



# Life in Colour

*In the first of a new series Maudji Mendel explores the life, work and collectability of unsung female artists, starting with the pioneering photographer Madame Yevonde*

**N**ext month the National Portrait Gallery unveils the largest exhibition ever devoted to the life and 60-year career of Madame Yevonde (1893-1975). While her name may be known to few today, Yevonde was a society photographer of note chronicling, among others, the Bright Young Things of the day. She was also a pioneer of colour photography at a time

when it was viewed as the poor relation of monochrome. The exhibition, opening on June 22, will showcase more than 150 of her works, 25 of which have only been recently discovered. One such is a previously unseen self-portrait in vivid Vivex tricolour from 1937 which sees Yevonde looking directly into the lens and at the viewer, positioned alongside her weighty one-shot camera. Yevonde was known for using props, many of which she made herself, and the portrait includes the book *Art Now* - Herbert Read's survey of modern art from 1933 - to demonstrate her artistic credentials.

## Liberal start

Madame Yevonde started life as Yevonde Philomene Cumbers, born in Streatham, south London in 1893 to a prosperous family. She was the eldest of two daughters, and with Verena, her younger sister, the family moved to Bromley in 1899. Her upbringing was both lively and, for the time, liberal. From an early age she displayed an independent attitude citing Mary Wollstonecraft as her girlhood champion.

At the age of 16 she was sent to a convent school in Belgium, but finding her life there dull and restrictive she quit the school returned to Bromley and joined the Suffragette movement, seeking out a lifestyle and income which would allow her independence. She said: "I was already fed up with the flower arranging and gossip that constituted the life of well-to-do girls."

The same year Yevonde answered an advert in a local paper requiring an assistant for a London photographic studio. She was duly taken on by one of the leading society photographers of the day, Madame Lallie Charles (1869-1919) as an apprentice. In her autobiography, *In Camera* (1940) Yevonde wrote: "I took up photography with the definite purpose of making myself independent. I wanted to earn money of my own."



**Above** Vivien Leigh by Yevonde (1936, printed 2022-3), purchased with support from the Portrait Fund, 2021 © National Portrait Gallery, London



**Right** Mask (Rosemary Chance) by Yevonde (1938, printed 2022-3), purchased with the support of the Portrait Fund, 2021 © National Portrait Gallery, London



**Left** Self-Portrait with Vivex One-Shot Camera by Yevonde (1937), purchased with support from the Portrait Fund, 2021 © National Portrait Gallery.

**Right** Dorothy Gisborne (Pratt) as Psyche by Yevonde (1935), purchased with support from the Portrait Fund, 2021 © National Portrait Gallery, London

**Below** Edward James by Yevonde (1933) purchased with the support of the Portrait Fund, 2021 © National Portrait Gallery, London



## Society photographer

Yevonde worked in Lallie Charles's Curzon Street studio for a year, learning the technicalities of photography as well as how to handle aristocratic clients.

In 1914, realising that Lallie Charles's romantic Edwardian treatment of women as submissive objects of beauty was becoming old fashioned she decided to go it alone. With the technical grounding she received from working with Charles, and a gift of £250 from her father, at the age of 21, months before the outbreak of WWI, Yevonde set up her own studio at 92 Victoria Street, London, and began to make a name for herself by inviting well-known figures to sit for free. Working under the title 'Madame Yevonde - Portrait Photographer' - taking the title from her erstwhile employer. It is estimated that throughout Yevonde's six-decade-long career 10,000 personalities passed through her doors, with early clients including Winston Churchill, Arnold Bennett, Rebecca West, and Evelyn Waugh.

## Eccentric poses

Yevonde's photographic work was frequently eccentric, often refusing to portray her models in conventional poses. Many of her seated portraits featured goddesses offering an empowering representation of womanhood



**'Yevonde's photographic work was frequently eccentric, often refusing to portray her models in conventional poses. Many of her seated portraits featured goddesses offering an empowering representation of womanhood rarely seen at the time'**

## Life of the gods

Yevonde's most renowned body of work is a series of women dressed as goddesses posed in surreal tableaux made in 1935, first exhibited as part of *An Intimate Exhibition: Goddesses and others* at her Berkeley Square studio in London.

It was inspired by an Olympian ball held at Claridge's for socialites and celebrities at which they were encouraged to dress as Greek heroes, and Roman deities. The party goers jostled to have their picture taken by Yevonde.

With a total of 24 sitters, the project became full of striking images including the mysterious model known as Baroness Gager, who was photographed embracing a stuffed bull.

Mrs Charles Sweeney, who posed as Helen of Troy was photographed through translucent blue paper, her skin has the icy gleam of statuary.

Clare Freestone, curator of the show at the National Portrait Gallery, said: "It resulted in the recognition of the power of colour photography and ultimately culminated in Yevonde's most celebrated body of work."

In 1940, Yevonde recalled the shoot: "Mrs Gisborne posed as Psyche. Her mournful brown eyes, exquisite mouth and fair hair seemed to express the pleasure as well as the pain that Psyche was forced to endure."

rarely seen at the time. In addition, Yevonde was passionate about colouring some of her images which were extraordinary in their vibrancy - these vivid colours making them stand out from other photographers' black-and-white prints.

In 1921, she became the first woman photographer to be invited to talk at the Professional Photographers' Association. During her lecture, titled 'Photographic Portraiture from a Woman's Point of View', Yevonde claimed, in her typically outspoken manner, that "Women

## THE EXPERT COLLECTOR *Unsung female artists*



**Left** Lady Dorothy Warrender as Ceres by Yevonde (1935), given by the photographer, 1971 © National Portrait Gallery, London

**Below** John Gielgud as Richard II in Richard in Bordeaux by Yevonde (1933) given by the photographer, 1971 © National Portrait Gallery, London

**Bottom right** Margaret Sweeny (Whigham, later Duchess of Argyll) by Yevonde (1938) purchased with the support of the Portrait Fund, 2021 © National Portrait Gallery, London

make better photographers than men because they put more character into their work.”

In 1925, she was invited to submit work to the Professional Photographers' Association International Exhibition of Professional Photography, held to celebrate a century of photography at the Princes Gallery, Piccadilly.

Yevonde's work quickly became published in leading society and fashion magazines such as the *Tatler* and the *Sketch*, depicting new freedoms in fashion and leisure as well as capturing the growing independence of women.

Her commercial work also appeared as advertisements constructed through humorous still life or by using models in tableaux.

Yevonde's audience included the readers of the growing field of women's magazines such as *Woman and Beauty* and *Eve's Journal*. Her clientele comprised some of the most famous faces of the time - from John Gielgud to Princess Alexandra.

However, such was the prevalent prejudice that her colour cover shots for *Tatler* and the *Sketch* ended up being printed in monochrome.



### Colour pioneer

Despite a general hostility to colour photography from photographers and the public alike, Yevonde's commitment to the new process makes her a central figure in the development of modernist photography. As well as reflecting a new style of portraiture, Yevonde was a pioneer of colour photography.

From the early 1930s, Yevonde experimented with techniques such as Solarisation (the effect of tone reversal observed in cases of extreme overexposure of the photographic film in the camera) and the Vivex colour process (a wash-off relief process using three negatives on waxed cellophane, one for each primary colour).

In 1932, during an address to the Royal Photographic Society, she said: "If we are going to have colour photographs, for heaven's sake let's have a riot of colour, none of your wishy-washy hand tinted effects." In the same year, she mounted a solo exhibition of her work at the Albany Gallery in Sackville Street, the first in England to include colour portrait photographs.

### 'Yevonde's work quickly became published in leading society and fashion magazines'

#### After WWII

After working as a land girl during the war, Yevonde returned to photography but the period of her most intense creativity was over. In 1939, she had to stop her colour work, due to the demise of the Vivex colour process, the same year in which her husband the playwright Edgar Middleton died. In 1940, she was elected as a fellow of the Royal Photographic Society for her work





in colour photography. Yevonde continued to experiment with black and white photography and exhibit her work producing a number of notable portraits. Yevonde died in 1975, aged 83.

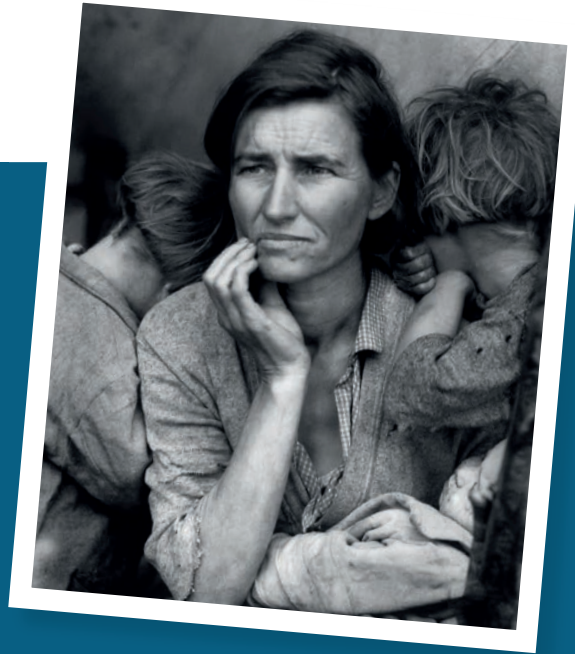
To celebrate her 80th birthday, the Royal Photographic Society gave an exhibition of her work. Throughout her career she lived up to her maxim “be original or die!”

### Lasting legacy

Almost 50 years later, her place as a key photographer in the 20th century is finally being recognised by a wider audience. National Portrait Gallery curator, Clare Freestone, said: “She is not a household name, partly due to the lack of female representation in the history of art and photography. She also defies easy categorisation: as well as being an excellent experimenter, the output of her 60-year career also encompassed advertising work which could have been seen to dilute the brilliance of her most creative work.”

With only 20 works having passed through auction since 1992, Yevonde’s record price in the public sphere currently stands at £14,484 (2012) for a still-life photograph shot in 1935. Most of her other photographs and prints currently sell for under £1,000, a lowly sum considering her pioneering methods and ingenuity.

*Maudji Mendel is a curator at RAW, Rediscovering Art by Women. Yevonde: Life and Colour is on at the National Portrait Gallery in London from June 22 to October 15.*



### Dorothea Lange

This month the work of Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) another pioneering 20th-century female photographer is in the spotlight when it goes under the hammer at Sotheby’s New York.

Among 18 photographs by the American photojournalist in the sale on May 1-2, is *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* (1936), one of the most famous images ever taken of Depression-era America.

Taken while photographing for the Farm Security Administration, the image transformed the subject – a hungry and desperate mother – into a Madonna-like figure and icon of the Great Depression. Lange took the picture returning home from an assignment for the Resettlement Association in March of 1936 when she came across a sign reading “Pea Pickers Camp”.

In 1940, Lange travelled to Arizona to document the working conditions of cotton workers. *Migratory Cotton Picker*, shows an anonymous migrant worker leaning against a fence with his cotton sack thrown over his shoulder. He presents his hand to the camera in an attempt to obscure part of his face but unexpectedly offers perhaps a more intimate portrait.

*The photographs are part of the sale of images from the San Francisco gallery Pier 24 Photography featuring the work of some of the most influential photographers of the 20th century at Sotheby’s New York on May 1-2.*

**Above** Joan Maude by Yevonde (1932), given by the photographer, 1971 © National Portrait Gallery, London

**Above right** Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) *Migrant Mother*, Nipomo, California, 1936, printed 1940s

**Right** Dorothea Lange (1895–1965) *Migratory Cotton Picker*, Eloy, Arizona, 1940, printed 1940s

