Irving Penn: Platinum Prints

June 19 - 2, 2005

Irving Penn: Platinum Prints, on view June 19 through October 2, 2005, is the first major retrospective examination of renowned American photographer Irving Penn's platinum prints. The National Gallery of Art is the sole venue for the exhibition.

A meticulous craftsman, Penn (born 1917) has experimented extensively with platinum/palladium printing since the early 1960s, transforming his celebrated photographs into independent works of art with remarkably subtle, rich tonal ranges and luxurious textures. In 2002 and 2003 Penn gave the National Gallery of Art 17 unique collages known as the Platinum Test Materials and 85 platinum/palladium prints as well as archival material. Spanning most of Penn's innovative career from the 1940s to the late 1980s, this important collection represents all of Penn's genres: from fashion photographs and still lifes to portraits of some of the 20th century's most celebrated figures-Pablo Picasso, David Smith, and Colette, for example-and studies of anonymous individuals from around the world. Organized by the National Gallery of Art, the exhibition presents the collages and prints together for the first time. (right: Irving Penn, Picasso at La Californie, Cannes, France, 1957, platinum/palladium print, 1974. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Gift of Irving Penn. Copyright 1960 by Irving Penn, Courtesy of Vogue)

"This collection eloquently and forcefully demonstrates Penn's important contributions to American photography, and reveals his ongoing pursuit of perfection in his art," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "We are grateful to the artist for the scope and generosity of his gift, as well as to the funders who have made this important exhibition possible."

The Exhibition

The exhibition presents works from all of Penn's genres organized chronologically, including portraits of famous celebrities and unknowns, fashion and ethnographic studies, and still lifes, along with the Platinum Test Materials collages.

Portraits: Widely celebrated for his portraits, Penn adeptly utilizes formal design elements to reveal the character and personality of his subjects. The exhibition includes many of Penn's iconic portraits, including Colette, Paris (1951; platinum/palladium print, 1976), and Steinberg in Nose Mask, New York (1966; platinum/palladium print, 1976). In the 1940s, Penn positioned his sitters in a small corner space made of two studio flats, a device of his own creation; one example on view is Marcel Duchamp, New York (1948; platinum/palladium print, 1979). Penn developed a more direct approach by the late 1950s, photographing subjects at close range, such as Picasso at La Californie, Cannes, France (1957; platinum/palladium print, 1974).

Fashion Studies: Examples of Penn's fashion studies, a steady part of his editorial assignments from Vogue for more than 50 years, are also on view as part of the collection. Penn came to fame immediately after World War II by presenting his models in simple settings, free from the theatricality that had characterized earlier fashion
photographs. Many of the works are of his wife, his favorite model, seen in *Cocoa-Colored Balenciaga Dress* (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn), Paris (1950; platinum/palladium print, 1979) and *Woman with Roses* (Lisa Fonssagrives-Penn in Lafaurie Dress), Paris (1950; platinum/palladium print, 1977).

Ethnographic Subjects: In 1948, after a fashion project in Lima, Peru, Penn flew to the town of Cuzco in the Andes. The Quechuan Indians he found there so captivated him that on impulse he rented the local photographer's studio. The exhibition includes *Cuzco Children* (1948; platinum/palladium print, 1978) among the works on view from that famous encounter. Fifteen years later, Penn would again take up ethnographic subjects, photographing such works as *Three Asaro Mud Men, New Guinea* (1970; platinum/palladium print, 1976) and *Two Guedras, Morocco* (1971; platinum/ palladium print, 1977), which are presented here with extraordinary detail, texture, and tone.

Still Lifes: Over the years Penn has created many striking still lifes in both his commercial and personal work. In the first photographs he conceived as platinum prints, he produced a series of still-lifes using urban detritus, such as cigarette butts and crushed paper; among them is *Archipelago, New York* (1975; platinum/palladium print, 1975). Pushing his technique still further, he made another series of still lifes in the late 1970s and early 1980s that tackled the challenges of revealing both the texture and changing tones of such disparate objects as steel blocks, human skulls, and leather shoes. Several striking examples are in the exhibition, including *Composition with Skull and Pear, New York* (1979; platinum/palladium print, 1981).

Platinum Test Materials Collages: The exhibition concludes with 17 *Platinum Test Materials* collages, which draw upon all of Penn's genres, and make provocative associations between the works. When Penn made his platinum prints, he often used test strips, positioned to capture a photograph's most relevant details and tonal range, instead of exposing full sheets of paper. In the late 1980s when he re-examined some of these strips, he was struck by their aesthetic qualities and attached several of them to large sheets of paper. By mixing together images from throughout his career, these collages reveal the diversity of his work and the unexpected juxtapositions between fashion and art, Western and non-Western ideals of beauty and adornment, and Penn's personal and commercial work.

Sarah Greenough, curator and head of the department of photographs, National Gallery of Art, is the exhibition curator. The exhibition catalogue *Irving Penn: Platinum Prints* is written by Greenough and published by the National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with Yale University Press, New Haven and London.

**Artist's Biography**

Irving Penn was born in 1917 in Plainfield, New Jersey. In 1934 he enrolled at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art, where he studied design with Alexey Brodovitch.

In 1938 he began a career in New York as a graphic artist. Then, after a year painting in Mexico, he returned to New York City and began work at *Vogue* magazine, where Alexander Liberman was art director.

Liberman encouraged Penn to take his first color photograph, a still life that became the October 1, 1943, cover of *Vogue*, beginning a fruitful collaboration with the magazine that continues to this day. In addition to his editorial and fashion work for *Vogue*, Penn has photographed for other magazines and for a number of commercial clients in America and around the world.

He has published nine books of photographs: *Moments Preserved* (1960); *Worlds in a Small Room* (1974); *Inventive Paris Clothes* (1977); *Flowers* (1980); *Passage* (1991); *Irving Penn Regards The Work of Issey Miyake* (1999); *Still Life* (2001); *Earthly Bodies* (2002); *A Notebook at Random* (2004); and two books of drawings.

Penn's photographs are in the collections of major museums in America and throughout the world, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York, which honored him with a retrospective exhibition in 1984. That exhibition was circulated to museums in twelve countries. In 1997, Penn made a major donation of prints and archival material to the Art Institute of Chicago. He made his gift of the *Platinum Test Materials* collages and 85 corresponding prints as well as archival material to the National Gallery of Art in 2002 and 2003.

Irving Penn lives and works in New York City.
Irving Penn and the platinum printing process

A meticulous craftsman, Irving Penn has experimented extensively with platinum/palladium printing since the early 1960s, transforming his celebrated photographs into independent works of art with remarkably subtle, rich tonal ranges and luxurious textures.

Prized for its rich, subtle tonal range and its wealth of fine detail, platinum was a popular method of making photographic prints at the turn of the 20th century. Photographers such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, and Frederick Evans employed it extensively. With platinum, chemicals could be applied with a brush, allowing greater freedom of expression. Also, the light sensitive salts were absorbed into the paper fibers, giving the print a sensuous texture dramatically different from the glossy surface of gelatin silver prints. As the cost of platinum escalated during World War I, manufacturers stopped making platinum paper. A few continued to make platinum paper by hand, but the process had long since been forgotten by the time Penn embraced it in the early 1960s.

In the early 1960s, disillusioned with the way his photographs appeared in publications, Penn embarked on a multiyear research project to learn more about the long-forgotten technique of platinum printing. He conducted his initial research in the New York Public Library, scouring old journals for recipes and techniques on the platinum process. His first results were less than satisfactory. As he looked at the first platinum print he had ever made, he realized that he needed to coat, expose, and develop his print multiple times in order to achieve the richness and complexity he desired. He would also have to ensure that his negative was in perfect registration and that the paper did not change size during its repeated submersions in chemicals. He overcame considerable technical challenges to do so, at one point even working with DuPont on a new polymer that would affix paper to an aluminum support.

Penn worked in his darkroom on Long Island on the weekends, often late into the night, devoting several years to his experiments with various printing techniques. He tried many different chemicals, including palladium, iridium, and gum bichromate, mixed with both black and colored pigments. Platinum, he discovered, produced a lavish tonal image and rich blacks but, used alone, could be "coarse," while palladium gave delicate tones but lacked true blacks. After many trials, he realized that when platinum and palladium were mixed together in the correct proportions and coated onto the paper multiple times they could create luminous prints.

Penn experimented not only with multiple coatings and different formulas, but also with different exposure times, developing solutions, and various papers. He spent several years perfecting his technique and did not make prints he found acceptable until 1967.

Penn mixed, coated, exposed, and developed all the platinum prints himself. After spending years as a commercial photographer who made negatives but sometimes did not see his results until they were printed in a magazine, he delighted in his newfound ability to make a photograph from start to finish. He went back to earlier photographs and sought to transform them from a thing suitable for reproduction into something beautiful in and of itself. Starting in the 1970s, he also applied the platinum process to new photographs.

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