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# VOGUE

IRVING PENN: CENTENNIAL OPENS AT THE GRAND PALAIS

By Ben Evans, October 7, 2017



A central piece of this magnificent exhibition is Irving Penn's own canvas backdrop, scored with planes of cracks in its matte grey paint. We then have the privilege of coming face-to-face with the subjects whose feet once rested upon it, from the tribes of Cuzco, Morocco and New Guinea to timeless celebrities like Capote, Dietrich and Colette and the small tradesmen of mid-century London and Paris. Among his many gifts, it is the giving of gravitas and glamour to such a wide cross-section of 20th-Century life that laid out plain here, and viscerally felt.

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A room of his famous discarded cigarette still-lives sits next to one of his vivid and tender flowers in full colour, whilst a portrait of a London sewer cleaner is as captivating as a newly-crowned Yves Saint Laurent at 21. All prove Penn to have been not so much a creator of fantasy, but more a man able to portray the characters of life with an honesty and understanding that can be appreciated on a deep emotional and intellectual level.

The exhibition is prefaced with Penn offering: "I myself have always stood in the awe of the camera. I recognise it for the instrument it is, part Stradivarius, part scalpel." An apt preparation for a body of work that sits somewhere special between social anthropology and high art.

Of course fashion makes up a huge part of the work, Penn was American Vogue's longest-standing contributor working at the magazine from age 26 through to his final 92nd year. His innate understanding of craftsmanship gifted the greatest fashion designers of the modern age the most impressive readings of their work, and in turn gave Vogue some of the greatest masterpieces in its archive. From the sumptuous folds of Cristóbal Balenciaga's mantle to Issey Miyake's playful architechnonics, the clothes are honoured further being worn by the greatest beauties of the age, most notably on Lisa Fonssagrives, the woman he would eventually make his wife.

As grand as its setting commands but as intimate as such an in-depth cross section of an artist's work can be, the exhibition will deserve its hoards and Penn most certainly deserves this new and panoramic eye on his oeuvre.