

# STALEY ♦ WISE

GALLERY

## The New York Times

Published: February 13, 2012

### Lillian Bassman, Fashion and Fine-Art Photographer, Dies at 94



Lillian Bassman, who moved from fashion to fine art, at her home in Manhattan in 2009

Lillian Bassman, a magazine art director and fashion photographer who achieved renown in the 1940s and '50s with high-contrast, dreamy portraits of sylphlike models, then re-emerged in the '90s as a fine-art photographer after a cache of lost negatives resurfaced, died on Monday at her home in Manhattan. She was 94.

Her son, Eric Himmel, confirmed the death.

Ms. Bassman entered the world of magazine editing and fashion photography as a protégé of Alexey Brodovitch, the renowned art director of Harper's Bazaar. In late 1945, when the magazine generated a spinoff called Junior Bazaar, aimed at teenage girls, she was asked to be its art director, a title she shared with Mr. Brodovitch, at his insistence.

In addition to providing innovative graphic design, Ms. Bassman gave prominent display to future photographic stars like Richard Avedon, Robert Frank and Louis Faurer, whose work whetted her appetite to become a photographer herself.

Already, at Harper's Bazaar, she had begun frequenting the darkroom on her lunch hours to develop images by the great fashion photographer George Hoyningen-Huene, using tissues and gauzes to bring

selected areas of a picture into focus and applying bleach to manipulate tone.

“I was interested in developing a method of printing on my own, even before I took photographs,” Ms. Bassman told B&W magazine in 1994. “I wanted everything soft edges and cropped.” She was interested, she said, in “creating a new kind of vision aside from what the camera saw.”

When Avedon went off to photograph fashion collections in Paris in 1947, he lent her his studio and an assistant. She continued her self-education and in short order landed an important account with a lingerie company. In its last issue, in May 1948, *Junior Bazaar* ran a seven-page portfolio of wedding photographs she had taken, titled “Happily Ever After.”

Ms. Bassman became highly sought after for her expressive portraits of slender, long-necked models advertising lingerie, cosmetics and fabrics. Her lingerie work in particular brought lightness and glamour to an arena previously known for heavy, middle-aged women posing in industrial-strength corsets.

“I had a terrific commercial life,” Ms. Bassman told *The New York Times* in 1997. “I did everything that could be photographed: children, food, liquor, cigarettes, lingerie, beauty products.”

Lillian Violet Bassman was born on June 15, 1917, in Brooklyn and grew up in the Bronx. Her parents, Jewish émigrés from Russia, allowed her a bohemian style of life, even letting her move in, at 15, with the man she would later marry, the documentary photographer Paul Himmel.

Ms. Bassman studied fabric design at Textile High School, a vocational school in the Chelsea section of Manhattan. After modeling for artists employed by the Works Progress Administration’s Federal Art Project and working as a muralist’s assistant, she took a night course in fashion illustration at Pratt Institute in Brooklyn.

She soon showed her work to Brodovitch, who was impressed. Waiving tuition, he accepted her into his Design Laboratory at the New School for Social Research, where she changed her emphasis from fashion illustration to graphic design.

Brodovitch took her on as his unpaid apprentice at *Harper’s Bazaar* in 1941, but desperate to earn money she left to become an assistant to the art director at Elizabeth Arden, whereupon Brodovitch anointed her his first paid assistant. Like her mentor, she was artistically daring. At *Junior Bazaar*, she experimented with abandon, treating fashion in a bold, graphic style and floating images in space.

“One week we decided that we were going to do all green vegetables, so we had the designers make all green clothing, green lipstick, green hair, green everything,” she told *Print* magazine in 2006.

Her nonadvertising work appeared frequently in *Harper’s Bazaar*, and she developed close relationships with a long list of the era’s top models, including Barbara Mullen (her muse), Dovima and Suzy Parker. The stylistic changes of the 1960s, however, left her cold. The models, too. “I got sick of them,” she told *The Times* in 2009. “They were becoming superstars. They were not my kind of models. They were dictating rather than taking direction.”

In 1969, disappointed with the photographic profession and her prospects, she destroyed most of her commercial negatives. She put more than 100 editorial negatives in trash bags, putting them aside in her converted carriage house on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. She soon forgot all about them.

By the mid-1970s, she was out of the fashion world entirely and had begun focusing on her own work, taking large-format Cibachrome photographs of glistening fruits, vegetables and flowers, pictures of cracks in the city streets and distorted male torsos based on photographs in bodybuilding magazines.

It was not until the early 1990s that Martin Harrison, a fashion curator and historian who was staying at her house, found the long-forgotten negatives. He encouraged her to revisit them.

Ms. Bassman took a fresh look at the earlier work. She began reprinting the negatives, applying some of the bleaching techniques and other toning agents with which she had first experimented in the 1940s, creating more abstract, mysterious prints.

"In looking at them I got a little intrigued, and I took them into the darkroom, and I started to do my own thing on them," she told *The Times*. "I was able to make my own choices, other than what Brodovitch or the editors had made."

Her reinterpretations, as she called them, found a new generation of admirers. A full-fledged revival of her career ensued, with gallery shows and international exhibitions, including a joint retrospective at the Deichtorhallen museum in Hamburg with her husband and a series of monographs devoted to her photography.

A one-woman show at the Hamiltons Gallery in London, organized by Mr. Harrison in 1993, was followed by exhibitions at the Carrousel du Louvre in Paris and an assignment from *The New York Times Magazine* to cover the haute couture collections in Paris in 1996. She completed her last fashion assignment for *German Vogue* in 2004.

Mr. Himmel died in 2009, having abandoned photography in his late 50s to become a psychiatric caregiver in the city's hospitals and later a psychiatrist in private practice. Besides her son, the editor in chief of Abrams Books, she is survived by a daughter, Liza Himmel, known as Lizzie; two grandchildren; and a step-grandchild.

Ms. Bassman's work has been published in "Lillian Bassman" (1997) and "Lillian Bassman: Women" (2009). A new book, "Lillian Bassman: Lingerie," is to be published by Abrams on April 1.

# The New York Times



Anne St. Marie, New York, 1958, as part of a Chanel advertising campaign.



Carmen, circa 1950s.



"More Fashion Mileage per Dress," New York, 1956.



"Touch of Dew," New York, 1961.



Tunic suit, 1955, for Harper's Bazaar.



The day-length dinner dress, 1949, shot at the Ritz, Paris.



Across the restaurant, 1949, shot at Le Grand Vefour, Paris, as part of assignments for Harper's Bazaar.



"Night Bloom," Paris, 1996.



"It's a Cinch," 1951, for Harper's Bazaar.



Lillian Bassman and her husband, Paul Himmel, c. 1945.