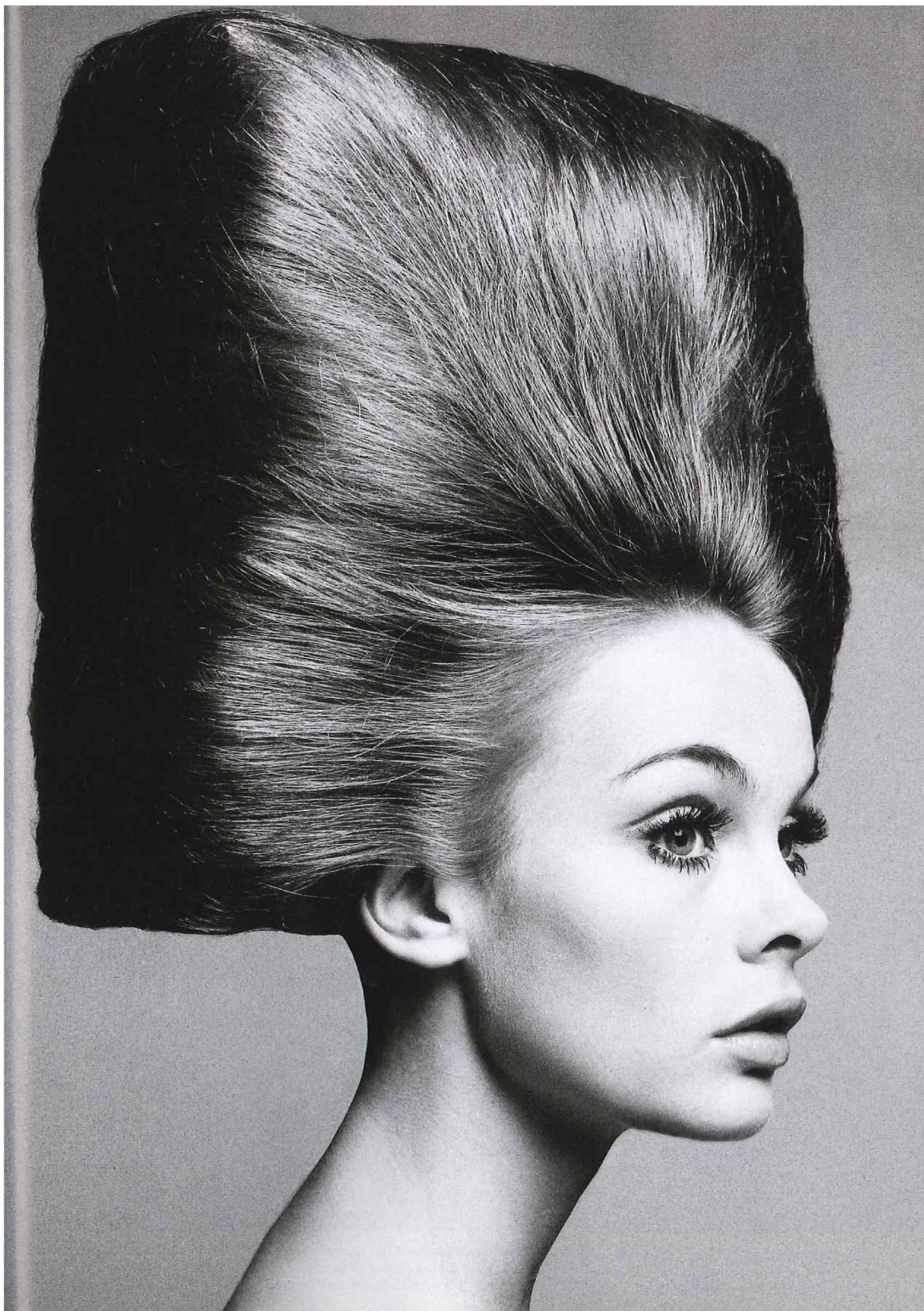


GAGOSIAN GALLERY

Harper's
BAZAAR

By Justine Picardie

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Celebrating 70 years of *Harper's Bazaar* and the most inspiring photographer of them all

BY JUSTINE PICARDIE

IF FASHION PHOTOGRAPHY IS AN ART, Richard Avedon was one of its greatest practitioners; although his work transcends fashion, it looks as freshly relevant today as it did when he first started working for *Harper's Bazaar*, 70 years ago.

Avedon was born in New York in 1923; his father was a Russian Jewish émigré who founded a retail clothing business in Manhattan, Avedon's Fifth Avenue. His mother's family also owned a dress-manufacturing business, so Richard (or Dick, as he was known by friends) grew up with fashion – copies of *Harper's Bazaar* and other glossy magazines were a constant presence in his childhood, he said. But so too was reportage photography; and at the age of 12 he joined the Camera Club of the Young Men's Hebrew Association. Towards the end of his life (he died in 2004, while on a photographic assignment in Texas), Avedon recalled a past framed by the camera, which also gave glimpses into the troubled yet potent forces that made his work so powerful. 'When I was a boy, my family took great care with our snapshots,' he observed in an essay that accompanied a collection of his portraits. 'We really planned them. We made compositions. We dressed up. We posed in front of expensive cars, homes that weren't ours. We borrowed dogs. Almost every family picture that was taken of us when I was young had a different borrowed dog in it... All the photographs in our family album were built on some kind of lie about who we were, and revealed a truth about who we wanted to be.'

That description could be used to define a certain kind of fashion photography, yet Avedon's own work always seemed to move beyond fiction or artifice, despite his clear-sighted understanding that portraits are mostly an illusion: 'All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.' This, too, he identified with his childhood. 'It was my father who taught me the physics of photography. When I was a boy he explained to me the power of light in the making of a photograph. He held a magnifying glass between the sun and a leaf and set the leaf on fire. The next day, as an experiment, I taped a negative of my sister onto my skin and spent the day at Atlantic Beach.

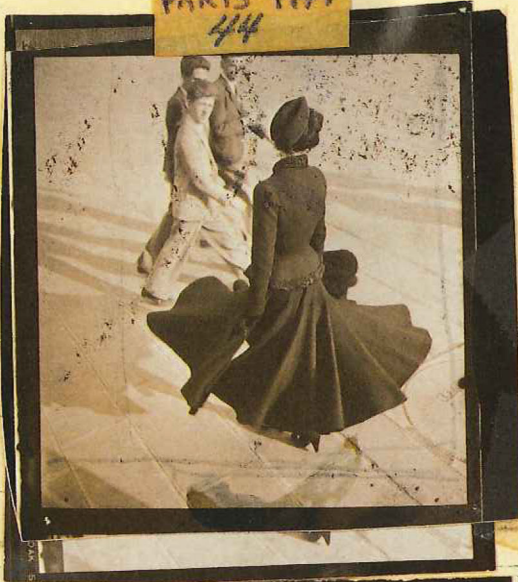
'That night, when I peeled the negative off, there was my sister, sunburned onto my shoulder. I knew from the beginning that being a photographer and playing with light means playing with fire. Neither the photographer nor the subject gets out of it unsinged.'

Avedon's sister Louise was his first and most influential model;



Above: Margot McKendry and China Machado with members of the French press, dresses by Larvin-Castillo and Heim, Paris, August 24, 1961 [*Harper's Bazaar*, September 1961]. Above left: Diana Vreeland, Dorisima, and Richard Avedon, hair by Enrico Caruso, New York, July 22, 1955. Previous page: Jean Shrimpton, hair by Alexandre, Paris, July 26, 1965 [*Harper's Bazaar*, September 1965]

PARIS 1947
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Paris

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*This page (contact prints)
and opposite: René, The New
Look of Dior, Place de la
Concorde, Paris, August 1947*



a great beauty who started to suffer from mental illness as a teenager, she died at the age of 42 in an institution. 'Her beauty was the event of our family and the destruction of her life,' he said in an interview published in 1984. 'She was treated as if there was no one inside her perfect skin, as if she was simply her long throat, her deep brown eyes. I think she believed she existed only as skin, and hair, and a beautiful body.' Perhaps it was not entirely coincidental that Avedon's most enduring models – including Dorian Leigh, Marella Agnelli and Audrey Hepburn – were, in his words, 'memories of my sister'. Hence, too, his understanding of what may lie beneath the timelessly beautiful surfaces of portraiture: 'A possibility of failure and danger and poetry in life...' Or, as he wrote in a letter to his father in 1970, having sensed his parent had felt 'wounded' after seeing Avedon's photographs of him in old age: 'You are angry and hungry and alive. What I value in you is that intensity. I want to make portraits as intense as people... I love your ambition and your capacity for disappointment, and that's still as alive in you as it has ever been.'

It took another troubled Russian émigré to recognise Avedon's potential: *Bazaar's* art director, Alexey Brodovitch, who had already introduced a touch of genius to the magazine with his elegant yet radical designs. Famed for his artistry and the dazzling speed with which he composed *Bazaar's* innovative layouts, Brodovitch was also a remarkable teacher of photography and graphic design, holding classes that were attended by the likes of Diane Arbus and Eve Arnold. Brodovitch invited Avedon to join these classes in 1944, soon after the young man had left the Merchant Marines. (Avedon had been called up for military service in 1942, and took thousands of full-face pictures of servicemen for their ID cards – a job that taught him, among other things, the power of a white background.)

By October 1944, Avedon's work was appearing in *Bazaar*, although only after Brodovitch encouraged him to move out of the studio, and to start shooting in the open air or on location, in line with the art director's emphasis on movement, reportage and imaginative narrative. From that point on, Avedon's photography came to define *Bazaar*; as much as the golden triumvirate who led the magazine: Carmel Snow, its brilliant editor-in-chief who had hired Brodovitch as art director soon after her appointment in 1934; and Diana Vreeland, appointed by Snow two years later. 'Boy, was I lucky,' said Avedon in retrospect. 'I didn't realise when [Brodovitch] chose me to work on the magazine that I would have Carmel Snow as my editor and Diana Vreeland as my fashion editor... my new chosen mother, father and crazy aunt...'

The photographer's debut at *Bazaar* also coincided with the early days of his first marriage; to Doe Avedon, a bookish young woman who he transformed into a fashion model. The marriage lasted just five years, but their story became the outline for *Funny Face*, starring Fred Astaire as photographer Dick Avery, opposite Audrey Hepburn as a bookseller-turned-model, with Avedon himself credited as 'visual consultant'. Needless to say, the *Bazaar*-like magazine in the film came complete with an art director called Dovitch and a Vreelandesque editor who exhorted her devotees to 'Think pink!'

While Avedon never veered away from a plain white background for his studio portraits, eschewing sets as irrelevant distractions, his fashion photography was shot everywhere from the streets of post-war Paris to the Sixties space-age launch pads at Cape Canaveral. Looking back at the extraordinary body of his work – as I do often, when thinking about the ways in which *Bazaar* might move forward – I am always inspired by his remarkable talent to capture a moment, and his ability to reveal something of what it means to be human; or, in Avedon's characteristically perceptive phrase, 'the wonder and terror that is a photograph...' □



Audrey Hepburn and Art Buchwald, with Simone D'Aillencourt, Frederick Eberstadt, Barbara Mullen, and Dr Reginald Kernan, evening dresses by Balmain, Dior, and Patou, Maxim's, Paris, August 1959 [*Harper's Bazaar*, September 1959]



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Paris

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*This page (contact prints) and opposite:
Doe Avedon, coat
by Christian Dior,
Gare du Nord,
Paris, August 1947*



*Above: Suzy Parker, Paris,
August 17, 1956 [Harper's
Bazaar, October 1956].
Opposite: Donna Mitchell,
veil by Venet, February 4, 1965
[Harper's Bazaar, April
1965]. All photographs © The
Richard Avedon Foundation*

