

**#30 June 2018 Cameraderie**  
**Irving Penn (1917-2009)**  
**Part I: Introduction and Portraits**



As I read about and study the work of great photographers, I have been sharing that in these columns. I have a very long list of names and topics. At last I have come to a modernist, and of such skill and variety that I am going to break up discussing him into a series of articles. All the images I will discuss are taken from the Irving Penn Foundation website:

<https://www.irvingpenn.org/artwork/>

I encourage you to look at all the images there, in the eight categories: Portraits, Small Trades, Still Life, Fashion, Beauty, Nudes, Travel, and Documentary. All are worth studying, and I am going to discuss the first five, in five articles. The website also has an excellent biography and chronology of Penn's life and work.

Here is the link to the Wikipedia article on Penn:

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irving\\_Penn](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irving_Penn)

Irving Penn was at first an artist, and later a photographer. His sense of artistic composition influenced all his photography. His photos are *very* composed.

About his artistic work, from the Irving Penn Foundation website:

As a young man, Penn harbored dreams of becoming a painter. He made a series of sketches for paintings, but he found his results to be disappointing and destroyed them. Despite this repudiation, in his work as a photographer, drawing continued to play an important role as he worked out an image and its composition.

After his retrospective exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art [1984], Penn returned to painting and drawing as a full-fledged creative endeavor. He even introduced elements from photography and printing to his painting practice, photographing a drawing to print in platinum, which he then used as a matrix for a painting.

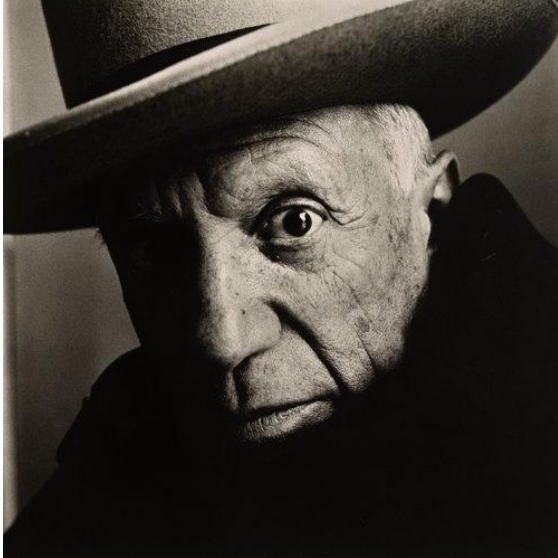
From the Wikipedia article:

Penn was among the first photographers to pose subjects against a simple grey or white backdrop and he effectively used this simplicity. Expanding his austere studio surroundings, Penn constructed a set of upright angled backdrops, to form a stark, acute corner. Subjects

photographed with this technique included Martha Graham, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso, Georgia O'Keeffe, W. H. Auden, and Igor Stravinsky.

Here are some of the images found on the Irving Penn Foundation website. Please go look at all of them in the Portrait category.

Pablo Picasso



A definitive portrait of the elder Picasso. Consider the lighting, with one eye looking straight at you and the other shrouded in near-black. This is the use of light and shadow at its best; it is heightened by Picasso wrapping himself in a black cloak. Cutting off the hat brings us within touching distance of the great painter, perhaps closer than the modern term, "comfort zone."

Salvador Dali



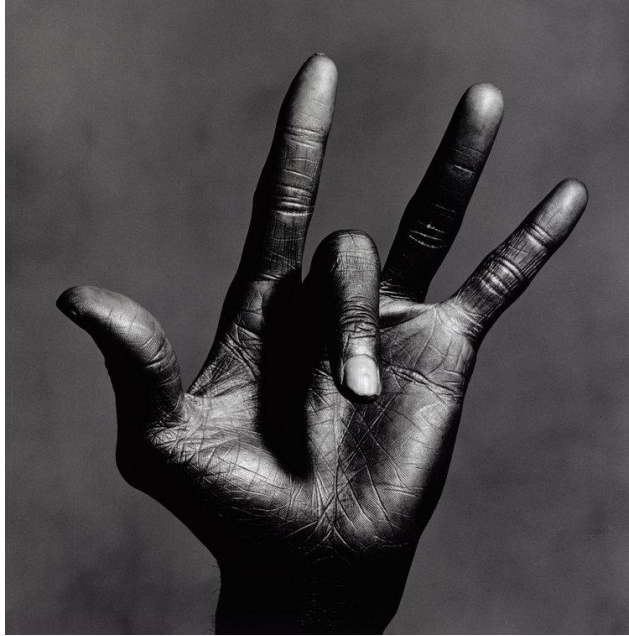
One of Penn's portrait techniques was to place his subjects in a confined V-shaped compartment. This required them to react to the space, with interesting or even surprising results. Salvador Dali (see #26, Feb. 2018) deliberately opened his entire body as widely as possible in contradiction to the confined space. Dali, an artist, must have been acutely aware of Penn's compositional framework and determined to oppose it.

Tennessee Williams



I find this portrait interesting because it cuts off Williams's head. Why is that? I think it is taken with a wide-angle lens, giving a slight distortion to Williams's left eyebrow and forehead. It suggests that Williams's head is cut open by the frame and is exploding with uncontrollable ideas. Williams's composed façade is contradicted by a composition that suggests that his brain is open to the sky and spilling out the inner tensions so evident in his plays.

The Hand of Miles Davis



The famous trumpeter's middle finger is flexed in a playing position, conveying his mastery of his instrument, with neither man nor instrument present. This is one of the finest "hand" portraits I have ever seen. Note the controlled lighting, indicated by the soft shadow of the bent middle finger. I don't know trumpet, so I cannot tell what note Davis is playing—do you?