

# PREVIEW

Charlotte Du Cann looks back at Man Ray's fashion

## Man's Eye View



In the 1990s our attitude towards materialism and personality is changing radically. And nowhere is this change more manifest than in the decline of fashion magazines, which have always depended on the heroic status of the celebrity and the desirability of earthly goods and chattels.

As the decade turned on the catwalk in a blaze of white tracksuits and crystal pendants, it soon became obvious that it would need

more than a superficial switch of clothing to confront the changes ahead. For any transformation, whether personal or collective, a review and a reassessment of the world is necessary. To face any future, you first have to divest yourself of the past.

Although it may appear to be a strange moment for an exhibition on fashion, such as the *Man Ray In Fashion* exhibition that is currently running at the Barbican Cen-

tre, or the recent retrospective of Cardin at the V&A, in fact it is perfect timing. It is both revealing and sobering to look with new eyes at the period when consumerism and the star system all began, with the rise of magazines and the portraiture of the grand and glamorous 'in-crowd' in the Paris and New York of the 20s and 30s.

Man Ray, the American painter and photographer, was one of the principal engineers of image to the modern

world. Although Ray considered himself principally an artist, he photographed widely for magazines such as *Vogue* and *Bazaar* and eagerly embraced the possibilities for photography in the new mass market (including shooting advertisements for Wrigley's chewing gum and Pond's cold cream).

He bridged the gap between an exclusive *avant garde* and a greedy free market which, if it was financially rewarding, was also revealed as a deeply uneasy alliance. The vision of the individual was then, as now, constantly challenged by the needs of commerce.

'Extraordinary results were expected of me,' Man Ray noted. 'But I soon discovered that editors were more interested in using my name than in a new idea or presentation. If they expressed hesitation as to the advisability of using one of my far-fetched works, and asked for a reduction in my fee, I replied to soothe my hurt vanity that in that case the fee would be double.'

But it was a Mephistophelean pact. As the magazines gave the artists their fortune, they also gave them their fame. The earliest glossy pages are filled with the artist as celebrity, wearing strange clothes, attending magical balls. They conferred on them a public status which had hitherto only been afforded to aristocracy.

This is well reflected in Man Ray portraits: the new elite stare vainly and proudly for their image-maker. And there appears nothing apologist or *demi-monde* about their *modus vivendi*. In one of the most telling portraits in the exhibition, Denise Poiré poses alluringly in her husband's dress 'Mythe', made of peacocks' feathers, with a Brancusi sculpture in the background. Art, fashion, beauty and privilege are tied up in one.

This is continued in his fashion pictures. We are a long way away from Next, the democracy of style, and the Japanese label suit. Fashion here is grand frocks made out of grand fabrics worn by women who looked as if they

bered, disembodied and distorted. They appear like broken bits of doll, like some frozen disturbing muse: Lee Miller's lips float in empty space, a model is sawn in half, a stone mask is superimposed on a face, a torso is bound up with string, an arm weighed down with bracelets. The line or the shape of the dress always takes more importance than the wearer.

In these meticulously detailed and well-lit photographs, the feminine principle is reduced to the role of fetish. It is an object to be feared and controlled, kept reasonably out of the way. Even in a culture that can admire a misogynist like David Lynch, this crude treatment of femininity is quite shocking. This reveals how far we have begun to accept the 'feminine' values of receptivity, creativity, intuition and sensuality. And indeed how far we have begun to move away from a strictly hierarchical, masculine perception dominated by the structures of Western thought.

In one sense, we have come full circle in our perception of fashion. Contemporary glossy magazines have forsworn any egalitarianism in their portrayal of fashion. Very expensive clothes are for very rich people. End of story. As the buses go past with full-length portraits by today's 'in' photographer, Herb Ritts, advertising Gap clothes, we register not the sports clothes (which are unremarkable) but the fact that these are portraits of some kind of modern elite: an elite that has assumed its position in the same manner as Man Ray, by its talents, rather than its birth.

But in another sense these fashion portraits are completely different. The clothes are the clothes worn by everyone, they do not flaunt their privilege, nor do they put any emphasis on outside glamour. The sitters look like human beings, not like exotic creatures. The cult of the glittering ego, that display of personality so brilliantly and darkly caught in its ascendant by Man Ray, is now disappearing fast.

mechanically taking apart the whole and experimenting with its separate components like a scientist. Although his surrealist techniques have been praised for their irony and their cleverness in the canons of photography, seeing them now in this familiar context you are reminded not of their innovation but of their palpable dislike and disregard for women, particularly their physicality.

Women in these pictures are either trussed up in some expensive silvery gown like a brilliant possession, or their bodies are dismem-