



ELEMENTS OF STYLE

Irving Penn understood that the language of fashion is universal

BY RUSSELL HART

► Long before fashion began to borrow wholesale from art, and art likewise from fashion, one photographer saw the connection between the two. For Irving Penn, who died on Oct. 7 at the age of 92, the barrier between photographic genres was always porous. His surpassingly artful portraits of mud-masked New Guinean aborigines, caped Peruvian peasants and uniformed English tradespeople, all excised from their native settings with a neutral background, recognized that modes of dress are part and parcel of human identity — that clothes make the man, and woman.

Penn's still lifes, seemingly the main interest of his late career, were at turns cool, elegant and witty, but always luminous and as ordered as a Dutch painting — whether they depicted animal skulls or skin-care products. His bread and butter was in photographs of fashion and fashionable people, of course, but even the former transcended their task of selling with gorgeous lines, measured

tones and a spareness that needed nothing more to be distinctly his. And the subjects of the latter — from Picasso to Capote, Kate Moss to Giselle Bündchen — knew that clothes could not protect them from his penetrating lens.

Penn accrued that vision in a career that spanned seven decades, if you date it from his 1943 first appearance in *Vogue* magazine. Working as an assistant to legendary Condé Nast art director Alexander Liberman, he was tasked with creating covers using in-house photographers — and ended up shooting the first one himself. He would go on to shoot 150 more for *Vogue*. And while Penn's superbly crafted prints went on to hang at art meccas including the Museum of Modern Art and the Getty Center (where his *Small Trades* images are on display through Jan. 10), Penn never lost his interest in fashion — nor, as in this image from a late series on the quirky couture of Japanese designer Issey Miyake, his power to delight the eye. AP