

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Fashion Photographer Horst's Full-Color Retrospective

At London's Victoria and Albert Museum, a new retrospective on fashion photographer Horst P. Horst reveals the full spectrum of his artistry

By J.S. MARCUS
Aug. 29, 2014



The German-American fashion photographer Horst (1906-99) is often remembered for his 1930s black-and-white photos, which he himself updated in the 1980s with refined black-and-white reprints. Now Horst's legacy is scheduled for a full-blown makeover when a new retrospective at London's Victoria and Albert Museum unveils him as a master of color.

"Horst: Photographer of Style" opens Sept. 6 and runs through Jan. 4, 2015. The exhibition features some 280 works, including 25 oversize color reprints first taken between 1939 and 1953 and specially produced for the show.

In addition to emphasizing his color fashion work, which in its time had a dominant presence in *Vogue* magazine, the show may also surprise long-standing Horst fans with his abstract nature photographs from the 1940s.

For Susanna Brown, the show's curator, the task is to introduce Horst to a broader public—and, along the way, re-evaluate his place in the history of the art form.

"I think Horst isn't as well known as Irving Penn, Richard Avedon and Cecil Beaton," says Ms. Brown, invoking three giants of the fashion-photography field. "Although his images are well known," she says, citing famous shots such as his 1939 black-and-white depiction of a woman in an untied corset, "he himself isn't known at all."

Horst—who is also sometimes known as "Horst P. Horst"—was born Horst Paul Albert Bohrmann in a city near Leipzig, Germany. He made his way to Paris in the early 1930s and fell under the tutelage of George Hoyningen-Huene, a pioneering fashion photographer. With the outbreak of World War II, Horst relocated to the U.S., where he became an American citizen.

For the better part of the 20th century, Horst was the urbane workhorse of the Condé Nast empire, contributing everything from surreal shots of 1930s French society hostesses to sly 1990s portraits of minor British royalty.

The London show is rich in Horst's crucial editorial work from the 1930s, when he became the chronicler of the golden age of Parisian haute couture. In Paris and later in New York, he helped invent the profession of the modern fashion model. A behind-the-scenes 1949 shot on display in London shows Horst and Swedish-born Lisa Fonssagrives, arguably the first supermodel, extravagantly preparing for a fashion shoot.

The 1940s color photography often appeared on the cover of *Vogue*, "but no prints were made," says Shawn Waldron, Condé Nast's chief archivist and consultant on the London show, who says the new 40-inch-tall color prints were made by scanning the original 8- by 10-inch Kodachromes.

Collectors haven't yet developed much interest in Horst's color work, says Etheleen Staley, co-founder of New York's Staley-Wise Gallery, which specializes in fashion photography. The gallery included some of Horst's color prints in a recent show, she says, "but we didn't sell too much." Instead, she says, a surprising number of collectors still show interest in the burlesque-like, black-and-white piece, "Round the Clock," Horst's 1987 iconic hosiery ad rendered in lavish platinum-palladium prints.

In the 1980s, Horst began to reissue some of his earlier black-and-white images using platinum-treated paper instead of the more standard silver. This type of handcrafted image is "the haute couture of photography," says London-based Philippe Garner, international head of Christie's photography department, as opposed to the "prêt-à-porter" of silver. Chemicals are absorbed right into the paper, he says of the process, "creating something very voluptuous and sensual."

All three top prices for Horst works sold at auction are of his 1939 corset image, often called "Mainbocher Corset," after the couture house that made it. The top price of \$288,000, for a signed platinum-palladium version, was reached at an April 2007 sale at Christie's New York. The coming show at the Victoria and Albert will present 17 of Horst's late platinum prints.

The same corset image can go for much less. At an auction held in May 2014 at Sotheby's London, for instance, a signed silver-print version sold for just €9375 (\$15,500).

"The issue with Horst is that there is a lot of work on the market, and [the pieces are] not strictly editioned," says Annette Kicken, owner of Kicken Berlin, a German gallery specializing in avant-garde and fashion photography. In a gallery setting, she says, "an early key Horst image in a nice vintage print" can fetch between \$50,000 and \$100,000.

Horst has a strong following in the fashion and entertainment world—collectors include Elton John, who has lent several of the artist's male nudes to the London show—but Horst's influence in the field of fashion photography comes and goes, says Valerie Steele, director of the Museum at New York's Fashion Institute of Technology.

Horst's work stands for a "bred-in-the-bone kind of elegance," says Ms. Steele, who argues that elegance isn't a large part of fashion photography today. "No one is elegant in real life anymore," she says. "People want to be 'cool,' not elegant."