



# Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service

**May 2008 | A Conversation with the Curator | Shannon Thomas Perich**

**Shannon Thomas Perich is curator of *The Kennedys | Portrait of a Family: Photographs by Richard Avedon*, which presents for the first time photos of president-elect John F. Kennedy and his family from a 1961 *Harper's Bazaar* photo session. The exhibition, a version of which **SITES** is circulating to six venues nationwide, opened to great acclaim last fall at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia. Shannon also wrote the companion book of the same title (Collins Design, 2007).**

**Shannon is associate curator in the National Museum of American History's Photographic History Collection, which consists of about 200,000 photographs and some 12,000 pieces of apparatus representing over 2,000 photographers, studios, and companies.**

**Q: What's the most common reaction you've had to the photographs?**

**A:** If people are of a certain age, they will recall where they were when Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. Many people connect with Jackie and respond to her sense of style, polish, and sophistication that she brought to American culture and fashion. Others feel nostalgic about that time period. Many young people are equally enthralled with the photographs and have a chance see the Kennedys is a new light.

Whether we know it or not, we all bring a lot of knowledge about the Kennedys to our viewing experience. The experience is full of dramatic irony because we know the story of how three of the four lives end. Here they are, Kennedy about to inaugurate in three weeks; Jackie is young and beautiful; Caroline is an innocent three year old; John Jr. is just barely six weeks old. There is so much anticipation and hope for what lies beyond January 3, 1961. But we know John Jr. will bury his father on his third birthday, then suffer his own tragic death. We know of Jackie's challenges, successes, and death.

**Q: Where were these photos originally seen?**

**A:** This exhibition is the first time that all of these photographs have been seen together. Originally, only six appeared in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1961. Recent research revealed that four more appeared in the January 1964 *Harper's Bazaar* along with "Sailing to Byzantium" (that's the poem that starts, "That is no country for old men.") by William Butler Yeats as a memorial to Kennedy.

**Q: What makes *The Kennedys* different from other Richard Avedon and Kennedy exhibitions and books?**

**A:** This is the intersection of two icons. Other exhibitions and books by Avedon or about John F. Kennedy and his family cover a larger span of time and multiple events. These photographs were produced within the course of a few hours. By studying this group of photographs, we can focus on the time between Kennedy's election and inauguration.

**Q: How often did Avedon and the Kennedys work together?**

**A:** Avedon photographed Jackie for *Harper's Bazaar* in 1947, the year she was voted "Debutante of the Year," and in 1958, when she was one of the magazine's "Six Faces of Beauty." After the *Harper's Bazaar* photo session on January 3, 1961, he photographed the Kennedys for *LOOK* magazine. Although Avedon photographed several other members of the Kennedy family, particularly in 1976 for his *Rolling Stone* "Family" project, he never photographed any of the first family again.

**Q: So there were two photo sessions on one day, but for different magazines?**

**A:** Yes, and the *LOOK* photographs are very different from the *HB* photographs! The most obvious difference is that many of the *LOOK* images are in color instead of black and white. The *LOOK* photos present the first family as the Kennedys were usually presented in various picture magazines. The environment (their home on the beach) and their activities (swimming in the ocean, playing in the yard, playing inside with dolls) provide information that shapes the viewer's perception of the Kennedys. The *Harper's Bazaar* photographs, by contrast, strip the context away, and all that is left is the person in front of the camera. We have to look at the person and develop opinions about that person.

**Q: What does Avedon want us to know about the Kennedys?**

**A:** When you look at the photographs as they appeared in their original photo essay context as Richard Avedon's "Observations" in *Harper's Bazaar*, the set of six photographs have to be seen together. As a magazine viewer, you would see them in sets of two as a spread. There is no text with the photographs except for the title of the section and each of the Kennedy family member's names. And although we know Jackie is wearing dresses by Oleg Cassini and Givenchy, this is not a fashion spread. These six photographs, made and arranged by Avedon, are about what he has observed.

Briefly, the first set suggests that Kennedy will be a paternalistic president. The second set refers to the values of family and hope for the future. The third set present President-elect and Mrs. Kennedy as regal, calm, and confident. We are expected to feel good about this first family in the White House and that this president will take care of the nation.

**Q: What do we learn from looking at the contact sheets?**

**A:** We learn about the photographer's image selection. Most people, when selecting a portrait, will pick the image in which the subject looks happy and is looking at the camera. Avedon did make those kinds of pictures, but he didn't choose those. He opted for the images in which the subject exhibits physical and/or psychological tension, as well as tension within the composition.

**Q: Tell us more about Richard Avedon. How did he get his start?**

**A:** Avedon was born and raised in New York City (1923-2004). His father owned a dress shop so Avedon was around women's fashions and advertising all the time. Growing up, Avedon was interested in music and poetry, even winning a poetry contest in high school. When he joined the Merchant Marines, he was assigned to make photographs for identification cards. Starting in 1945,

after the Merchant Marines, he began bringing together the sensibilities he had been gathering to bring to his vision of photography.

**Q: What happened then?**

**A:** Alexy Brodovitch, a famed designer, was the art director at *Harper's Bazaar*. In about 1942, he noticed Avedon's potential as a unique photographer and brought him on board. The two men, along with editors Carmel Snow and Diana Vreeland, formed a powerful team that produced visually and intellectually exciting content for the magazine. At the time, fashion magazines were on the front edge of graphic design. Avedon became so well-known as a fashion photographer that the movie *Funny Face* is based on him. He actually served as a visual consultant and taught Fred Astaire how to work with the camera.

**Q: How many donations did Avedon make to the Photographic History Collection?**

**A:** In total four. First were photographs from his one-man show at the Smithsonian in 1962, part of a series of exhibitions by the "Famous Photographers" of the Famous Photographers School correspondence course. Then in 1965 and 1966 he donated over 400 photographs and negatives, of which the Kennedy material is part.

In 2002, he donated a portrait of Isaac Ho'opi'i. Avedon photographed a series of September 11, 2001, first responders that ran in *USA Today*. Ho'opi'i was a Pentagon first responder that was featured, and the National Museum of American History had collected his uniform and the badge from his K-9 unit, Vito. It made sense to collect the portrait in order to enable us to show what the man who wore the uniform looked like. It also helps us tell a fuller story about September 11, by pointing to one way in which a well-known photographer, the American Red Cross, and the newspaper were trying to honor those first responders' heroic efforts after the tragedy.

**Q: In your book, you write that Avedon manipulated his negatives and prints, saying his negatives became the basis for photographs that were treated more like canvases wet with oil paint. What did you mean by that?**

**A:** Ansel Adams treated the negative like a score of music. To print was like performing from sheet music. For Avedon, the negative was less formal, and the prints actually contain less detail than the negatives. His printing style pushed the contrast and showed grain. After looking at lots of his prints, I get the sense that if silver halides in photo paper could be pushed around, he would have done so in an aggressive and emotional way.

**Q: If Avedon were still alive, what would you like to ask him about the photo session?**

**A:** I would like a blow by blow of the events and to know what he overheard! There were so many people: some were working in relation to the photo session, some just hanging out, and others working for Kennedy. In fact, on January 3, 1961, the U.S. severed diplomatic relations with Cuba, so I wonder if between frames there were people saying things like, "Eisenhower's staff is on the phone and they've got news." I'm also curious about how the *LOOK* magazine session came to be. I have some ideas, but would like to confirm them. It would tell me more about how he operated as a working photographer.

**Q: You're doing research on the history of digital photography. What does photography as a medium gain or lose by being digital rather than film based? How does it affect you as a curator?**

**A:** That's a huge question! I'm trying to think about digital photography in relationship to the rest of the Photographic History Collection, where we actually collect for the *history* of photography. Here we have a new medium that is pushing other photography formats out of the way. There are some key moments in its development that I'm capturing—equipment and images.

This isn't the first time that the history of photography has seen a major technological shift. There are gains and losses with each, and I try not to be sentimental about the loss of the physical nature of loose photographic prints. I don't know what will substitute—if there is anything—for those shoeboxes and drawers full of snapshots. Before we know that, we need to understand what those shoeboxes of snapshots mean to us as historians. Then we can figure out how to capture the new format of that information. Storage of digital formats remains a question, especially if archivists are not keeping a variety of computers that can run a variety of software in the same way that 16mm projects and VHS players are kept to see other old media.