

This page:
"Bee Stung
Lips, New York,
1995." Right:
"Frozen Foods
With String
Beans, New
York, 1977."





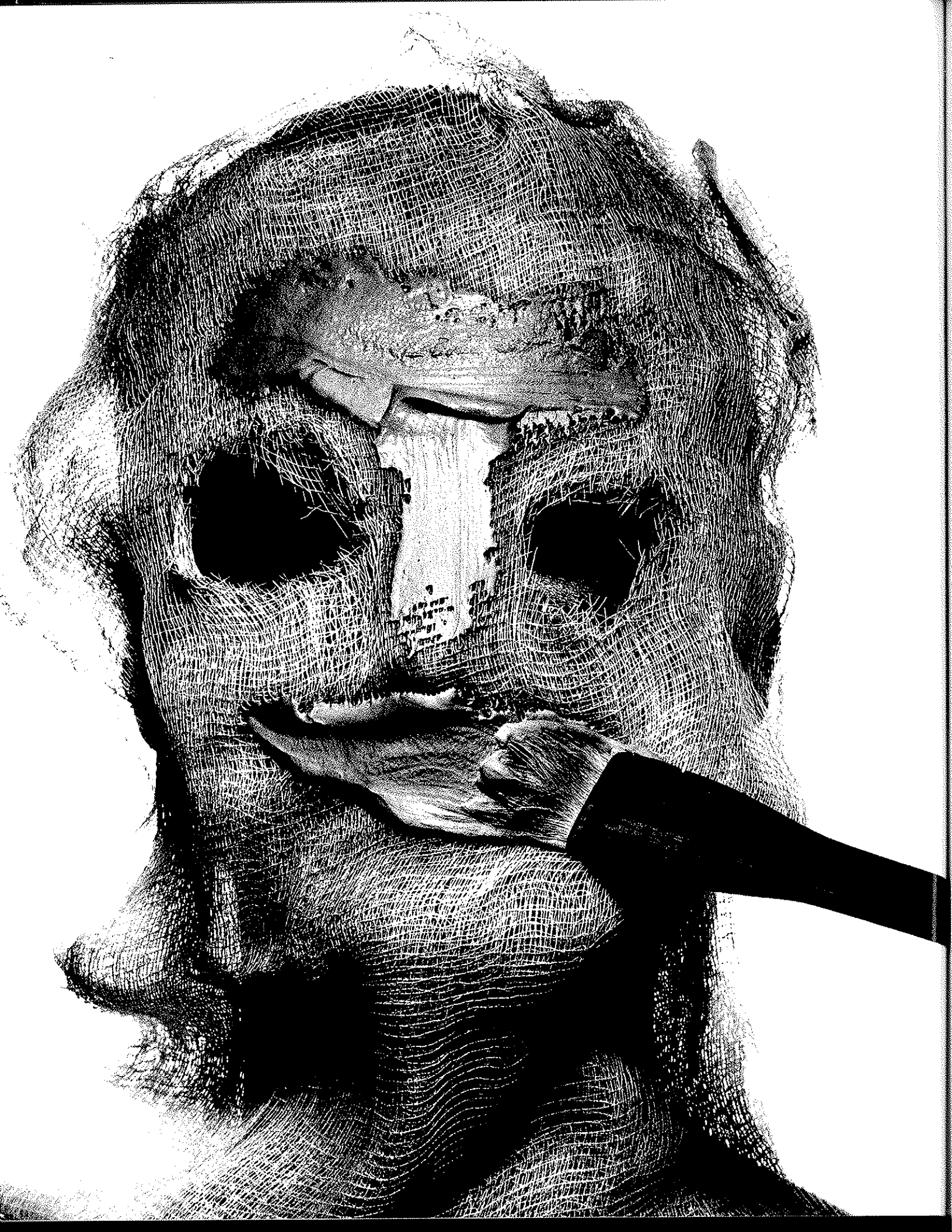
PENN



A master's
still lifes reveal the
essence of
his style.

By Mary Panzer

The still-life pictures of Irving Penn send us back to 1943, the day his photographic career began. Then an assistant art director at *Vogue*, he found himself in the unenviable position of giving instructions to the magazine's vaunted staff photographers, who, being vaunted, ignored all his ideas. Penn's boss, Alexander Liberman, told him to go behind the camera himself, and on October 1, 1943, *Vogue* turned Penn's first color photograph into its first still-life cover, a seductive



In essence, Penn treats all subjects and all genres—portraits, advertising, and fashion—as still lifes.

sculpture of luxury items—flowers, an unset topaz, a dark brown suede purse, a calfskin belt, and hand-sewn gloves—into which Penn added a lemon, its astringent color like a joke told by a beautiful woman. The image charged fashion with desire. Nearly every element of the style that would come to be identified as purely Penn appeared in that first photograph. Decades later, the same strong design, tactile white light, delight in texture, and taste for surprise would be apparent in his photographs of objects—an ordinary toothbrush, a drugstore tumbler, sleek scientific bottles, and bar of soap that made Clinique cosmetics impossible to resist.

As a student in the late 1930s, Penn trained with graphic designer Alexey Brodovitch, whose bold use of type, color, and white space transformed the magazine page into a medium for art. From Brodovitch, Penn learned to seize opportunity when it appeared. In 1950, Penn—by then *Vogue's* top photographer—philosophically explained that for him the fashion magazine was “one of the few contemporary media in which commercial success and the highest aesthetic standards are not incompatible.”

From 1943 on, with Liberman's support, Penn exploited this opportunity at *Vogue*, where every staff photographer got a studio, a salary, and technical assistance. In exchange, he was always on call, for any assignment. Penn wanted the even, north light of an old-fashioned studio, and he re-created it with a bank of hot tungsten lights that demanded long, wilting exposures—the kind that inanimate objects could withstand without protest. Today, Penn openly admits that he prefers to work with things rather than people: “Things are more completely accepting of me.... Things are patient; they don't try to evade the process.” As the famed 1950s model Dorian Leigh recalled, posing for Penn could be grueling. She compared the work to a battle, “a silent bending of my will to his.” No matter how hard she tried, every session with Penn left Leigh furious, as she realized that she must “become his medium of expression rather than [her] own.” Other living subjects were thrilled by Penn's demands. Sitting for his portrait, anthropologist Lionel Tiger recalled “the sense of giving more than I had, of being more than I was, of telling more than my story.”

Penn's pictures have been the object of much scrutiny over the years from critics, admirers, and, of course, other photographers. His still lifes have been appropriately revered, but until now, with

the publication of *Still Life: Irving Penn Photographs 1938-2000* (Bulfinch, \$85), no book has been devoted solely to this work. In essence, Penn treats all subjects and all genres—portraits, advertising, fashion—as still lifes. Early in his career this approach struck many as startling and even brutal. Fashion pictures had long been photographed in luxurious surroundings, whether in a studio or on location. When Penn isolated his models against stark, blank backgrounds, it caused what he later termed “a minor revolution.” In 1990, Liberman cheerfully recalled that some saw him and Penn as the beat poets or action painters of fashion, “dangerous destroyers of good manners in a world of ladies in status hats and white gloves.” Today we embrace this irreverence and admire Penn and Liberman, Pollock and Ginsberg as brilliant leaders of American culture. In 1975, Penn credited his innovation to another source—postwar fashion itself. The strong, constructed shapes needed no context but could “stand as a still life.”

At the very least, Penn's still lifes (reproduced with vivid clarity in the new book) declare his deep connection to the history of art. Every subject becomes an exercise in light and composition, an exploration of natural form, a comment on life's constant, poignant struggle against time. In “Frozen Foods with String Beans,” a picture he made for *Vogue* in 1977, Penn treats blocks of fruit and vegetables as a modern equivalent of a Dutch painter's heap of produce, revealing beauty in ordinary colors and shapes, poised in precarious balance, soon to collapse and rot. He turns a closeup shot of a lipsticked mouth painted by a sable brush full of color into a study of the artist's tools and an investigation of one beautiful fragment of the female body.

Penn's unsentimental humor can make us laugh and shudder. Like Alfred Hitchcock, he knows that ordinary life is full of excitement. He finds suspense in a lighted cigarette, a spilled handbag, a pair of packed bags, two theater tickets, two umbrellas, a face hidden behind thick bandages. He turns a common phrase into an unsettling event just by asking, “How do you get a pair of ‘bee-stung lips?’”

Having said that Penn treats all subjects as still lifes, it is perhaps also appropriate to note that to him no still life is truly still. His camera reveals what lies hidden, silent, just below the surface. Penn himself describes this process as something mystical, musical, ruthless, and precise: “I myself have always stood in awe of the camera. I recognize it for the instrument it is, part Stradivarius, part scalpel.” ■

“Aromatherapy Thermal Mask with Brush, New York, 1997.”