

#32 September 2018 Cameraderie
Irving Penn (1917-2009)
Part III: Still Lives



This is the third of five articles on Irving Penn. The previous, #30 and #31, were about his Portraits and Small Trades portraits. This article covers his Still Life work.

Just as reminder, this is 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 discussing 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

From the Irving Penn Foundation website:

Underpinning all of Penn's work as a photographer is his special talent in the still life genre, to which he applied his signature resolve to prune away anything that did not contribute to the picture. From his earliest work at *Vogue* through to his latest series of personal work, this resulted in powerful images that invite contemplation with their acute awareness of objects and their placement.

Penn's still life compositions are sparse and highly organized, assemblages of food or objects that articulate the abstract interplay of line and volume. Penn's photographs are composed with a great attention to detail.

Penn frequently included elements of *memento mori* and selected subject matter that could, at first glance, seem unworthy of close examination, which give his images a "bite" that lingers. [*Memento mori*: an object serving as a warning or reminder of death, such as a skull. Latin: "remember that you have to die." It is the Medieval Latin Christian theory and practice of reflection on mortality, especially as a means of considering the vanity of earthly life and the transient nature of all earthly goods and pursuits.]

After-Dinner Games, New York, 1947



This blithely-named image is not a happy scene. I can spot Chess, Checkers, Cards, Gaming Chips, Dice, and a Backgammon doubling-cube. But the scene also contains the evidence of after-dinner toxicity: caffeine, alcohol, and tobacco—the last of which adds filth to the scene—a suggestion of rot and disintegration. The entire story of human frailty and poor choices is told in this scene, which shows neither a human nor humanity, but conveys its idea through a tabletop assemblage. Reference the Penn portrait two months ago of Miles Davis's hand, which showed neither the man nor his instrument, but certainly explained the person.

Have a look also at how this image fulfills the ideas explained in the quote above from the Irving Penn Foundation. There are three dice, three cards, three chips—certainly planned. Also note two dice with fives total ten, and single die showing four and six total ten—not a coincidence. I looked up the ace of hearts as a symbol in literature, but each author seems to make of it something different—no doubt Penn chose it consciously, but I am not sure why. The black knight may derive from the unknown knight in the Arthurian legend, and may symbolize death. The chess knight is also a magical piece, the only one that can fly over other pieces.

Ripe Cheese, New York, 1992



The title is “Ripe Cheese,” but I think it is just at the point of becoming over-ripe, and beginning to smell a bit too strongly. Likewise, the fruit is beginning to show some blemishes of over-ripeness. Without showing a skull, Penn tells us that everything rots and dies. Don’t miss the ant, a common artistic symbol of decay and decomposition. Reference Salvador Dali’s profuse use of ants in his paintings. Penn would be familiar with this symbolism and Dali’s use of it. A circle of light from above both defines the table top with an arc in the background, and casts shadows on the right side of the fruit and cheese. Notice that the shadow of the fruit is sharper than the shadow of the cheese—that means the light source is very close to the fruit, maybe just out of the frame a few inches. There might be an additional spotlight putting the glint on the oozing cheese.

I would like to know if the ant is real or plastic.

Since this shot was taken in New York, that means that in 1992 runny cheese like this was available outside of France (yum—I like my runny French cheese a little overripe).

Rose ‘Blue Moon’, London, 1970



A friend of mine always does his flower photographs with a few decaying petals. Perhaps we all learned this from Penn. I don't know if Penn originated or popularized this, but the signs of decay are typical Penn. I think this is backlit, making the petals a bit translucent, and simultaneously giving deeper color to the rotting petals.

Frozen Foods with String Beans, New York, 1977



I just like this for its complete originality.