

# Preface and Acknowledgments: In High Fashion

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Steichen was already a highly successful painter and photographer on both sides of the Atlantic when, early in 1923, he was offered one of the most prestigious positions and certainly the most lucrative in photography's commercial domain, that of chief photographer for Condé Nast's fashion and society magazines *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*.

Steichen leapt at the chance. For the next fifteen years, he would take full advantage of the resources of the Condé Nast empire to produce an oeuvre of unequalled brilliance, putting his exceptional talents to work dramatizing and glamorizing contemporary culture and its high achievers in literature, journalism, dance, sports, politics, theater, film, and, above all, the world of high fashion.

Although Steichen was not the first *real* fashion photographer (that honor must go to the flamboyant Baron Adolphe de Meyer, his predecessor at *Vogue*), he was the first truly *modern* fashion photographer. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that he invented modern fashion photography. His influence on the field was immediate, and it has proved long-lasting. Somewhat the same can be said of Steichen's celebrity portraiture, the other side of the Condé Nast coin (and in certain cases the same side, as famous actors and actresses often posed modeling Chanel or Schiaparelli while publicizing their latest Broadway production or Hollywood film). Steichen was among a tiny band of talented photographers who elevated celebrity portraiture from the status of formulaic publicity stills to an aesthetically sophisticated genre in its own right.

No other fashion photographer could rival Steichen for the range of haute couture he covered: Alix (Grès), Callot Soeurs, Chanel, Lanvin, Lelong, Pacquin, Poiret, Schiaparelli, Vionnet, Worth, and a host of other designers and fashion houses saw their works depicted creatively and convincingly on the pages of *Vogue*. No other portrait photographer could rival Steichen for the volume of vivid, engaging studies he made of artists, athletes, actors, musicians, writers, and statesmen for *Vanity Fair*: Cecil B. DeMille and Josef von Sternberg among the filmmakers, Winston Churchill and Franklin Delano Roosevelt among the statesmen, H. G. Wells and Colette among the writers, Greta Garbo and Gary Cooper among the actors. Overall, Steichen's work constitutes an archive in its own right. And there is no other archive like it.

What astonishes and delights the eye in Steichen's work is the constant reinvention. Though the incessant demands of the magazines meant that the lion's share of the shootings had to be accomplished in the studio, Steichen seems to have been oblivious to its physical constraints; he continually found new ways to frame his subjects, pose them, and light them. If we look at the work of most of his studio-bound contemporaries (his disciple George Hoyningen-Huene, for example, or even Huene's disciple Horst P. Horst), we find a more limited