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In the autumn of 1994, thanks to a joint initiative by Philippe Daverio, Leonardo Mondadori, and Gianni and Santo Versace, an opportunity arose at Palazzo Reale to host a major retrospective, entitled 'Evidence 1944-1994', recounting 50 years of work by one of the greatest photographers of the twentieth century, Richard Avedon.

The project was international in scope because it involved three European institutions, the Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Palazzo Reale in Milan, and London's National Portrait Gallery, and also two American institutes: the Whitney Museum of American Art, the driving force behind the project, and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

The Palazzo Reale exhibition ran from 18 January until 5 March, and was an incredible hit with the public, with more than 80,000 visitors.

Thinking back now to that event, many years later, we are convinced that that show helped to enrich Palazzo Reale's cultural mission, even though work on restoring the formal rooms, and the Hall of Caryatids, had not even begun back then.

Primarily, this was the moment when the idea began to gain ground of devoting some of our scheduled events to foregrounding the language of photography, which, up until then, had only been featured sporadically, and on an occasional basis. From that time on, the decision to present major photography exhibitions became more and more a part of our planning and scheduling.

Secondly, that exhibition made it possible to commence a profound and long-running relationship with the world of fashion, which represented – and continues to represent – a strong aspect of Milan's identity.

As I accompanied Avedon on his preparatory visits to Palazzo Reale, I realized that he was fascinated by the state of many of the first floor rooms at the time, which were rather run-down, truth to tell (there is a documentary, *Darkness and Light*, made by Helen Whitney, in part dedicated to that exhibition, which testifies to the condition of the spaces). The visit to those rather dilapidated interiors was an illuminating experience for him, because he decided to display his more personal works there, especially the ones on Vietnam, and those belonging to the 'In the American West' project, financed by the Amon Carter Museum in Forth Worth, Texas. For this project he photographed prison convicts, tramps, circus performers, miners, slaughterhouse workers, in short a very different kind of humanity from gorgeous models and powerful members of the jet set. An ambitious project that was reminiscent of 'Face of our Time' by Germany's August Sander, Edward Curtis' works on Native American Indians, the works of Walker Evans on the Great Depression, and 'The Americans', by Robert Frank.

Great artists know how to take the various opportunities that come their way: they turn a probable problem into a definite opportunity. This had already happened with Pablo Picasso in 1953, who decided to loan Guernica for the exhibition at Palazzo Reale after seeing the condition of the Hall of Caryatids, scarred by the bombs of August 1943.

A generation has come and gone since then; many of the protagonists of that successful initiative are no longer with us. We are left with memories of Avedon, and his works, which are returning to Palazzo Reale, and to an Italy which, we must never forget, had a vital role in inspiring the famous white backgrounds in his photos. One need only look at the photos he took in 1946 in Piazza Navona, or his 1947 photographs in Noto and Palermo. Perhaps the only man before him to intentionally use a white background for his works was Egon Schiele.

Avedon was an innovator in many respects. He eliminated everything that was superfluous from the scene, to underscore the sole presence of the person being portrayed. This decision allowed him to give free rein to his formidable capacity for observation. He changed fashion photography for all time, by including, along the lines of the great Hungarian photographer Martin Munkacsi, today unjustly forgotten, movement in the fixed image, making it no longer static but instead something that was alive. Models were no longer statues dressed in beautiful clothes, they were real people. Characterful people, in many cases. Ever since childhood, in his father's clothing store, he used to cut out photographs by Munkacsi from fashion magazines, and put them on the walls of his bedroom. Later he would even surpass the master, by adding soul and emotion to movement, because a portrait photograph is the image of a person who knows they are being photographed, and so, in a session, the portrait is formed from the encounter of emotions between the subject and the photographer.

The precociousness of his huge talent made him a famous and much sought-after photographer. Indeed, he was the inspiration for the character of Dick Avery in the famous 1957 film *Funny Face*, featuring Fred Astaire and Audrey Hepburn. Despite the fact he was lionized by New York's high society, he never craved approval at all costs. If anything, the opposite was true. In 1955 he photographed the famous soprano Marian Anderson, who was banned from performing at Constitution Hall in Washington because she was black. Ten or so years later he ran into problems because he took the first photo of a black model published in a magazine.

One cannot imagine the history of photography without Richard Avedon. When he died, there was immediately a general feeling that an entire era was coming to an end, with his passing. It has been almost 20 years since his demise, and that feeling is now becoming a definite certainty.

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