



PHOTOGRAPHY

## The Remarkable Stories Behind The Two Most Iconic Vogue Photographs Ever Taken

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HORST P HORST / © THE HORST ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

When [\*Vogue 100: A Century of Style\*](#), a large-scale and far-ranging historical exhibition celebrating *Vogue*'s first 100 years, opened at London's National Portrait Gallery in the spring of 2016, it was the culmination of five years of research. As chief curator, I pored over every issue of the magazine, over 1,500 and counting. As far as we could for the early decades, we wanted to go right back to the very prints that *Vogue* had published all those years ago. If they were torn, abraded or otherwise displayed the patina of age, then so much the better, we thought, for this was the very stuff of *Vogue*, its history.

Tracking down those original prints took the team around the world from Costa Rica to Qatar by way of Paris, Ottawa, New York and Los Angeles. At nearly every meeting with auction house experts, museum staff, private collectors, fellow curators, fashion journalists, photographic historians – in fact, anyone I ever discussed *Vogue 100* with – people would make one of two observations, occasionally both. The first would go along these lines: “Of course,” they would pipe up, “You are, aren’t you, showing that famous photo, the one with the two models on the diving board?” The second: “I can’t wait to see that early one, you know, the Madonna corset one. It’s so beautiful, it says everything about *Vogue*, doesn’t it? I mean, it sort of *is Vogue*, don’t you think?”



Coco Chanel captured by Horst in Paris, 1937. HORST P HORST / © THE HORST ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

And, yes, we did show them both, two exquisite prints, one discovered halfway around the world, the other barely half an hour from my Sussex home. A new exhibition at [New York's Staley-Wise Gallery, Horst P Horst/George Hoyningen-Huene](#) is an opportunity to tell the stories behind both of these pictures.

The first, popularly known as “Divers” or “Friends”, dates from 1930 and is by Huene – we learnt to abbreviate his name as he did – and the second one is known as the “Mainbocher Corset” and was taken a bit later in 1939 by Horst (as he similarly shortened his credit line). Both given titles are a little inaccurate, but their position as masterpieces from the golden age of fashion photography is indisputable.



Jackie Kennedy and sister Lee Radziwill, photographed by Horst in New York in 1958. HORST P HORST / © THE HORST ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

In contemporary memoirs, the talented but unpredictable Huene achieved a measure of notoriety. In her autobiography, *In My Fashion* (1960), *Vogue* fashion editor Bettina Ballard recalled him as a “most difficult star. He would walk into a sitting late, take one withering look at the models standing nervously in the dresses he was to photograph, turn to the editor in charge and say ‘Is this what you expect me to photograph?’ [then] snap the camera a few times and walk away. Everyone was terrified of him.”

Born a Baltic baron to a family made destitute by the 1917 Revolution (his father had been Chief Equerry to Nicholas II), Huene studied drawing under Le Corbusier in Paris before taking up a camera and coming to *Vogue*. He left the magazine – acrimoniously – in 1935 after nine years to join its rival *Harper’s Bazaar*. Here he enjoyed further success but he would never perhaps achieve the graphic simplicity of his *Vogue* years of which “Swimwear by Izod of London” – to give “Divers” its better title – is perhaps the finest example. Certainly, it remains one of the best known of all *Vogue* fashion photographs.



“Round the Clock I” by Horst, New York, 1987. HORST P HORST / © THE HORST ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Huene’s aim was to portray clothes as women might wear them in real life, but magazine photography had not yet captured, he explained, “the attitudes and gestures that women assumed. My models seemed to freeze in front of the lens.”

Huene contrived instead to bring everyday life into the studio by constructing sets and by introducing into his photographs props that alluded to the outdoors: deckchairs, golf clubs, beach balls, skis. His skill with lighting enabled him to imitate daylight convincingly as well as the play of shadow on surfaces. When he was able to shoot outside, he made a virtue of the spatial limitations afforded him.

“Swimwear by Izod of London” was given the banner headline “Modern Mariners Put out to Sea”, arguably more romantic than “Divers” or “Friends”. Huene, master of light and shadow, tricked the eye superbly. It turned out not to be the diving board of a swimming pool or the plank of a jetty pointing out towards the ocean, but the roof of the *Vogue* studio in Paris. Huene’s models sat above the traffic of the Champs-Élysées on white cubes brought up from below, the impression of sky meeting sea in a hazy horizon fabricated by throwing a low balustrade out of focus, a finely balanced composition of geometry and architectonics.

Huene’s two subjects, male and female, share a sporty boyishness. “Modern people seem so androgynous to me,” he once remarked. The model, seated to the left, has been identified as our other photographer, the German Horst Bohrmann, who started out as a protégé of Huene, and who would achieve fame in his own right at *Vogue* as Horst, a photographer for nearly 60 years. Sadly for synchronicity, it’s not him. Horst modelled extensively for Huene, but not on this occasion, as it predated their meeting by several months. Horst, who would also become Huene’s lover, provided a muscular Homeric male presence in early ’30s photography, an affirmation of a taste for neoclassical ideals of physical beauty. Is the model on the right the celebrated beauty [Lee Miller](#)? Some biographers think so. Certainly, she had the required androgyny, and she modelled for Huene frequently around this time – it was under his guidance that she first studied fashion photography – but in the absence of any confirmatory evidence we must be cautious.



"Divers" by Huene, Paris, 1930. GEORGE HOYNINGEN-HUENE / © THE HOYNINGEN-HUENE ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

And so to the corset picture by Horst. The protégé took over from his mentor when Huene, notoriously quick-tempered, upended a restaurant table onto *Vogue's* art director and stormed out of the magazine, leaving a vacant place.

This is probably Horst's most famous photograph, and, like "Swimwear by Izod of London", is surely among the best known of all *Vogue* fashion photographs – in spite of the fact that it nearly never came about. Taken in Paris on the eve of war, it was the last photograph Horst took before fleeing the city for America. It was intended for the important Collections issue of French *Vogue*, but on the declaration of war on Germany in September the magazine closed its doors – and the issue never appeared; instead, it was sent on to the American and British editions.

The sitting took all day, Horst explained, mainly "because I had never photographed a corset before". When he had finished in the early hours, as he recalled it, "I went back to the house, packed my bags and caught the seven o'clock train to Le Havre to board the *S.S. Normandie*. I knew that life would be completely different now. I had found a family in Paris and a way of life. The clothes, the books, the apartment, all was left behind. The photograph is peculiar – for me it is the essence of that moment. While I was taking it, I was thinking of all that I was leaving behind."

Horst's model was one Madame Bernon (of whom little is known), her waist shaped into an "hourglass" figure by meticulous retouching. The gap between Madame Bernon's left breast and the corset was retouched further for American *Vogue* – though not for the British edition.



Katharine Hepburn captured by Huene in 1938. GEORGE HOYNINGEN-HUENE / © THE HOYNINGEN-HUENE ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

The popular title to this photograph, “Mainbocher Corset”, is only slightly misleading: the corset was made not by the celebrated American couturier, Main Rousseau Bocher, but *for* him by the corsetière Detolle, to be worn under one of

Mainbocher's creations. The corset was so firmly in fashion again, that Horst declared it "shared headlines with the invasion of Poland".

Horst's inspiration for this evocative, much admired image may have been his friend Man Ray's photograph "Le Violin d'Ingres" (1924), a nude portrait of his mistress Kiki (Alice Prin). Perhaps Horst meant also to suggest Velázquez's painting "The Toilet of Venus" ("The Rokeby Venus") (1647-51), the corset ribbons echoing those clutched by the goddess of beauty's son, Cupid, as he holds up a mirror to his naked mother.



"Josephine Baker" by Huene, 1929. GEORGE HOYNINGEN-HUENE / © THE HOYNINGEN-HUENE ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

The corset photograph shows Horst's expertise at its most deceptive. Although the figure appears to be lit from a fixed source to the right, he admitted that "it was far more complex than it looks, with extra spotlights and reflectors used". Horst's tendency to shroud his photographs in "artistic mystery" did not impress his editors. Edna Woolman Chase of American *Vogue* chastised him for "the lack of light" in his photography. "I am sick and tired of having women say to me, 'How is this dress made? What is it like?'"

Horst chose the photograph for the cover to his photo-biography *Horst: His Work and His World* (1984), and in 1990, its status as an iconic image was further enhanced when the promotional video for Madonna's song "Vogue", directed by David Fincher, showed the pop goddess recreating Horst's photograph.



Toto Koopman photographed by Huene in 1934. GEORGE HOYNINGEN-HUENE / © THE HOYNINGEN-HUENE ESTATE / COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY, NEW YORK

Not long before he died in 1999, aged 93, he recalled his famous picture: “I don’t know how I did it. I couldn’t repeat it. It was created by emotion...” For Horst, the corset photograph, made in Paris as old Europe dissolved in flames, marked the end of an era. When at last he returned to Paris after the war was over, it was no longer as a German; he had become naturalized as an American citizen. His mentor Huene was still going strong, though now at *Vogue’s* rival *Harper’s Bazaar*. Huene would go on to have a second career in Hollywood as a colour coordinator and designer of main titles, as well as adviser to his friend, film

director George Cukor. He died in 1968. The two photographs by two long-time friends have resonated down the years.

True to form, visitors to *Vogue 100* lingered long in front of them, and the souvenir postcards made of both images sold out in the gallery's shop.

*'Horst P Horst / George Hoyningen-Huene' runs until 31 July at Staley-Wise Gallery, New York.*