



PICTURE PERFECT

Fashion photography, classic and contemporary, is more covetable than ever for savvy collectors. By SHIRINE SAAD

October 7, 2009, was a sad day: Irving Penn died, marking the end of the golden era of modern fashion photography. Along with Richard Avedon and Helmut Newton, Penn energized fashion image-making after the Second World War, liberating models from dusty aristocratic settings and infusing them with the democratic vigour of the emerging pop culture. While Penn's admirers mourned, dealers were anticipating the already high prices for his work to soar despite the bleak

economic climate. In 2008, Penn's iconic 1950 black-and-white *Vogue* cover image of Jenn Patchett sold for US\$481,000, while the week of Penn's death saw several of his lesser pictures sell for a total of more than US\$492,000 at Christie's. For an expanding group of fashion photography collectors, scoring an image from the master of poetic composition is invaluable.

But these types of works weren't always a serious collector's *objet de désir*. Until the early '80s, fashion photos were seen as commercial pictures that belonged only in magazines, and they were seldom sold as prints. "Fashion pho-

tography was the stepchild of collecting when we opened in 1981," says Taki Wise, co-owner of Staley-Wise Gallery in New York, which has one of the world's largest collections of fashion images. "But more recently it has taken centre stage because it isn't looked down upon the way it used to be. We always thought, There's so much good commercial photography, so why not show it? These images are edited by art directors, photographers, stylists and makeup artists at the top of their craft. The combination of people coming together creates such interesting images." Great fashion photographs show much more than just the clothes; they create »



LEFT: UNTITLED BY MILES ALDRIDGE. ABOVE: DOVIMA, EVENING DRESS BY FATH, PARIS STUDIO, AUGUST 1950 BY RICHARD AVEDON

a phantasmagorical universe, often questioning the roles of the body, sexuality, consumerism and beauty in society. Some images, like Newton's *Sie Kommen (Naked and Dressed)* of 1981 and Steven Klein's 2003 Madonna Unbound series in *W*, have become icons of a cultural moment.

As photography, once considered inferior to painting and sculpture, became a critically acclaimed art form in the '80s, collectors' interest rose. Auction houses and galleries began to sell famous early fashion shots by Horst P. Horst and Cecil Beaton, and mid-century images by Avedon, Newton and Penn. Later in the decade, young upstarts like Juergen Teller, Corinne Day and Wolfgang Till-

mans revolutionized fashion photography by questioning its elitism, shooting their own grungy lifestyles and anti-traditional ideals of beauty. The '90s saw increasing crossovers between art and fashion—artists like Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman borrowed from the language of fashion image-making, while photographers like Teller, Inez van Lamsweerde and Vinoodh Matadin started selling prints to collectors. Fashion photography began to be viewed as a deeply creative form and a powerful mirror of culture. Museums and galleries welcomed more of it onto their once hostile walls, and hedge funders competed to get their hands on beautifully produced nudes of Kate Moss, Gisele Bündchen and Naomi Campbell.

The turn of this century marked a new era of critical respectability, with a flurry of contemporary and classical fashion

photography exhibitions held at the Victoria & Albert Museum, MoMA, the Jeu de Paume and galleries around the world. In 2009, New York's prestigious International Center of Photography showcased images by Avedon and contemporary photographers including Klein, Mert Alas and Marcus Piggott, and Sølve Sundsbø in *Year of Fashion*. This spring and summer, the National Portrait Gallery in London is commemorating Irving Penn; images of Grace Kelly in her dashing attire are on view at the V&A; and The Costume Institute at The Metropolitan Museum of Art is showing *American Woman*, an exhibition about the evolution of style from 1890 to 1940.

Apart from its inherent aesthetic value, fashion photography is now also a good investment. Though it's still a new category in the market, prices have »



LEFT: HARLEQUIN DRESS (LISA FONSSAGRIVES-PENN) NEW YORK, 1950, BY IRVING PENN. ABOVE: CAMERALESS CAMERA, BOGOTÁ, 2008, BY JOEL-PETER WITKIN

PHOTOGRAPHY: UNTITLED BY MILES ALDRIDGE/TRUNK ARCHIVE; DOVIMA, EVENING DRESS BY FATH, PARIS STUDIO, AUGUST 1950 COURTESY OF THE RICHARD AVEDON FOUNDATION; HARLEQUIN DRESS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT MUSEUM/THE IRVING PENN FOUNDATION/CONDÉ NAST PUBLICATIONS INC.; CAMERALESS CAMERA, BOGOTÁ, 2008, COURTESY OF BAUDOIN LEHON

BELOW: ZAZIE, HAMBURG (STERN) BY PETER KNAPP.
RIGHT: UNTITLED BY RICHARD BERNARDIN



risen steadily in the past few years. Prints are easy to store and transport, and what's more decorative than a fashion image? While a Newton print can fetch up to US\$660,000, contemporary works by Ellen von Unwerth or Paolo Roversi sell at around US\$3,000, a relatively modest sum for art collectors. "If you look at auction results from the past 10 years, fashion work at auction has been doing much better than it ever has," says *The New Yorker* art critic and adjunct curator Vince Aletti, "and it has been getting the kind of attention from serious collectors that it wouldn't have gotten a decade before because there's enough perspective on it now."

Last April, while the art market took a serious beating from the crash, a fashion photography sale at Christie's fetched over US\$4 million, over 10 per cent above the high-end estimate.

"Fashion photographs have moved from the back of the sales catalogue to the front," says Matthieu Humery, specialist and head of sale for photographs at Christie's New York. "Fashion images really make people dream. They are much more impulsive buys than conceptual art, for example."

You don't have to be an expert to start buying fashion photographs. When Toronto dermatologist Sandy Skotnicki decided to start a collection in 2002, she went to gallerist Jane Corkin for advice. Corkin, whose world-class collection includes hundreds of photographs from the likes of Penn, Avedon, Klein and Canadian Nigel Scott, helped Skotnicki acquire glamorous images by

Erwin Blumenfeld and Lillian Bassman. The images have increased in value in just a few years. Montreal stylist Annie Horth has collaborated with Creative Flats' Nathalie Bouchard to decorate her furnished rental condos with prints from a variety of photographers, including Horth's Montreal fashion photographer friends Richard Bernardin and Jean-Claude Lussier. These cost between \$500 and \$1,000, and now Horth is considering purchasing Avedon and Penn prints.

While many critics maintain that a Prada ad doesn't belong in a museum, Aletti insists that good fashion images can be very powerful. "The best fashion photography is art," he says. "I've often said that I can go to an afternoon of photo shows in Chelsea, and go back home and find more interesting pictures in a magazine." »



LEFT: PANIC BY ELLEN VON UNWERTH. BELOW: BARBARA AVEC UNE MAIN BY NIGEL SCOTT



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: *UNTITLED* BY MIGUEL JACOB; *UNTITLED* BY RICHARD BERNARDIN; *LUCILE BROKAW*; *PIPING ROCK BEACH*, *LONG ISLAND* BY MARTIN MUNKACSI



HOW TO BUY

There are different approaches to collecting. Some people buy only from galleries they trust. Others like the thrill of auctions, but risk buying overvalued art in the heat of the moment. And for some, the value doesn't matter, just the beautiful image on their wall. "I never sell pictures for an investment," says Taki Wise. "We encourage people to buy a picture that they're happy to live with and that hopefully will become a good investment." If \$3,000, the average starting price for contemporary photography, is too high a sum, check out the work of up-and-coming photographers in indie magazines, local galleries and on websites. A few interesting Canadian names to consider are Ishi in Toronto, Richard Bernardin in Montreal and Raphael Mazzucco, now based in New York.

Novice collectors may find the process intimidating. A first step is to do some research in fashion magazines to narrow down a few areas of interest. Do you feel compelled by Juergen Teller's grunge aesthetic? Are you fascinated by Steven Meisel's elegant compositions or Steven Klein's clinical images? These are three of the best living fashion photographers, but there are many others. After deciding on a budget, talk to experts in galleries and auction houses to build a better understanding of the options. The price of a photograph is determined by many factors: the shooter, the number of editions, the quality of the print and the size. Prices can also be affected by market speculations and the economic climate. Some questions to ask: Has the artist, or the photo, been critically celebrated? Has it been exhibited, and if so, where? Is the subject a celebrity



or iconic model? Is the image showing a particularly important dress or jewel?

While some collectors choose to focus on an area of expertise—images from the '60s, say, or nudes—others build eclectic personal collections. And many mix fashion photography with non-commercial photographs, sculptures and paintings.

WHERE TO BUY

Christie's and Sotheby's are good places to go for auctions, but small galleries around the world have great collections and valuable experience.

Montreal

Galerie de Bellefeuille 1367 Greene Ave., 514-933-4406, debellefeuille.com **LOOK FOR:** David Drebin

Toronto

Corkin Gallery 55 Mill St., Bldg. 61, 416-979-1980, corkingallery.com **LOOK FOR:** Richard Avedon, Irving Penn
One800 800 Dundas St. W., 416-778-9777, one800gallery.blogspot.com **LOOK FOR:** George Whiteside, Miguel Jacob, Chris Nicholls, Michael Williams

New York

Staley-Wise 560 Broadway, 3rd floor, 212-966-6223, staleywise.com **LOOK FOR:** Horst P. Horst, Lillian Bassman, Ellen von Unwerth, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, Patrick Demarchelier, David LaChapelle
Pace/MacGill 32 E. 57th St., 9th floor, 212-759-7999, pacemacgill.com **LOOK FOR:** Irving Penn
Lehmann Maupin 540 W. 26th St., 212-255-2923, lehmannmaupin.com **LOOK FOR:** Juergen Teller

London

Michael Hoppen Gallery 3 Jubilee Pl., 0207-352-3649, michaelhoppengallery.com **LOOK FOR:** Annie Leibovitz, Martin Munkacsi, Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, Sarah Moon, Ellen von Unwerth

Paris

Baudoin Lebon 38 Sainte Croix de la Bretonnerie St., 014-272-0910, baudoinlebon.com **LOOK FOR:** Peter Knapp, Joel-Peter Witkin, images from the Comtesse de Castiglione archive □

PHOTOGRAPHY: *UNTITLED* BY MIGUEL JACOB AND *UNTITLED* BY RICHARD BERNARDIN COURTESY OF THE ARTISTS; *LUCILE BROKAW*, *PIPING ROCK BEACH*, *LONG ISLAND* COURTESY OF THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART/MARTIN MUNKACSI ESTATE/COURTESY OF HOWARD GREENBERG GALLERY, NEW YORK