

Irving Penn

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, NEW YORK SEPTEMBER 13-NOVEMBER 27, 1984

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MAJOR IRVING PENN RETROSPECTIVE TO OPEN AT
THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART ON SEPTEMBER 13

The first major retrospective of the work of Irving Penn in more than twenty years will open at The Museum of Modern Art on September 13, 1984. The exhibition surveys Penn's long career, spanning the past four decades, and features his work in portraiture, fashion, advertising, the nude, ethnographic subjects and still life, as well as a selection of Penn's early, unpublished photographs. Consisting of approximately 200 color and black and white photographs, the exhibition is being organized by John Szarkowski, Director of the Department of Photography at The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition is made possible by a generous grant from SCM Corporation, with additional support provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. IRVING PENN is the sixth exhibition SCM Corporation has sponsored at The Museum of Modern Art in the past decade.

Irving Penn has long been recognized as one of the world's most distinguished practitioners of editorial, advertising and fashion photography. Since his photographs first began to appear regularly in Vogue magazine in the 1940s, his work has been characterized by a technical elegance, a demanding standard of style, and a sensitivity to the quality of light that have influenced a generation of photographers.

Born in 1917 in Plainfield, New Jersey, Penn studied design at the Philadelphia Museum School of Art from 1934 until 1938. For the next three years he worked as a graphic designer in New York, followed by a year spent painting in Mexico. Upon his return to New York City, Penn went to work for Alexander Liberman, the art director at Vogue magazine. Penn produced his first Vogue cover, a photographic still life, in 1943, and his photographs have continued to appear editorially

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in Vogue and several other publications since that time. He has also photographed for various commercial clients in America and abroad since 1951.

John Szarkowski notes that it was in the area of still life and portraiture that "Penn first found full confidence in his own intuitions. His memorable double portrait of George Jean Nathan and H.L. Mencken was made in 1947, as was his riotous, joyful Still Life with Watermelon, one of the triumphs of color photography." With the support and influence of Vogue, Penn built up an impressive roster of portrait subjects, including Joan Miró, Jean Cocteau, Balthus, and André Derain. In contrast to the highly ornamental style of fashion magazines of the day, Penn's early portraits are set in anonymous studios, sparsely furnished, and free of reference to the sitter's occupation or habitual environment. By the 1950s, even this undefined space disappears, leaving no environment at all, "only a wordless conversation between the photographer and the sitter," according to Mr. Szarkowski.

This same concentration and economy of vision characterizes Penn's fashion pictures, beginning with his notable series of photographs of the 1950 Paris collections. Unlike the elaborate orchestration of earlier fashion pictures-- by de Meyer, Beaton, and others--in which the dress and its model appear to act out a role, Penn's 1950 pictures ignore plots and dream worlds. "They are not stories, but simply pictures," writes Mr. Szarkowski.

As haute couture declined in the 1950s, Penn found a substitute in "the even more passionate and costly pursuit of style that had survived in the corners of the world not yet completely absorbed by the West." In Peru, West Africa, Nepal, Morocco and other exotic locales, Penn photographed people who had not yet learned to be embarrassed by the art of adornment. Characteristically, Penn photographed them in an abstract, neutral space, revealing nothing of the circumstances of their lives beyond their sense of style.

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The omnipresence of decay is a recurring motif in Penn's work. Ravelled carpet, lipstick on a dead cigarette butt, flies, stains, etc. appear frequently in his otherwise elegant compositions. A still life is compromised by the stain of spilled coffee or by a rank ashtray.

Penn's Cigarette series in the early seventies heralded a change in his treatment of this motif. The "decay"--the discarded cigarette--now becomes the central subject, but is given an unequivocal nobility and elegance. The Cigarette pictures also represent a shift of interest from the printed page as end product to the expressive possibilities of the photographic print. Through long, meticulous experiment he perfected a command of platinum printing to bring an even greater richness and clarity to his increasingly personal work.

For most of his career, between public editorial projects and private experiments and portraits of the famous, Penn has also undertaken commercial photography--advertisements for perfume, shoes, cosmetics and other consumer products. In this often more restrictive medium, Mr. Szarkowski notes, "Penn's work elevates itself and its role by virtue of its great refinement of craft. The grace, wit, and inventiveness of his patternmaking, the lively and surprising elegance of his line, and his sensitivity to the character, the idiosyncratic humors of light, make Penn's pictures, even the slighter ones, a pleasure for our eyes."

At 67, Penn's powers seem undiminished, Mr. Szarkowski observes, and it is reasonable to assume his work will "continue to delight and challenge us. It demonstrates for photography in our time what must be relearned by most arts in most times: that the apparently inconsequential can be redeemed by artistic seriousness; that a plain vocabulary is the most demanding; that high craft is the just desert not only of monuments and ceremonial vessels, but of the ordinary baggage of our lives."

After closing at The Museum of Modern Art on November 27, IRVING PENN will travel to: Milwaukee Art Museum, July 12 - September 1, 1985; Detroit Institute

of Arts, September 24 - November 24, 1985; University Art Museum, University of California at Berkeley, January 20 - March 16, 1986; Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., April 19 - June 8, 1986; and Fort Worth Art Museum, June 29 - August 31, 1986. The exhibition will circulate abroad under the auspices of The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art.

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Museum is publishing Irving Penn, the first comprehensive volume of Penn's work since Moments Preserved (1960). In addition to an essay by John Szarkowski, which traces Penn's career from its art school beginnings in the 1930s to the provocative work of recent years, this 216-page catalog will contain 191 color and black and white illustrations. A cloth-bound edition of the book will be distributed for the Museum by New York Graphic Society Books/Little, Brown and Company, Boston at \$60; a paperbound version will be available only at the exhibition or by direct order from the Museum, at \$19.95 until November 30, 1984; \$25 thereafter.

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