



V&A opens major exhibition of photography, on loan from the private collection of Sir Elton John and David Furnish

Fragile Beauty: Photographs from the Sir Elton John and David Furnish Collection

In partnership with Gucci

18 May 2024 – 5 January 2025

The Sainsbury Gallery, V&A South Kensington

Opening this Saturday 18 May, *Fragile Beauty: Photographs from the Sir Elton John and David Furnish Collection* is a major exhibition of modern and contemporary photography, on loan from the private collection of Sir Elton John and David Furnish. The exhibition showcases over 300 rare prints from 140 photographers and is the V&A's largest temporary exhibition of photography to date.

Selected from their collection of over 7,000 images, the exhibited photographs (many on public display for the first time and some in the collection's bespoke frames) are era-defining images which explore the connection between strength and vulnerability inherent in the human condition. Whilst universally compelling, the images are intensely personal for John and Furnish, as they are the photographs they live with in their home.

Following on from the 2016 exhibition *The Radical Eye: Modernist Photography from the Sir Elton John Collection* at the Tate Modern, this exhibition covers the period from 1950 to the present day. It brings together an unrivalled selection of the world's leading photographers to tell the story of modern and contemporary photography, and includes celebrated works by **Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin, Cindy Sherman, William Eggleston, Diane Arbus, Sally Mann, Zanele Muholi, Ai Weiwei, Carrie Mae Weems** and others.

Brand new acquisitions are on display by **Tyler Mitchell, Trevor Paglen** and **An-My Lê**. These join some of the very first acquisitions made by John, fashion photographs by **Horst P. Horst, Irving Penn** and **Herb Ritts**.

Sir Elton John and David Furnish, said: “*Since we first loaned a selection of Horst photographs to the V&A in 2014, our relationship with the museum has grown significantly. Fragile Beauty takes our collaboration to really exciting new heights, showcasing some of the most beloved photographers and iconic images from within our collection. Working alongside the V&A again has been a truly memorable experience, and we look forward to sharing this exhibition with the public.*”

Duncan Forbes, curator of *Fragile Beauty*, said: “We are delighted to be working with Sir Elton John and David Furnish to present highlights from their unparalleled collection: from the playful and surprising, to the contemplative and thoughtful. Whether through the elegance of fashion photography, the creativity of musicians and performers, the exploration of desire, or the passage of history as captured by photojournalism, photography reveals something important about the world. *Fragile Beauty* is a truly epic journey across the recent history of photography, and a celebration of Sir Elton John and David Furnish’s passion for the medium.”

Marking 30 years of collecting, the exhibition celebrates John and Furnish’s passion for the medium and reflects their personal taste and unique eye as collectors.

Across eight thematic sections, *Fragile Beauty* explores themes such as fashion, reportage, celebrity, the male body, and American photography. Portraits of stars from stage and screen feature, including photography of Aretha Franklin, Elizabeth Taylor, The Beatles, and Chet Baker. Many photographs in the exhibition respond to themes of persecution, resistance, and key moments in history, and include images of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, AIDS activism of the 1980s and the events of 11 September 2001.

Highlights include: three images depicting **Marilyn Monroe** taken between 1957-1962 are to go on display: **Richard Avedon’s** well-known early photograph of the actress in New York in 1957, **Eve Arnold’s** portrait of Monroe rehearsing her lines on the set of *The Misfits* in 1960, and finally **Bert Stern’s *The Last Sitting***[®] (1962) which captures the star lost in thought two months before she died. Presented together to the public for the first time, these candid portraits capture Monroe at the height of her fame, in moments between scripted scenes or staged shoots.

Also on display is **Nan Goldin’s *Thanksgiving series***. A 149-image series, shown in its entirety in the exhibition, it documents events from 1973 to 1999 and depicts some of the most intimate and emotional moments in Goldin and her community’s lives, from the euphoric to the sensual to the distressing. Displayed floor to ceiling, the photographs become an intense homage both to the friendships that survived those twenty-six years, and to those friends she has lost.

Other highlights include; three photographs by **David LaChapelle**, including the humorous portrait of Elton John with two eggs over his eyes (*Elton John: Egg On His Face*, 1999); eleven **Robert Mapplethorpe** images ranging from his still life including *Poppy* (1988), to the iconic horned self-portrait taken in 1985; **Sam Taylor-Johnson’s *Crying Men*** (2004), featuring some of Hollywood’s greatest male talents including Laurence Fishburne, Robin Williams and Daniel Craig, in vulnerable states of tearfulness and contemplation; photogram portraits of John and Furnish’s children, taken by **Adam Fuss**; the viral image by Associated Press photographer **Julio Cortez**, taken at the protests in Minneapolis following the murder of George Floyd in May 2020, depicting a lone protester carrying an upside-down U.S. flag next to a burning building; **Peter Hujar’s** unflinching portrait, *Candy Darling in Her Deathbed* (1974), depicting the American transgender actress Candy (an Andy Warhol superstar and a muse of The Velvet Underground) in her hospital bed; **Tom Bianchi’s *Fire Island Pines***, 1975-1983, a series of photographs celebrating gay joy at a time when homosexuality was still illegal

across the USA , and capturing the resort's halcyon days with poolside pictures of tanned torsos.

Fragile Beauty: Photographs from the Sir Elton John and David Furnish Collection is curated by Duncan Forbes, Head of Photography at the V&A, Newell Harbin, Director of The Sir Elton John and David Furnish Photography Collection, and Lydia Caston, Exhibition Project Curator at the V&A. The exhibition is part of the ongoing partnership between Sir Elton John and David Furnish with the V&A, which began with their generous support for the V&A's Photography Centre in 2019.

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For further PRESS information about *Fragile Beauty: Photographs from the Sir Elton John and David Furnish Collection* please contact Shannon Nash on s.nash@vam.ac.uk.

A selection of press images is available to download free of charge from pressimages.vam.ac.uk.

Support for the V&A is more vital than ever. Please help us by acknowledging the exhibition partner Gucci, with further support from Foundation Socindec.

About the V&A

The V&A is a family of museums dedicated to the power of creativity. Our mission is to champion design and creativity in all its forms, advance cultural knowledge, and inspire makers, creators and innovators everywhere.

V&A South Kensington is a world of extraordinary global creativity, with unmissable exhibitions, experiences and educational programmes for all. One of London's most iconic buildings, it is home to national collections of art, design, fashion, photography and furniture to theatre, performance, architecture, and ceramics, as well as the UK's National Art Library. It is a place where everyone can experience a story of creativity that spans 5,000 years and every creative discipline, which brings that story to life through programmes and activities for all ages and specialisms, and world-leading research and conservation. [Vam.ac.uk](http://vam.ac.uk)

About The Sir Elton John and David Furnish Photography Collection

Sir Elton John began collecting photographs in 1991 and his collection is now regarded as one of the leading private photography collections in the world, distinguished by its exceptional quality and remarkable range and depth. From major vintage 20th century modernist works to cutting-edge contemporary images, the collection now holds over 7,000 fine art photographs. To make this collaboration possible, the V&A has worked closely with Rocket Entertainment along with Newell Harbin, Director of The Sir Elton John and David Furnish Photography Collection.

About Gucci

Founded in Florence, Italy, in 1921, Gucci is one of the world's leading luxury brands. Following the House's centenary, Gucci continues to redefine luxury and fashion while celebrating creativity, Italian craftsmanship, and innovation under the leadership of President and CEO Jean-François Palus and the Creative Direction of Sabato De Sarno.

Gucci is part of the global luxury group Kering, which manages renowned Houses in fashion, leather goods, jewelry, and eyewear.

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