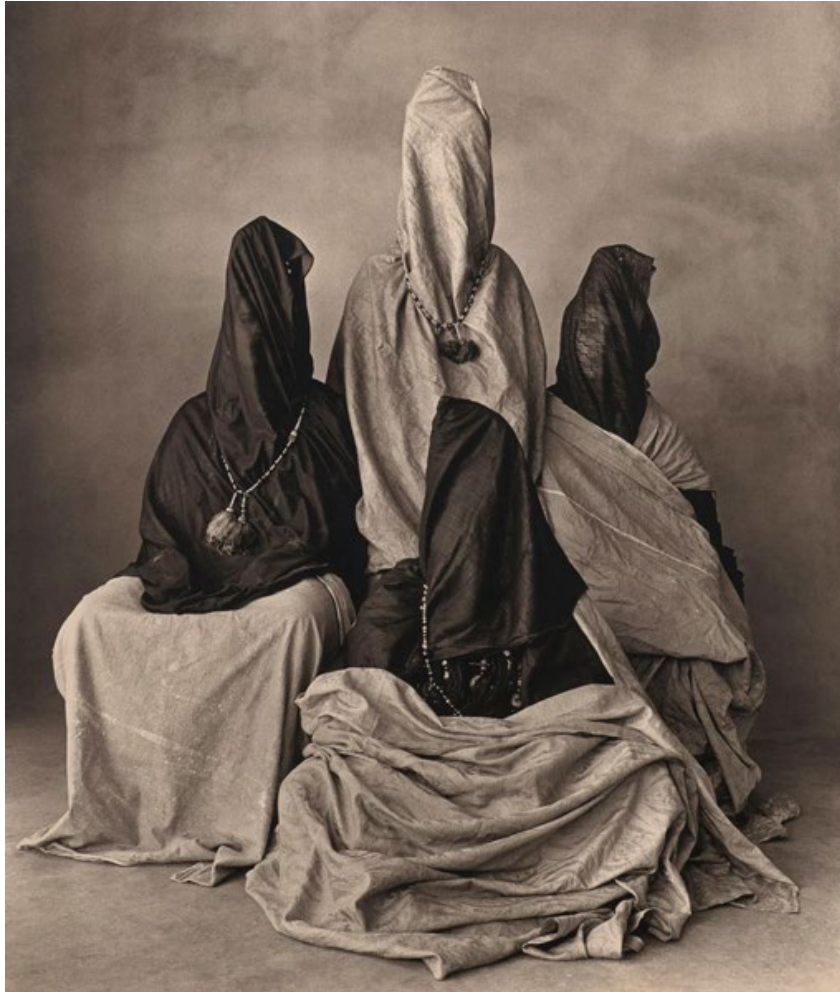


Leggere *la fotografia* - Authors, works, and image languages



Irving Penn, "Four Guedras, Morocco", 1971 - Copyright © The Irving Penn Foundation.

Irving Penn

Four Guedras, Morocco, 1971

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Introduction

Irving Penn's "Four Guedras, Morocco", captured in 1971, stands as an indisputable pinnacle in the history of twentieth-century portrait and ethnographic photography. Taken in Goulimine (now Guelmim), a remote town positioned on the northern fringes of the Sahara Desert in Morocco, the image portrays four "Guedra" dancers.

The Guedra is a traditional, ritualistic dance performed by the women of nomadic tribes across Southern Morocco, Mauritania, and Algeria. However, within the confines of this extraordinary photograph, the kinetic energy typically associated with the dance is entirely suspended, frozen into a statuesque, majestic, and silent composition.

This image belongs to Penn's legendary and groundbreaking itinerant project, undertaken between 1967 and 1971, during which the photographer traveled the globe with a custom-designed, portable tent studio. This ingenious canvas sanctuary was erected in diverse and remote locales ranging from Nepal and New Guinea to Dahomey (now Benin) and Morocco. Inside this structure, isolated from the chaotic, picturesque hustle of the outside world, Penn masterfully decontextualized his subjects.

The neutral backdrop elevated these individuals into timeless icons of universal dignity. "Four Guedras" transcends the boundaries of mere anthropological documentation to become a brilliant exploration of sculptural form, material texture, and the gravity of human presence, effectively transforming a travelogue into a display of absolute visual language.

Biographical and Emotional Analysis

The pivotal decade straddling the late 1960s and early 1970s marked a period of profound introspection for Irving Penn regarding the human condition and universal identity. After decades spent defining the absolute aesthetic of fashion and glamour for *Vogue* magazine since the 1940s, Penn felt a compelling urge to turn his piercing lens toward distant cultures, many of which were threatened by rapid westernization and global homogenization.

His approach was not that of a cold anthropologist or an explorer hunting for exoticism; rather, it was the quest of an artist seeking a genuine, primordial connection with the 'other'. Penn himself described the portable studio as a "sort of neutral area" where both he and his subject were thrust into a shared "limbo".

This mutual sense of displacement he far from his New York comfort, they alienated from their native desert landscape fostered a palpable vulnerability and an intense, silent communication. In "Four Guedras", the lack of identifiable facial features radically shifts the emotional axis from individual identity to the overwhelming power of collective presence and unfathomable mystery.

The heavily draped figures exude a commanding aura of impenetrability and silent pride. The emotional resonance of the work stems from the dramatic tension between concealment and revelation, between the massive physical weight of the group and the delicate folds of fabric masking their bodies.

Penn deeply respects their silence, orchestrating a choral portrait where the viewer is invited to sense the profound respect, awe, and reverence the photographer held for the indigenous cultures he encountered.

Technical Analysis and Visual Language

From a strictly formal and compositional standpoint, "Four Guedras" is an absolute masterpiece of two-dimensional sculpture. The composition is strictly pyramidal, firmly rooted at the base of the frame: the three kneeling or seated figures serve as a massive plinth for the central figure, who rises vertically like a draped monolith.

The strong contrast in tone and texture between the luminous veil of the dominant central woman and the dark, almost pitch-black fabrics cloaking the lower figures creates an arresting visual dynamic, guiding the viewer's eye along the sinuous folds and dramatic cascades of the cloth.

Penn masterfully utilizes the natural light streaming through the north-facing skylight of his tent. This soft, yet highly directional light recalls the zenithal illumination of classic nineteenth-century Parisian photographic studios, bringing out the coarse textures of the fabrics and the subtle glimmers of traditional jewelry peeking through the drapery.

Later in his career, beginning in 1964 and peaking in the 1980s, Penn meticulously printed these images, including "Four Guedras" in November 1985, using the antiquated, labor-intensive platinum-palladium process. He hand-coated Arches paper (often flush-mounted to aluminum) with these noble metal salts. This complex process yields an infinitely rich tonal range: the blacks acquire the absolute density of velvet, while the mid-grays and bright whites vibrate with unmatched subtlety.

The choice of platinum-palladium is not merely technical virtuosity; it bestows the final print with a physical materiality and an eternal chemical stability that amplify the monumental scope of the portrait.

Historical-Cultural Contextualization

In the early 1970s, Morocco was a nexus of fascination for the Western world. Saturated with exoticism and orientalist aesthetics, it became a pilgrimage site for artists, countercultural rock stars, and fashion visionaries seeking inspiration. Diana Vreeland, the legendary and highly influential editor of *Vogue*, enthusiastically supported and funded Penn's expeditions.

She astutely perceived that these rigorous studies of foreign customs and unusual bodily adornments would feed directly into the fashion trends of the era, which were increasingly incorporating global, tribal, and countercultural elements. However, Penn's artistic intent diverged

sharply from superficial tourist voyeurism or standard editorial reportage. "Four Guedras" was created against the backdrop of an era increasingly aware of the impending disappearance of traditional societies.

Yet, Penn firmly resisted any urge toward sentimental nostalgia or patronizing pity. His photographs are resolutely anti-romantic: by isolating the dancers against the mottled grey canvas of his tent, he eradicates geographic, social, and historical contexts, stripping away any picturesque anecdotes.

This rigorously austere method grants the Moroccan women a solemnity reminiscent of classical Greek statuary. In doing so, Penn deconstructs the conventional colonial gaze typical of ethnological photography, restoring to these women an imposing presence, sovereign mystery, and profound human dignity.

Placement in the Author's Production

"Four Guedras, Morocco" represents the zenith of Irving Penn's artistic maturity. It serves as a cornerstone of his monumental editorial project "Worlds in a Small Room", which was masterfully compiled into a book in 1974. This era marks the resolution of an apparent dichotomy in his career.

Prior to this, Penn was globally celebrated for his claustrophobic portraits of the cultural elite (his famous "corner portraits"), his impeccably elegant still lifes, and his definitive high fashion photography. By traveling internationally with his portable tent studio (1967-1971), Penn effectively transported his exacting studio rigor to the edges of the earth. The neutral backdrop became a great democratic equalizer, the aesthetic thread seamlessly linking supermodels in Balenciaga gowns in Paris, tradesmen on the streets of London, and nomadic tribes in the Sahara.

"Four Guedras" perfectly illustrates the master's evolution toward a radical formal minimalism: the methodical subtraction of the superfluous to retain only the architectural essence of the human form. It is enduring proof that, for Penn, haute couture and ethnographic drapery were part of a single, colossal obsession a relentless investigation into form, texture, and the ontological mystery of human presence.

Inter-Author Comparative Analysis

Irving Penn's distinct visual and conceptual signature is best appreciated when compared with those of other titans of photography:

- **Richard Avedon:** Like Penn, Avedon utilized a decontextualizing background (the stark, clinical white seamless of his "In the American West" project). However, Avedon sought brutal psychological confrontation, exposing the flaws and raw vulnerability of his subjects under unforgiving frontal strobe light. Penn, conversely, favored a mottled grey backdrop

and soft zenithal daylight to establish a respectful distance, cloaking his models in a statuesque beauty that protects rather than dissects them.

- **August Sander:** In his titanic inventory of German society ("People of the 20th Century"), Sander classified his contemporaries with quasi-scientific objectivity. Penn shares this taxonomic ambition, but while Sander invariably photographed individuals within their social and professional environments, Penn uproots his subjects from their natural habitat, isolating them in the neutral matrix of his tent to distill pure form.
- **Edward S. Curtis:** A pioneer of the early 20th century, Curtis documented Native Americans, often altering their attire to forge an idealized, pictorialist vision steeped in melancholy over a "vanishing race." Penn vehemently rejects this fabricated sentimentality; his apparent neutrality is an act of striking, modernist objectivity, devoid of romanticized pity.
- **Peter Beard:** Operating in Africa during the same decades, Beard created convulsive, organic works saturated with narrative interventions (animal blood, dirt, dense handwritten diaries) to scream against the destruction of the continent. Penn sits at the absolute opposite pole: his art is minimalist, clinical, utterly silent, and entirely directed toward aesthetic absolutism and formal control.

Market and Collecting

Original photographic prints by Irving Penn, particularly his platinum-palladium masterpieces, rank among the most coveted and prestigious acquisitions in the global fine-art photography market. Penn hand-printed "Four Guedras, Morocco" in November 1985 in a strictly limited edition of 18 (along with a few artist's proofs).

These prints, lovingly coated by the artist himself on Arches paper bonded to aluminum, are globally revered for their breathtaking tonal density and archival longevity. The verso of each piece features a complex array of the author's stamps: signature, title, dates, technical details, copyright (in association with Condé Nast / Vogue), and the highly prized circular stamp "Hand-coated by the photographer".

In the art market, Penn's platinum ethnographic portraits regularly soar well above the six-figure mark at historic auctions hosted by Christie's, Sotheby's, Bonhams, and Phillips. The institutional validation of this image is undeniable, with the work residing in the permanent collections of major institutions such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York (gifted by The Irving Penn Foundation in 2020) and the Smithsonian American Art Museum.

The fervent interest of elite collectors is driven by Penn's miraculous fusion of profound intellectual reflection on humanity with a level of artisanal craftsmanship bordering on alchemy, elevating photography to the highest echelons of fine art.

Chronological Timeline

- **1917:** Born on June 16 in Plainfield, New Jersey.
- **1934 - 1938:** Studies design at the Philadelphia Museum School of Industrial Art under the mentorship of influential art director Alexey Brodovitch.
- **1943:** Makes a dramatic entrance at *Vogue* magazine in New York, shooting his first cover and beginning an editorial allegiance that would span over sixty years.
- **1947 - 1948:** Creates his iconic "corner portraits"; makes his first trip to Cuzco, Peru, where he improvises a studio at a local photographer's shop, a crucial precursor to his mobile studio project.
- **1950:** Marries the sublime Lisa Fonssagrives, history's first supermodel and his timeless fashion muse.
- **1960:** Publishes "Moments Preserved", his first major retrospective book, which shatters contemporary photographic publishing codes.
- **1964:** Begins his alchemical experiments with platinum and palladium printing, reinventing this 19th-century historical process for his modern vision.
- **1967 - 1971:** Deploys his "Portable Studio" globally to Dahomey, Nepal, New Guinea, and Morocco.
- **1971:** Travels to Goulimine, Morocco, where he immortalizes the iconic series featuring "Four Guedras".
- **1974:** Cements his ethnological legacy with the publication of the cult classic book "Worlds in a Small Room".
- **1985:** Meticulously hand-prints the platinum-palladium editions of "Four Guedras, Morocco", finalizing the physical materiality of the masterpiece.
- **2009:** Dies on October 7 in New York, leaving behind an inestimable archive that redefined the photographic medium.

Critical Conclusion

Ultimately, "Four Guedras, Morocco" asserts itself masterfully as a key work that encapsulates the entirety of Irving Penn's intellectual and aesthetic philosophy. By transmuting a group of Saharan dancers into an unshakable colossus of dark drapery and architectural lines, the photographer abolishes the narrow boundaries of standard travel documentation.

He elevates the image to the status of a profound, visceral meditation on the secret of human presence and the power of form to generate reverence. His ingenious use of the tent studio to create a sanctuary for his subjects, coupled with the supreme nobility of the platinum-palladium print, reveals absolute moral rectitude and an unrelenting quest for perfection.

Far from any condescension or exploitation of the picturesque, Penn establishes a meeting of equals in the liminal space of his canvas backdrop. "Four Guedras" endures through the decades as a photographic monolith, a majestic and silent work that continually challenges our fascination with the 'other' while celebrating the breathtaking immortality that only high art can bestow upon the humble beauties of this world.

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