

# IRVING PENN

## SMALL TRADES

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Irving Penn. *Seamstress Fitter*, London, Negative: 1950; Print: 1951. Gelatin silver print. The J. Paul Getty Museum. Partial gift of Irving Penn. © 1951, restored 1996 Condé Nast Publications, Ltd.

### GETTY MUSEUM EXHIBITS COMPREHENSIVE SET OF PHOTOGRAPHS BY IRVING PENN FOR THE FIRST TIME

#### *Irving Penn: Small Trades*

J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center  
September 9, 2009–January 10, 2010

"Taking people away from their natural circumstances and putting them into the studio in front of a camera did not simply isolate them, *it transformed them*. Sometimes the change was subtle; sometimes it was great enough to be almost shocking. But always there was transformation."  
—Irving Penn, *Worlds in a Small Room*, 1974

LOS ANGELES— *Irving Penn: Small Trades* at the J. Paul Getty Museum, the Getty Center, September 9, 2009–January 10, 2010, presents a seminal collection of photographs by Irving Penn, one of the most respected photographers of the twentieth century, that is being exhibited together in its entirety for the first time. Acquired by the Getty Museum in 2008, the 252 prints from the *Small Trades* series depict skilled tradespeople dressed in work clothes and carrying the tools of their occupations.

"*Small Trades* holds profound importance for Mr. Penn, and our acquisition of this complete set of masterful prints allows us to fulfill his desire of keeping it intact while expanding our highly significant holdings of 20<sup>th</sup>-century portrait photography," says J. Paul Getty Museum Director Michael Brand. "By displaying the entire group of works in this exhibition we are able to provide our public with an unprecedented opportunity to experience the full breadth and impact of Mr. Penn's artistic vision."

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In a career that began at the premiere fashion magazine *Vogue* in 1943 and spans more than seven decades, Penn (American, born 1917) created innovative fashion, still life, and portrait compositions. His photographs are defined by the elegant simplicity and meticulous rigor that have become the trademarks of his style. Natural lighting, a neutral backdrop, and minimal props contribute to the refined austerity of his images, while also underscoring the fundamental theatricality of Penn's decision to single out each subject for portrayal.

Penn began his *Small Trades* series while on assignment in Paris in the summer of 1950, basing these full-length studies of tradespeople on representations of workers in popular print media. In addition to vendors of traditional wares and services, he also photographed individuals from the city's working-class neighborhoods, including a bohemian sculptor and the chanteuse known as Benoîte Lab.

He continued the series over the next year in London, where he photographed fishmongers, newspaper sellers, ragpickers, and chimney sweeps, and in New York, where he broadened the series to include many of the local vendors and deliverymen he encountered near his studio overlooking the East River as well as a wide range of modern trades associated with entertainment, sports, and technology.

For his sittings, assistants sought out people at work, and invited them to come to Penn's studio, dressed exactly as they were and carrying the tools of their trade. With the same care that he would devote to photographing fashion models, Penn posed the workers against a canvas background.

Natural light provided a stage on which his subjects could present themselves with dignity and pride. For example, the trouncer stands fiercely beside a barrel of the kind he unloads for a London brewery; the British bricklayer holds a level and trowel in each hand in remarkable parallelism. "Penn prized the small trades and deliberately included their tools or accoutrements," explains Anne Lacoste, who co-curated the exhibition. "He carefully positioned the workers and their tools to create balanced compositions that emphasize their skills. As a result, Penn's portraits not only define the occupation but also convey the workers' pride."

Penn employed a tripod-mounted camera, using black-and-white negative film to create gelatin silver prints that exploit the gray scale in a painterly way. Penn returned to the *Small Trades* series in the mid-1960s, when he began a period of extensive experimentation with platinum printing. It is the first body of work he revisited using this process, investigating countless variations of platinum and palladium over the course of more than 20 years,

producing ever more exacting prints. The resulting prints are powerfully expressive, rendered with a range of tonalities. The artist set aside the most brilliantly lucid gelatin silver and platinum/palladium enlargements, with the intention of depositing them at an institution and these are the 252 works that Getty Museum acquired in 2008.

The *Small Trades* project grew out of Penn's awareness that many of these occupations would eventually disappear. Motivated by a broader interest in "dissolving cultures," he traveled throughout the world from 1948 to 1971 to photograph individuals in locales as diverse as Cuzco, Crete, Extremadura, Dahomey, Cameroon, San Francisco, Nepal, New Guinea, and Morocco. After initially publishing excerpts from each series in *Vogue* magazine, Penn compiled them in the book *Worlds in a Small Room* in 1974. Virginia Heckert, co-curator of the exhibition, notes, "By isolating sitters within the controlled artifice of the studio, Penn proposed—and revealed—a fundamental equality between them."

In conjunction with the exhibition, Getty Publications has published *Irving Penn: Small Trades*, which features all 252 photographs, including 210 as full-page reproductions, and an introductory essay describing the history and context of the *Small Trades* series. An interview with Edmonde Charles-Roux, the chief editor for French *Vogue* for 16 years, who assisted Penn on the assignment in Paris, also provides fascinating insights on the Paris sittings.

*Irving Penn: Small Trades* was co-curated by Virginia Heckert, associate curator in the Department of Photographs, and Anne Lacoste, assistant curator in the Department of Photographs.

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