

## Icons in and out of fashion (I) – Bert Stern - Los Angeles Luxury Style | Examiner.com

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Can I get serious here for a second? Yes, of course I'm serious about fashion; but fashion is something fluid, something that changes. I'm talking about what endures – *ars longa, vita brevis* – get the picture? I guess I mean philosophical – as in aesthetics. I've been thinking a lot about the intersection of iconography and illustration, with narrative art and art generally, and the culture at large. What makes an icon – fashion or otherwise? How does it change, become magnified (or shrink), and endure from one context to another?

**Marilyn Monroe** is one such icon; her iconic status so well established that the name alone is enough to signify its power, import, and impact. Yet the icon did not divinely manifest. It was shaped and built steadily and inexorably through art and will, conscious (and perhaps less than conscious) design and determination, the cosmetic, design and directorial talents of hundreds, and the power of a global entertainment industry. It was further magnified by advertising, an enthralled and devoted audience far beyond the reckoning of the industry itself, and perhaps finally a great American artist who managed to put his finger on the icon for exactly what it was. We can see the icon taking shape from her earliest films: from *The Asphalt Jungle* to *All About Eve* (all but upstaging both Bette Davis and George Sanders with drop-dead hilarity in her brief screen moments – no small feat) to *Niagara* – the look at its purest – ready for a delicate fade or to break out in the right vehicle. Which is exactly what she did less than year later in ***Gentlemen Prefer Blondes***. From its eye-popping opening scene to what would become one of Monroe's signatures, "Diamonds Are A Girl's Best Friend," all shot in the most dazzling Technicolor, it proclaimed Monroe's emergence as The Blonde America would henceforth prefer.

Around the time the American President was being serenaded on his 46th birthday by America's Blonde Movie Star, another iconization was taking place across two continents. It involved a movie star who was already iconic in her own right and a brilliant Welsh Shakespearean actor who also wanted Hollywood stardom. The roll-out for 20th Century Fox's ***Cleopatra*** began long before the cameras began rolling in Rome; but the affair between **Elizabeth Taylor** and **Richard Burton** that ignited on the Cinecittà sets rendered Fox's pre-planned publicity campaign almost incidental. In fact, **Bert Stern's** on- and off-set photography of Taylor and Burton for *Life* Magazine was in perfect synch with Fox's carefully paced and primed publicity plan. What overtook it (ironically) was life itself – and Stern audaciously followed his subjects and story beyond their originally mandated parameters. The results included some of the hottest, most colorful and candid photography coming out of the production – and some of the most iconic. The pictures were a publicity gold mine for Fox – and for Stern, too. Stern's off-set portraits of Taylor eased his entrée into *Vogue*; and one of them eventually appeared in its pages. Already well-established as a photographer of celebrity and commercial advertising subjects, Stern pitched *Vogue* another iconic subject: Monroe.

The photographs that came out of these sessions became the stuff of legend. In 1973, Stern's photographs were featured prominently in a discursive and luxuriously illustrated biography of Marilyn Monroe authored by one of America's most notorious literary provocateurs, **Norman Mailer**.

**TASCHEN** (a publisher this Examiner confesses she could not function without), has re-packaged these photographs, along with virtually the complete "last sitting" photographs, as well as the complete Mailer text, into a luxury, over-sized edition – **Norman Mailer, Bert Stern: Marilyn Monroe**, including special art and collector's editions – and launched it this past Wednesday with a party at the newly refurbished **Hotel Bel-Air** and a book-signing at their

Beverly Hills store. There was a brief Q&A with Stern at the store, which prompted these thoughts – and a few more, which I'll share in my next post.