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Absolutely fabulous: Lady Warrender as Ceres, 1935 | CREDIT: Yevonde/National Portrait Gallery

in 18th-century costume, glamorous with a camera, surrounded by surrealist props such as butterflies and picture frames. Whatever life threw at her, Yevonde responded with wit, imagination and skill. Although Yevonde died in 1975, her legacy continues to brightly blaze. As Susanna Brown's essay in the richly illustrated exhibition catalogue makes clear, Yevonde's high-key world, so full of prop-filled artifice, has had a lasting influence on the fashion world, from John Galliano's surreal set design ("She

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ALASTAIR SOOKE By Telegraph Reporters 9 May 2023, 3:45pm 18 Apr 2023, 4:22am

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this brilliant artist across a 60-year-career. You'd be hard-pressed to find a more joyful show anywhere in the country.

and was entranced by Connell's studio, filled with picture postcards of leading suffragettes. Although Yevonde didn't take the job – the trip up from Bromley was just too tiring, she thought - her interest was piqued. She contacted the popular portrait photographer Lallie Charles at her rose-hued Mayfair studio and asked for work: her wish was granted and she was on her way. In 1914, after having only taken one photograph, and with, in her words, "the supreme recklessness of the very young", Yevonde, supported by her father - director of a printing ink manufacturer – set up her own studio. She remembered: "In almost any other job I must have failed, but by great good luck I had adopted an art-trade-profession-science – that, like myself, was not properly 'grown

up". She threw herself into her chosen profession; years later she observed that "photography as a career for women is full of fascination, and offers excellent chances to any girl with originality, energy and grit".

From an early age, Yevonde loved dressing up. She was educated at Lingholt, a progressive boarding school, became a suffragette and was "finished" in Paris. On graduation, she decided to earn her own living. The question was, how? In 1911, an advertisement in the feminist newspaper Votes for Women paved the way: "Miss Lena Connell, Photographer, 50 Grove Road, St John's Wood, has a vacancy for Young Lady Pupil - Write or call between 3 and 5." Yevonde called,

an upper-class craze for surrealism saw the future in colour photography By Jennifer Higgie 18 June 2023 • 10:00am

Ancient and modern: Violet Gagern as Europa, 1935 | CREDIT: Yevonde/National Portrait Gallery On January 5, 1893, a doctor dressed as a courtier to Louis XVI stopped on his way to a costume ball to deliver a baby girl. This was prescient. When that girl grew up she achieved fame for her photographs of society women in fancy dress: goddesses, harlequins, sprites. Ever the innovator, like Beyoncé or Madonna today, Yevonde Cumbers went simply by Yevonde (occasionally preceded by Madame). At a time when serious photography was, in the main, black and white, in an address to the Royal Photographic Society in 1936, she declared: "Be original or die' would be a good motto for photographers to adopt; let them put life and colour into their work!" Yevonde: Life and Colour opens at the <u>revamped National Portrait Gallery</u> on Thursday and will feature a comprehensive selection of works dreamed up by

Madame Yevonde - subject of a major show at the revamped National Portrait Gallery -**Related Topics** Photography, National Portrait Gallery, Museums, Suffragettes

'Be original or die!' How a suffragette sparked

Charting the uncharted: self-portrait with "one-shot" Vivex camera | CREDIT: Yevonde/National Portrait Gallery Word of that originality and charm got out, and the upper classes came calling. It was the heyday of the illustrated press, and Yevonde's fantastical photographs of society beauties and stars of the stage soon filled the pages of The Sketch and Tatler - all in her first year of starting out. The outbreak of the First World War put a temporary pause on her work, and then a shift in focus. In the years that followed, Yevonde documented society darlings attempting to assist the war effort. She briefly joined the Women's Land Army as "second cowman" but anaemia put an end to her self-declared "martyrdom". Back in the studio, commissions poured in. In 1920, she married the journalist Edgar Middleton who, unusually for the time, didn't mind his wife working. The

Salts interesting. In 1924, she curated Photography by Women at the Women's Institute; the exhibition included her engagement portrait of Lord Louis Mountbatten and the Hon Edwina Ashley, the first of Yevonde's many royal sittings, and it cemented her role as society's most fashionable photographer.

couple were founding members of PEN International, which promoted

By 1921, business was booming. Her compositions became increasingly

their flat in Temple were renowned.

"friendship and cooperation among writers". Their social circle included

figures like Rebecca West and Allen Lane; the "mad parties" they hosted at

inventive. After the horrors of the war, a heady distrust of reason and rules had

infiltrated not only art, literature and music, but society. Those with money

and time to spare were drawn to Yevonde's dreamy world, a place where

nothing awful happened and where a click of the shutter would propel a

Commedia-style in Invitation (1923), dressed as Columbine, receiving an

invitation from Harlequin; and in 1927, the movie star Jeanne de Casalis

whispers into the ear of a bust of Nefertiti. Yevonde also shot admiring

parade of beauties across time and space. In The Model Sapho (1922) model

and muse Meum Stewart, in a short tunic, juggles balloons; Stewart returns

portraits of writers, such as Noël Coward and George Bernard Shaw, and she

rose to the challenge of making advertisements for Pears soap and Eno's Fruit

In the late 1920s, her "double portraits" became all the rage: headshot profiles of couples or a flipped single portrait floating against modernist motifs – surrealism for the upper classes.

ked nair and exquisite complexions came into their own. We were in for exciting times!" Portrait of Joan Maude, 1932 | CREDIT: Yevonde/National Portrait Gallery Yevonde's decade was undoubtedly the 1930s, an era of grand costume parties

in which arch modernists were fascinated by mythology. She was thrilled by

technology used three negative plates (cyan, magenta and yellow), exposed

through a specially designed "one-shot" camera, and processed separately -

Yevonde had to battle the bias of her contemporaries: "Photographers," she

said, "will tell you quite seriously that the colour photograph is unnecessary

which freed Yevonde to manipulate the colours and experiment with balance -

before the images were printed on top of each other. Vivex's name, like Kodak,

the invention of Vivex, the first colour print service for professional

was chosen because it was an entirely new word.

photographers in the UK, and became its most brilliant advocate. The

and unnatural." Yevonde was uninterested in doing anything in half measures: "Red hair, uniforms, exquisite complexions and coloured fingernails came into their own. Hurrah! We were in for exciting times!" She delighted in the fact that colour photography had "no history, no tradition, no old masters, but only a future!" She painted extravagant backgrounds, employed surprising props, exaggerated the makeup of her sitters and intensified colour via filters. Her first solo show at the Albany Gallery in Mayfair in 1932 comprised 70 vibrantly coloured still lifes and startling portraits, such as the red-headed, red-lipped actress Joan Maude in a cherry coat posed against a vermilion background. It was the first exhibition of colour portraits in the UK.

the series for which she is best known today. Her interest had been sparked by the Olympian Ball held at Claridge's a few months earlier, which was hosted by Lady Warrender as Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, resplendent in a crown of golden wheat. It featured "a galaxy of goddesses" performed "by almost everyone who has been called beautiful". Four of these ethereal beings reprised their roles in Yevonde's studio; the photographer cast and styled 19 new characters. Occasionally taping blue or green cellophane over her studio lights and lens to accentuate the cool of Greek marble statues or the pallor of sea creatures, the result is astonishing: a hallucinatory group portrait that is at once very ancient and very modern. Violet, Baroness von Gagern as Europa, embraces a bull crowned with flowers; Aileen Balcon as the goddess of wisdom, sports a riding cap, a pistol and an owl; Madeleine Mayer channels the monstrous Medusa by casually draping a snake around her neck. Yevonde often visited galleries; she sought inspiration from Velázquez for her portraits of robed peers at George VI's Coronation. She not only devoured art historian Herbert Read's Art Now (1933) but, in 1937, shot a self-portrait with her camera balanced on a copy of it. It's fair to assume that she agreed wholeheartedly with Read's dictum: "Modern art has been inspired by a natural desire to chart the uncharted." He was a co-organiser of the International Surrealist Exhibition, which opened at the New Burlington Galleries in London in 1936 – a show so popular it stopped the traffic on

Piccadilly. It included 392 surrealist paintings and sculptures by 71 artists,

performance artist Sheila Legge caused a stir - in an ivory satin gown, her face

including Picasso, Magritte, Max Ernst and others. Although the English

obscured by roses, she was covered with ladybirds and brandished a pork

chop - the star of the show was Salvador Dalí, who attempted to deliver a

lecture on "Some Authentic Paranoiac Phantoms" while dressed in a diving

suit, holding a billiard cue and two Russian wolfhounds on a leash. With its

melding of myth, eroticism and humour, Yevonde's "Goddesses" series of a

year earlier was a sign of how aligned the photographer was to the artistic

innovations of the day - and the levels to which surrealism had infiltrated

British culture.

In July 1935, Yevonde staged An Intimate Exhibition: Goddesses and Others –

Olympian cool: Aileen Balcon as Minerva, 1935 | CREDIT: Yevonde/National Portrait Gallery

Over the following decades, Yevonde's zest for life never waned. She shot a

glamorous woman in high fashion, smoking and shelling peas for the cover of

Woman and Beauty; Vivien Leigh, beautiful against a blood-red background;

During the Second World War, her Berkeley Square studio narrowly escaped

bombing, which destroyed the house next door. In the 1960s, she travelled to

smiling in uniform and clutching a small dog. She shot exquisite still lifes, her

lens attuned to the compositional possibilities of lobsters, cabbages, owls, flies

Some Distinguished Women to mark the 50th anniversary of women's right to

vote. Yevonde also took a number of self-portraits, picturing herself variously

Addis Ababa where she photographed Hailie Selassie, Emperor of Ethiopia,

and flowers. She also elevated advertisements for lingerie, cigarettes and

cosmetics to an artform. Yet, alongside her love of glamour, her origins as a

suffragette held steady: in 1968, she staged an exhibition of 50 portraits of

and the motor-racing driver Jill Scott in a burgundy jumpsuit and goggles.

came from Streatham, just like me!" he once enthused), to the luminescent photography of Mario Testino and Miles Aldridge. This is apt. Despite being enamoured with the distant past, Yevonde, ever the optimist, always had her eye on the future: a place, she believed, of infinite possibility. Yevonde: Life and Colour is at the National Portrait Gallery, London WC2 (npg.org.uk), from Thursday

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