



Sex, art and Euro-American culture

## Description

# Legendary photographer Horst soars in Montreal exhibition

By Robert Kilborn

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It started in London. It will soon move on to Rotterdam, and then Düsseldorf. But at Montreal's McCord Museum until Aug. 23, you can experience the frisson of fashion, elegance, sex and glamour that runs like an electric current through a rare exhibition of the art of Horst P. Horst, one of the 20th century's most important and influential fashion and portrait photographers.



No, not Madonna in her Vogue video. The Mainbocher Corset first appeared in Paris Vogue in 1939. © Condé Nast / Horst Estate.

You may recognize the Mainbocher Corset image on the left, a photo that first appeared in the pages of Vogue in 1939. It, among other photos shot by Horst for Vogue, was appropriated by Madonna and inspired the singer's Hollywood Golden Era poses in her classic Vogue video. Fashion passes, but elegance, sex, and glamour remain. The images of Horst remain: Marlene Dietrich, Rita Hayworth, Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Bette Davis, Katharine Hepburn, as well as Salvador Dali, Coco Chanel, and half the aristocracy of Europe.

Horst joined Vogue in 1931, at a time when colour photography had begun to transform the pages of magazines. As objects of popular attention, movie stars displaced dukes and princesses. The first professional models and celebrity couturiers entered public consciousness. A glam revolution informed by high art was afoot.

Born in Germany in 1906, Horst studied applied arts in Hamburg. In 1930 he left for Paris to study under the architect Le Corbusier. In 1939 he settled in New York, and in 1943 enlisted in the U.S. Army and became an American citizen. His work, which eventually came to define a particularly American visual style, shows the influence of the Bauhaus ideals of modern design, the surrealism of 1930s Paris, Greco-Roman sculpture, Egyptian and other ancient art. His best-known photographs are often modern additions to the radiant glamour of aristocratic privilege and ritualized separatism found in the tradition of high-born portraiture from the very beginning of Western art in ancient Egypt, epitomized by the head of Nefertiti (ca. 1350 B.C.).

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In the first image, the model's corseted back has the chiseled solidity of Greek sculpture, yet is alive with a creamy sexuality. It is simultaneously inviting and distant. In the second image, Dietrich's sexual allure, intoxicating and dangerous, offers us the same attention to detailed symbolism as a medieval crucifixion. Note the image of a man contained by an egg-like shape on the chair-back, shadowed, wombed, and contained by the dominance of a cultural archetype: a woman who is both nature and artifice, masculine and feminine in broad-shouldered jacket and voile gloves, herself a polyvalent and androgynous work of art.



Dietrich's sexual allure: intoxicating and dangerous, New York, 1942. © Condé Nast / Horst Estate.

Horst's celebrity photographs and Vogue images have suffused the culture. Open any fashion or lifestyle magazine today, and you'll see the impact and traces of his influence. But there are other images from his 60-year career on display here.

He also created surrealist still lifes, and studies of natural forms such as flowers, minerals, shells and butterfly wings. These studies show his fascination with dynamic patterns, from which he then created kaleidoscopic collages. Horst intended these pattern manipulations as possible designs for textiles, wallpaper, carpets, plastics and glass.

In the 1940s and 1950s, he took photographs in Israel, Iran, Syria, Italy and Morocco that reflected his interest in ancient cultures, landscapes, and architecture. Beyond its formal beauty, his image of the Persepolis Bull, a vast sculpture head amidst the ruins of a once magnificent Persian palace, embodies a poetic monumentality that tells a story of the sad death of empires.

For a 1953 Paris exhibition, Horst created a series of dramatically lit male nudes that evoke classical sculpture.



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A selection of them is here, borrowed from the private collection of Elton John and David Furnish. In the 1960s and 1970s, for Vogue and House & Garden, he photographed the unique dwellings of, among many others, Andy Warhol, Yves Saint Laurent, and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. A large anthology of these colourful personality, home and image essays are here shown in projections and on interactive screens.

### **One of the great moments in the history of art**

Enthusiasts and aficionados will appreciate the many visual footnotes to the more than 250 vintage photographs featured in this exhibition: sketchbooks, archival films, contact sheets, original magazines, as well as eight haute couture dresses created by Chanel, Lanvin, Schiaparelli, and other celebrated designers.

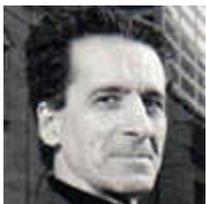
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Taken all together, Horst's imagery creates and reflects the tastes, concerns, and worlds of aspiration and desire of his time. His most memorable imagery transcends it. This touring exhibition, produced by London's Victoria and Albert Museum, is the first major retrospective of the photographer's work. It makes a strong case that Horst inhabits the same stratosphere of photographic achievement as his better-known peers Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Cecil Beaton.

There's a rich world of power, sensuality and visual intelligence to enjoy and learn from here. We can connect the dots of high and popular culture, fashion, travel, and décor in the work of a master of light, composition, atmosphere and sophistication who lived until 1999. And whatever certain art snobs may think, the history of fashion and portrait photography from the 1930s to the 1990s is one of the great moments in the history of art.

*Horst: Photographer of Style*, continues at the McCord Museum until Aug. 23. For more information, visit [musee-mccord.qc.ca](http://musee-mccord.qc.ca)

*Featured image: Contemporary retro? No, it's early supermodel Muriel Maxwell on the cover of American Vogue, July 1, 1939. © Condé Nast / Horst Estate.*



**Robert Kilborn** is a Montreal writer and creative advisor. He has written for publications including the *National Post*, the *Montreal Gazette*, *Whitehot Magazine of Contemporary Art*, *La Scena Musicale*, *Cult Montreal*, and *Tuck*. He is a former rock singer, English teacher, restaurant consultant, and General Manager of one of Canada's leading modern dance companies, *Anna Wyman Dance Theatre*. Contact him at [rkilborn@sympatico.ca](mailto:rkilborn@sympatico.ca)

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