

STUDIO TO STREET

On the centenary of his birth, we celebrate the radically innovative eye of fashion photographer Norman Parkinson.

By Shirine Saad Photography by Norman Parkinson



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NATIONAL PARKS

This year England honours the centenary of Parkinson's birth. For exhibition and event information, visit the Norman Parkinson Archive, www.normanparkinson.com.

IN *JUMP*, A *HARPER'S BAZAAR* image by British photographer **Norman Parkinson**, swimsuit-clad model Pamela Minchin appears suspended mid-air. Her lean, athletic body extends in an elegant motion as her hands, raised above her head, open towards the sky. Her face, shaded by a silk head wrap and black sunglasses, turns towards the sand and the sea beyond. Her body, in a ballistic leap, clashes with the still background, where wooden beams cast long shadows across the white sand, creating a graphic dreamscape.

It's a highly stylized image, but it evokes a sense of

irrepressible freedom, a spontaneous urge for life—as if the photographer had captured a loved one on film while holidaying at the beach. When Parkinson snapped it in 1939, it exploded the prevailing norm of fashion photography: rigid, meticulously composed images. While his early contemporaries—including Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst and George Hoyningen-Huene—photographed models and socialites within the constraints of the artificially lit studio, Parkinson sought to set them free. “All the girls had their knees bolted together,” he told *The Telegraph*. “I thought, ‘I don’t know any girls who live like that.’”

He took the models to the beach, to the farm or to the street, giving them the vitality real women were seeking in a period of rapid social and economic change.

“What I like about him is his casual, easy approach,” says photography critic Vince Aletti. “These were clearly staged pictures, but it didn’t feel like a staged set.” This natural spirit is what Norman Parkinson, also known as “Parks,” is celebrated for this year, the centenary of his birth. A bevy of major exhibitions and events consider the legacy of the photographer, who created beautifully composed images with the dynamic energy of a snapshot, forever changing the code of fashion photography.

Of—and Ahead of—His Time

If Martin Munkacsí and Jean Moral before him had taken models out of the studio, Parkinson went a significant step further, becoming known for thoroughly adapting his style to the zeitgeist. From the black-and-white images of the 1930s to the vibrant shots of Swinging London to the luxurious pictures of the excessive '80s, he caught each pulse of his turbulent century and infused every image with movement, wit and, often, a subtle erotic tension. He photographed the hardships of war in a realist style, captured the elegance of the New Look in glamorous images, and portrayed the bohemian-chic spirit of the '70s with colour and exoticism. He blurred social boundaries, shooting celebrities and royalty candidly, and drew inspiration from the fashions of his era to create imaginative and theatrical scenarios.

Parkinson himself, who was 6 feet 5 inches tall, sported a neatly groomed moustache, and wore a “good luck” Kashmiri hat and the eccentric outfits favoured by dandies, was a character who liked to play—in particular with women, whom he loved. “He was a perfect gentleman, but with an edge,” says Elizabeth Smith, co-director of the Norman Parkinson Archive. His boisterous (and sometimes abrasive) persona was as famous as his work.

Parkinson’s apparent coolness was, in part, a pose. He was technically astute, and at a young age honed his photographic skills as an apprentice to court photographers on Bond Street before beginning his work as an editorial and portrait photographer for *Harper’s Bazaar* and *The Bystander*. During World War II, he retired to his farm and took pastoral fashion photographs that reflected Britain’s yearning for a truly English rustic way of life. In 1941, Parkinson began a lifelong collaboration with British *Vogue*. His first assignment for American *Vogue* was a portfolio in 1944 of staffers from British *Vogue* dressing under the pressures of war, with the constraints of rationing and coupons.

After the war, Parkinson adapted to the new era. He photographed the radical New Look fashions, moving models from the countryside to the sidewalks of London. In 1947 he married his third wife, Wenda, who became one of his

most inspiring muses, and two years later he was hired by legendary art director Alexander Liberman at American *Vogue*. He shot images of women on the streets of New York City, such as the remarkable *Young Velvets*, *Young Prices*, where four models sport the latest hats on the roof of the Condé Nast building, facing the sky and cityscape, intoxicated with freedom, prosperity and modernity.

A Lens of Innovation

In the postwar period, Parkinson was one of the first fashion photographers to experiment with colour photography, and his images became ever more vivid and glamorous. He photographed the era’s colourful outfits on models such as Celia Hammond and Carmen Dell’Orefice, untraditional beauties he is credited with discovering.

In 1965, American *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland, whose extravagant tastes were legendary, sent Parkinson to Tahiti with instructions to shoot something “more Gauguin than Gauguin.” The result was a flamboyantly colourful 33-page fashion story that involved gold leaves and horses. He began to shoot regularly in faraway

Previous page: *Jump*, Pamela Minchin, Isle of Wight, in a Fortnum & Mason bathing suit, *Harper’s Bazaar*, 1939.



locales, taking Grace Coddington, Jerry Hall and Iman (whom he also discovered) to Jamaica, Barbados, Tobago, India, the Seychelles, Mexico, Malaysia and the Soviet Union. Through this wave of exotic location shoots, Parkinson helped reveal intriguing new worlds to Europeans and Americans at the dawn of leisure culture and global openness. “It must have been mind-blowing to someone living in the middle of England to think ‘Wow, there’s this world beyond,’” says Smith, “and to put fashion in front of these temples—that was just so bizarre.”

Parkinson also brought fresh vision to less exotic assignments. He took portraits of socialites and artists and was briefly appointed

Above: Anne Gunning in a pink mohair coat outside the City Palace, Jaipur, India, *Vogue*, 1956. **Left:** Nena von Schlebrügge, *Vogue*, 1958.



Above: *Traffic*, New York, American *Vogue*, 1957.

the official court photographer. His portrait of young Princess Anne for her 21st birthday sent a shock wave through the media. One newspaper commented that Anne, “who would find no rivals as the world’s grumpiest princess, looks soft and lovely, amiable and charming through Parks’s lens.” He continued to photograph celebrities and models for magazines such as *Vogue* and *Town and Country* until his death in 1990, on assignment in Singapore.

During his lifetime, he had been loved, hated, criticized, celebrated. But those who knew him best described him as a connoisseur of art and music who found inspiration in nature and culture to create images that channelled his

insatiable lust for life. His spirit has allowed numerous photographers, from David Bailey to Mario Testino and Tim Walker, to express a genuine *joie de vivre* through their images, with a touch of unique eccentricity. He was a man of the world, but as Robin Muir, author of *Norman Parkinson: Portraits in Fashion*, sums it up, he is rightfully remembered and celebrated for a style that was “tarnished, end-of-the-pier, comical, quasi-titillating and thus very English.”

Brooklyn-based **Shirine Saad**, author of *Boho Beirut: A Guide to the Middle East’s Most Sophisticated City*, writes on culture and lifestyle for *The New York Times Style Magazine*, *MTV* and *NOWNESS*.

“

I like to make people look as good as they’d like to look, and with luck, a shade better.

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Norman Parkinson



A FRESH FACE

Among Parkinson’s discoveries was 14-year-old **Nena von Schlebrügge** (now known as mother of actress *Uma Thurman*), who later moved from her home in Stockholm to model for him in London.