

The Style of Icons: Fashion Photography, Museum, and Artistic Significance

Icons of Style: A Century of Fashion Photography, 1911–2011. June 26 – October 21, 2018, Exhibition at the J. Paul Getty Museum, Getty Center.

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The relationship between fashion photography and the museum has not been an easy one. Although by the 1970s *photography* was firmly established as a serious art form, showing *fashion* photography in the museum still carried some risk because of its association with commercialism and advertising (Williams 2008: 198). Many important photographers themselves were at least partly responsible for this situation. Art photography luminaries such as Brassai (Gyula Halász, 1899-1984), André Kertész (1894-1985), and Robert Doisneau (1912-1994), continued treating fashion photography simply as a source of income while considering their photographic art to be somewhere else. It was also not uncommon for feminist photographers and artists such as Hannah Wilke (1940-1993), Martha Rosler (b. 1943), or Jo Spence (1934-1992) to condemn fashion photography as a means of objectifying women (Williams 2008: 208-209). This distrust of fashion photography unquestionably affected its representation in art galleries and museums, and it was not until 1977 that the first survey exhibition of fashion photography took place at the International Museum of Photography at the George Eastman House in Rochester, USA. This breakthrough event was organized by the writer and curator Nancy Hall-Duncan. She also edited the lavishly illustrated catalog, with its preface written by Yves Saint Laurent. The exhibition broke stereotypes about fashion photography as purely “commercial” and demonstrated that famous photographers like Edward Steichen (1879-1973), Kertész, Man Ray (1890-1976), George Platt Lynes (1907-1955), and Diane Arbus (1923-1971), among others, successfully recorded “changing trends in photography and in art taste, manners, and social customs” through fashion.¹ Six years later a major exhibition of fashion photography, “Shots of Style: Great Fashion Photographs,” opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. By the mid-1980s it was clear that museums had

embraced fashion photography and were happy to exhibit the work of photographers who “cross[ed] boundaries between fashion and art, or those whose work challenged notions of public taste” (Williams 2008: 211).

Yet, even today, as fashion photography is broadly recognized as a part of the fine art system and the public flocks to galleries and museums that exhibit it, it is not unusual for critics and artists to continue treating it with some misgivings. This attitude lingers even in favorable reviews of the immensely popular recent exhibition, “Icons of Style: A Century of Fashion Photography, 1911-2011,” at the Getty Center in Los Angeles. The *Los Angeles Times* art critic Christopher Knight, for one, expresses a fundamental “doubt about the artistic legitimacy of fashion photography itself” (Knight 2018). Vanessa Friedman of the *New York Times* (June 22, 2018), in her critical review with the telling title, “It Was an Ad? So What. It’s Still Art,” echoes Knight’s reservations and questions the relevance of the exhibition on two grounds. First, she still wonders whether the world of fashion photography truly belongs into the traditional art museum landscape. After all, the discipline of photography itself had only slowly overcome the “non-art suspicion” against it. But, more importantly, to this day, *fashion*, “with its whiff of indulgence and the superficial,” is hardly regarded as “serious” (Friedman 2018). In contrast, Melanie Abrams, four years prior, opened a *New York Times* piece with a question that was clearly rhetorical: who would have thought “that the art world would lose its disdain for fashion photography’s commercialism?” She sees the debate between art and commerce, the tension between aesthetics and economics, as unambiguously decided by the visitors themselves, voting with their wallets: fashion photography draws “large crowds to exhibitions,” she writes (and lists several) that “produce much-needed revenue from sponsorships, rentals, and even merchandise” (Abrams 2014).²

This debate between art and commerce, here played out between genres of photography, has venerable historical and philosophical roots in Immanuel Kant’s and Theodor W. Adorno’s writings on aesthetics. Kant’s idea of the beautiful in the art work is based on a feeling of pleasure invoked in the subject – but it has to be a *disinterested* pleasure – which means, notably, a pleasure free from *desire* for the art object itself. This view of the beautiful stands in diametrical opposition to the very purpose of fashion photography, which, after all, is

advertisement or brand name enhancement. Adorno, in his far-reaching philosophical oeuvre often updating Marx, Hegel, and Kant to match up with the forms of economic, social, and aesthetic reality of late capitalism, links Kant's notion of disinterest to a necessary autonomy of fine art from capitalist constraints – an autonomy that fashion photography, as a commercial enterprise, lacks. This is just one reason why Benetton campaigns in the 1990s, aspiring to raise social awareness for many issues, from racism or homosexual families to AIDS and Mafia killings, have proved to be so controversial. They did draw attention, for sure, but Benetton was also accused of exploiting human suffering for commercial gains. Such aesthetic-moral issues, however, do not prevent fashion photography from being absolutely gorgeous, intriguing, and worthy of careful interpretation – which is precisely what the extensive, well curated Getty exhibition invites visitors to do. It presents more than 180 fashion photos, together with a number of the depicted dresses displayed on mannequins and in several video shows, spread out over eight rooms. And it is very well attended by a diverse public. What makes it exciting is that the very tension between art and commerce is so clearly in evidence from the earliest images onward that use their pictorialism, echoing the older established art of painted portraiture, to accommodate the commercial needs of dressmakers. These wish not to have too much detail revealed about the specifics of their products (the craft, the fabrics, the colors) in order not to diminish their commercial potential. Photographers, Steichen, for one, with whose work the exhibition opens, responded with soft-contour painterly images that blur sartorial detail, so that potential seamstress-imitators had to be satisfied by *inspiration* rather than the specifics for direct *imitation*. This feature is thus both photographic convention as well as a consequence of the vestimentary production methods of the time when dressmaking was still a craft practiced by individuals rather than mass production for a global market. Soon, quality, stylish mass-produced clothing put the housewife-seamstress out of business – except for special occasions.³

The catalog opens with an introduction by the exhibition's curator, Paul Martineau, highlighting some key moments in the history of fashion photography, referencing his earlier exhibition, *Herb Ritts: L.A. Style* from 2012, and his subsequent efforts to build up the Getty collection of fashion-related photography. The highly informative illustrated timeline of dates,

names, and events in “Fashion, Photography [and] Culture” provides the reader a useful chronological backbone for reference. The catalog then subdivides the century that the exhibition covers into five sections of roughly two decades, each introduced and elucidated by informative essays that suggest certain narratives, beginning with the shift from early pictorialism to more realist, natural, imagery.

1911-1929: Fashion Photography Comes of Age

The year 1911, the starting point of the exhibition, is not a random date. It is the year Steichen was asked to create the first artistic photographs of dresses by Paul Poiret (1879-1944) that subsequently appear in the journal *Art et décoration*. Thus is born a new genre of photography. It undergoes constant change, both technical and stylistic, over the next century, beginning almost right away as Steichen’s and the early Baron de Meyer’s (1868-1946) pictorialism gives way to sharper focused images, as for instance, in Dora Kallmus’s (1881-1963) picture of a beautiful Wiener Werkstätte dress, shot from the back, 1921. Society portraiture and the depiction of clothing blend in Man Ray’s image of Madame Poiret in a dress by her husband, 1919, or Steichen’s Caja Eric, modeling for Chanel, or his Lee Miller (1907-1977) portrait-cum-evening gown display, both from 1928. Early on, the scenes also move outdoors, notably in the racetrack pictures from the 1910s, but certainly in the George Hoyningen-Huene (1900-1968) beach scenes from 1928 that appear decidedly modern in their stark black-and-white.

Pictorialism as the allusion to classical portraiture and the painterly arrangement of well-dressed women in interior spaces marks a distinct phase and style in the early history of fashion photography. But Anne McCauley’s “contrivance,” discussed in her catalog article, “From Contrivance to ‘Naturalism’,” especially in the term’s slightly derogatory meaning of “artificiality,” remains a perennial feature of fashion photography (McCauley 2018:29). In fact, it could be argued that it is central to fashion photography and becomes, if anything, more prominent in recent decades as the search for ever more varied locations, more *outré* ways of presenting clothes, and the prevalence of ever more scantily dressed and artistically arranged

bodies gain importance. Early examples in this direction are Cecil Beaton's (1904-1980) "Debutantes" (1928) featuring three young women in a watery fantasy landscape of backlit balloons and cellophane, or Steichen's "Tamaris with a large art deco scarf" (1925) that nearly blends her into the expressionist geometrically abstract background. The year 1929, with the stock market crash as the historical reference point, brought the end of "the roaring twenties," a time of excess and exuberance, jazz, and the flapper dress – in short, the age of *The Great Gatsby* (published in 1925). Paul Martineau's essay, "Style in the Face of Crisis, 1930-1946," leading the reader through the next decade and a half, which includes another global disaster, WWII, sees fashion going through hard times. The fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli, however, having observed that "[i]n difficult times, fashion is always outrageous," expects at least no boredom.⁴ As for *The Great Gatsby*: its iconic style and sartorial opulence has been recognized twice in popular culture: two of the novel's four extant film versions, including the most recent, received Oscars for their costume design.⁵ Icons of style remain recognizable.

1930-1946: From Flapper Flamboyance to War Austerity

The 1930s turn from the flapper back toward a more classical femininity. Hoyningen-Huene's "Miss Sonja" (1931) marks an astonishing photographic transformation from textile into a marble frieze; Steichen remains relevant, working for Condé Nast until 1938, producing some exquisitely arranged full-length portraits, of Marion Morehouse (1931), for instance, or "Mrs Arthur Gordon Bowman in a Wedding Gown" for *Vogue* (1933). The 1930s blend modernism into realism into surrealism – and, as a technical innovation, color appears, with Louise Dahl-Wolfe (1895-1989), an early adopter and master, producing *Harper's Bazaar's* first color images in 1938. Movement is added, too, during that time, masterfully by Martin Munkàcsi (1896-1963; for instance, in his images from a 1933 beachwear shoot; in the iconic "Jumping a Puddle," from 1934; or the airy "Peignoire in a Soft Breeze" (1936) that can so instructively be juxtaposed to Hoyningen-Huene's "Miss Sonja") – and thus the blur reappears, but this time a blur of motion, no longer the pictorialist soft-contour. Dahl-Wolfe adds everyday casualness – and eroticism – in the innovative angle and orientation of the female figure in "Girl

With Camera Lying on Grass,” (1938), whereas in “Keep the Home Fires Burning” (1942), a more traditional romantic female icon of longing is physically set in front of a fireplace – but emotionally against the background of the war. The war, literally, appears in Beaton’s sober, even somber, depiction of a model in a two-piece dress standing in front of ruins in London, her face turned away from the viewer.

The 1930s is also the time of Walter Benjamin’s groundbreaking cultural-critical essay on the work of art in the age of mass (re)production, his reflections on the visual arts of photography and film.⁶ Benjamin puts his finger right on the changing modes of reception in contemporary society, the phenomenon of the casual glance and the distracted attention to mass produced images. Acknowledging potentials for enlightenment and dialectical progress, he nevertheless sees the broader development as a loss of “aura” for the modern artwork, an idealist nostalgia that the editors of fashion magazines and their photographers can ill afford. They create “aura” for every issue – and it disappears with the arrival of the next. Benjamin could not possibly imagine how much further the *digital* age would push reproducibility and expand venues of reception, making both available to ever larger numbers of participants. It is this development, the exponential rise in self-fashioning via the Internet, that lately has crashed into the world of the traditional fashion magazine and called into question its very existence, thus providing the end date of the exhibition, the year 2011. In the meantime, Brown’s contribution. “Letting the Skirts Down,” leads into the next chapter of the catalog with Christian Dior’s first collection that “signaled the end of World War II’s time of austerity” (147).

1947-1969: Breaking the Conventions

The post-war “new era in couture” celebrates a return to the luxury, glamour, extravagance, and exclusivity of the past (Brown 2018: 147). The designer who set the tone for couture at the end of the 1940s and dominated throughout the 1950s was Christian Dior while the role of the “image makers” of postwar Europe and America was filled by two imaginative American photographers, Irving Penn (1917-2009) and Richard Avedon (1923-2004). They were eagerly embraced by the open-minded Russian-born art directors Alexander Liberman of *Vogue*

and Alexey Brodovitch of *Harper's Bazaar*. Together, these commercial photographers and art directors reworked the traditional representation of models as perfectly groomed, unattainable, and elite. Penn and Avedon broke the strictures of the genre and produced compelling images of fashionable women who exuded more energy and emotion than the static glamorous debutantes and socialites created by Beaton. In part, the change was inspired by Brodovitch's Design Laboratory at New York's New School for Social Research and especially by his new class, "Art Applied to Graphic Journalism, Advertising, Design, and Fashion," which attracted talented students like Arbus, Lillian Bassman (1917-2012), Jerry Schatzberg (b. 1927), and Art Kane (1925-1995). Penn and Avedon also took this class. In technical terms, fashion photography in those days was characterized by "photo-journalism, contrived spontaneity, action and passion," and the work of Penn and Avedon was a good example of that (Craik 1994: 105). For Avedon, motion was key to his medium. Inspired by the work of Martin Munkácsi, he photographed his models in diverse environments (cafés, casinos, Parisian streets, zoos) and from unusual angles. Avedon's photography was "super-kinetic" while Penn's brought "breathtaking scale to a 'still'" (Jacobs 2018). Avedon's striking "Dovima with Elephants" (1955) and "Carmen (Homage to Munkácsi)" (1957), in which the model seems to be walking on air, and Penn's "Harlequin Dress" (1950) and a black-and-white *Vogue* cover (1950) became signature photographs of their respective individual styles in the 1950s. In that decade a number of talented women join the ranks of fashion photographers. Among them were Bassman, Frances McLaughlin-Gill (1919-2014), and Genevieve Naylor (1915-1989). Previously, the only prominent female fashion photographer was Dahl-Wolfe who worked for *Harper's Bazaar*.

As prêt-à-porter fashions were taking over the consumer market, many photographers adopted a "photojournalistic aesthetic" to capture the bustling energy of urban environments in which models were now frequently photographed. The use of the light 35mm camera—instead of the heavy traditional equipment—encouraged techniques associated with the "press and surveillance photography," desired for more spontaneous and natural shooting (Brown 2018: 153). But models themselves had to be more "humanized" and reflect the cultural spirit of the time. It was inevitable that fashion magazines would finally welcome photographers with

a different social experience than the older generation. The new energy and rejuvenation came from a trio of working-class Londoners, called the Terrible Three, David Bailey (b. 1938), Terence Donovan (1936-1996), and Brian Duffy (1933-2010)—all former assistants to John French (1907-1966), a master photographer of the old school. Their approach to photographing fashion was distinctly unconventional. They wanted to chronicle the lifestyles of young trendy London and refused to photograph models as “clothes horses,” preferring to depict them as women of flesh and blood, with whom one could hang out at parties and in clubs. Since the Terrible Three were outside the establishment and did not accept the normative standards of “good taste,” their photography played an important part in “shifting public attention away from the social elite towards the casually famous” (Gundle 2008: 281). Their fashion narratives were a breath of fresh air as they brought integrated urban street culture, sex appeal, partying, and the new working-class models, such as Jean Shrimpton and Twiggy, who replaced the classical upper-class standards of beauty. In the atmosphere of cultural change, racial diversity also made its first strides. In 1966 Bailey photographed the first black model, the American Donyale Luna, for the cover of British *Vogue*. In 1968 *Glamour* became the first American fashion magazine to choose a black woman, the Harvard University student Katiti Kironde, for its cover while Naomi Sims modeled for the cover of *Life* magazine in 1969.

The importance of the 1960s is hard to overstate in the history of fashion photography. Foremost, it highlighted the “explicitly sexual nature of the relationship between the photographer and the model.” As filmic techniques of the New Wave cinema were incorporated into fashion photography, the photographer’s camera explicitly sexualized the model (Craik 1994: 107-108). Another important development was the growing tension between photographers, designers, and fashion editors. As photographers became more independent in their choice of models, narratives, and styling, designers complained that fashion became secondary to the advertising process. In sum, the 1960s set new standards for choosing the visual content in the future while the borderlines between the photographer, art director, and editor became fluid because photographers pushed for more creative freedom and control over their images.

1970-1989: Shock and Seduction

In the 1970s-1980s the trends set in the late 1960s continued to evolve but new cultural shifts also emerged. In the early 1970s street culture was already ubiquitous in the representation of fashion and the body in mainstream fashion magazines, and the “voice of the reader” led to the reinvention of fashion photography at an “unprecedented pace” (Michal Raz-Russo 2018: 225). Fashion photography showed an extraordinary variety of styles as did fashion itself. The influence of film, television, and video on fashion photography of the time is undeniable, and two provocateurs, Helmut Newton (1920-2004) and Guy Bourdin (1928-1991), exemplified a new aesthetic shift toward “brutal realism and eroticism.” Their art tested the ideological and cultural foundations of fashion as it embraced the debate on gender, sexuality, violence, and crime (Craik 1994: 108-109). Fashion itself had to respond to the sexual revolution of the 1960s, which had a profound effect on women’s tastes. Women wanted more comfortable and practical clothes adjusted to everyday life and many of them, especially in the younger generation began to create fashion on their own terms. *Vogue* and *Harper’s Bazaar* were slow to respond to women’s new desires, and an independent “marginal” market was born—especially in Britain—in the form of alternative lifestyle publications such as *Blitz*, the *Face*, and *i-D* that favored natural-beauty looks and more believable narrative scenarios of real life.

But Avedon and Newton went in a different direction by pointing “readers’ attention to the constructed artifice of fashion photography” and beauty types (Raz-Russo 2018: 229). Newton’s work was explicitly sexualized and bordered on pornographic as he manipulated the viewer’s gaze to focus on his models in suggestive positions. The exhibition features a few examples of his work in the 1970s. In one, “Woman Examining Man, Saint-Tropez” (1975), published in *Vogue*, in which the model—sitting on a couch and dressed in a simple Calvin Klein dress—casts an appraising gaze at a passing man. The man’s attractive torso is naked but the viewer can see only his head. The model’s legs are widely spread. The narrative is open to the viewer’s fantasy, and as feminist critics pointed out, feeds into their own pornographic imagination (Craik 1994: 110). Equally shocking are his photographs, “Woman into Man, Paris”

(1979), and “Self-Portrait with Wife and Models, Paris” (1981), that play with kinky sexualities, homoeroticism, and the scopophilic gaze. In an equally subversive manner of fashion advertising, Bourdin created fetishistic and violent images for the advertising campaign of the French shoe designer Charles Jourdan, beginning in 1967 and lasting into the 1980s. To increase the shock value of his images he used strong colors and lighting, techniques conventional for TV and cinema. Bourdin’s work in particular demonstrates that “cultural and social attitudes held more value in a fashion photograph than the product itself did” (Raz-Russo 2018: 231).

In the 1970s and 1980s female photographers continued to make their way in fashion photography. Thus, Deborah Turbeville (former fashion editor; 1932-2013) and Sarah Moon (former model; born 1941) established their strong presence in the business and represented the women’s view of fashion. Turbeville is credited with showing the vulnerability of the model’s private world, and her photographs “neither glamorized the clothes nor the models” while conveying “a sense of alienation, despair and suffering” (Craik 1994: 110). Raz-Russo’s critical commentary also touches on the evolution of racial and gender diversity that the exhibition tries to address. Diverse faces began to appear increasingly in the 1970s, and in 1974 the first black model, Beverly Johnson, became the star of a 1974 *Vogue* cover. Although racial prejudices have persisted in the fashion industry, its fascination with the exotic resulted in more ethnic faces on the runway. In a similar way, gender diversity made its first appearance in fashion advertising as men became the subject of fashion photography. Popularized by the work of the photographers Robert Mapplethorpe (1946-1989), Herb Ritts (1952-2002), and Bruce Weber (born 1946), a new masculinity contributed to the emerging cultural debates about sexuality, homosexuality, and HIV/AIDS. From that point on images of men in mainstream fashion and style magazines began to share the fate of their female counterparts. The sexual objectification of the male body in fashion photography has turned out to be similar to that of women.

Other cultural trends that revolutionized fashion and fashion photography came once again from the streets, especially from punk culture that emerged in London in 1976, but also from a new generation of fashion photographers, Bill Cunningham (1929-2016), Steve Johnston (born 1956), Jamel Shabazz (born 1960) or Scott Schuman (b. 1968, and a guest in the speaker

series accompanying the Getty exhibition) who made their names by photographing trendy people in the street. By the end of the 1980s fashion became an established vehicle of cultural expression and provided commentary on art, politics, the changing views on race, class, and gender. Fashion photography ultimately went beyond the boundaries of clothing and provoked people to think critically and accept their identity vis-à-vis the cultural norm.

1990s-2011: New Media, Gritty Realism (суровый реализм), and the Glamorous Escape

Arguably, the 1990s were the most rebellious years in fashion photography. Two trends became prominent: gritty realism and fantasy. The economic atmosphere of the last decade of the millennium opened up a bleak outlook and the fashion world was quick to respond to it. The generation of supermodels of the 1980s (Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington) posing in unsettlingly expensive glamorous clothes gave way to the new model type, a girl “who does not really fit in.” A depressed economy, urban drug culture and the Seattle grunge music contributed to fashion’s interest in looking at the darker side of life (Shaw 2018: 288). The new supermodel who epitomized this dark spirit of fashion photography, referred to as “heroin chic,” was Kate Moss. Corinne Day’s (1962-2010) blunt approach to photographing Moss for the 1993 issue of the British *Vogue* was perceived as revolutionary in fashion photography. Day depicted the model in a simple skimpy tank top and panties against the backdrop of a white wall decorated by a string of Christmas lights. This minimalist arrangement went against the grain of luxury and glamour and sent a message that anything can be fashion. Other photographers of that subversive movement represented in the exhibition are Terry Richardson (b. 1965) and Juergen Teller (b. 1964). Richardson’s photograph, “Untitled” (1997) for *Dune* magazine, is perhaps the most shocking—if not sleazy—in the exhibition. It portrays a naked model lying on a couch in high kinky black boots and wearing a matching glove, presumably masturbating. The setting in the photograph is typically non-descript and minimalist. Richardson’s candid and unsettling erotic realism exudes a sense of alienation and despair when compared with the aestheticized eroticism of Newton or Bourdin.

The 1990s witnessed the explosion of fashion and style publications, many of them offering a lively alternative cultural landscape (e.g., *Dazed and Confused*, *Dutch*, *AnOther Magazine*), which gave photographers an opportunity to earn their living in commercial fashion magazines while expressing themselves artistically in independent venues. This period also revitalized the interest of fashion editors in using celebrities rather than models for magazine covers. A merging of celebrity portraiture and fashion manifests itself vividly in the work of Annie Leibovitz (b. 1949).

With the globalization of the fashion industry, its advertisement became necessarily more standardized and monotonous, despite a tangible diversity in ethnic and body types of models. Fashion advertisers and magazine editors were looking for novel ways to appeal to modern sensibilities. New technical possibilities, especially the advent of digital technology, served this effort well, leading photographers to create fantastical or surreal worlds. Among the most innovative fashion photographers at the time was the Canadian Steven Meisel (b. 1954) who distinguished himself as a master of “postmodern appropriations and reworking of the masters” (Gundle 2008: 371). Meisel was essentially a creative imitator. He rehashed the styles of major photographers from the 1930s to the present, stripping his models of any individuality in the process. Other technical innovators were Ellen von Unwerth (b. 1954), Nick Knight (b. 1958) and Tim Walker (b. 1970). They created unrecognizably glamorous worlds with a novel approach to lighting, color, and setting, with little or no reference to reality, ranging from fantasy to the absurd or the surreal. In their search for new forms of expression, they combined defamiliarized landscapes with retro imagery, pop-cultural references of the present, a playfully fanciful future, and commodified sexuality.

From now on, the studio became a laboratory for experimentation for making fashion look strange and stranger. For one, David Sims (b. 1966) took his images to the extreme, and his representational milieu looked “almost confrontational” while models appeared “displaced, angry, and a bit mad” (Shaw 2018: 292). Craig McDean (b. 1964) combined minimalist imagery with the provocative attitudes of rock-and-roll culture, while Mario Sorrenti (b. 1971) experimented with lighting effects and constructed imaginary spaces “drained of light” and projecting the atmosphere of danger and the uncanny. By the turn of the millennium fashion

photographers became even bolder in their exploration of light effects, mixed processing of film, color play, and unnatural environments, as they pushed even more boundaries and taboos and moved further into topical social issues. For example, Melanie Pullen's (b. 1975) photograph, "Half Prada" from the series, "High Fashion Crime Scenes," portrays a suicide by hanging, depicting the body from the waist down of a fashionably dressed young woman. Beautiful Prada clothes on the lifeless body can be read as the photographer's ironic look at modern materialist society in which luxury and consumption fail to make people happy. In another stylized photograph, "Amber Valetta, for Prada," Glen Luchford (b. 1968) creates a mood of loneliness and alienation by using muted colors and the eerie background of a fire. The model wearing a Prada dress stares indifferently into space while reclining in a motionless row boat in the middle of a lake. Other trends in fashion photography are associated with Mario Testino (b. 1954) who recreates a deliberate, ostentatiously decadent and frivolous world of fashion, while Steven Klein (b. 1965) plays with the grotesque contrast between everyday life and high fashion. The Getty retrospective also includes four photos by the influential Scott Schuman who was one of the first bloggers on the fashion front. Realizing that there was a considerable demand to see street fashions, he launched the immensely successful fashion blog, *The Sartorialist*, in 2005 and began photographing stylish people in urban environments and writing about them.

In Conclusion: All Sound and Fury, Signifying Nothing?

Shaw's fine essay sums up one hundred years of fashion photography as a story of a great artistic achievement. He writes, "Once a niche industry with a cult following, [fashion photography] has now become a primary cultural channel ... offering us a 360-degree view of the world through highly individualized filters" (Shaw 2018: 296). One should take his words—or rather his overstatement—with a grain of salt. Does this exhibit really give us a comprehensive view of the world? Although photographers before 2011 tried to provoke new ways of thinking about fashion and its role in modern society, and the museum visitor observes the stunning progress in modes of photographic representation, the meaning of fashion has

remained the same. It is contingent upon glamour, and as the cultural historian Stephen Gundle observed, modern glamour is a fusion “of class and sleaze, of high style and lowly appeals,” and “it works as a vaguely transgressive explosion of visual effects and publicity-seeking fireworks” (Gundle 2008: 390). Indeed, we are all drawn to images of youth, beauty, and fanciful worlds, and this is one big reason why the exhibition is so successful with the public. Yet, when we leave the Getty we wonder what relevance “Icons of Style” has to the current world of political corruption, environmental disasters, the rise of populist movements, and other hot issues. Does the exhibition convince us that fashion photography is relevant and merits a major exhibition? Is the rebellion of photographers real? Or could we agree perhaps with the celebrated photographer Wolfgang Tillmans (b. 1968) who argued in 1998 that a “completely subversive” label doesn’t apply to fashion photography? He wrote,

“Fashion photographers can be incredibly naïve and one-dimensional. They think only of cause and effect, forgetting that the market constantly changes. When a story is published in *i-D*, it’s seen by the *The Face*, then *Vogue*, seen by advertisers and becomes the new dominant fashion . . . I don’t like the pretense that we’re all doing something radical. However grand the proclamations from photographers such as Juergen Teller or Terry Richardson that they don’t want to be “in fashion,” that their work is subversive, they take a look and propel it into fashionability. The substance of their work is essentially the same as David Hamilton’s young girls in knickers. The work doesn’t question gender roles, or why we buy into fashion, it gives you a series of feelgood factors.”⁷

And that’s perhaps all that there is to it. And little bit of envy and desire. But that, of course, takes us right back into the realm of the commercial...

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Notes

¹ See the dust jacket, Nancy Hall-Duncan. *The History of Fashion Photography*. New York: International Museum of Photography and Alpine Book Company, 1979.

² Abrams mentions Peter Lindbergh at Gagosian Gallery in Paris; Horst P. Horst at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London; Mario Testino at the Dallas Contemporary; Miles Aldridge at the Sims Reed Gallery, London; as well as the “Coming Into Fashion: A Century of Photography at Condé Nast” exhibition in the Museum Bellerive in Zurich.

³ In a fascinating presentation, “Picturing Beauty, Race, and Identity through Fashion: 1911–2011,” by Deborah Willis, part of the lecture series that accompanies the exhibition, she pointed to a social context where the home-made outfit lasted much longer than in mainstream white urban culture: in the segregated African-American world where black women could not enter fashion stores, but gleaned ideas from the displays – and then made their own versions of the coveted dresses at home.

⁴ See the *Harper’s Bazaar* site of famous fashion-related quotes: <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/fashion/designers/a1576/50-famous-fashion-quotes/> (Last accessed August 20, 2018).

⁵ Two film adaptations of Scott Fitzgerald’s novel won the Oscar for Best Achievement in Costume Design: Theoni Aldredge in 1975, for the film starring Robert Redford and Mia Farrow (dir. Jack Clayton); and Catherine Martin in 2014 for the Leonardo DiCaprio/Carey Mulligan led film (dir. Baz Luhrmann).

⁶ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935, “*Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit*”) proposes that the modern work of art loses its “aura” by mechanical reproduction as it enters a new reception context.

⁷ Wolfgang Tillmans’ 1997 unpublished interview as quoted in Williams 213.