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## Irving Penn's nudes

Two New York shows highlight the photographer's brief sojourn into the world of women with lush, fleshy bodies.

By David Bowman

Feb 1, 2002 | Women of generous weight are being displayed in New York. We have permission to show you the ones most petite. They were photographed during the summer of 1949 by Irving Penn. Gaze upon one subject's lush torso. Sloping belly. Rump. The dark cloud between her legs. The lens of Penn's camera drinks in her Rubenesque flesh like water. Think of Irving Penn as a very thirsty man. In fact, model Dorian Leigh (pal of Truman Capote and the inspiration for Holly Golightly) reports that every time she slept with Penn, in the mid-'40s, he'd gulp down bottled water afterward. "Sex dehydrated him," she explained. How thirsty Penn must have been photographing those big women!



After Penn printed the shots, he showed them to his cohort/editor at Vogue, Alexander Liberman. Penn believed he and Liberman "were always searching for some delectable and seductive quality" in women. Unfortunately, Liberman failed to find anything delectable about Penn's big women. Liberman then showed the photos to the grand dean of American photographers, Edward Steichen. The next year, when Penn was submitting work to Steichen to be included in the Museum of Modern Art symposium "What Is Modern Photography?" Steichen threw his arm around the younger man and said something like, "Forget the big nudes."

Penn already had. After Liberman's lukewarm reception, Penn stored the 150 photos away. They appear to have been more experiment than obsession. Penn showed a few of them once at a 1980 show, and now 53 are hanging at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (and in the pages of the book "Earthy Bodies: Irving Penn's Nudes, 1949-50"). Viewing all 53 photos in sequence (each titled by number, Nude No. 21, Nude No. 38, etc.) you see how the first shots are of a woman with an average June Cleaver body. Then with each new picture, the bodies get plumper. Penn is obviously using several different models. You can recognize one woman's mole, if not the differences in their weight. In several shots, the female torso is puffed up big as some Pillsbury Doughboy, but for many others she is just "Renée Zellweger as Bridget Jones" plump.

In an essay accompanying the show, curator Maria Hambourg justifies the historical eroticism of Penn's work by referring to a far more ancient fat woman, the [Venus of Willendorf](#) -- a prehistoric sculpture of an obese earth woman deity. Hambourg's point is that throughout the centuries, heavy women were often considered sexier than slender femmes.