



Eye of the *Beholder*

She was the mother of modern fashion photography, revolutionizing the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* in the 1930s with a dynamic new style that put the woman not the clothes at the center of the story. Yet for decades, American photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe was practically invisible. As a new show of her work opens in London, *Liz Hoggard* celebrates this pioneer of the female gaze

In one of the most perfect fashion images—*Twins At The Beach, Nassau, Bahamas*—two women in black bathing suits sit together on white beach chairs. Their arms curve upwards and their thighs are strong; their nails gleam against their tawny skin. You can feel the sun beating down and the spray of the ocean. The picture pulses with energy and although it's nearly 70 years old, it's as compelling today as it ever was.

Twins At The Beach was taken in 1949 by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, one of the most celebrated photographers of the 1930s to 1950s. "She was the bar we all measured ourselves against," Richard Avedon once said. Weber regularly references her work, while Raf Simons drew direct inspiration from her imagery for his spring summer collection for Jil Sander in 2012, and cult label Band of Outsiders used an image that Dahl-Wolfe had shot in Brazil in 1947 of two young women in short skirts as the jumping off point for an entire collection in 2015. Dahl-Wolfe, whose work is celebrated in an exhibition at London's Fashion and Textile Museum that opens this month, brought a modernity to image-making that has yet to look out of date.

During the two decades she spent working at American *Harper's Bazaar*, Dahl-Wolfe pioneered the use of natural lighting in fashion photography by shooting outdoors, and produced more than 86 iconic and dazzlingly colorful magazine covers, as well as thousands of black and white pictures. Working alongside *Bazaar's* legendary editor Carmel Snow, fashion director Diana Vreeland and art director Alexey Brodovitch, she helped define the look and feel of fashion imagery as we know it today. More than 100 photographs from 1931 to 1959, including the *Bazaar* covers, will be on show in London.

"Many female photographers are great storytellers," says PORTER's creative director Rebecca Mason. "They tell the reader who the woman is and what she is doing. Dahl-Wolfe was the mother of this narrative style and contemporary photographers such as Pamela Hanson, Corinne Day, Camilla Åkrans, Cass Bird and Zoe Ghertner all continue to develop it."

Dahl-Wolfe was an unlikely fashion icon herself. In photos, she is round-faced, with glasses and scraped-back hair. An interview for a job at *Vogue* had failed because of her looks. But Snow discerned real artistry in her work. "She was already 40 when she started as a staff photographer at

Bazaar in 1936," says hair stylist Sam McKnight, a longtime fan. "She wasn't some 17-year-old; she'd really refined her craft and style and had a lot to offer."

In 1930s America, readers were used to seeing exquisitely lit studio pictures with models posed like mannequins in Paris gowns. Dahl-Wolfe chose tall, athletic models, took them outside and encouraged them to walk, run, jump, even sprawl on the floor. "They often look directly into the camera; they're liberated women," says Susanna Brown,

curator of photographs at London's Victoria and Albert Museum. She gave them presence and made sure the clothes, however spectacular, never eclipsed the woman.

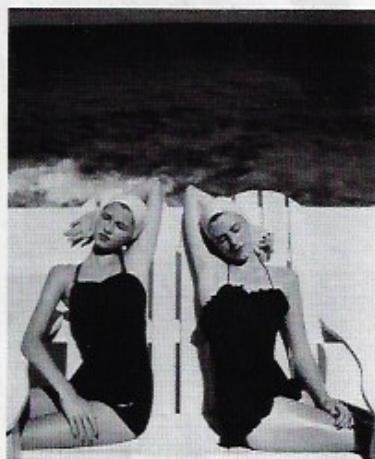
"It's what American magazines are still about," says McKnight. "It was about capturing the moment and a world away from the stiff set pieces by Cecil Beaton, Horst P. Horst or Baron de Meyer—though I love those images, too. But you can definitely see a woman's point of view, which must have been radical back then. She had the sense of detail and beauty you find in the classic studio portrait, but made everything more alive."

What Dahl-Wolfe really understood was the psychology of the emerging female consumer. "I still feel a strong connection with her images and her point of view," says Camilla Åkrans, who photographed this issue's cover star Brie Larson and has shot campaigns for Missoni, Hermès and Chloé. "I absolutely believe the woman should be the focal point, because you'd rather buy clothes from a woman who inspires you through the picture than see the clothes looking just perfect on a 'statue'." Along with Vreeland, Dahl-Wolfe chose new young American designers—such as Claire McCardell (creator of the Popover dress and promoter of the ballet flat) and Clare Potter (doyenne of the two-piece bathing suit and sweater-as-eveningwear), as well as the traditional European fashion labels. She captured a new sensibility in American fashion—clothes that were casual and comfortable, and reflected women's increasingly active and independent lifestyles.

History intervened too. "When the Paris fashion houses had to close during the Second World War, American designers really came into their own," says Brown. "And Louise was right there, making the transition from the rarefied, specialist world of couture fashion to this relaxed and accessible, American, ready-to-wear fashion for the masses." Emancipation was part of the story. "They look independent—women who don't need to be on a man's arm," says McKnight. "They are women who are dressing for other women." In fact, men barely figure in Dahl-Wolfe's fashion photos, except perhaps as a glimpse of a waiter.

Louise Dahl was born in San Francisco in 1895, the youngest of three daughters of Norwegian immigrants; her father was an engineer. She dreamed of becoming a painter and in 1914 went to the San Francisco Art Institute to study design, composition, art history and color theory, and took special courses in life drawing, painting and anatomy. She believed in knowledge and expertise. "You have to study color like the scales of the piano," she wrote in her memoir. "It's really scientific." Her advice to all young photographers was go to art school.

In 1915, she attended the World's Fair in San Francisco which introduced major European works of painting and sculpture to the US, and in 1916 attended a performance by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes with sets by Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and André Derain. The influence of this modernity spurred her on, but when her father died in 1919, she postponed her plans to study interior decoration in New York and took a job designing electric signs. "It was frightfully boring and routine," she recalled. Then in >



Previous page: left, Dahl-Wolfe in the studio, 1938; right, a shot for *Harper's Bazaar*, May 1948
This page: above, *Twins At The Beach*, 1949; opposite, shooting for *Bazaar*, 1947



1921, she met the photographer Anne W. Brigman, a woman in an almost exclusively male profession, who ran her own studio and was experimenting with female nudes. Dahl-Wolfe was inspired to take up photography herself. "We'd pose in the nude for each other, using a Brownie box-sized focus camera," she said of her and Brigman's experiments.

But a tragic car accident, in which her mother was killed, changed everything. She left the US for Europe and in Paris she bought her first movie camera. She moved on to Tunisia, where looking out of a train window at Kairouan station, she spotted a handsome mustachioed man. "I just liked the look of the cut of the guy," she said. "I thought: 'Gee, that's for me'." He was a fellow American, the sculptor Meyer 'Mike' Wolfe, and it turned out she was right.

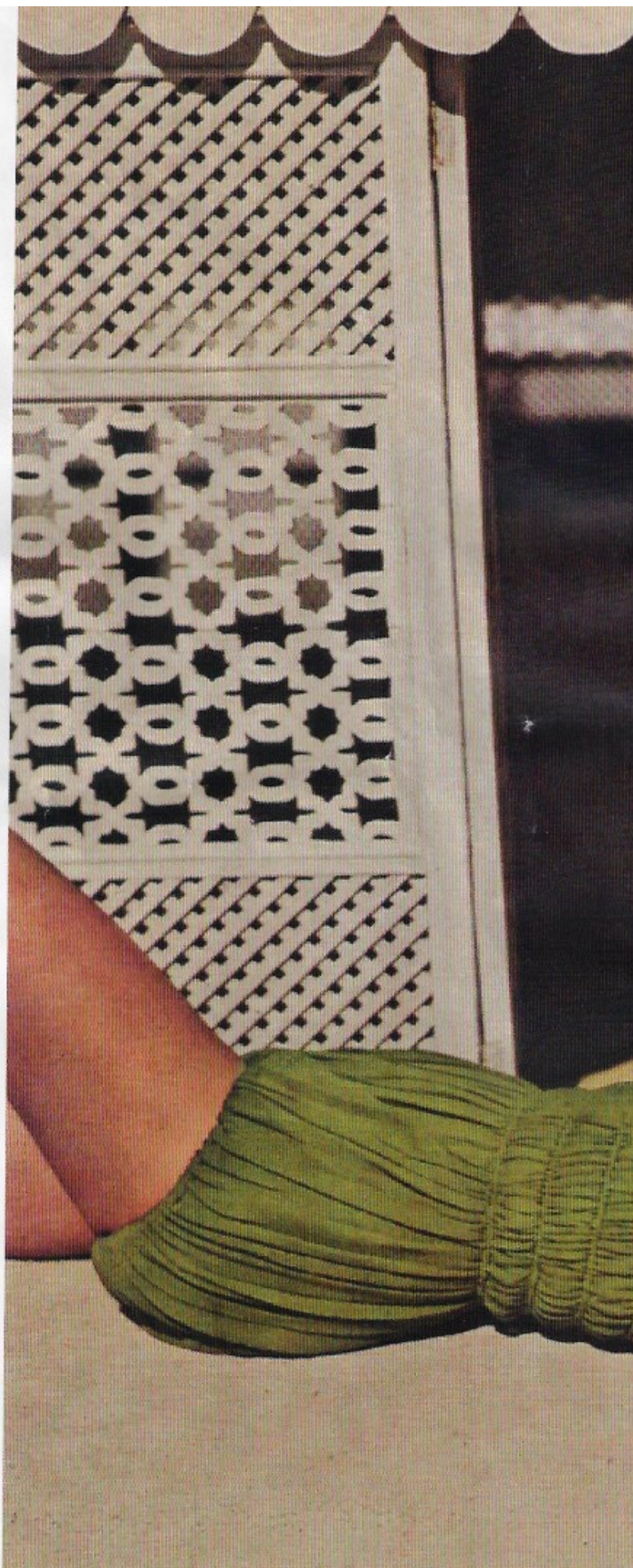
They married in 1928 and moved to a log cabin in Wolfe's native Tennessee. It was the height of the Depression and Dahl-Wolfe began documenting their poor, mostly African-American, neighbors. Her sensitive portraits reveal the sadness, resignation and brutality of their lives. When one of these – *Mrs Ramsey* – was published in the November 1933 issue of *Vanity Fair*, it was groundbreaking. "Nothing like that had appeared in the magazine before," says Terence Pepper, photographs curator for the Louise Dahl-Wolfe show. "It really caused a stir; not everyone approved." Several other images from the series were included in a group photography exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1937.

In 1933, the couple moved to New York, where Dahl-Wolfe worked on the recipe pages of *Woman's Home Companion* and set about becoming a fashion photographer. She practiced on the showroom models at Milgrim's department store. "This was the best training I ever had," she said. "Those girls were at least 40 years of age. I tried out lighting on them to get them to look chic, elegant, beautiful and yet natural – and that took work."

By the time Snow came across her work in 1936, she was working on advertising shoots for Saks Fifth Avenue. "From the moment I saw her first color photographs, I knew *Bazaar* was at last going to look the way I had instinctively wanted my magazine to look," Snow later said. With the new fashion editor, the gloriously eccentric Vreeland, the team was in place. When Dahl-Wolfe despaired of the clothes she had to photograph, Vreeland would save the day by brightening up an outfit by adding a single earring or a scarf. Vreeland even modeled for her once when one of their favorite models, Elizabeth Gibbons, fell ill.

Dahl-Wolfe made superstars of her models. Until then, sitters were debutantes and society ladies. These new girls were raring to go, flying off on shoots all over Europe, North Africa, South America, the Bahamas. Dahl-Wolfe also launched the career of Lauren Bacall, putting the unknown Betty Bacall on the March 1943 *Bazaar* cover, which landed her her first Hollywood screen test. When *Bazaar* sent Dahl-Wolfe to Hollywood for the first time in 1938 to photograph movie stars, she quite naturally shot them outdoors with her Rolleiflex. There's Carole Lombard with a fluffy dog on the studio lot; Bette Davis lying in the grass; a demonically youthful Orson Welles. >

Photograph by Louise Dahl-Wolfe, featured in *Harper's Bazaar*, June 1950





Dahl-Wolfe forged close friendships with her models, working them hard and making them hold poses for hours, but giving them plenty of agency too. "I adored posing for her," said Gibbons. "She was the only photographer who let her model become a great actress, dancer, femme fatale and reigning beauty. Her running praises were head-turning and believable." When Gibbons got married she took Dahl-Wolfe with her on honeymoon. This sense of freedom and encouragement also left its mark on model Mary Jane Russell, who looked after Dahl-Wolfe after her husband died in 1985. "She was wicked, challenging, exasperating and heavenly," Russell once said about Dahl-Wolfe. "She was the most beautiful person in my working life."

The trust Dahl-Wolfe had built with Gibbons is especially manifest in the nudes she took of her for *Bazaar*. "I stole the chance to portray nudes whenever I could," she said. When she wasn't shooting in the desert, Dahl-Wolfe worked in her studio in New York, which she maintained throughout her 22-year reign at *Bazaar*. The atmosphere was bohemian, with frequent breaks for food and cocktails.

Her husband helped build the elaborate backdrops of Matisse-style cut-outs and Chinese calligraphy.

The studies in female eroticism she produced prefigure the sensuality of contemporary women photographers such as Sarah Moon and Ellen von Unwerth. This was a time when models were often passive, fantasy objects, but Dahl-Wolfe made them part of the story and especially disliked poses that made women look docile or ridiculous. "What kills me is when a body is twisted unnaturally to show both the front from the waist up and the skirt from the side, a real contortionist's pose," she said in the 1940s. Outside of the studio, she broke more rules, daring to shoot her models in art galleries and museums. "I was more interested in looking at a Degas than more dresses done by third-rate designers," Dahl-Wolfe admitted in her 1984 memoir *A Photographer's Scrapbook*. But in spite of her frank views, she understood exactly what was expected of her. "A fashion photographer is not a free agent. You must try to express in the photograph what the designer is saying without being literal, corny or unnatural." It's perhaps no wonder that so many contemporary fashion designers owe a debt to her work. "Her images have been a huge influence on me," says milliner Stephen Jones. "It's all about the stylization of the idea of the woman versus the reality. She created some of my favorite photographs of headgear, in particular the portraits of Vreeland, Bacall and Sunny Harnett where she really plays with the hats' sculptural forms."

But despite her success, Dahl-Wolfe was one of just a few female players in the industry, partly due to its closed-shop nature, but also the physically grueling nature of the job. Dahl-Wolfe worked mostly with a Rolleiflex and a 3.5 x 4.5 Graflex, all 3kg of it hanging round her neck. "The result was three, worn-down vertebrae, a trip to the hospital and traction," she said. After which the doctor insisted she use a tripod. "I don't use a tripod either and I've got a seriously sloping shoulder," says Åkrans. "But

the lack of female photographers is really a complex question to answer. Part of the problem could be that the way in is mainly through assisting and since that job is very physically demanding, male photographers may feel uncomfortable hiring a woman. But with digital changes, it is now much easier for women to get work as an assistant. I think this is the moment when a more powerful group of women is beginning to emerge." PORTER's Mason sees the changes happening already. "I believe there will soon be a 50/50 balance between men and women in the industry," she says. "For a start, there are more female creative directors. There's also a real feminine aesthetic, less retouched and more sensitive to what we are creating for other women."

Male fashion photographers, claimed Dahl-Wolfe, had a tendency towards conventional colors, particularly red or

"She let her *model* become a great actress, dancer, *femme fatale*"

red and green. "I fought red like crazy, especially in skin tones," she said, and the results are part of what makes her work so modern. Photography for her was about painting with light. From 1937 when she started using Kodachrome color film for *Bazaar*, she even corrected her own proofs, driving technicians mad before she was satisfied.

Her pictures helped transform *Bazaar* into one of the foremost fashion titles of the era. But in 1957, Snow left and a year later, Brodovitch was fired. Dahl-Wolfe soon followed when the new art director paid a surprise visit to her studio and had the nerve to peer through her camera during a shoot. "This had never happened in all my years. The great era of my magazine was finished," she declared. She retired to New Jersey in 1960, taking up bookbinding and sewing. Although she and Wolfe never had children, it seems to have been a happy marriage. In her memoir, there's a nude sketch he did of her sitting on his knee for their 23rd wedding anniversary in 1951.

After her death in 1989 aged 94, Dahl-Wolfe's work was forgotten for a time, an insider secret at best. But today her work pops up on storyboards in design studios everywhere. Her black and white location shots look contemporary. "Really, they're timeless," says McKnight. "Some of the hair and makeup looks so modern. I'd love to see what she would have done with a strong woman such as Cate Blanchett," he adds. "I bet Louise would have loved her."

Louise Dahl-Wolfe: A Style Of Her Own is at the Fashion and Textile Museum, London from Oct 20, 2017 to Jan 21, 2018; ftmlondon.org

Dahl-Wolfe with husband Meyer "Mike" Wolfe, 1977

