexey Brodovitch, the renowned art director of Harper's Bazaar, who recognized Penn's talent and became something of a father figure.



"Girl Drinking (Mary Jane Russell), New York, 1949," part of a series made over 40 years. Irving Penn, Condé Nast and Metropolitan Museum of Art

By 1938, Penn was in New York, making drawings and designing for magazines, including Harper's Bazaar, and saving enough money to buy his first camera. This was a Rolleiflex, an advanced implement and in itself a strong statement of commitment and ambition. Nonetheless, he spent a year in Mexico trying to be a painter before realizing where his future lay.



"Mother and Posing Daughter, Cuzco, 1948," part of a series of portraits of Peruvians. Irving Penn Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art

In June 1943, Penn was hired by Alexander Liberman, who had been recently appointed as the art director at Vogue, to design covers. When Penn expressed his disappointment in some photographs, Liberman encouraged him to take his own. His first Vogue cover, using one of his still lifes, appeared that October. The August 1944 issue featured his first fashion photographs.



Penn's use of sharp, angled corners in his sets fit the narrow frame of his subject in the portrait "Marcel Duchamp, New York, 1948."  
Irving Penn Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Met exhibition, organized by Maria Morris Hambourg, an independent curator, and formerly the curator in charge of the Met's department of photography, and Jeff L. Rosenheim, its present curator in charge, unfolds with a clarity commensurate with Penn's sensibility. It proceeds through small galleries, each devoted to a series or a kind of work that, not surprisingly, explores some aspect of photography's arsenal.



An animated portrait of the movie star Marlene Dietrich, shot in 1948.  
Irving Penn Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art

The first gallery is dominated by portraits taken in 1947 and 1948, when Penn was barely 30. Liberman assigned the project to force his protégé's growth. With subjects invariably older and more accomplished than he, Penn leveled the playing field with challenging little stage sets, most famously a corner of sharply angled walls that made the image psychologically immediate and boxed in. This fit the narrow frame of Marcel Duchamp especially well. For the designer Elsa Schiaparelli, Penn pulled back the camera to reveal slices of the studio, while Schiaparelli cocked one gloved hand on her hip and extended the other up the wall, as if waiting to be handed castanets.



A photo shoot for “Mouth (for L’Oréal), New York, 1986.”  
Irving Penn Foundation, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Another format — a worn carpet thrown over some boxes — created terrain of almost Beckettian desolation for subjects to sit on, as a forlorn-looking Alfred Hitchcock did, or lean on, like Peter Ustinov. He placed his chin in one hand and flung the other behind him, like a small and distant planet orbiting the sun of his face. These portraits, some of art’s greatest, quickly made Penn’s reputation.

The next chapter, a gallery of fashion photographs accompanied by nine Vogue covers, is, of course, stunning — especially the shots of the graceful Swedish model Lisa Fonssagrives, whom Penn married in 1950. By then he was photographing most of his models against a scarred canvas painted with clouds and a patch of brightening light. Its matte textures worked well against the pristine coats and gowns.

With Richard Avedon, Penn revolutionized fashion photography in the postwar period. They brought out the models’ individual personalities, adding wit to their gestures while featuring their garments in ways that highlighted the designs’ details and also their sculptural qualities.

You could say that Penn played the reserved Jasper Johns to Avedon's more outgoing Robert Rauschenberg. While Avedon set many of his models in motion, having them leap or run, Penn's were almost always completely still, forming complex silhouettes. An unusual degree of motion animates Marlene Dietrich's 1948 portrait, later in the show. Seated with her back to the camera, she turns toward us, her head held low, as if we'd just awakened her from a nap.

One of the show's greatest moments is the divided gallery that starts with a cluster of the portraits of Peruvians that Penn shot over three days in December 1948 in a borrowed studio in Cuzco. Their somber dignity and equanimity often equal those of European portraiture from earlier centuries, but may also indicate knowledge of the great Peruvian portrait photographer Martín Chambi (1891-1973), who worked in Cuzco.

In one of the best-known, a sister and brother rest their joined hands on an upholstered piano stool, staring at the camera but also into the future. In another, a little girl leans against her mother, her head high. She points to the ground, as the Duchess of Alba pointed to Goya's signature in the dust at her feet.

These images inspired Penn's "Small Trades" series, in the gallery's second half. Made in Paris, London and New York, it captures a locomotive fireman, a mailman, a headwaiter, a sewer cleaner and others in their work clothes, with their specialized gear. (The one woman here is an imposing Parisian balloon seller.) They echo the portraiture of the German photographer August Sander, according the subjects status while representing them as individuals and, to some extent, exemplars of a national character.

Penn continually exposed the workings of photography, revealing its craft, artifice and truths. He plumbed the expressive potential of his negatives, exemplified in a row of four variously toned prints of the 1949 "Girl Drinking (Mary Jane Russell), New York," made over 40 years. And, of course, reality always lurked just beyond the angled walls and weathered backdrops that cosseted his distinguished guests and glamorous models. But his main achievement, made abundantly clear by this exhibition, was simply to approach everything he did with the rigor and the care of the artist he was.

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Irving Penn: Centennial  
Opening April 24 and running through July 30 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art;  
212-535-7710, metmuseum.org.

<http://nyti.ms/2glCc7S>