

'I was snapped by the legendary Bill Cunningham - and I know why New Yorkers revere him more than ever'

A new exhibition of collectible photographs by iconic New York street-style photographer Bill Cunningham launches this month

By Sarah Kennedy NEW YORK
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Bill Cunningham's prints are on sale for the first time | CREDIT: © The Bill Cunningham Foundation, Courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

Bill Cunningham, the photographer who died in 2016 aged 87, was the father of street style photography and rode his bicycle around town from the late 1960s, shooting stylish passersby until his death. His 'On the Street' photo spread in the New York Times each week captured Manhattan style.

"Bill was very democratic in terms of the people he photographed," says the photography gallerist Bruce Silverstein. Silverstein's gallery is the venue for a new show, 'Bill Cunningham; New York, New York'. "It was much more about what people were wearing rather than who they were; he captured street style and haute couture."



Photographs in the new show start at \$6,500 each | CREDIT: © The Bill Cunningham Foundation, Courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

Photographs in the exhibition were taken on the streets or at the hottest venues of the Big Apple throughout the 1970s and '80s. Alongside signature Cunningham strolling shots of Jackie O, Donald Trump, Anna Wintour, Linda Evangelista and David Bowie are artistic snaps of the era's favourite characters in motion; Jerry Hall does a high kick, Pat Cleveland swings a shopping bag.

Until his death in 2016, Cunningham could regularly be spotted in his trademark blue serge jacket and black beret clicking away on his patch, usually uptown around 59th and 5th Streets, snapping city workers and style stars alike on their morning commute or as they grabbed lunch.



Cunningham snapped fashion models and commuters alike | CREDIT: © The Bill Cunningham Foundation, Courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

"Bill never sold his prints during his lifetime. He just produced them as one-offs for filing or publication. Each one was exquisitely printed at the time it was shot and has been stored to perfection," says Silverstein, who stresses the unique character of the photographs in the exhibition, which start at around \$6,500 (approx. £5,050) each.

"Many have Bill's notations on the back. Especially the earlier prints, where he was

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very focused on identifying the designers being worn. Later on in his career quite a few of the prints have the name of the person if he's able to identify them. Since we announced the exhibition I've been amazed by the interest."



Spreads of his street photography featured in the New York Times every weekend | CREDIT: © The Bill Cunningham Foundation, Courtesy of Bruce Silverstein Gallery, New York

Cunningham worked on instinct to select his subjects; you couldn't request a picture by him. No amount of smiling and waving worked and believe me, pathetically I sometimes tried. "We dressed for Bill," Anna Wintour famously quipped after his death.

He was probably the most famous of all the faces at each New York Fashion Week, yet also the least photographed. On the day he actually took my picture, well, my husband's to be precise, I had no idea it had happened.

Standing in Barney's doorway one morning in December 2012 dissecting a parent-teacher meeting at our sons' school a few blocks away, we said "hi" to Bill as he snapped hipsters on their way to work, and stayed engrossed in our conversation.

Fast forward to a couple of weeks later, January 2013, and excitement exploded in my feeble heart when I spotted my husband in Cunningham's New York Times On the Street spread titled 'Coat of Arms'. There was my guy in his velvet-collared, Chris Kerr overcoat, fag in hand, the quintessential English bloke. Excitement fizzled up a notch to envious fury though.



A Bill Cunningham spread from the New York Times; the writer appears, with her husband, in the bottom left-hand corner | CREDIT: The New York Times

So blinded was I by the fact that he had been picked by dear Bill Cunningham that I failed to recognise myself next to him in the shot. "Who the hell is that blonde with you?" I demanded of my nonchalant hubby, still half-snoozing over his coffee. Patiently lifting the paper from my hands he glanced down at the page then said "That's you in your sunglasses, you idiot." Singing and dancing commenced and harmony was restored.

Looking back at the picture now my heart bursts with a mix of nostalgia for us when our kids were still in school and New York how it was back then. The fashion and media businesses we worked in boomed uptown. Art, tech and finance ruled downtown. Everyone dashed around dressed to the nines.

"There is no better time for a reminder of the spirit and style of the city than now," added Silverstein in our phone chat this week. "Many of us are returning back after a long hiatus and are reminiscing on the life that we had. In particular, life on the streets of New York. The show is a reminder of a sense of freedom, joy and carefree pleasure which will hopefully return."

Bill Cunningham: New York, New York is at Bruce Silverstein, 529 West 20th Street, New York, by appointment only; September 24, 2020 - November 21, 2020

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