

Vanity Fair Show Captures A Century In Pictures

February 13, 2008

LONDON (Reuters) - As a magazine *Vanity Fair* captured the changing moods of two distinct periods of the 20th century in prose and pictures -- from the pre-War Jazz Age to the post Pop Modern.

Now for the first time portraits from those two phases of the trend-spotting publication have been brought together in the “**Vanity Fair Portraits – Photographs 1913-2008**” exhibition that opens on Thursday at London’s National Portrait Gallery.

The show contains 150 pictures painstakingly picked out of more than 10,000 that appeared in some 500 issues by curators David Friend and Terence Pepper in a process that took more than three years. “It was a tough task. We basically chose the subjects, then the photographers then the images. It was a big back and forth process but I think we have got the cream,” Friend said at a press preview on Wednesday.

From Russian ballet star Nijinsky to Britain’s Princess Diana, the portraits chronicle an era in which stars became public property and the photographers became celebrities in their own right.

Published by Condé Nast in 1913 at the dawn of the Jazz Age, the magazine set out to be a cultural catalyst, showcasing works and portraits of people from British author Thomas Hardy to American dancer Fred Astaire and Swedish actress Greta Garbo.

As its fame grew, so did that of its photographers like Man Ray, Cecil Beaton, Andre Kertesz and Edward Steichen – all of whose pictures feature in the exhibition.

“In his day Steichen, who was appointed staff photographer, was paid double what any other photographer could command,” a gallery spokeswoman said.

Then came the Great Depression and *Vanity Fair* closed down as belts were tightened everywhere and it was deemed too frivolous for the time.

When it was revived in 1983, it again set out to capture the new cultural icons from painter David Hockney to director Billy Wilder, musician Miles Davis and politician Margaret Thatcher. As with the new celebrities so new photographic stars were also born such as Helmut Newton, Herb Ritts, Mario Testino and Annie Liebovitz, who occupied the role previously filled by Steichen.

The exhibition, which runs to May 26 before moving on to Edinburgh, Los Angeles and Canberra, not only illustrates the changing faces of celebrity. It also tracks closely the development of photography through the century. From stylized studio portraits in sepia tones via the surreal to outdoor settings in vibrant color, it captures the changing balance between the stars and the snappers.

– REPORTING BY JEREMY LOVELL; EDITING BY PAUL CASCIATO

The New York Times

