

RICHARD AVEDON

Photographer of Influence



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Richard Avedon (1923-2004) was influential in many ways: his photographic innovations in fashion and portraiture set new precedents for those who followed him; he shaped his own legacy through exhibitions and publication of his work; he became known for depicting famous and powerful individuals on his own terms; and with his energy and charisma, he became a celebrity himself.



COVER

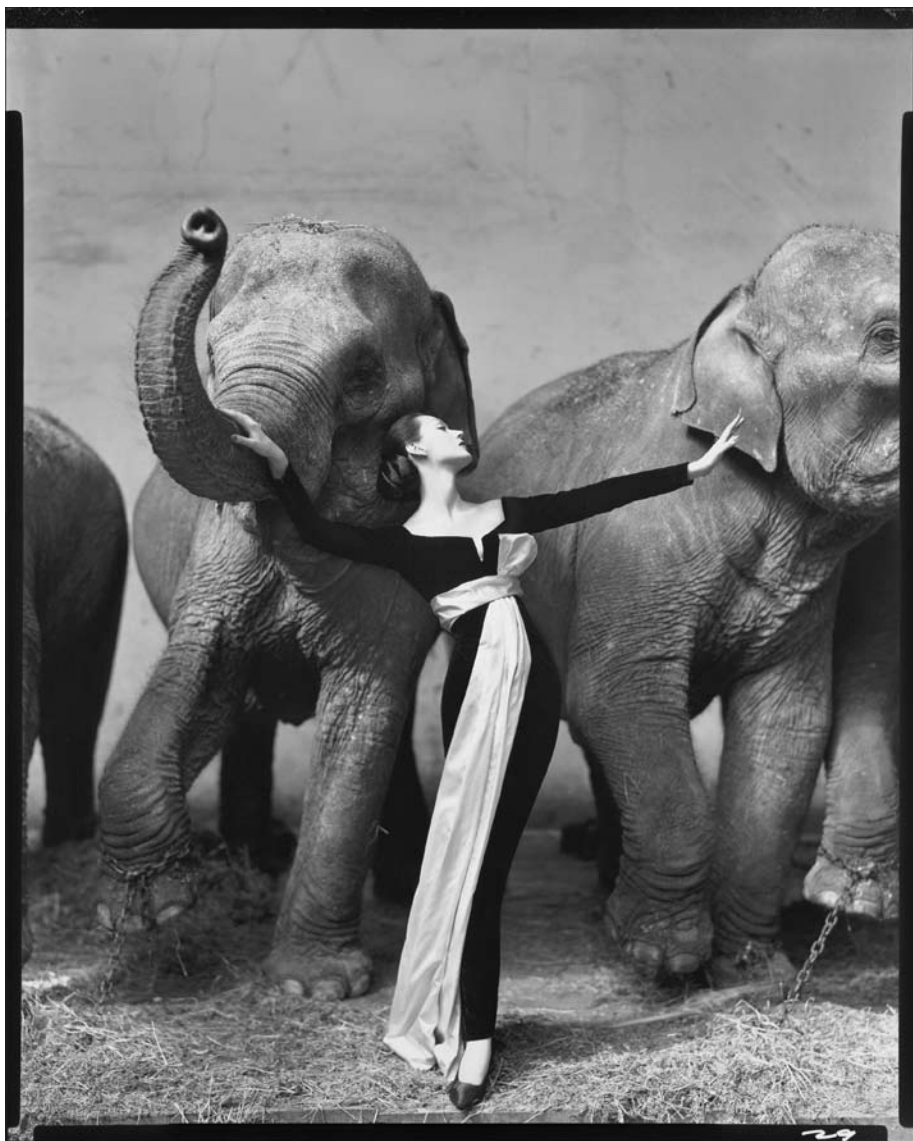
Richard Avedon, self-portrait, Provo, Utah, August 20, 1980.

ABOVE

Bob Dylan, musician, Central Park, New York, February 10, 1965.

In 1994, *American Photo* magazine named "Photography's Top 100," their assessment of the field's most important figures. Richard Avedon ranked number one. The entry about him enumerated the many facets of his long career. A caption beneath a portrait of the grinning photographer read, "In an era of superstar photographers, he is still the quintessential superstar."

Avedon first gained prominence as a fashion photographer, working for *Harper's Bazaar*, and then broadened his career to a wider photographic field, where his achievements included museum and gallery exhibitions, commissions for editorial and artistic projects, twelve publications, and sales of prints to private and public collections worldwide. *Richard Avedon: Photographer of Influence* is drawn from the Center for Creative Photography's Avedon collection. Bringing together examples of his fashion and portraiture, this exhibition suggests the breadth of Avedon's vast body of work and the range of his influence.



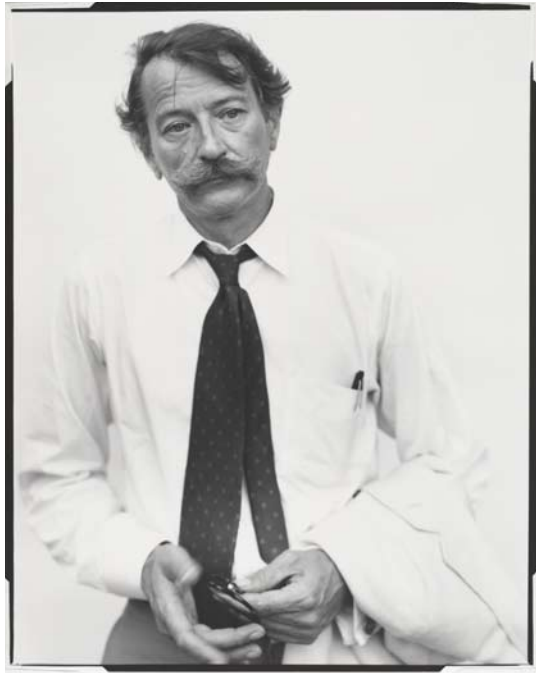
Dovima with elephants, evening dress by Dior, Cirque d'Hiver, Paris, August 1955.

MAGAZINE VERSUS MUSEUM

Magazines offer a particular viewing experience, one that combines intimacy and disposability. Most often we view magazines by ourselves, at our own pace, studying single images as long as we choose. A magazine is purchased and then shared, preserved, or discarded. Publishers serve up these images, but consumers are in control of their use.

Avedon's early success relied on his understanding of what his magazine readers wanted, which led him away from conventional images. When Avedon began working for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1945, most of his colleagues photographed models simply standing in a studio, posing in the newest fashions. They were, in essence, living mannequins. Avedon, by contrast, approached his models as actresses, creating glamorous scenes—of Paris nightlife, for instance—that invited readers vicariously to join his haute couture culture. The images appealed to readers interested in fashion's details—they feature clothing, jewelry, and shoes to great effect—but they also had a more lasting impact through their sophisticated compositions and narratives.

Avedon's magazine work was not limited to fashion spreads. He is among the greatest portraitists of the twentieth century, and he made many of these powerful pictures for the pages of periodicals such as *Rolling Stone*, the *New Yorker*, *Vogue*, and *Harper's Bazaar*. In striking contrast to his early fashion images, Avedon usually suppressed the background in his portraits. Indeed, his signature style eliminates the setting completely, placing his subject against a white backdrop, allowing facial expression, gesture, and stance to command the viewer's focus. In this way, Avedon's portraits not only document the appearance of famous actors, politicians, and artists, but also explore a dynamic range of emotion. The reward for studying these pictures is not to know what Marilyn Monroe or Bob Dylan looked like, but to see in them the evidence of deep feelings—hope, fear, joy, doubt, determination, or tenderness—that characterize human experience.



John Szarkowski, curator, New York, August 5, 1975.

The ephemeral nature of magazines and the intimate way we experience them are distinctly different than seeing a photograph in a museum setting. Art museums are public spaces and a photograph encountered there has been deemed culturally valuable. Photographic prints are framed (to protect and preserve them) and hung on the wall (to allow many people to view them), with a label designating the artist and the work's title. Visitors come to study the photographs themselves, and each work or suite of works must attract and hold attention for its visual qualities, rather than just

the information it conveys. The focus moves away from the picture's content to the artist's output, his creative contribution.



Avedon installing his first exhibition, the 1962 *Richard Avedon Retrospective* at the Smithsonian Institution.

Many of Avedon's museum and gallery exhibitions included both portraits and fashion photography initially produced for magazines, as well as personal work that emerged from his desire for artistic expression. Avedon was intimately involved in every aspect of these exhibitions, from selecting the works to deciding how they would be framed and hung. He worked closely with museum curators and

designers in considering wall color, print size, placement, and labeling. A particularly important instance of this involvement was initiated in 1979, when the Amon Carter Museum's director, Mitchell A. Wilder, engaged Avedon to undertake a series of portraits of people in the West. With the museum's sponsorship, Avedon was liberated from commercial pressures and could create photographs without regard for their appeal to a client or consumer. Perhaps he first exercised this freedom in his choice of subjects. He gravitated toward people not for their fame, accomplishment, or picturesque qualities, but for their emotive potential, the possible interest of their physical appearance, and their role within his imagined composite portrait of the American West. Interestingly, he applied the same pared-down, confrontational portrait style he had employed for his magazine work to this new art project, now using it to challenge mythic themes of democracy, heroism, and success.



In the American West is populated with unflinching portraits of people lost to American society: drifters, housekeepers, miners, bartenders, and slaughterhouse workers. Yet these ordinary individuals took on an extraordinary collective presence in the context of Avedon's exhibition, which opened in Fort Worth in 1985. At a time when typical fine-art photographs were no larger than 11 x 14 or 16 x 20 inches, Avedon chose to make huge prints; the largest single print was nearly seven feet tall and five and a half feet wide. The figures appear larger than life in some examples. Each of the show's 124 prints was mounted on aluminum, and unglazed, which exposed the surfaces to visitors for examination.



Avedon's work elicited a powerful response, and the exhibition provoked controversy. A local Fort Worth critic argued, "This is not our West," and others denounced the works as exploitive, cruel, and cynical. Huge crowds flocked to see for themselves. After its Texas debut, *In the American West* traveled to six cities—Washington, D.C., Chicago, Atlanta, Boston, San Francisco, and Phoenix (the Phoenix Art Museum was the show's only Southwestern venue). In 2005, the Amon Carter Museum revived *In the American West*, introducing these still-challenging portraits to a new generation. It circulated to four museums, including Tucson's Center for Creative Photography.

View of *In the American West* installed at the Center for Creative Photography, 2005.
Photograph by Center staff.

Cover of *In the American West* (1985).



THE ROLE OF TEXT

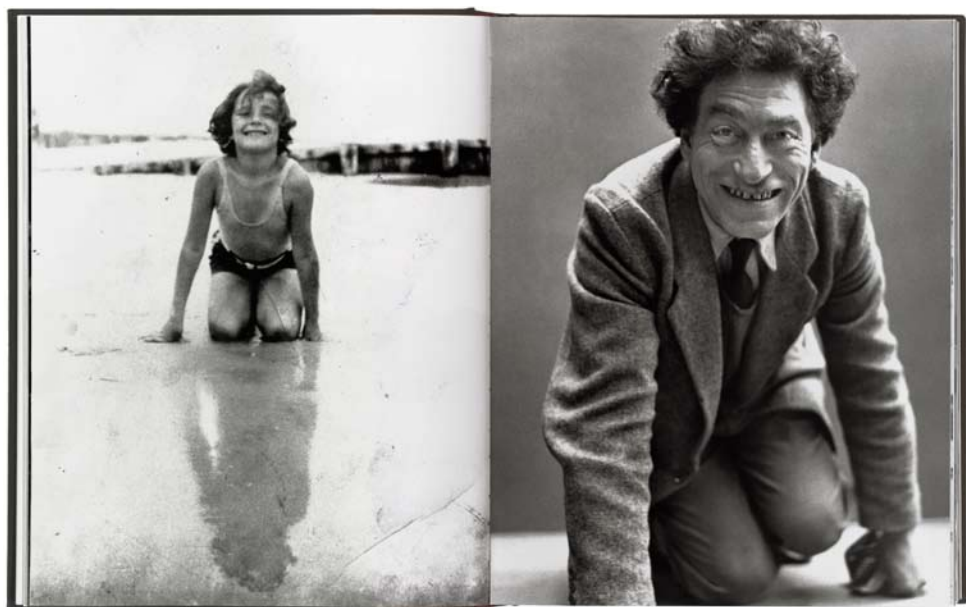
When Avedon first worked as a staff photographer at *Harper's Bazaar*, magazine editors routinely overlaid descriptive text upon the images. Caption and image worked together to convey information about the specific qualities of the garment displayed. One such caption described the Rosalie Macrini garment photographed by Avedon and published across two pages in the October 1961 issue of *Harper's Bazaar*: "Dahlia chiffon—sorcery pure and simple, delicate yet dynamic as a moving cloud. Two panels waft, as if wind-whipped, from the bodice; the skirt, when still, falls in gentle folds to the ground." Additional text explained where the dress could be purchased and who designed dancer Cyd Charisse's jewelry and shoes. Printed across a white area at the image's bottom, the caption interacts with the pictorial elements to emphasize the dress's dynamic qualities.

Beginning in 1959, Avedon explored another medium for sharing his work, collaborating with author Truman Capote and designer Alexey Brodovich on the photographic book *Observations*. During his career, Avedon went on to produce twelve books, each of them designed to his exacting specifications. Here, he could choose what was shown and how it was described. In most of his books Avedon captioned the images only with their titles, sometimes removing even that information to an index, perhaps in an effort to direct readers' focus to the visual language of the photograph. Most of the books contain a short essay; *Nothing Personal*, of 1964, the most political of Avedon's books, includes an essay by author and civil rights advocate James Baldwin; Avedon wrote his own statement for *In the American West* and his *Autobiography*. These writings, however, act as a literary component within a larger artistic work, and do not attempt to describe or explain individual works the way a magazine caption might.

Avedon not only took advantage of text to create meaning, but also considered image sequence as a key element in presenting his photographs. In *Autobiography* (1993), he blended family pictures, along with his reportage, fashion images, and portraits in a book he felt represented his life's work. In a two-page introductory statement, he talked about the pairing of images that on the surface may seem "to have no relationship to each other" but had a logical connection to the photographer. He also alluded to the nonlinear, nonchronological sequence he chose: he liked the quality of images that, in their seemingly jumbled presentation, acted "as echoes and fore-shadowings."

Photographic books straddle the worlds of museum and magazine. A book usually offers the intimate scale of a magazine, and allows for similar privacy, but presents photographs as works of art, just as a museum's sanction does. Avedon, however, undermined the intimate nature of the book by creating massive, weighty volumes. His images fill the large pages, the books are hefty and substantial, and most include hundreds of pictures. In this way he maintained a sense of the imposing presence his large prints command when hung on the wall. Avedon's books, each beautifully printed, are works of art, and have become collectible in their own right.

From early on Avedon understood that his life's work was about much more than creating pictures. He controlled the life of his images, casting them in magazines, exhibitions, and books, where he used size, sequencing, and text to shape their effect and meaning. During his lifetime, the photographer structured The Richard Avedon Foundation to protect his legacy. Though Avedon's career is complete, his influence extends as his photographs continue to appear in new magazines, books, and exhibitions.



Cyd Charisse, dancer, New York, June 9, 1961.

Two-page spread from Richard Avedon's *An Autobiography* (1993) showing (left) Louise Avedon, sister of Richard Avedon, Long Beach, New York, July 11, 1932, and (right) Alberto Giacometti, sculptor, Paris, March 6, 1958.

A LANDMARK PHOTOGRAPHY PARTNERSHIP

In 2006, Phoenix Art Museum and the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona in Tucson inaugurated a highly innovative and unprecedented collaboration to bring the finest in photography to Phoenix Art Museum visitors. It established a vibrant new photography exhibition program at the Museum, while bringing the Center's world-renowned collections to new and larger audiences.

The Center for Creative Photography is one of the world's largest repositories of materials chronicling photography. Founded in 1975, it now houses 3.8 million archival items and 80,000 fine prints by photographers including Ansel Adams, Edward Weston, Harry Callahan, Aaron Siskind, Frederick Sommer, W. Eugene Smith, Louise Dahl-Wolfe, and Garry Winogrand.

One of the nation's leading art museums, Phoenix Art Museum presents international exhibitions of the world's greatest art and features a collection that spans the centuries and the globe—American, Asian, Contemporary, European, Latin American, and Western American art, and fashion design. Not to be missed are the Thorne Miniature Rooms, the interactive family gallery PhxArt-Kids, great shopping and dining, and a variety of public events.

Now, through the combined efforts of these two organizations, Phoenix Art Museum visitors will experience unparalleled excellence in the field of photography in the Museum's new Doris and John Norton Gallery for the Center for Creative Photography.

Phoenix Art Museum
1625 North Central Avenue
(North Central Avenue and McDowell Road)
Phoenix, AZ 85004-1685
602-257-1222
www.phxart.org

Center for Creative Photography
University of Arizona
1030 North Olive Road
P.O. Box 210103
Tucson, AZ 85721-0103
520-621-7968
www.creativephotography.org

Phoenix Art Museum

CENTER FOR CREATIVE PHOTOGRAPHY

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