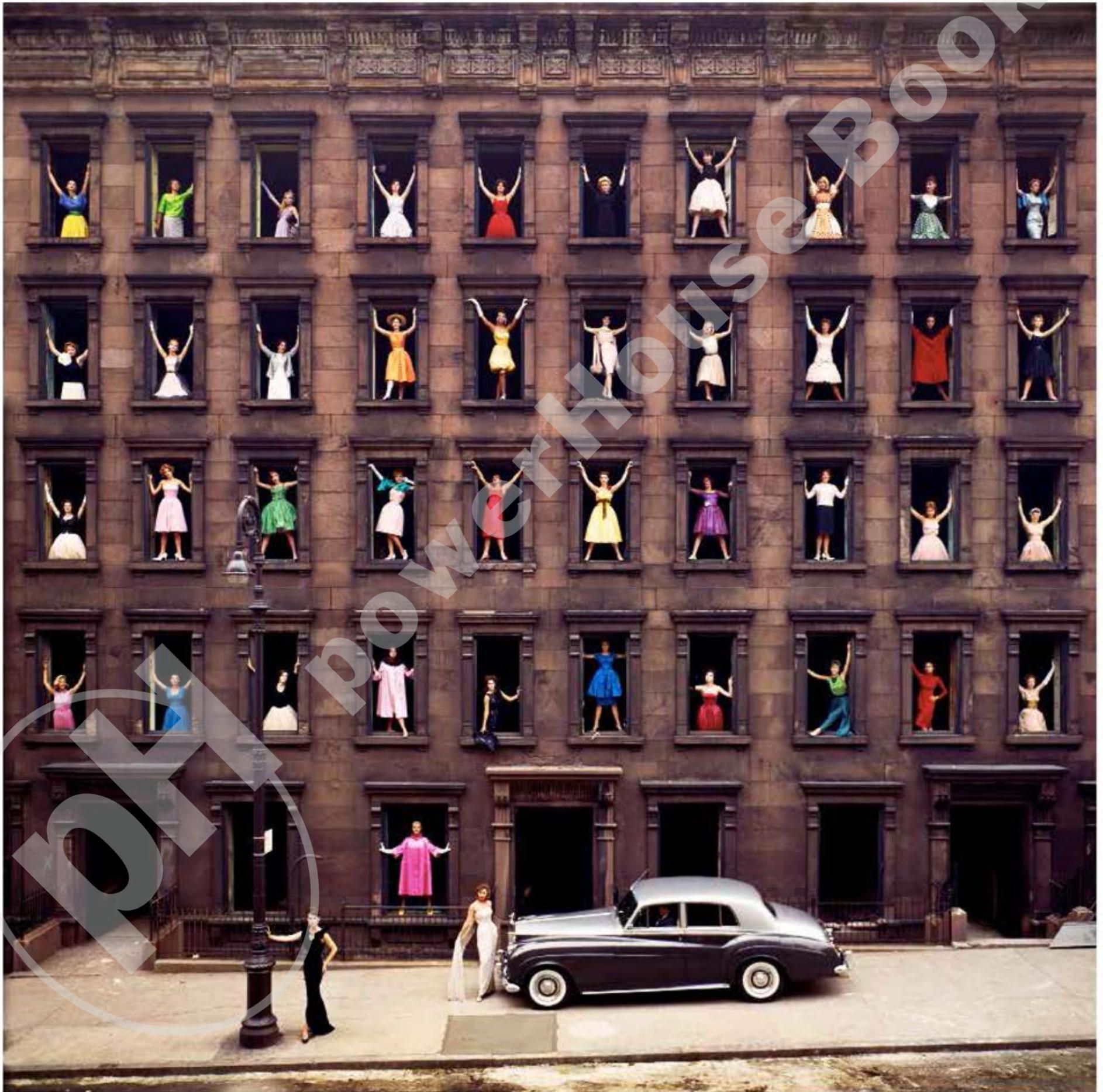


ORMOND GIGLI  
GIRLS IN THE WINDOWS  
AND OTHER STORIES



# GIRLS IN THE WINDOWS AND OTHER STORIES

by Ormond Gigli

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CAROL HANEY AND ORMOND GIGLI, 1954



ORMOND GIGLI  
GIRLS IN THE WINDOWS  
AND OTHER STORIES

Introduction by Christopher Sweet  
Afterword by Marla Hamburg Kennedy

POWERHOUSE BOOKS, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

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Gigli

## INTRODUCTION BY CHRISTOPHER SWEET

Ormond Gigli had an illustrious career as a commercial photographer and photojournalist over the course of some forty years and took many magnificent photographs, but one photograph has eclipsed all the others. It was a photograph he conceived for himself, without an editorial assignment. It is the incomparable *Girls in the Windows* of 1960. This photograph is his signature image and has become an icon of postwar photography and of postwar New York. It is a powerful image made at the height of the Mad Men era, at a moment when New York City was in the midst of dynamic changes and on the verge of social upheaval, and occurring relatively early in Gigli's career, at the point when he comes fully into his own as a photographer.

Ormond Gigli was born and raised in New York City and came from a hard-working family of modest means. Through hard work and talent and focus he would earn his way through life. He discovered photography as a young teenager. His father had borrowed money to give him his first camera. Upon developing his first photographs he discovered his métier, his vocation in life, and he would devote himself to photography thereafter. In high school he worked as a photography assistant after school and then as a Navy photographer during the war. Upon his return to civilian life, he would launch his career as a freelance photographer. By the early 1950s he had published his first assignment in *Life* magazine and his photographs would soon become a regular presence in the pages and on the cover of *Life* as well as *Time* magazine. He would also be a frequent contributor to *Collier's*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and many other publications. He would enjoy the special status and perks that were showered on photographers, writers, and editors of Time-Life in the postwar heyday of that company.

In 1960 Gigli bought a brownstone on East 58th Street, between Second and First Avenues, just to the east of one of the entry ramps to the Queensboro Bridge. He would build his studio on the garden and street level, and he and his family would live on the second floor. There were three apartments on the top three floors and he planned to divide each of them into two, and rent out the apartments to help pay the mortgage. When he bought the building the tenant on the top floor just happened to be Marcel Duchamp, the doyen of Dada and Modernist master. Duchamp did not want to leave the apartment, saying that climbing the stairs kept him young, but when the renovations began on the floors below his, he changed his mind and moved elsewhere.

Across the street from Gigli's house stood a row of brownstones from the previous century. The original residents had long since moved on and the houses had fallen into decline and been carved up into warrens of apartments to let. By 1960, however, New York's postwar building boom was on in earnest and the shabby brownstones were primed for destruction. With the grand thoroughfare of East 57th Street one block south, the landlord scheduled the buildings for demolition to make way for an apartment building. These brownstones filled the view from Gigli's house. At one point he was looking across the street at the desolate brownstones, emptied of the former tenants, and in that curious intermediate state, poignant as an ancient ruin, he was moved to somehow memorialize the doomed, empty houses. He saw all of a sudden what he would do. He envisioned glamorous women filling the windows. The façade would be an elaborate frame, from cornice to curb, for a dazzling array of fashionable ladies. He would add the flourish of a Rolls Royce pulled up onto the sidewalk before the center building for an additional note of old-world glamour. It was a photograph without commission or assignment but pure inspiration.

Gigli sought to preserve for posterity a slice of old New York that had formed the view from the front of his house. However briefly he had lived there, it was a façade in many permutations that would be well known to a New Yorker, the backdrop to many memories. His insight was to turn the empty façade of the buildings into a set piece for living figures, its windows into multiple stages for his model-collaborators to present themselves. It is an entirely staged composition, its structure dependent upon the brief state between gutting and final demolition of the building. It pretends to no narrative, but to document its own reality, it is a picture of an “event” that occurred entirely for the purpose of the photograph. It is a sort of modernist theater, a kind of “happening,” as Gigli’s wife suggested. All the participants came as themselves.

Looking at the photograph, *Girls in the Windows*, the old brownstones fill the image. The sky is cropped out. The cornice contains the upward motion. The space before the building, of sidewalk and gutter, forms a shallow stage to heighten the sense of the façade as a kind of bas relief. The doorways themselves are off center with respect to the buildings, set to the left of the base of each building with two windows to the side and then four uniform windows on each of the four floors above the ground floor. To achieve the general symmetry, the composition is centered on the doorway of the middle building. And the doorways of the buildings on either side anchor the lower left and lower right corners. And so we see the full façades of two buildings and half the façade of the building to the right. The fenestration seems as if it would stretch to the left and right beyond the picture frame as far as a city block. The upper story windows, a grid of forty windows, are each filled with a model, a woman dressed formally in colorful, elegant attire. As a base to the dominant grid and to balance the off center element of the lamppost and the slightly distorted line of the curb, the photographer positioned one model in the only ground floor window to be filled, just to left of center, and two models on the sidewalk along with the limousine (and driver). A model in a black gown drapes the lamppost while another in a white gown adorns the Rolls Royce—as if a hood ornament come to life. This grouping activates the foreground and leads to the rhythms above. It reminds us of the essential linkage of the sidewalk and street to the buildings that line those streets.

The photograph is Gigli’s *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, alluding to Piet Mondrian’s masterpiece of 1943. And from there one thinks of Ellsworth Kelly’s *Colors for a Large Wall* of 1951, and onto Andy Warhol’s grids of Marilys and Jackies in the early 1960s—or perhaps more aptly his *Ethel Scull 36 Times* of 1963. Given the fact of Duchamp’s tenancy, his *Fresh Widow* of 1920 also comes to mind. The photograph resonates in powerful ways. Aside from the rhythms and energy of the colorful figures arranged across the façade, the window itself has long been a motif of art, indeed, the very premise of pictorial art since Leon Battista Alberti wrote in 1435: “Let me tell you what I do when I am painting...on the surface I draw a rectangle of whatever size I want, which I regard as an open window through which the subject to be painted is seen.” For the Romantics in the early nineteenth century the theme of figures in windows, framed by windows, became a compelling subject. However, the viewer was invariably inside, behind the figure, looking out over the shoulder to the world beyond. The room is the realm of intimacy and familiarity, safety and convention, perhaps entrapment, while the vista suggests the unfulfilled longings of poetry, manifold possibilities, a realm of freedom. In any case the window offers communication—spiritual, intellectual, emotional—to something greater, something desirable on the outside, in the world beyond.

In Gigli’s photograph we look to the windows from outside. The interior has been rendered opaque, unreadable, uninhabitable, as with Duchamp’s *Fresh Widow*, where the panes of the facsimile French window are blacked out with leather sections. The gutted rooms behind the women in the windows are in essence blacked out, closed off, almost menacing in their obscurity. The windowed façade is the margin between interior and exterior, it is the zone between past and future—the window sills are thresholds. Interestingly, Gigli has in a sense put into practice Duchamp’s statement: “I used the idea of the window to take a point of departure... I could have made twenty windows with a different idea in each one.” Gigli brings forty-one ideas to the widowed windows. The interior behind the women represents a past which cannot be regained, though perhaps wistfully remembered. They are poised on the threshold, on the brink of no return. They look and open their arms to the future. The past is void, the moment and the future are everything.

*Girls in the Windows* is an image made at a decisive moment in the life of New York City. It is the moment when the waning values of the nineteenth century at last gave way to Modernism and indeed contemporaneity. The conservative, conformist 1950s period is the last gasp before the revolutionary social changes of the 1960s and beyond. Imbued with a sense of promise and pathos, *Girls in the Windows* is an image of that threshold, the transitional state of urban and social transformation that is New York City. The wrecking balls are all over the city, and the promise of the future is great, but the consequences cannot all be foreseen and some are inevitable. Within a few days of the taking of the photograph, the site was a rubble-strewn lot. The buildings and the people who lived there are long gone, the building that replaced them is now in middle age. Those who gathered for an hour or so for the photograph dispersed and never reunited. In recent years the photographer sold his house across the street and retired to his farm in the Berkshires. Brownstones which had once been symbols of middle class prosperity and then became emblematic of urban decay have now circled back to become once again proud symbols of wealth and status. We live in a state of constant change, but the photograph *Girls in the Windows* is forever.

## HOME & ABROAD

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I was living in Paris in the early 1950s when my career got under way with my first published assignment in *Life* magazine. From then on, I was like a night watchman, going out every evening, sometimes returning home at dawn. And I began to work for *Paris Match* and other French and German magazines. A year into my stay in Paris my father died and so I grabbed my cameras and some photographs and headed home to stay with my mother for a while, as I was an only child. I thought it would be for a couple of months, but my career blossomed in New York. A French photographic agency that I worked with in Paris, Rapho, had a New York office called Rapho Guillumette and they agreed to represent me. I continued working for *Life* in New York and then also for *Time*, *The Saturday Evening Post*, and *Collier's*, and many others. My shooting schedule was so full, I decided that though Paris was tempting, success in New York was too great to ignore. One of the first jobs I got when back was to photograph Williston Basin for *Time*. It was quite a change to go from the City of Light to an oil town on the Great Plains as winter is coming on. *Time* wanted to see what I could accomplish, and I wanted to deliver the goods. One day I was going to drive out into the boondocks to shoot a cattle ranch or something. I was told that in the back of the rental car were a blanket, a metal pipe, and a can of Sterno. If it started snowing and I got stuck, I was to stay in the car, and someone would find me in a day or two, according to the rental agent. I understood what the blanket was for and the Sterno, but what about the pipe? He told me I should open the window and stick the pipe out through the snow so the Sterno would have oxygen to burn. I was a little nervous after that, but I needed it to be a successful assignment and did what I had to do. Fortunately, I didn't get snowed in. —O.G.



NUNS, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL, 1955



BARCELOS, PORTUGAL, 1952

MOROCCO, FOR *TIME*, 1968

*Time* magazine called me up one day and asked if I would like to go to Morocco and photograph it as the new "in" place in the world to go. Or they said I could go on a safari. I said forget the safari, I want to go to Morocco. They wanted me to take someone along who could take notes and suggested I bring my wife, Sue. So off we go to Morocco where we meet a reporter who lived there, a stringer for *Time*. He had done all the research on the best hotels, best restaurants, the best of everything, and that's where we stayed, where we ate, and where we photographed. We started out in Rabat and went all over. We had a wonderful time. I got six pages in the magazine.



## FORM & FASHION

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My earliest professional work as a photographer involved fashion. In 1941, at the age of seventeen, I got a job in the afternoons, after school was out, working for the *Ladies' Home Journal*. I worked as a photo assistant to Wilhela Cushman who was the fashion editor there. We used an apartment on East 79th Street, which I had located for the purpose, as our studio. Some of the top models of the day would be sitting around in that apartment waiting for their turn to be photographed. We usually wouldn't get started until around six o'clock and sometimes we would go to eleven o'clock or even one o'clock at night. Sometimes Mrs. Cushman would get carried away and say, "Ormond, call Mr. Goldfarb, I want hundreds of sunflowers." I would say, it's one o'clock in the morning, and she'd say she didn't care, call him at home. If nothing else, it taught me that if you needed something, you go after it, there is no time to be shy. The work also exposed me to good taste and a sense of quality. Quite a few times we would be driving along in her limousine and she would see a girl on the street who looked attractive, and we would stop and she would tell me to go get the girl. I would rush out after the girl and explain the situation and bring her to Mrs. Cushman in the car. Mrs. Cushman would usually say, "No, you won't do."

The war intervened and I ended up as a navy photographer. When I got back to New York in 1945, the *Ladies' Home Journal* somehow learned I was out of the service and let me know that they would like me to come work for them again. But I knew I would have a problem with Mrs. Cushman again about credit. I had been doing all the lighting, setting up the shoots, the cameras, and handing Mrs. Cushman the cable release, then she would snap the picture. Then I would change the film and reset everything. I stayed with them for about six months and never got credit, so I moved on.

I was living the life of a starving artist in Paris in the early 1950s and it was a beautiful place to be. I was staying in a cheap hotel in Porte de Saint-Cloud. At one point I was up in the attic developing pictures I had taken on a trip to Spain and Portugal and it was freezing cold. Finally, I felt I had to give it a try and so I went to *Life* magazine's Paris bureau. I saw the bureau chief there, John Jenkisson, and showed him my work. He said to me, "When I send Robert Capa on an assignment he never does what I ask him to. If I say I want a straight portrait, I get a profile. I don't mind getting profiles, if I'd also get a straight portrait. If I give you an assignment, will you give me what I ask for?" I said yes as long as I could inject my own thoughts into the picture. He tells me he will see what he can dig up for me. So I get on the Métro and head back to my hotel, and as I walk in, the concierge tells me that *Life* magazine just telephoned. I call them back and they have an assignment for me. I get on the Métro and head back to *Life* and they ask me to photograph the French fashion openings and the "new look" for the season. Schiaparelli, Dior, Fath, and all. I had four photographs published in *Life* magazine, in the "centerfold," in March 1952. And that was really the beginning of my career. — O.G.



NORMA KAMALI, FOR NEWSWEEK, 1978



WOMAN WITH SWANS, 1960

This was an outtake from a car advertising campaign I was working on. The shoot took place near Fort Lauderdale. The model is wearing a very expensive Pauline Trigère dress I had borrowed from the designer. She is walking across the pond on submerged cinder blocks and the swans were tied so they couldn't swim away or ripple the surface of the water, which was supposed to show the car reflected. The swans didn't move, the model didn't fall in the water, everything went well.

FAMOUS FORD MODELS, 1966

I asked Eileen Ford to photograph her top models in a group portrait. I had to set up very carefully in advance as I had to do it quickly, since the girls were doing Eileen a favor and were anxious to get it done and go. I spread a huge cloth, painted like the sky, on the floor and up the rear wall, and then pre-lit the studio for six in the evening when they all showed up. Thirty-five of the most beautiful women in the world suddenly walk into the studio. I had their places marked and they took their positions. I had boxes and cushions and such to even out the distribution of figures, so no one was blocked. It all took place in less than an hour. The girls were from all over the world and the photograph was picked up by a lot of magazines—in Germany, Italy, everywhere. It was a very successful picture. It stands out for me as one of my best, along with *Girls in the Windows*.





LOUIS ARMSTRONG, FOR "HOW  
THE OTHER HALF BATHES," *TIME*, 1971

Mrs. Armstrong said in the article,  
"Redecorating this room made the rest of  
the house look so shabby that I had to  
redecorate everything."

MARLENE DIETRICH, FOR *THIS WEEK*, 1954

This photo ran on the cover of *This Week*, a newspaper supplement.





JAYNE MANSFIELD, 1956



HELEN PARTELLO, 1958

Helen was a girl of the moment who had appeared in a couple of Italian movies but was actually from California. The photographs ran in *Nugget*, a men's magazine of the time. The article accompanying the photographs quoted an unnamed photographer as saying that she had the face of an innocent schoolgirl, while the director Vittorio De Sica said she had the face of a perfect delinquent. She was pretty alright.

SOPHIA LOREN, ROME, 1955





LIZA MINNELLI AT THE HALSTON BOUTIQUE, MADISON AVENUE, NEW YORK, 1968



BARBRA STREISAND IN *FUNNY GIRL*, FOR  
"THE GIRL," *TIME*, 1964

After photographing Barbra onstage with the full cast for two hours after the performance—until one-thirty in the morning—I then photographed her in her dressing room. When we finished, she said, "Let's have a bottle of champagne." Then she announced, "Now I have to leave for my party, two hundred people are expecting me." I said, "Do you think they'll still be there at this hour?" She said, "They'll be there!"



HALSTON AT BERGDORF GOODMAN, FOR "POSH PLACE FOR FASHION," *THE SATURDAY EVENING POST*, 1962

MARCEL DUCHAMP AND XANTI SCHAWINSKY,  
NEW YORK, 1961

When I bought my building on East 58th Street in New York, Marcel Duchamp, the great Dada artist renowned for his painting *Nude Descending a Staircase, No. 2*, had the entire top floor. I had to get him out as I needed to divide the floor into two apartments in order to get a mortgage. While he really liked the apartment and didn't want to leave, once construction began, he left. Duchamp devoted his life to art and playing chess. Having given up painting and sculpture he made a living advising art collectors, but spent most of his time at the chess board. He was a good friend of Xanti's and I took many photographs of the two artists at their favorite pastime.



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