

THE FASHION IMAGE: LOUISE DAHL-WOLFE

A Pioneering Photographer's Eye for Style

By John A. Cuadrado

"THERE IS Louise Dahl-Wolfe. Make way. I go to her, she does not come to me!" With this exclamation, star fashion photographer Richard Avedon hailed Louise Dahl-Wolfe at his Museum of Modern Art opening in 1974—voicing both his esteem and the admiration felt by a profession in which the name Dahl-Wolfe has long been legend.

Couture was at its most vital during the years Dahl-Wolfe reigned at

Harper's Bazaar at the top of her field. New York joined Paris as a fashion center, giants like Dior, Chanel, Mainbocher and McCardell were at the height of their powers, and *Harper's Bazaar* was the number-one fashion magazine in America.

Today Dior and Chanel are corporate entities, and Tokyo and Milan have joined New York to rival Paris as fashion capitals. Yet, just short of her ninety-third birthday, Louise

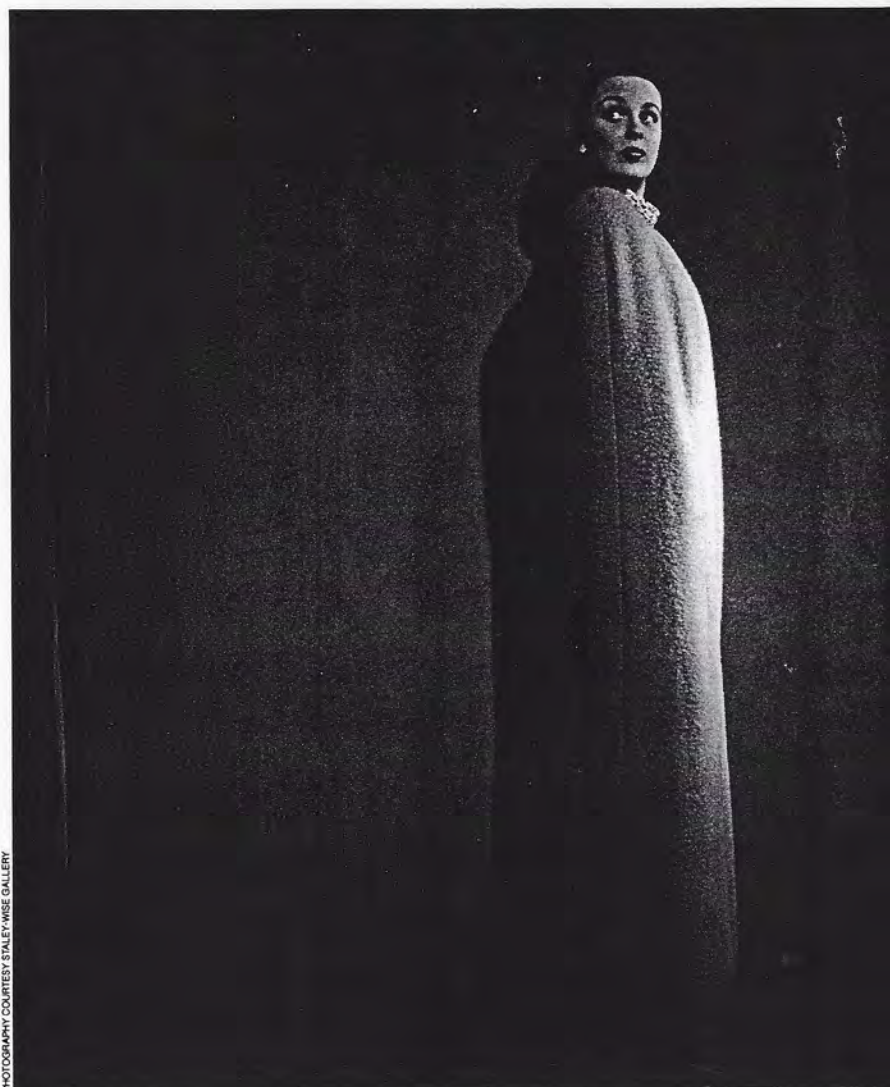


Dahl-Wolfe is still very much a presence on the scene, ready to recall, with quick wit and trenchant commentary, the days when her eye and her camera lens defined haute couture for millions of Americans.

From 1936 until 1958, over the course of eighty-six covers, some six hundred color photographs and thousands of black-and-white shots, Dahl-Wolfe brought a fresh American look to fashion photography. To a field dominated by affected images of impassive models posed like sculpture, Dahl-Wolfe brought naturalness and impromptu glamour. She supplanted the haughty "European" ideal of the 1930s with an active, approachable vision of the fashionable woman.

Dahl-Wolfe was one of the first to leave the studio to photograph "healthy outdoor women" on the

ABOVE: "I believe that the camera is a medium of light, that one actually paints with light," says legendary photographer Louise Dahl-Wolfe, shown here in a circa 1950 portrait. LEFT: Light creates sculptural simplicity in a portrait of an actress, Patricia Morison, 1940.



PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY STALEY-WISE GALLERY

continued on page 70

THE FASHION IMAGE: LOUISE DAHL-WOLFE

A Pioneering Photographer's Eye for Style
continued from page 66



"The French were the ones who really knew how to design clothes," says Dahl-Wolfe. "I paid them tribute each year by buying one ensemble at the Paris showings." ABOVE: Christian Dior at His Millhouse Outside Paris, 1946.

beach, in the country or at exotic foreign locales. Her studio work conveys this same modern elegance—invigorated by bold graphic backgrounds and witty borrowings from the history of art. At the same time, Dahl-Wolfe's images give evidence of an almost abstract formal perfection: carefully gauged relationships of color, light and shadow, pattern and form that achieve a compositional strength seldom equaled.

Nor has Louise Dahl-Wolfe's forte been limited to fashion. She is a portraitist of the first order, and this work gives evidence of similar immediacy and elegance of composition. The range of Dahl-Wolfe's portraiture is startling, encompassing in-

tensely moving Depression images taken in the South and photographs of some of the most celebrated personalities of this century.

Dahl-Wolfe's vision retains its freshness and power for the contemporary eye and is widely collected today. As rediscovery of the photographer has quickened, her work has been the focus of numerous exhibitions. At the opening of a recent show at Washington's National Museum of Women in the Arts, Dahl-Wolfe was accorded a level of attention normally reserved for film stars and was trapped for hours signing autographs.

Born in San Francisco in 1895 to an upper-middle-class Norwegian family, Dahl-Wolfe was raised with few of the restrictions imposed on females of the period. Even her name, Louise Emma Augusta Dahl, was chosen so that the initials would spell a word—

significantly, L.E.A.D.—by parents of an unusually independent, individualist bent. Especially close to her father, Dahl-Wolfe vividly remembers climbing with him to the hilltops to watch San Francisco burn after the great earthquake of 1906.

In 1914 Dahl-Wolfe entered the San Francisco Institute of Art, an experience she believes underlies her later successes. There she was most influenced by color theory and by life-drawing classes, which "sensitized me to the grace and flow of line." At this time as well, Dahl-Wolfe was "overwhelmed" by a performance of Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* with its costumes by Bakst and the revolutionary sets of Picasso, Braque and Derain. Also formative were Dahl-Wolfe's early experiments with photography, encompassing nude studies with such titles as *Grief*, *Pan* and *Wind Harp* and the fabrication of a homemade enlarger. Fashioned from an apple crate, a tin can and a reflector made from the interior of a large Ghirardelli chocolate box, this apparatus was housed in Dahl-Wolfe's closet.

In 1926 Dahl-Wolfe embarked on an eighteen-month tour of Europe and



"Portraits were my favorite assignments," says Dahl-Wolfe, who photographed the most celebrated artistic and literary people of her day. ABOVE: Edith Sitwell, New York, 1951.

THE FASHION IMAGE: LOUISE DAHL-WOLFE

A Pioneering Photographer's Eye for Style
continued from page 70

North Africa that changed the course of her life. As her train arrived in the holy city of Kairouan, she spied an American artist by the name of Meyer (Mike) Wolfe and remembers saying to herself, "Gee, that's for me." That initial meeting led to fifty-eight years of married life.

Upon their return to the United States, the young couple moved into a log cabin in the Smoky Mountains and Dahl-Wolfe began taking her first mature images. Gatlinburg, Tennessee, was bootleg-liquor territory, filled with "extraordinary mountain people, quite happy to shoot government revenue men on sight," and fortunately also ready to allow themselves to be photographed by their citified neighbor. With no electricity, Dahl-Wolfe ran a line from the car battery to her darkroom to develop images that would later launch her career. In November 1933 *Vanity Fair* published one of these, entitled *Tennessee Mountain Woman*. The photograph of careworn, tired and somehow timeless Mrs. Ramsey in her favorite twenty-five-year-old hat became an overnight sensation.

Dahl-Wolfe established her own studio in New York in the Sherwood Building on Fifty-seventh Street, and by 1936 began her long collaboration with *Harper's Bazaar*. Working with editor-in-chief Carmel Snow, fashion editor Diana Vreeland and art director Alexey Brodovitch, Dahl-Wolfe flourished. She was almost immediately recognized as a major talent and was entrusted with many of the magazine's most important assignments, including the all-important color spreads. Kodachrome had just been introduced, and Dahl-Wolfe's pioneering use of color sent shock waves through the field.

Dahl-Wolfe was given complete artistic control of her work and was scrupulously consulted on layout, pagination, cropping and color correction—rare privileges that could be very costly when she insisted on changes. Indeed, Dahl-Wolfe's

perfectionism remains legendary. Her assistants remember a relentless eye for detail and frequent trips back to the darkroom to try for prints that could meet her high standards. Photo sittings could be unending affairs. Dahl-Wolfe remembers "painting with light," varying the spots for hours—"honing, adjusting, perfecting and readjusting," according to one of her editors—to build satisfying compositions of light and shadow.

Her temper was sometimes explosive. She was nicknamed "Vesuvius" by her great friend, artist Pavel Tchelitchew, and "Queen Louise" by her husband. Friends remember conciliatory bouquets sent back and forth between Dahl-Wolfe and Diana

Vreeland as emotions cooled after exhausting photo sessions. More frequently, Dahl-Wolfe would express admiration for the way Vreeland could transform a hopelessly uninteresting outfit by adjusting a coiffure, reknitting a scarf and adding jewelry or a Cossack hat.

Dahl-Wolfe's background sets were famous and her bag of tricks seemed limitless. One former editor at *Vogue* remembers the staff there "trembling as each new issue of the *Bazaar* appeared, wondering what Louise had come up with this time." Dahl-Wolfe would set shots against abstract color planes, collages or over-size calligraphic script. She would position models beside blowups of



"You must try to express in the photograph what the designer is saying without being literal, corny or unnatural," says Dahl-Wolfe, who delighted in architectural finds that would provide rich settings. ABOVE A Howard Greer bathing suit was the focus for Natalie in *Hammamet*, 1950.

continued on page 80

SELECTIONS

SOFT SLIPCASE: Coffee-color vinyl case, gold stamped on cover and spine, provides padded protection for treasured back issues of *Architectural Digest*. Two cases will hold 12 issues. \$8.95 (2.00)

ACRYLIC SLIPCASE: Attractive see-through organizer made of sturdy acrylic keeps 6 issues of *Architectural Digest* handy and dust-free. \$22 (2.25)



MAGAZINE BIN (not shown): An elegant contemporary design, this clear acrylic bin keeps back issues neatly stacked. Cut-away handles allow easy portability. \$41 (3.00)

BACK ISSUES: Available from 1984 to present. List selections on a separate sheet. \$6 each (we pay shipping).

CALL TOLL FREE
1-800-421-4448

Mon.-Fri. 9 A.M. - 5 P.M. Pacific Time. In California, call 1-800-252-2071. Credit card orders only. Prices subject to change. Please allow 6 weeks for shipment. Items may be shipped separately. Offer good in USA and Canada only. *Architectural Digest* and *Architectural Digest Selections* are registered trademarks of Architectural Digest Publishing Corp., and are used under license.

Mail to:
Wilshire Marketing Corp.
5900 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90036

(please print)

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____

STATE _____ ZIP _____

☐ Check payable to Wilshire Marketing Corp.
(California residents add applicable sales tax)

☐ Visa ☐ MasterCard ☐ American Express
Card # _____

Exp. Date _____

INDICATE QUANTITY:

_____ #201111 SOFT SLIPCASE \$8.95 (2.00)
_____ #200011 ACRYLIC SLIPCASE \$22 (2.25)
_____ #200111 MAGAZINE BIN \$41 (3.00)
_____ TOTAL BACK ISSUES \$6.00 each

GRAND TOTAL \$ _____
Please add amount indicated in () for
shipping per unit shipped.

A698

THE FASHION IMAGE: LOUISE DAHL-WOLFE

A Pioneering Photographer's Eye for Style
continued from page 76

Flemish nudes, before giant Matisse-like cutouts ostensibly created by scissors set in their hands, or garb them in lingerie and dangle them precariously from trapezes.

On location in the Yucatán, Paris, Rio or the Caribbean, Dahl-Wolfe would scout for days to find the right backgrounds: everything from the roofs of the Louvre to mosaic courtyards and ruined temples. Her models would lounge, windblown, on boats; stand beside the hindquarters of elephants; or warm themselves by the fire in elegant country houses. One of Dahl-Wolfe's most famous location shots almost did her in. It shows a nude reclining on a dune, the curves of her body echoed by the contours of the sand. Dahl-Wolfe recalls, "We were in the middle of the Mojave desert and I almost collapsed from the heat. It wasn't so bad for the model—at least she was naked."

Dahl-Wolfe's work for the *Bazaar* put her in contact with many fascinating figures from the arts, politics and entertainment, and her impressions are insightful and unsparing. Dahl-Wolfe took a dislike to the

tervene to take her from the scene.

Two portraits from 1943 remain especially meaningful for Dahl-Wolfe. She is proud to have "discovered" Lauren Bacall with a wartime cover shot showing Bacall in front of a Red Cross blood-donor clinic. Notes Dahl-Wolfe, "She was just a kid from high school, and the first thing I said to her was 'You should go into the movies.' Well, the art director hated that photo, saying it looked like she had given her last pint of blood, but it interested Howard Hawks enough to ask her to come to Hollywood."

Five-Star Mother, taken later that year, brings back different associations. The photograph depicts an elderly woman standing before a window emblazoned with a star for each son gone off to war. It is one of the most moving images of the period. "That shot makes me feel badly even today," says Dahl-Wolfe. "You can see the worry in her eyes."

Louise Dahl-Wolfe had her own portrait taken recently. Her passion for detail and her insistence on perfection were as evident as ever. Bruce Weber—a longtime Dahl-Wolfe fan

To a field dominated by affected images of impassive models posed like sculpture, Dahl-Wolfe brought naturalness and glamour.

duchess of Windsor and has "yet to understand why he married her." Though Dahl-Wolfe loved Chanel's work, the designer herself was not a favorite, either. "She gabbed away as I tried to pose her—chirping like a bird—and it drove me mad." By contrast, Dahl-Wolfe came away from her session with Colette with a great sense of respect, and her portrait of the author gives evidence of it. Taken in 1951, near the end of Colette's life, the photo shows her propped up in bed poised over her notebook, an expression of strength and wisdom on her face even as fate would soon in-

—traveled to her Princeton home to photograph her. Weber is one of the most successful photographers of the eighties, and like Dahl-Wolfe he is a perfectionist who never allows any interference with his work. To the amazement of all present—except, surely, Weber—Dahl-Wolfe had him down on his knees, following her directions in minute detail. The next day, the indomitable Dahl-Wolfe could not leave the matter alone. Soon she was on the phone to Weber, explaining that due to the angle of the shot, it was imperative that he crop the photo into the forehead. □