

*Erwin Blumenfeld***BEASTSTYLE** 09.14.14

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## Vogue Photographer Erwin Blumenfeld: Secrets of a Fashion Legend

He was one of the highest-paid fashion photographers of the 1950s, and he committed suicide by inducing a heart attack. Now his family wants to remind the world of Erwin Blumenfeld's brilliance.

On July 4, 1969, in searing heat, the celebrated fashion photographer Erwin Blumenfeld ran up and down the Spanish Steps in Rome in a successful bid—so his family believes—to kill himself. The 71-year-old had not taken his heart medication, and he suffered a heart attack. He thought he had prostate problems, possibly cancer. By this time Blumenfeld's career was also in free fall—astonishing, because during the 1940s and '50s he was one of the most celebrated and highly paid fashion photographers in the world, creating magazine covers and spreads that were works of art.

In his long career, Blumenfeld photographed celebrities including Marlene Dietrich, Grace Kelly, Audrey Hepburn, the painter Henri Matisse, Bette Davis, the singer Josephine Baker, and Lucille Ball.

**GALLERY: Vogue Photographer Erwin Blumenfeld—Pictures of a Fashion Legend (PHOTOS)**



(C) The estate of Erwin Blumenfeld

The excellent Ovation documentary, *The Man Who Shot Beautiful Women*, produced by his grandson Remy Blumenfeld, reveals the colorful swathe of Blumenfeld's life, from growing up in Germany before the First World War, and his early, wildly creative collages that combined text and images, revealing the aesthetic direction his photography would later take.

One of my favorite early stories sees Blumenfeld share a public convenience stall with the Dada-ist George Grosz, who fixed a monocle in his eye and apparently pissed the outline of Blumenfeld's profile on to the pissoir's wall.

Blumenfeld's images were never conventional: models' heads were replicated, frames were split, mirroring devices were used, some features were accentuated over others. There was an element of the surreal to his portraits, and what's really noticeable is how the glossy magazines of the day—principally *Vogue* and *Harper's Bazaar*—embraced his work: today it would seem commercially self-sabotaging to feature the complex images he produced. No Kardashian coverlines, no hard sell on the clothes; the beautifully composed image was everything.

The documentary demonstrates how [his most famous work](#) have been imitated by fashion photographers ever since: the model Lisa Fonssagrives, holding on to the Eiffel Tower, for example, or the model Lisa Patchett's face reduced to an eyebrow, shadows, and pair of lips for a 1950 *Vogue* cover. While convinced he himself was ugly, Blumenfeld was entranced, and inspired, by beautiful women—and his photographs capture the lines and shadows of their bodies sensually.

When Blumenfeld was seemingly at his creative zenith, the magazine world moved on—and the brasher, more commercialized landscape of the 1960s was not one that appreciated his more overt artistry. It must have demoralized, even devastated, him.

His partner at the time of his death, the woman he left his wife Lena for, was Marina Schinz, his assistant who was 44 years his junior.

After Blumenfeld died his family feuded over his treasure trove of pictures and negatives. This led to the photographer's images being kept from public view until now. There have been recent high-profile exhibitions of his work in cities including London, Paris and Shanghai, his work has been selling for large sums of money, and the TV documentary has further reignited interest in his work, and its influence on fashion photographers today.

Blumenfeld's grandson, the TV producer Remy Blumenfeld (founder of the [Thinking Violets](#) production company), made the Ovation documentary, and spoke to *The Daily Beast* about it, and the vivid and mysterious life of his grandfather.

### **Do you have memories of your grandfather? What were they? What was he like?**

My first memory of my grandfather is when he came to visit us in Vienna and he brought me two love birds in a cage, which he called Remy and Remy. When you see these identical birds through his fascination with mirrors, the gift makes sense. I still have the beautiful Portuguese wire cage that the love birds came in. I remember my grandfather taking me in his arms and throwing me up in the air—up and down.

Later, in New York, my grandfather took me to my first movie. It was *The Jungle Book*. A young, pretty, boyish woman came with us, although my grandmother, with whom he lived until he died, was at home in their apartment. I later discovered that this woman was his last mistress. We left their apartment at 1 West 67th Street and walked to the movies at Columbus Circle.

### **How did he seem to you?**

He was the most loving man. Very cuddly with me as a young boy. Very warm. Smiling.

### **Why did you want to make a documentary about your grandfather?**

When I was a teenager, a producer at the BBC came to visit and asked if I would agree to play my grandfather as a young man in a documentary film about his life. They wanted me to walk around museums in Berlin, in my grandfather's footsteps. In the end, it didn't happen. The BBC film was never made. I suppose in the intervening years I always assumed someone else would make a film about him. Then I became a producer and made dozens of documentaries and reality TV series. I even made films about other artists, such as *The Other Francis Bacon* (Channel 4 1999). Still, no one else had produced a film about Erwin Blumenfeld. So I pitched the idea to Richard Klein at BBC4 and he said I should make it.

### **What did you know about his story?**

I grew up in Cambridge, surrounded by his photographs and collages, which my father had inherited. Of course, I'd read his autobiography, *Eye to I*, when it came out in English.

I remember my father leaving our July 4th fireworks party to go to Rome

where my grandfather died. But there were many questions, that as a child I didn't understand. How exactly had my grandfather died? Why was he in Rome with his 27-year-old assistant? Why did my grandmother not attend the funeral?

### **What was revealed to you about him by making the documentary?**

Through making the film, I had to sit down with my father and my uncle, Erwin's two sons, and ask them questions, as a film maker that as their son and nephew I couldn't ask—about his private life. I had not known, for instance that although my grandmother Lena was the great love of his life, in later years he'd taken two mistresses and that the first of these, and the woman whom he adored above all others, was my aunt Kathleen. That he would have introduced his great love to his son in the hope that they would marry, was a surprise to me.

### **What is it about his life that is most moving for you?**

You could say he had the most hideous luck. In the First World War, he was conscripted as an ambulance driver, witnessed horrific scenes, tried to desert and was reported to the authorities by his own mother. He lost his beloved brother and best friend to battle, and his father to syphilis. His inheritance, which ran to millions of Deutschmarks, was worth only pennies after the raging post-war inflation. In the Second World War, he was first interred by the French for being German and then, after the German invasion, he was hounded for being Jewish.

However, you could also say that he was extraordinarily lucky. He survived two World Wars. He escaped France, when other Jews there were sent to their death and he became the highest paid photographer in the world at the age of 50, taking more than 100 covers for *Vogue*.

For me, what was most moving was his terrible fear of ageing and his extreme dislike of his own appearance. Although you can clearly see how he channeled these obsessions into his work, particularly his self-portraits, it explains for me why in many ways he was a tortured human being.

### **How sexual was he do you think? His photographs major on legs, lips, sensuality of the female form?**

He grew up in Berlin the 1890s, at a time when sexuality was very suppressed, but then came into his own as an artist in Paris of the 1930s, and New York in the 40s and 50s, when he could explore his fascination with the female form. However, in all his work, even in many of the nude portraits he took, there are veils, whether of glass or fabric or color washes.

### **How do you feel about his personal life—how he treated, and what he expected, of his wife? She obviously eventually had enough.**

Other people's relationships are always impossible to understand. On one level, my grandfather and his wife, Lena, were the closest of friends, the most intimate of partners, until they died. Sexually, that was not the case. He clearly had several other lovers. But my grandmother tolerated this, right up until his

last mistress, who was so young that I feel my grandmother felt it made them both look foolish.

### **Which photographs stand out for you, and why?**

Of course there are some people who feel his early Dutch and French work, in black and white, before he made it as a commercial photographer are his purest, best work. There are others, today, who say his color work as fashion photographer in New York is his most iconic. For me, there are great photographs in every period of a life that charts the history of photography in the 20th Century. His strongest images, and there are some even from Amsterdam in the 1930s through to New York in the 1960s, are the images which look as though they were taken tomorrow. They are timeless. I especially love his color nudes where he washes red and orange light over the bodies, and of course, Lisa Fonssagrives on the Eiffel Tower.

### **Do you think he fulfilled his full potential? If so, why; if not, why not?**

He did not see why he could not be recognized as a commercially successful color photographer and as an artist whose medium was photography. However, he lived at a time (and we are only now escaping from this view) when it was thought you could not be both. In the end, he made a choice to feed his family, prosper and live the American dream, but it is a shame that his extraordinary, pioneering art photography is only now starting to be appreciated. In his lifetime his work was shown at the Metropolitan Museum and at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), but he never had a solo show.

### **You work in TV. Did his creative example inspire your own life or career in any way and if so how?**

My mother is a sculptor (the sculptor Helaine Blumenfeld) and my father is a writer. Clearly, my grandfather passed on to them and they both passed on to me and my brother, Jared (a photographer and regional administrator for Obama's EPA), the sense that we could, we should follow a career that we passionately loved.

### **Is the family still at conflict over his pictures? if so, how do the sides delineate exactly?**

The conflicts of the past are over. His two sons, my father and my uncle, each have the pictures they were left and my aunt Lisette's images are in the hands of her daughter.

### **The suicide seems shocking. Why do you think he did it, if so? Professional failure? The fact the magazine world had moved on and left him behind?**

His friend, the model Carmen Dell'Orefice, has encouraged me to see what he did as a form of euthanasia, or assisted dying. He apparently knew he had prostate cancer, he was 70 and he didn't want to get old, so according to my father, he stopped taking his heart medication and then ran up and down Rome's Spanish Steps. The last pages of his autobiography, *Eye to I*, which has

since been translated into many languages, including Chinese, lay finished in his typewriter.

### **Is it frustrating that he hasn't had the recognition you feel he deserves?**

Making the film, what I came to understand is that although unlike Irving Penn or Richard Avedon, who were born and died much later, my grandfather died too early to see the advent of a market in photography, he is held in the very highest regard by his peers. Nick Knight, Rankin, Sølve Sundsbø, were just some of the photographer's working today who told me how profoundly influenced they were by Erwin Blumenfeld's work. Writing in the Financial Times last year, the eminent critic, Francis Hodgson said:

*"Blumenfeld, who knew both men, was a more brilliant experimenter in photography than Man Ray and outdid Irving Penn as a pioneer in fashion. Blumenfeld is a photographer of the very first water. It is an accident that he is no longer very well known, not a true reflection of his level. A number of Blumenfeld's inventions have become standard tropes not only in fashion, but also in picture-making generally. His double portraits – profile and face combined – are one example. So are his multiple-exposure views of the same subject, stepped across the page, which give an almost typographical order to photographic imagery. Nobody did more to refine fancy photographic tricks (such as solarisation, which gives a lovely mysterious shadow to the edges of objects) into usable tools of commercial expression."*

### **Why do you feel Blumenfeld has been overlooked, given the work he did?**

He died before the emergence of a market. The first commercial photography gallery in New York opened in the 1970s and for many years after his death he was overlooked, mainly because there was no champion, there was no one promoting his work. The dealer, Ethleen Staley of the Staley Wise Gallery in New York, says this very clearly in the film. The person whom he hoped would champion his work, his last assistant and lover, had other priorities and responsibilities. Far from promoting his work, she suppressed it, keeping her own prints hidden and dividing the rest between his (at the time) warring children.

### **Do you think it's possible at this stage to establish his reputation in the public mind?**

For me, there are many different barometers of success. There's the museum world—and having been overlooked by museums for decades, in the last year he's had major museum shows at Somerset House in London, The Jeu De Paume at the Louvre in Paris and now in Moscow, Sao Paulo and Shanghai, with more museum shows planned.

There's the world of the critics, who have been extraordinary in their praise of his work and his place in the evolution of photography as an art form.



*Erwin Blumenfeld*

There's the art market and at auction last year, we've seen prices in excess of \$137,00 for a Blumenfeld print.

Finally, and for me this is perhaps the most important, and the barometer that he himself would most appreciate, there's the viral, digital world. Erwin Blumenfeld is one of the most searched and most shared artists on line. Just look at Pinterest or Twitter or Google. And this has nothing to do with museums, auction prices or photography critics. This is purely because the images are iconic and still stand out today.



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