SESSION 12 · UNIT 2 — LIGHT & PERSON · Dec 08, 2026

Irving Penn & Richard Avedon

Penn 1917–2009 · American — Avedon 1923–2004 · American

Directing a portrait subject — the psychology of the sitting



Corner Portraits · Irving Penn, 1948

"A portrait is not a likeness. The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion."

— Richard Avedon, Evidence: 1944–1994, 1994

KEY WORKS

- Corner Portraits, 1948 — subjects wedged into a tight studio corner, stripped of environment (Penn)
- Cuzco Children, Peru, Dec. 1948 — shot in a borrowed tent studio on assignment for Vogue (Penn)
- In the American West, 1979–1984 — a commissioned survey of working people across the rural West (Avedon)
- Marella Agnelli, New York, Dec. 1953 — the portrait that helped define mid-century fashion photography (Avedon)

CONTEXT

Irving Penn and Richard Avedon photographed many of the same faces for the same magazines in the same New York decades, and they're still taught as the twin poles of studio portraiture. Penn built a nearly bare set — a plain backdrop, or two studio flats angled into a tight corner — and let the confinement do the work; a sitter folded into that corner, he found, often revealed more than they meant to. Avedon worked against a similarly blank white background but pushed in the opposite direction, directing sitters into motion, gesture, and unguarded expression, coaxing a performance out of the pose rather than a confinement. Between them — controlled stillness versus directed movement — is close to the full range of what "directing a portrait subject" can mean.

WHY THIS PHOTOGRAPHER

Penn's corner and Avedon's white backdrop strip away almost everything except the sitter and the direction they were given — which is exactly what's being asked of you today. Before you can direct a partner's portrait, you have to decide: are you asking for stillness and confinement, like Penn, or movement and gesture, like Avedon? Neither is the "correct" way to direct a sitting — but you have to choose one on purpose.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Penn's subjects are confined into a corner with nowhere to move; Avedon's are given a blank white field and told to move freely. Which would reveal more about you as a subject — and which would you rather direct, as the photographer?
2. A portrait is a negotiation between what the subject wants to show and what the photographer is asking for. Where's the line between directing a sitting and putting words in someone's mouth?

MORE IMAGES



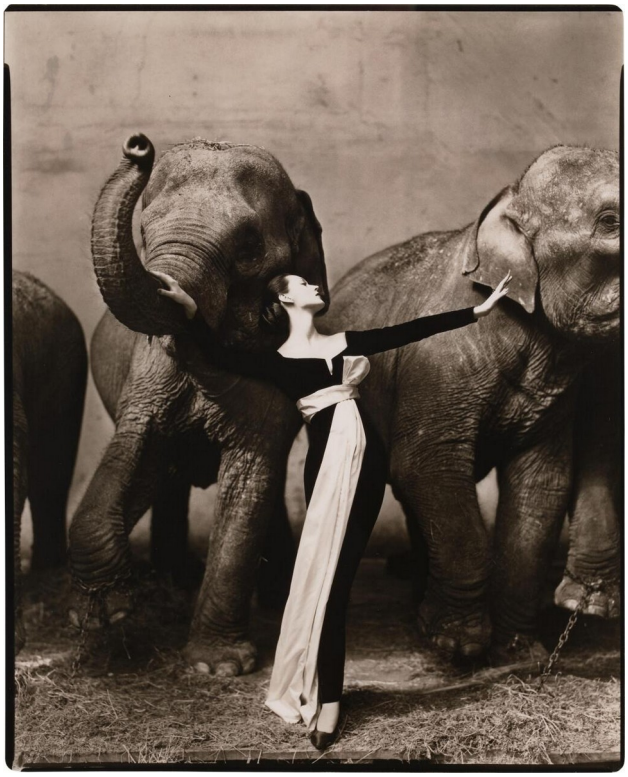
Cuzco Children, Peru · Irving Penn, Dec. 1948



Flowers series (poppies) · Irving Penn



Worlds in a Small Room, Morocco · Irving Penn, 1974



Dovima with Elephants, Evening Dress by Dior · Richard Avedon, 1955



In the American West · Richard Avedon, 1979–84



Marella Agnelli, New York · Richard Avedon, 1953