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## An Eye For Fashion

The great and good of Bristol attended the private view of vintage photographs by iconic fashion photographer Norman Parkinson at M Shed

Photos by John Seaman



Georgie and Elizabeth Rees



Daddy G (Massive Attack)



Annie Locker and Christina Robino



Catherine Littlejohns (curator, Bristol Museums), Angela Williams, Charlotte Coombs, Mary Inns



Michael Hewitt, David and Catherine Partner



Becky Peters (museum co-ordinator), Angela Williams and Michael Hewitt

# Vintage chic



**A new exhibition celebrates iconic photographer Norman Parkinson. His former assistant and the show's curator talk to VELIMIR ILIC**

**W**idely regarded as one of the foremost fashion and portrait photographers of the 20th century, chances are you're already aware of Norman Parkinson's work. In the '50s and '60s, his shots of models wearing the latest couture and designer clothing revolutionised the fashion industry, appearing on the covers of *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar* and *Queen* magazine.

Back then, Britain was on the cusp of social change. As fashion became more exciting and experimental, it was adopted by a burgeoning youth culture eager to leave behind post-war austerity.

Taken from the Angela Williams Archive, M Shed's *An Eye For Fashion* exhibition is an evocative reflection of that era, featuring original vintage prints from 1954 to 1964, captured through Parkinson's lens.

In a career that spanned seven decades, Parkinson's style and approach was bold

and imaginative, his images the epitome of glamour, elegance and aspiration. He photographed top models wearing the latest outfits from leading designers such as Mary Quant and Daks. He was also very adept at identifying new talent; he spotted Nena von Schlebrügge – the mother of actress Uma Thurman – in Stockholm aged just 16 before bringing her to London to model for *Vogue*.

His favourite model though, was Celia Hammond. "He discovered her in about 1962," says Parkinson's former assistant Angela Williams. "Celia was unpretentious but absolutely beautiful, and Parks knew she had something. He photographed her for the cover of *Queen* magazine almost straight away."

Parkinson captured the natural beauty of his models, but also imbued his images with a trademark sense of realism and wit, paving the way for '60s photographers such as David Bailey and Terence Donovan. "He was pioneering a new style of fashion

photography, taking his models out of the studio setting into the real world," says show curator Catherine Littlejohns. "He created a rapport with them, encouraging them to express themselves. As a result, many of his pictures have an energy and movement that was incredibly innovative."

The exhibition includes several of Parkinson's notable images from the 'Brash New Breed of British Designers' series, completed for *Life* magazine in 1963.

## Models in the wild

The models are out and about in London, chatting to bobbies on the beat and jumping on London buses, wearing designs by Mary Quant and Jean Muir. "They were exciting times," says Angela, who now lives near Frome. "We showed [fashion designer] Alice Temperley the photos and she was hugely inspired by them. Things just seemed to happen for people back then."

Angela was a medical photographer



Life magazine 1963, Kings Road. Opposite page, a Parkinson shot for *Queen* magazine from 1960

**"Tall and moustachioed, he was striking and elegant, a highly flamboyant man"**

before starting work for Parkinson in 1962. She worked with him for six years – during which time he sold up and moved to Tobago – and acquired an enviable collection of his iconic photographs.

A striking and elegant man, Angela remembers the tall, moustachioed photographer – known as 'Parks' to his close associates – being a highly flamboyant character. "He was just fantastic," she recalls. "He would wear fabulous tailored suits and collarless shirts when it was very unusual [to do so]. In the summer, he grew these wonderfully old-fashioned roses and would plonk handfuls of them on the desk."

Parkinson was clearly a huge influence on the young Angela, herself an aspiring photographer who later snapped the likes of Audrey Hepburn and Pink Floyd. "He was terribly inspiring and very encouraging," she says. "He taught me how to talk to all sorts of substantial people. I had to learn to be quite authoritative."

A prolific, fastidious but genteel photographer, Parkinson referred to

himself as a technician rather than an artist. "He was as meticulous as a film director in setting up a shoot," says Angela. "He would suss out locations and visualise the shot, then put the model in place and talk about 'the magic happening'."

Her favourite Parkinson photo is one of a model wearing a sack dress. "It was the most unshapely garment," she says.

"The model is standing with a hat, gloves and stockings on, and this sack hanging down. Parks put her on the back of a coal merchant's truck, wearing this dress. She's just looking at the camera thinking 'am I supposed to be looking elegant in this?'"

"There's just a whimsy about it that, for me, sums up his anarchic wit." **LI**

**Photographs:** © Norman Parkinson Ltd/courtesy of the Norman Parkinson Archive.

[www.normanparkinson.com](http://www.normanparkinson.com)

The exhibition *An Eye For Fashion* is at M Shed until 15 April; [mshed.org](http://mshed.org)



Parkinson with model Carmen Dell'Orefice