

FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY

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A fashion photograph is, simply, a photograph made specifically to show (or, in some cases, to allude to) clothing or accessories, usually with the intent of documenting or selling the fashion. Photographs of fashionable dress, in existence since the invention of photography in 1839, are not fashion photography. The distinguishing feature—and the common denominator in the enormous diversity of style, approach, and content—is the fashion photograph's intent to convey fashion or a "fashionable" lifestyle. At the end of the twentieth century, the Calvin Klein advertisement featuring only Calvin's portrait changed the very definition of a fashion photograph from a picture of the featured clothing to the selling of a glamorous lifestyle identified with a specific logo.

Fashion photography has sometimes been called ephemeral, commercial, and frivolous, and its importance has been called into question. That fashion photography has a commercial intent implies to some that it lacks photographic and artistic integrity. In reality, it has produced some of the most creative, interesting, and socially revealing documents and revealed the attitudes, conventions, aspirations, and taste of the time. It also reflects women's image of themselves, including their dreams and desires, self-image, values, sexuality, and interests.

The psychology behind a fashion photograph as a selling device is the viewer's willingness to believe in it. No matter how artificial the setting, a fashion photograph must persuade individuals that if they wear these clothes, use this product, or accessorize in such a way, the reality of the photograph will be theirs. The fashion photograph can offer a vision of a certain lifestyle (from glamorous to grunge), sex, or social acceptance (via the most current, the most expensive, or the most highly unattainable), but it is the viewer's buy-in that makes the photograph successful.

Early Fashion Photography

The earliest fashion photographs were made, probably in the 1850s and 1860s, to document fashion for Parisian fashion houses. Reproduction in fashion journals occurred much later, between 1881 (with the invention of the halftone printing process by Frederic Eugene Ives) and 1886 (when the refinement of the process made it financially practicable). This breakthrough made it possible to reproduce photographs and sell to a large audience through the medium of the printed page.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, distinctions between fashion photography, portraiture, and theater photography were often blurred. The idea of using professional models was initially considered shocking, and it thus became fashionable in the early years of the century for society celebrities, such as Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, to model. The result was that fashion photographs were strikingly similar to society portraits. The idea of using an actress such as Sarah Bernhardt is not unlike the vogue in the early 2000s for using Gwyneth Paltrow or Madonna or the tennis stars Venus and Serena Williams to model current fashion.

That nineteenth-century fashion photography did not exist is a misconception. Many believe that Americans were first in this field, perhaps based on Edward Steichen's claim that he was the first fashion photographer. This has obscured the contributions of such important Parisian fashion photographers as Maison Reutlinger, Talbot, Felix, Henri Manuel, and Boissonnas et Taponnier as early as 1881. They worked in the studio, but charming outdoor fashion photography was also shot on the Parisian boulevards and at the races by the Seeberger Frères in the first decade of the twentieth century.

American Fashion Photography, 1900–1930

The first important American photographer of fashion was European-born Baron Adolf de Meyer, who had entered fashionable London society through his marriage to Donna Olga

Alberta Caracciolo (the daughter of the duchess of Castelluccio and reputed to be the illegitimate daughter of King Edward VII) and was knighted by the king of Saxony. De Meyer changed fashion photography by disintegrating form and bathing his pictures in a limpid atmosphere and shimmering light, creating what *Vogue* in 1914 termed “artistic” photography. This approach changed the idea of what a fashion photograph should be, from an exacting depiction of a garment’s detail to an evocation of mood.

In 1924, Edward Steichen replaced the soft-focus effects of de Meyer’s style with the clean geometric lines of photographic modernism. Steichen rejected the rococo backdrops used by de Meyer in favor of unadorned, sleek settings and showed modern woman in the sports clothes that reflected a new, liberated sense of herself and her freedom from the corset. Many of Steichen’s most important photographs featured his signature model Marion Morehouse, who epitomized the look of the “contemporary” woman, the flapper. Other important photographers who benefited from and were influenced by Steichen’s innovations were George Hoyningen-Huene, known for his extraordinary use of negative space and passion for the Greek ideal, and his student Horst P. Horst, who used theatrical lighting and trompe l’oeil effects to great advantage.

Photograph of model at Lincoln Memorial.

The true fashion photograph is not one that simply records a clothing design, but one that conveys a desirable lifestyle suggested by that design.

Photograph by TONY TINSELL. THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS. Reproduced by permission.

Realism and Surrealism

Another startling change—and one that would have profound impact on future fashion photography—was the 1933 introduction of out-of-door realism by the Hungarian sports photographer Martin Munkacsi. Munkacsi’s *Harper’s Bazaar* photograph of the model Lucile Brokaw running down the beach—blurred, in motion, and possessing the naturalness of amateur snapshots—changed the course of fashion photography. The spontaneity was revolutionary, particularly when contrasted to Steichen’s posed and static style that preceded it. Realistic fashion photography offered the modern woman a vision that she could apply to her own life. Munkacsi’s snapshotlike realism influenced a long line of photographers, including Toni Frissell, Herman Landshoff, and Richard Avedon.

The artistic ferment of Paris in the 1930s, particularly the fantastic, mysterious, and dreamlike aspects of surrealism, had a profound influence on fashion photography. The painter and photographer Man Ray produced fashion photography as a way of earning money that enabled him to pursue “serious” painting and experimental photography. He was able to chart a new direction for fashion photography because he disregarded the conventions of fashion depiction, instead producing elongations, double exposures, and a “fashion rayograph” that simulated what a fashion would look like when radioed from Paris to New York. Other fashion photographers who incorporated surrealist-influenced ideas in their work were Peter Rose-Pulham, André Durst, George Platt Lynes, and Cecil Beaton.

Constant experimentation and technical virtuosity marks the fashion work of Erwin Blumenfeld, who used solarization, overprinting, combinations of negative and positive images, sandwiching of color transparencies, and even drying the wet negatives in the refrigerator, resulting in crystallization, to achieve his extraordinary effects. Also important in the 1930s was the appearance of Kodachrome, which arrived on the market in 1935. Louise Dahl-Wolfe was one of the first and most important practitioners of color in fashion photography, creating striking photographs of American fashion with the new color technology.

Fashion Photography after World War II

Fashion photography was severely affected at the outbreak of World War II in 1939, not only because of the lack of materials, models, and safe locations, but also because of a demoralization in attitude toward the medium: because fashion was seen as a frivolous and unnecessary form of luxury, fashion magazines stressed women's role in the war, rationalized fashion as morale building, published war reports instead of society columns, and featured the tailored, plain, and often drab clothing more suitable for a world subjected to daily reports of death and destruction. Studio photography with its complicated props and setups was almost eliminated. In general, photographers such as Lee Miller in Paris and Cecil Beaton in London turned to a straightforward documentary approach. Louise Dahl-Wolfe produced some of the most important American fashion photography of the 1940s using a clear, straightforward style.

With the end of the war, New York replaced Paris as the mecca of fashion photography. America's fashion design and ready-to-wear industry achieved its first international success in the postwar period. The time was thus ripe for the emergence of two young American talents who would dominate fashion photography for many years to come: Richard Avedon and Irving Penn.

The charming ease of Richard Avedon's fashion style of the 1950s was perfectly suited to a war-weary society. In this decade, Avedon staged his models as glamorous but "real" girls whose carefree exuberance was both sophisticated and appealing. Each was an actress of sorts, creating both a fashion look and a dialogue of emotions. By the 1960s, Avedon's fashion work had moved from the outdoor locations and softly beautiful natural light of his early work to his signature style of models running and jumping across a plain white background, illuminated with the harsh, raking light of the strobe.

The other major fashion leader whose work started in the 1940s is Irving Penn. Penn's work has no rival in terms of formal complexity, in the rich beauty of constructed shape, elegance of silhouette, and abstract interplay of line and volume. Compared with the white-hot moment of immediacy of Avedon's photographs, Penn's work aimed at the values of monumentality, formal clarity, and quiet truth. Perhaps his most extraordinary shots are those done in collaboration with his wife, the model Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn.

Both Avedon and Penn have each sustained careers over a period of five decades, a record of remarkable range and consistency. Avedon's ability to take inventive risks and his creative inspiration, with its kaleidoscope of techniques and ideas, are unequalled in the field of fashion photography. He always captures the "look" of the moment, in part because of his choice of the model who best epitomizes the time, from Dorian Leigh, Dovima, and Suzy Parker to Verushka, Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton, Brooke Shields, and Nastassja Kinski.

Fashion Photography in the 1960s

Fashion photography in the 1960s yielded to more socially oriented and exotic themes. In part this was due to the fact that fashion design began to show the influence of many diverse sources, from peasant and "street" styles to the women's liberation movement, the space program, and pop art. There was a break with convention, both in social mores and fashion itself: outrageous, seemingly unwearable outfits were designed, models reflected a new diversity of "look" and race, and fashion was redefined toward a defiant market dominated by the youth culture.

The 1960s was also a time when certain fashion photographers, including Bert Stern and David Bailey, enjoyed high-voltage lifestyles, skyrocketing fees, and lavish studio setups. At the opposite extreme, the influence of Penn and Avedon continued to attract serious young photographers from the world over to New York. Yasuhiro Wakabayashi, known professionally as Hiro, developed a monumental, clear, and memorably vivid style while Bob Richardson's work flirted with social concerns such as lesbianism. Other photographers working in the field of fashion in the 1960s included William Klein, Art Kane, and Diane Arbus, whose photography for the *New York Times Magazine* was among the most disturbing and uncharacteristic children's fashion images ever published.

Fashion Photography in the 1970s

In the 1970s, the tide again turned: Diana Vreeland resigned from her influential reign as editor-in-chief of *Vogue*, and in January 1977, American *Vogue* reduced the actual trim size of the publication. Meanwhile, French *Vogue* took the creative lead in fashion photography in this decade and offered their two leading photographers, Helmut Newton and Guy Bourdin, complete creative autonomy. Deborah Turbeville produced work that reflected psychological dislocation in the modern world, in part through her slouching and stylized poses. She was the first to use overweight and “ugly” models, pioneering a more diverse standard of model. Her “bathhouse” photographs published in *Vogue* (May 1975) created a furor by evoking the grisly aura of a concentration camp or the frightening vacuousness of drugged stupor.

Fashion Photography in the 1980s

Some of the most important editorial and advertising fashion photography of the 1980s continued to be done by Richard Avedon. His brilliant advertising campaign “The Diors,” a story spun weekly in the pages of the *New York Times Magazine*, created the enduring vogue for narrative in fashion photography. Avedon’s shot of Nastassja Kinski, her nude form sensuously entwined with a gigantic snake, has become a classic. Women’s strength and independence was emphasized, from sporty and athletic to domineering and brutalizing. Numerous photographers, including Denis Piel, Bruce Weber, and Bert Stern pictured women threatening men with everything from pocketbooks to knives and chains. Fashion itself, particularly in the work of such designers as Jean Paul Gaultier, Azzedine Alaïa, and Issey Miyake (whose work was notably photographed by Penn), helped form the look of the decade’s photography

Fashion Photography in the 1990s

In the last decade of the century, Herb Ritts, Steven Meisel, and Bruce Weber continued to produce some of the most interesting and innovative work, including Weber’s hilarious hip-hop version of a black Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and his seminal spread dealing with the impact of grunge on fashion in the 1990s (including the first post-punk nose ring in a *Vogue* fashion spread). Two of the greats of fashion photography, Irving Penn and Helmut Newton, continued to dominate the field. Ellen von Unwerth’s romantic individualism and Sheila Metzner’s spare but sumptuous style were also widely evident. Models were increasingly racially diverse, with a number of black models, such as Iman, Naomi Campbell, and Karen Alexander, achieving the status of celebrity superstars. As to the early years of the twenty-first century, one must await the knowledge of hindsight to assess the importance of very recent fashion photography as well as the development of such young talents as Christophe Kutner, Glen Luchford, Javier Vallhonrat, and Craig McDean. What seems certain is that fashion photography—whether published in *Vogue*, *W*, *Dazed and Confused*, or *Sleaze Nation*—will continue to reflect the society and the times in which it was made.

See also [Actors and Actresses, Impact on Fashion](#); [Art and Fashion](#); [Avedon, Richard](#); [Beaton, Cecil](#); [Hartnell, Norman](#); Hoyningen-Heune, George; [Newton, Helmut](#).

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