

# HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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## Fashion photography gets its close-up in MFAH's 'Icons of Style'



Molly Glentzer | June 21, 2019 | Updated: June 21, 2019 12:54 p.m.



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Curator Malcolm Daniel stands just inside of the "Icons of Style: A Century of Fashion Photography," exhibit at the MFAH, featuring more than 200 prints along with a selection of costumes from the museum's collections, Wednesday, June 19, 2019, in Houston.

Photo: Karen Warren, Houston Chronicle / Staff photographer

No one doubts the power of fashion as a cultural force today, and in the age of Instagram, our sense of it is formed by fashion photography that's wildly democratic.

But museums are only slowly acknowledging the genre as something more meaningful than commercial or popular art, worthy of scholarly study. This is somewhat ironic, given that photographers focused on fashion have always shown far greater sensitivity to art movements and experimentation than those who've concentrated on, say, documentary narratives or landscapes.

"Icons of Style," opening Sunday at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, makes a case for fashion photography as a valid art form. "You can't look at these and think that the photographers weren't considering themselves artists," MFAH photography curator Malcolm Daniel says. "They're so self-consciously artistic."

Organized by the J. Paul Getty Museum but significantly reimaged, the Houston presentation contains about 200 images accessorized with displays of a dozen or so couture outfits from the MFAH's costume collection, including hats, shoes and purses. Wall-sized graphics, large projections and videos also help build a more dynamic environment for visitors who may not find huge walls of relatively small, black-and-white images all that magnetic from a distance. But breezing through the opening galleries would be a mistake: Each frame holds something wonderful.

Daniel and associate curator Lisa Volpe replaced about half of the Getty's photographs with works from the MFAH's own massive photography collections and other sources, including the Houston Public Library, to better reflect Houston's diversity and to incorporate our celebrity- and street-scene-saturated times. The farther in one goes, the more colorful the walls get.

Organizing the show thematically, the curators also had a guiding principal: They insisted that each image qualify as more than documentation. "Nobody sets out to make an oil painting who's not trying to make art. But photography plays all these different roles in society — photojournalism, fashion, advertising, science," Daniel says. "There are certain things we look for in art: a kind of beauty, mastery of technique, something that reveals a broader sense of the culture or context in which it was made, the ability to move us spiritually."

### **From 1911 to now**

Virtually all of the photographs in "Icons of Style" have transcended their original purpose as ads or editorial spreads in the glossy pages of fashion magazines. Paul Outerbridge's famous "Advertisement for George P. Ide & Company" is a standout example. Made in 1922, the graphically strong image juxtaposing a white shirt collar against a checkerboard background has become an icon of Modernism "to the point where a lot of people don't even realize it was made as an advertisement," Daniel says.

The images date from 1911 to the present, a sweeping arc that captures the spirit of more than a century of human culture, dreams and desires. With their aspirational intent, these images collectively illustrate how people perceive beauty. To Daniel and Volpe's credit, the diversity doesn't just begin with Kwame Brathwaite and the Black is Beautiful movement of the 1960s. In the early 20th century, photographers such as James Van Der Zee and Charles "Teenie" Harris conveyed the glamorous aspects of life in early-20th-century Harlem and Pittsburgh, respectively.

The show starts in 1911 because that's when a Parisian journal hired Edward Steichen to make "artistic photographs" of new styles by designer Paul Poiret. A copy of the journal rests under glass in the first gallery, although the eyes go first to an actual Poiret coat on display, a flapper's dream wrap of gradated beads and velvet from 1922.

Other garment standouts from the MFAH's costume vault of more than 1,300 pieces include a strapless, silk taffeta Charles James ballgown from 1947 and Issey Miyake's accordionlike "Flying Saucer" gown from 1994.

A section called "Material Elegance" illustrates the seductive power of light and shadow on luminous silks, absorbent velvets, lace (Steichen's "Gloria Swanson"! ) and human curves. Walls devoted to Art Deco, Surrealism and Op and Pop influences make the case quickly for fashion photography as a specialized art genre. Man Ray made fashion photos, you know.

Getty curator Paul Martineau notes in his catalog that in the 1930s, Louise Dahl-Wolfe commented that there were no fashion photographers, only artists who did fashion pictures. She would herself become one of the greats, taking models to the bombed-out streets of Paris in 1946 (though she was not the first to show that willful fortitude in the face of war; Cecil Beaton shot models in front of ruined buildings in 1941 in London).

### **Hashtag Instagram moment**

A very large print of Richard Avedon's "Dovima With Elephants," which may be the most famous fashion photograph of all time, hangs in an alcove Daniel only half-jokingly calls the "a little chapel to the god Avedon."

Shot with an 8-by-10 camera for Harper's Bazaar in 1955, Avedon's image juxtaposes the extreme beauty of a statuesque model with the perceived clumsiness of a couple of elephants. The subject, actually, is the first evening gown Yves Saint Laurent designed as the creative director for Dior, but the curve of Dovina's thin frame and the gown's graceful bow mimic the lines of the elephants. Not until about 23 years later, as art collectors began acquiring his work, did Avedon start mining his archives and making editioned prints of images such as this.

As the show unfolds, the styles of other artists in the fashion pantheon reveal themselves: Irving Penn's elegant minimalism; the hyper-sexualized realm of Helmut Newton; the Greek-influenced eye of Herb Ritts; and the provocative style of Bruce Weber, who became a sensation with his men's underwear ads for Calvin Klein.

Yes, the show contains rooms of serious eye candy, and they are not too taxing on the brain. But there's also substance from multiple angles. Progressing from end to end, visitors will see evolutions in fashion and popular culture as well as developments in the medium of photographic techniques, including experiments with solarization, negative printing, stop motion and color.

"There are some ways in which couture filters down to the street, and also in which the vernacular bubbles up to couture," Daniel says. As the world changed with civil rights, the youth movement and women's liberation, fashion photography was right there with it.

And art history begins repeating itself, validating the whole premise. Visitors who are paying attention will see images by younger talents that pay homage to predecessors in galleries of contemporary work. Just one example: Ram Shergill's black-and-white "Queen of the Jungle," from 2014, places a regal model in Indian-inspired finery between two elephants, riffing on Avedon's great image.

The last gallery is likely to be the most crowded, full of terrific and splashy celebrity portraits. It feels up to the minute globally with prints of dandies from Badouin Mouanda's "Sapeurs de Bacongo" series but also has a glam Houston quotient — Beyoncé, Solange, James Harden, Simone Biles.

Projections at this end feature galleries of images by famous New York Times photographer Bill Cunningham and Langston Hues, known for his "Modest Street Fashion" project showing mostly Muslim women. (Hues will visit Houston in September to speak.) The show's newest work, which appears just outside the gift shop, is a flashing, frenetic and super-fun video made for the MFAH by French photographer Jean-Paul Goude, who also created the well-known portrait of Grace Jones.

Instagrammers can watch it as they pose in a pop-up set that mimics John Dyer's portrait of Selena in black leather for Texas Monthly. With a hashtag, their images show up on the museum wall — making the whole experience truly democratic: Everyone may not be an artist, but anyone can be a fashionista.