Irving Penn
L'Essence du portrait

7 November 2026—30 January 2027
Opening Saturday 7 November 2026, 6—8pm

Thaddaeus Ropac
Paris Marais
7, rue Debelleyme, 75003 Paris



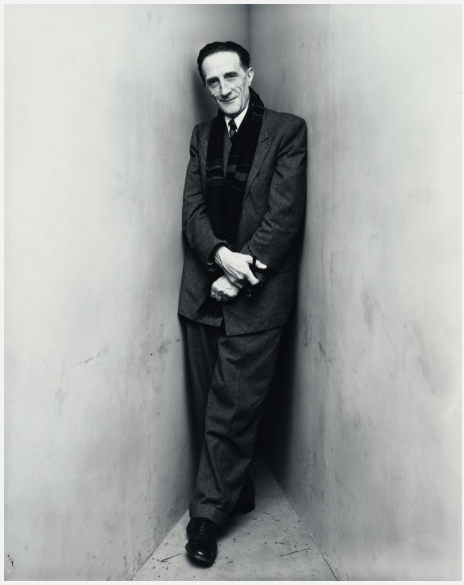
Irving Penn, *Paloma Picasso*, New York, 1984
Gelatin silver print (printed in 1984), 36.2 × 35.1 cm © Condé Nast

I have always stood in awe of the camera.
I recognize it for the instrument it is, part Stradivarius, part scalpel.
— Irving Penn

Thaddaeus Ropac Paris Marais presents *L'Essence du portrait*, an exhibition that sheds light on Irving Penn's mastery of photographic portraiture, from his early existential portrait of Marcel Duchamp to his photograph of an exultant Elizabeth Peyton in the final decade of his life. Penn decisively contributed to elevating photography to the status of high art, and his portraits rival paintings in their technical bravura and psychological gravitas. The

exhibition coincides with *PENN & FASHION* at the Maison Européenne de la Photographie (until 17 January 2027) as well as an exceptional selection of his photographs at the Bourse de Commerce – Pinault Collection as part of the exhibition *Remember Me* (until 28 January 2027).

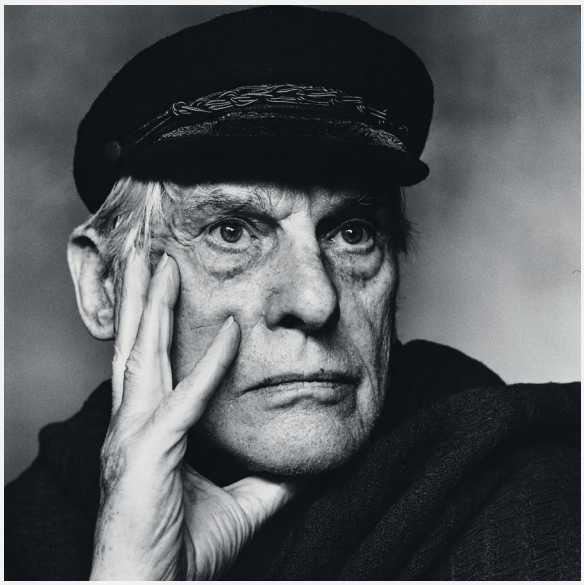
Penn's portraits are penetrating. Photographing personalities from 1943 onwards, he would prepare each sitting by immersing himself in his subjects' respective oeuvres and routinely conversing with them over coffee in the studio prior to the session. As Penn noted, every sitter arrived 'armed with an image of himself' that the photographer strove to transcend. In his early portraits, Penn frequently used a contrived corner as a Hitchcockian entrapment that allowed him to capture his subjects quite literally.



Irving Penn, *Marcel Duchamp (2 of 2)*, New York,1948
Gelatin silver print (printed in 1983), 24.13 × 19.21 cm
© The Irving Penn Foundation

This is epitomised by his 1948 photograph of Marcel Duchamp smiling knowingly from the confinement of the studio set's acute angle. In Penn's portrait of Yehudi Menuhin, the virtuoso violinist appears lodged within the exiguous space, a bow clenched in his fist and his Stradivarius dangling from the other hand. Relegating the instrument to the tenebrous margins, the photographer illuminated Menuhin's searing expression, which imbues the chiaroscuro composition with its searching intensity. Penn let 'the unguarded psyche inhabit the pose, animating it and bringing it to life,' writes Maria Morris Hambourg, the co-curator of his *Centennial* exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017.

As the exhibition highlights, much of the twentieth-century vanguard stared straight into Penn's lens. In one



Irving Penn, *Willem De Kooning (1 of 2)*, Long Island, New York, 1983
Gelatin silver print (printed in 1984), 35.3 × 35.6 cm © Condé Nast

overhead photograph, John Cage folds over a grand piano as if probing the instrument's heartbeat, while in another close-up, a 79-year-old Willem de Kooning gazes out of the picture plane, utterly absorbed in thought. In one of his most striking portraits, Penn arrests Pablo Picasso's likeness with unparalleled psychological acuity. Having initially pretended not to be at his home in Cannes, the modern master granted Penn merely ten minutes for the session (after the photographer's assistant scaled the locked gate of 'La Californie'). Picasso appeared clad in a



Irving Penn, *Miles Davis Hand on Trumpet*, New York, 1986
Gelatin silver print (printed in 1998), 25.7 × 26.6 cm
© The Irving Penn Foundation



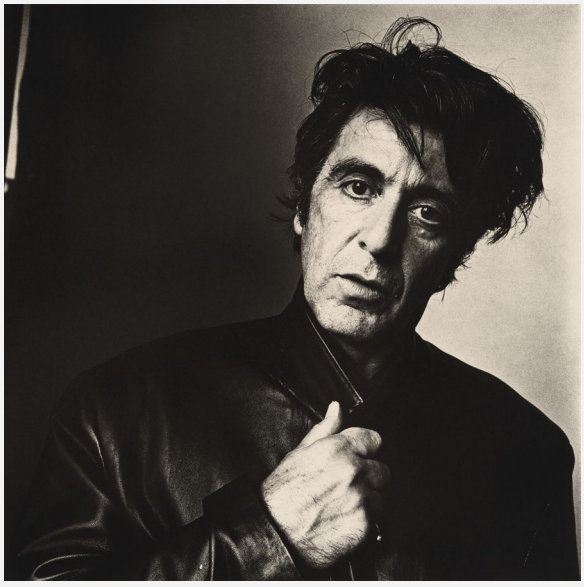
Irving Penn, *Jessye Norman*, New York, 1992
Gelatin silver print (printed in 1992), 26 × 26 cm
© Condé Nast

grey sweatshirt, before donning a Spanish cape and hat. Unperturbed by his accoutrement, Penn inched closer and closer until he captured Picasso's starkly lit face to reveal but a single wide-open eye. As Morris Hambourg sets forth, Penn 'carve[d] the essence of the artist out of his coy deflections.'

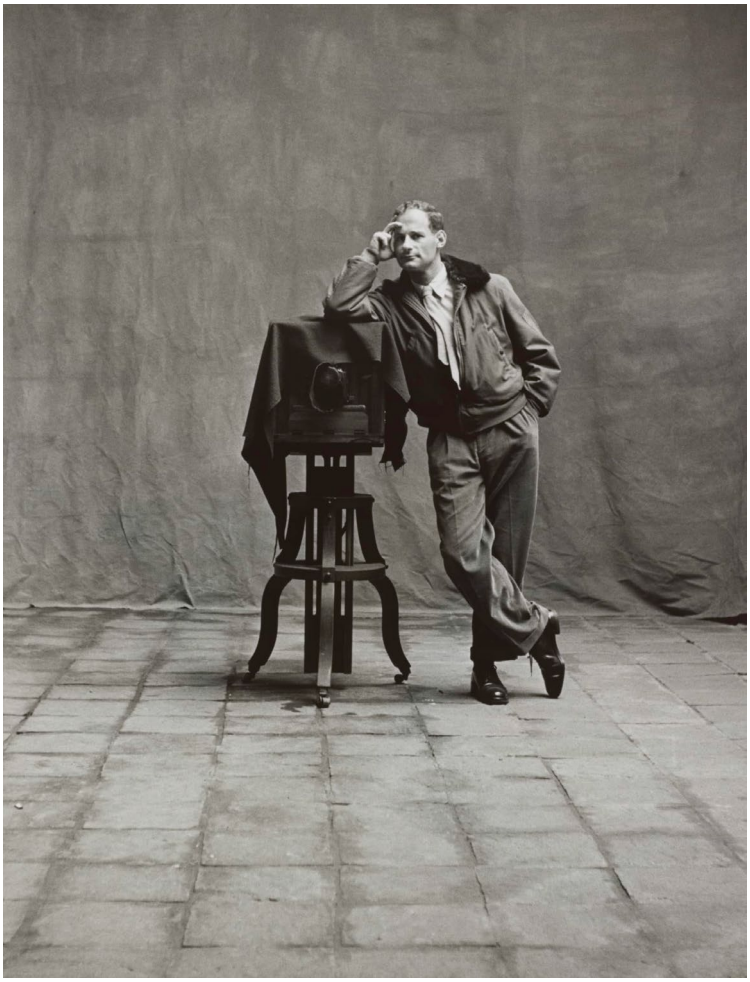
Penn peeled away his illustrious sitters' protective layers until his camera seized something elemental. During his session with Miles Davis, the legendary jazz musician gradually shed his armour of jewels and garments until he posed bare-chested before Penn, metaphorically stripped bare. As art director Eiko Ishioka recalled, 'I felt that even the breathing patterns of Miles and Irving were reaching a peace, led by the mellifluous rhythm of the shutter.' In the work on view, Penn isolates Davis's hand against a flat backdrop, its fingers outstretched behind his trumpet as if an extension of its valves. The instrument's lustrous geometry contrasts with the glyphs on the musician's weathered palm, yet Penn visualises the ineffable symbiosis between the trumpeter and his horn in this metonymic portrait. As the photographer would later remark of Davis's oeuvre, 'it struck me as being visual art of a most profound kind.'

Through the photographs on display, Penn harnessed the formidable expressivity of the artist's hand. In his photograph of Luciano Pavarotti, the seemingly stunned operatic tenor brandishes his signature white handkerchief – a gesture that heightens the composition's theatricality – while in his portrait of Jessye Norman, the soprano rests her head in one palm, her undulating fingers underscoring the image's formal delicacy. Penn's disquieting photograph of Yves Saint Laurent peering at the spectator through his splayed, mask-like hand further diverges from his portrait of a nonchalant Gianni Versace clasping his jacket whilst reaching overhead with his other arm in a quasi-Mannerist pose. Reflecting on his portraits, Penn observed that 'each [is] in its way a small human drama.'

An inimitable graphic purity unites the exhibited portraits. In Penn's exquisitely composed *Vogue* cover of 1950, the artist captures Jean Patchett's 'New Look' with absolute formal concision in a veritable portrait of haute couture. Patchett's plump, pitch-dark lips become the focal point of the composition, like a blown-up embroidered dot on her veil, around which the starkly geometric volumes of her ensemble radiate against the blinding-white ground. Penn avowedly drew on the likes of Honoré Daumier, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Francisco de Goya to deliver a visual punch. Toulouse-Lautrec's legacy notably surfaces in Penn's photograph of Silvana Mangano's precisely delineated profile caught between the flat black mass of her upswept hair and softly sculptural mantle, while Goya emerges in the shadows enshrouding his more unsettling portraits. As Morris Hambourg posits, Penn foresaw his portraits 'like paintings, weighty and resolved.'



Irving Penn, *Al Pacino (A)*, New York, 1995
Platinum-palladium print (printed in 1996), 45.7 × 45.7 cm © Condé Nast



Irving Penn, *Picture of Self*, Cuzco, 1948
Gelatin silver print, 25.4 × 25.7 cm © The Irving Penn Foundation.

About the artist

Irving Penn was born in 1917 to immigrant parents in Plainfield, New Jersey. Penn attended the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Arts from 1934–38, where he studied drawing, painting, graphics and industrial arts under Alexey Brodovitch. His first photographic cover for *Vogue* magazine appeared in October 1943, and he would continue to work at the magazine throughout his career. In the 1950s, he founded his own studio in New York and began taking advertising photographs alongside his private, experimental work, including the *Nudes* series. In the early 1970s, Penn closed his Manhattan studio and immersed himself in platinum printing in the laboratory he had constructed on the family farm on Long Island. There, he created his groundbreaking *Cigarettes* series, which was shown in his first exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1975, as well as his *Street Material* series, shown at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York in 1977.

The first retrospective of Penn's work was organised by The Museum of Modern Art, New York in 1984 and toured internationally to countries including Japan, France, Spain, Germany, Sweden, Israel, Italy and the UK. He donated his archives to the Art Institute of Chicago in 1995, and established The Irving Penn Foundation in 2005 to promote knowledge and understanding of his artistic legacy, including the diversity of techniques, mediums and subject matter that he explored. Recent exhibitions of the artist's work include *Irving Penn: Beyond Beauty* at the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. (2015); *Irving Penn: Underfoot* at Tate Modern, London (2019–20); and *Irving Penn, Chefs d'œuvre de la collection de la MEP*, Les Franciscaines, Deauville, France (2023). In 2017, on the 100th anniversary of the artist's birth, *Irving Penn: Centennial* opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, before travelling to the RMN - Grand Palais, Paris (2017); C/O Berlin (2018); the Instituto Moreira Salles, São Paulo (2018); and de Young Museum, San Francisco (2024).

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