



Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., and Joan Crawford by Nickolas Muray. *Vanity Fair*, October 1929

# — Pause, Célèbre —

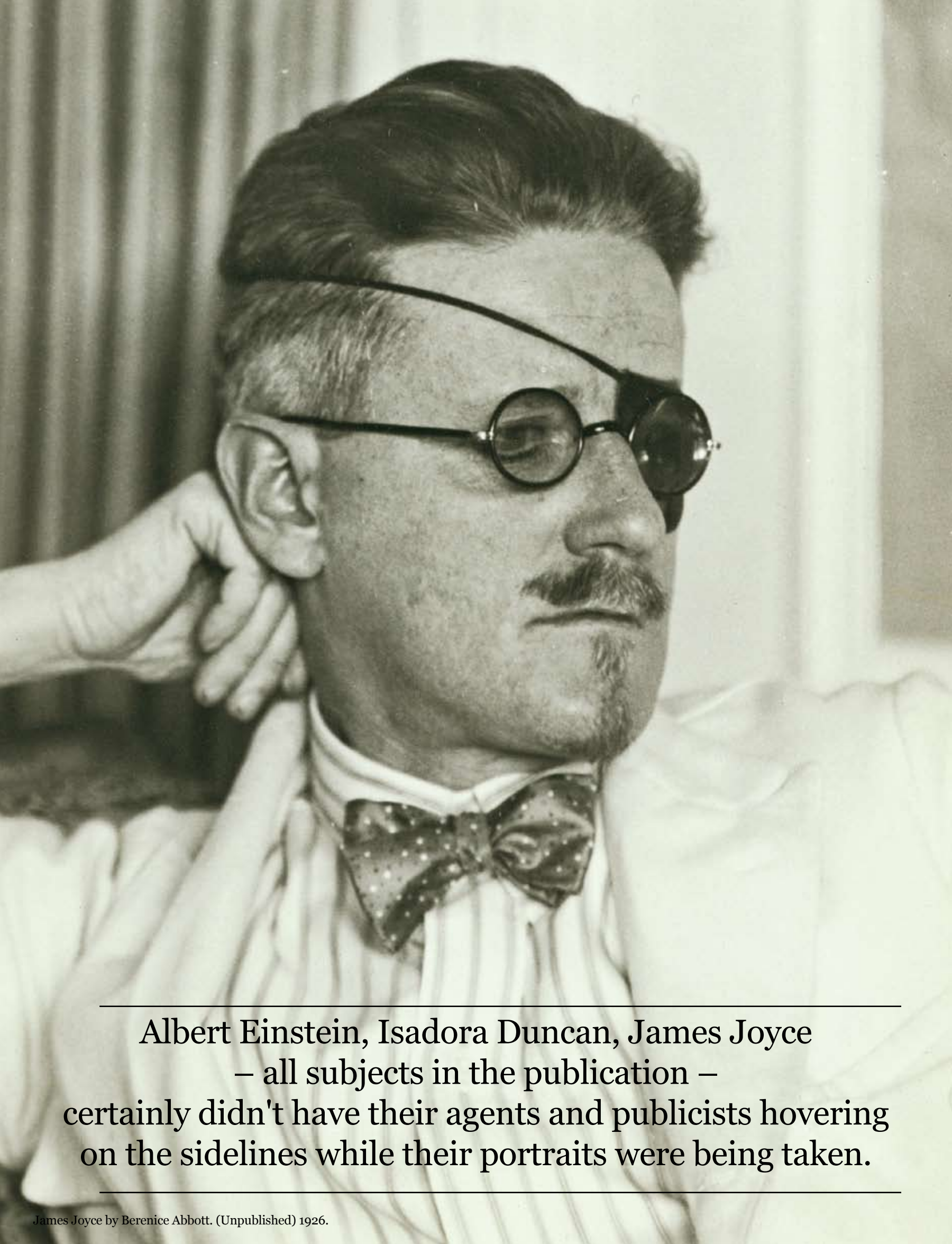
# VANITY FAIR

by Susan Michals

A few years back, producer Robert Evans came up with a great line: “Instant gratification takes too long.” In this age of immediacy, there is no truer statement. Patience is no longer a virtue, it is an obstacle or a gratuitous nuisance that hinders our voracious hunger for information. A shot of Britney sans panties has become breaking news, getting more airplay than the Georgian conflict. If Gmail stalls for more than five minutes, it’s obvious – this must be a sign of the apocalypse. What has happened to us that we can no longer revel in the moment? When our children are bad, we put them into ‘time out’ – forcing them to take five minutes and reflect on their actions. Rarely as adults do we do that for ourselves. Read a book for a change. Try meditating. Check out the museum. Art – a frequent source of inspiration and reflection, can hypnotize us into a meditative place of taking stock; just a simple, contemplative respite can often put things in perspective, for more than a fleeting moment.

This month, *Vanity Fair* magazine is giving us the perfect opportunity to dial it down and pause. Starting October 26th, LACMA will showcase 140 of the publication’s greatest photographic works in a collection entitled: *Vanity Fair Portraits: Photographs 1913–2008*. It is the only exhibition of photographs from the magazine’s historic archive, ranging from the early days, (1913-1936) to the contemporary publication (1983- present). It also coincides with the magazine’s 95th birthday, as well as its 25th anniversary. Editor-in-Chief Graydon Carter admits making his selections was no easy task. “We had a remarkably vast archive to choose from,” mentions Carter. “David Friend, our editor of Creative Development, and I went through all 570-plus issues of the magazine...and selected several finalists. We focused on classic pictures; photographs that defined the subject, photographer, or time period and surprising, lesser-known images that felt especially fresh upon re-discovering them.” ▶





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The baby of entrepreneur Condé Nast arrived on the scene in 1913. For over twenty years, it was the darling of café society until the mid-1930's, when it became a casualty of the Great Depression as well as declining ad sales. Forty-seven years later, publisher S.I. Newhouse, Jr. decided it was time to resuscitate Nast's trendsetter, and brought the magazine back in that decade of decadence, the '80's. The exhibit covers both eras of the magazine's iconic celebrity portraiture, as well as select pieces of ephemera from the early years. *Vanity Fair* has always been synonymous with entertainment, but when perusing some of the early work, it is not necessarily representative of the word 'celebrity' as we know it today, as it was more of artists and forerunners. Albert Einstein, Isadora Duncan, James Joyce – all subjects in the publication - certainly didn't have their agents and publicists hovering on the sidelines while their portraits were being taken. Of course there were the requisite matinee idols – Jean Harlow, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., Joan Crawford – all icons, without knowing they were iconic. Their stances, comfortable and relaxed, feel almost candid in their interpretation.

In these early days, even the movies were still finding their way, gradually transitioning from silent films to talkies. In the photography realm, there was no Photoshop – only photographer and subject. "*Vanity Fair* helped invent portrait photography," says Carter, "when Frank Crowninshield, the first editor, sort of stripped away the gimmickry that was the fashion at the time, and made the pictures spare and modern." One image, taken in 1924 by early chief photographer Edward Steichen, gives us a hypnotic depiction of a very young Gloria Swanson – and shows the very reason why she got top billing on the marquee. (One of Hollywood's first great actresses, Swanson later gained her greatest success in taking on a role that mirrored her own career – that of fallen silent film star Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*.) Steichen stated: "I took a piece of black lace veil and hung it in front of her face. She recognized the idea at once. Her eyes dilated and her look was that of a leopardess, lurking behind leafy shrubbery, watching her prey. You don't have to explain...her mind works swiftly and intuitively."

Knowing what works when, and why – those inherent traits of its various editors – has kept the magazine in the upper echelon of the American vernacular as one of the foremost arbiters of taste and style. An acquaintance of mine who contributes to the publication, told me not long ago, "To work for them, you must have a story that you – and only you – can tell." The magazine thrives because of this resolute air of exclusivity – despite being surrounded by the inundation of gossip doled out by the Perez Hilton's and TMZ's who reside solely in a salacious realm of reality. ►

The first issue of round two hit newsstands in 1983, under the tutelage of editor Richard Locke, previously of *The New York Times Book Review*. He didn't last long – a mere three issues – before being replaced by Leo Lerman, a former features editor at *Vogue*. Lerman too, moved on quickly and in came Tina Brown. This was the era when we denied ourselves nothing. Coke and monetary excess became symbiotic heroes, and Studio 54 usurped the church and synagogue as the celebrity's chosen place of worship. The savvy British blonde boldly grabbed hold of the period and revamped the magazine, hiring writers like Dominick Dunne and Maureen Orth, and photographers Robert Mapplethorpe, Herb Ritts, and that ultimate *Vanity Fair* image-maker, Annie Leibovitz. However, *Vanity Fair* was a financial flatliner. Brown broke out her defibrillators with two photo shoots that gave the publication a much needed publicity jolt. The first involved President and Mrs. Reagan – shot by Harry Benson in 1985. The concept was an amalgamation of Hollywood and politics – a woman entranced by her husband – who just happened to be the man holding the tethers of the most powerful nation

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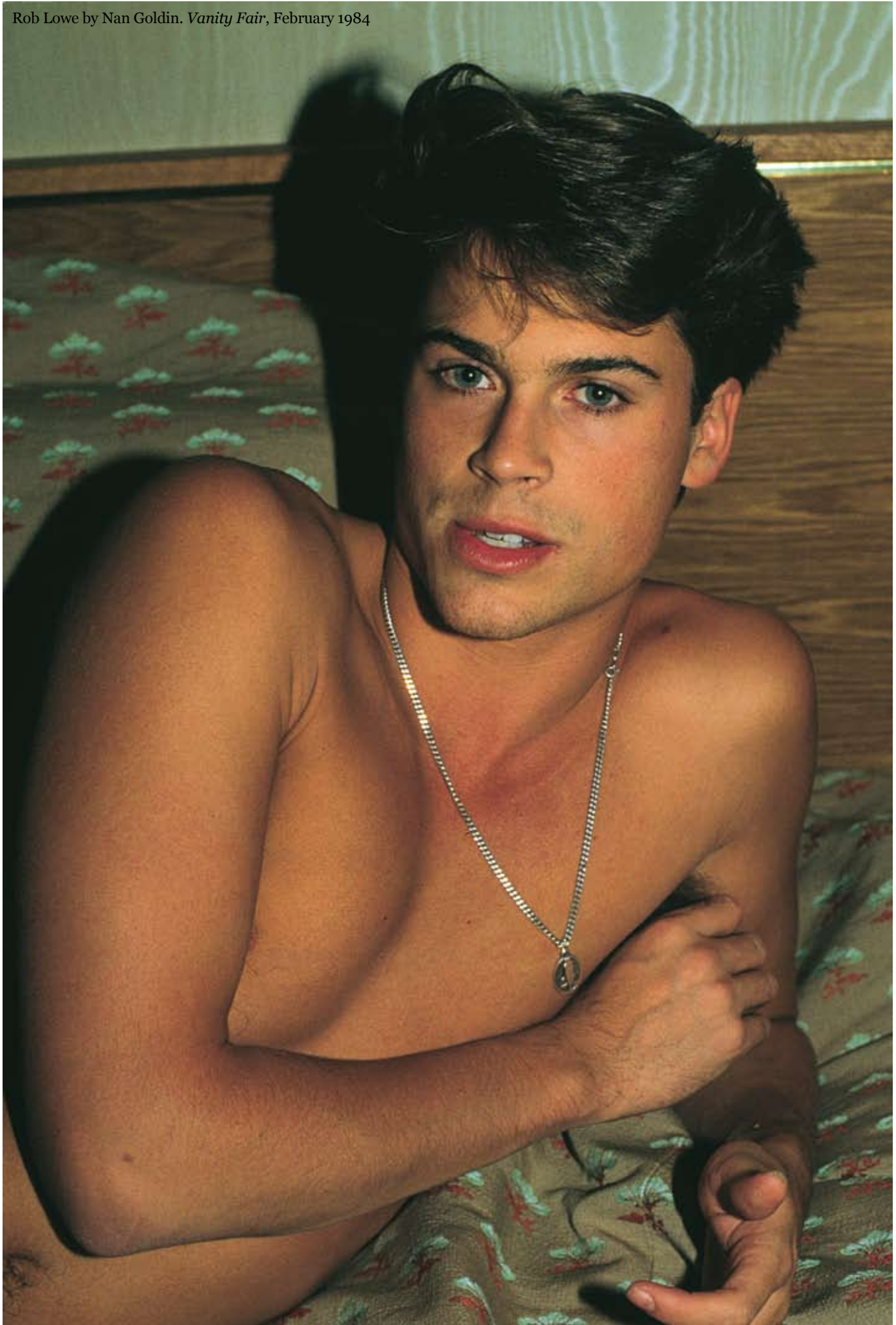
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in the world. They danced, they embraced, and in that moment, they became just like us. The second was a series of portraits of socialite Claus von Bülow while he was on trial the second time for attempting to murder his wife, Sunny. Photographed by Helmut Newton, von Bülow appears shameless, bedecked in a sinister black leather jacket. In another portrait, he poses with his mistress at the time, Andrea Reynolds. “I was there that day, when those photos were taken,” says writer Dominick Dunne, who was covering the trial for *Vanity Fair*. “I attended Sunny's debutante ball, y'know. And here I was, all these years later (at the trial)...it was so strange, but so fascinating.” In Dunne's article, (*Vanity Fair*, August 1985) Claus von Bülow gushes, “This is the first time I've actually posed for a picture since my front and side shots.” In a recent written statement from editor of Creative Development, David Friend: “The magazine's subjects, in concert with *Vanity Fair*'s photographers, were pushing photo sessions to their limits in a performance-art satire of their own celebrity. The images were a wink to the reader; postmodern fame was sometimes sustained or amplified by letting the viewer lift the curtain on the artifice required to maintain one's public persona.”▶



Gloria Swanson by Edward Steichen. (Originally shot 1924) *Vanity Fair*, February 1928

Rob Lowe by Nan Goldin. *Vanity Fair*, February 1984



© Nan Goldin/Courtesy of the Artist



Hilary Swank by Norman Jean Roy. *Vanity Fair*, March 2005

When actor Rob Lowe was photographed by Nan Goldin back in 1983, he had just completed his first two feature films - *The Outsiders* and *Class*. He was hovering on the cusp of super stardom. "I was just out of high school," says the actor. "(I was) totally passionate about acting. This (*Vanity Fair* shoot) was the beginning of something exciting." We are exposed to Lowe's budding sexual persona; the almost documentarian styling of the photo, combined with his casual reclining stance, makes the image feel almost taboo in its presentation. This is but one example of the magazine's natural ability to identify future talent. Graydon Carter comments further. "It means that right now, whether it's fame or infamy, you've done something that has affected the culture to such a degree that you should be in the pages of *Vanity Fair*."

Though she had successfully brought the magazine to the public forefront, Tina Brown moved over to *Nast's New Yorker* in 1992 at the request of Newhouse, and another editor was brought in. Graydon Carter – formerly of *Time* and *Life*, had also co-founded *Spy*, a publication known for its unflinching irony and wit – and one that had spent a great deal of ink satirizing the very magazine he was taking over. While Brown elevated *Vanity Fair* with her *Tatler*-esque gloss, Carter's journalistic sensibility, infused with a fresh ingenuity, catapulted the magazine to a new level of literary reportage. He hired outspoken intellectual auditors like Christopher Hitchens and Amy Fine Collins. Politics and world affairs got just as much airplay

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as the Hollywood elite. Within a short period of time, Carter refurbished the publication, replete with a newfound consciousness - as well as an abundance of profit.

Of course, people weren't just buying *Vanity Fair* for the articles. Early in his tenure, the editor brought in a number of photographic auteurs -- including David LaChapelle, Bruce Weber, and Norman Jean Roy – to the *Vanity Fair* collective. "Most great photos are a real collaboration," muses Carter. Actress Hilary Swank, who was in the midst of preparing for what would become her Oscar winning performance in *Million Dollar Baby*, wanted to showcase her new, athletic prowess. "She'd been training for hours a day... (photographer) Norman (Jean Roy) wanted to do something on the beach - so the terrific result is a really great twist on the typical bikini-clad girl at ►



© Annie Leibovitz/Contact Press Images/Courtesy of the Artist

Scarlett Johansson and Keira Knightley by Annie Leibovitz. *Vanity Fair*, March 2006

the beach photo.” Carter’s visceral predilection for showcasing celebrities in unusual – and often, overtly sexual – situations continued to appease a now ravenous audience, hungry for his publication. Take Leibovitz’ March 2006 cover of a nude Scarlett Johansson and Keira Knightley. By photographing two, nubile innocents in an unexpected - albeit almost obtrusive level of eroticism – Carter once again fulfilled his audience with a visual feeding frenzy. His take was not merely *savoir-faire*, it had become *savoir flair*.

The *Vanity Fair* portraits give us an opportunity to pause and take stock; not only to savor their artistry, but to admire the effort. Think what has gone into putting these portraits together – the labor of a photographer, the tenacity of an editor, and the vulnerability of a subject. These things take time. This is not to say when gazing upon these photographs the gratification will not be instant. But there is no doubt that long after the moment has passed, their impact will transcend the fleeting comments of tomorrow’s latest blog, or that never ending myriad of texts. ■

*Vanity Fair Portraits: Photographs 1913–2008, October 26, 2008 – March 1st, 2009. [www.lacma.org](http://www.lacma.org)*