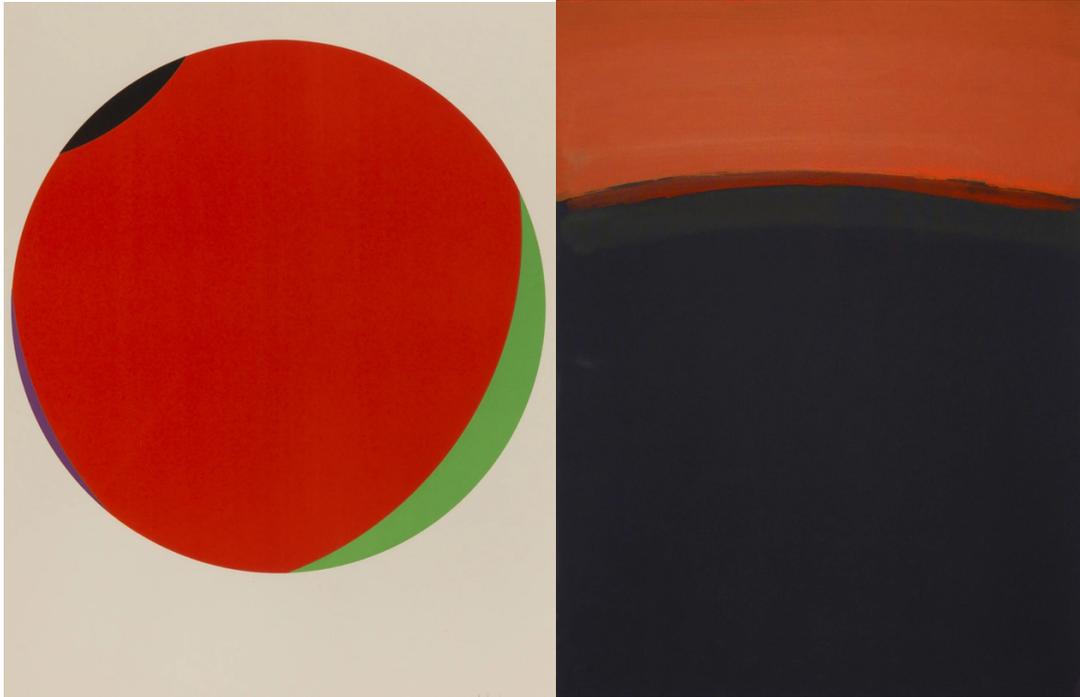


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Stories: Alexander Liberman

Tsvetelina Miteva | March 1, 2023



Left: Red Circle by Alexander Liberman, 1976. Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the Woodward Foundation. Right: Orb XIV painting by Alexander Liberman, 1967. Oil on canvas, 60 × 45 inches. © Alexander Liberman Estate. Courtesy of Vallarino Fine Art.

For more than half a century, Alexander Liberman had been the dominant creative force at the Condé Nast empire while maintaining an independent practice as an artist.

As the company’s editorial director, he mentored several generations of editors, art directors, and photographers. A sculptor, painter, photographer, designer, editor, and writer, Liberman embraced many lives in one.

“I was very much impressed by the visual impact of the revolution. All the great marches through the Nevsky prospect [in St. Petersburg, Russia] with red banners, gigantic red banners.” —Alexander Liberman on his earliest childhood memories in an interview with the Bomb Magazine.

Early Years

Alexander Liberman was born in 1912 in Kiev into the family of rich timber merchant Simon Liberman and theatrical actress Henrietta Pascal. After the Bolshevik Revolution, Simon took a post of economic advisor at the Soviet government and sent his son to an English boarding school. “If you can survive that, you can conquer anything,” Alexander would recall of this period. Then he moved to Paris to study mathematics, architecture, philosophy, and painting.

“All art is solitary and the studio is a torture area.” —Alexander Liberman

Formative Time

Liberman’s early work life in France was diverse: he designed stage sets, briefly worked as an illustrator, and assisted to poster designer Cassandre. Aged eighteen, Alexander started his publishing career with VU, one of the world’s first illustrated periodicals. There he collaborated with renowned photographers, including Brassai, Man Ray, and Robert Capa. Eventually, Alexander rose to managing director at Vu, but left it in 1936.

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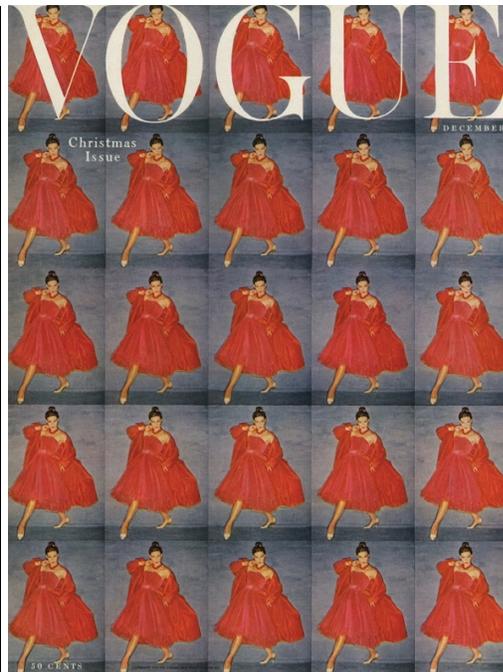
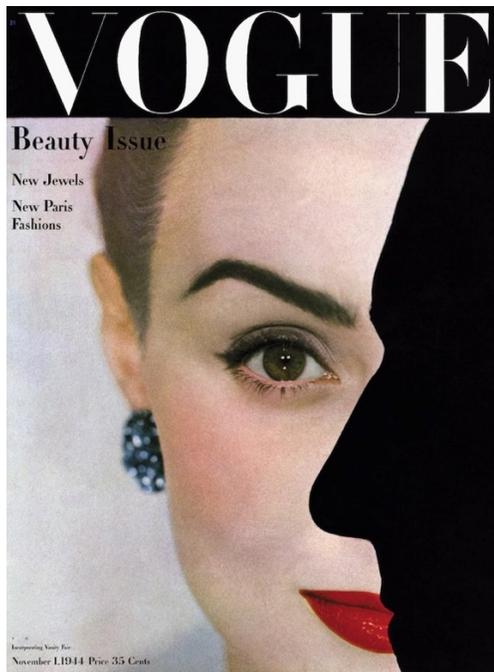


Left: Alexander Liberman stands in his studio with a recent work of welded and painted steel. Photo via Getty Images. Right: Equipoise by Alexander Liberman, 1967. Steel. Smithsonian American Art Museum, gift of the artist.

“I think the term “art director” is the greatest misnomer. There’s no art in magazines unless you are reproducing works of art.” —Alexander Liberman

Condé Nast’s creative mastermind

With the outbreak of World War II, Liberman fled to the United States together with his future wife, Tatiana Yacovleff Du Plessix. Always well-connected, he soon took the post of art director at Vogue, reshaping the look and layout of every publication he touched. Twenty years later Alexander reached the role of Editorial Director at Condé Nast Publications, where he stayed for another thirty-two years. During that period, he was responsible for the look, style and content of Vogue, Mademoiselle, Glamour, Bride's and House & Garden—five of the most popular women's magazines in the US, with a total readership of more than five million.



Left: Vogue magazine cover, November 1944. Right: Vogue magazine cover, December 1950. © Condé Nast.

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“My role is to communicate ideas—not illustrate words.” —Alexander Liberman

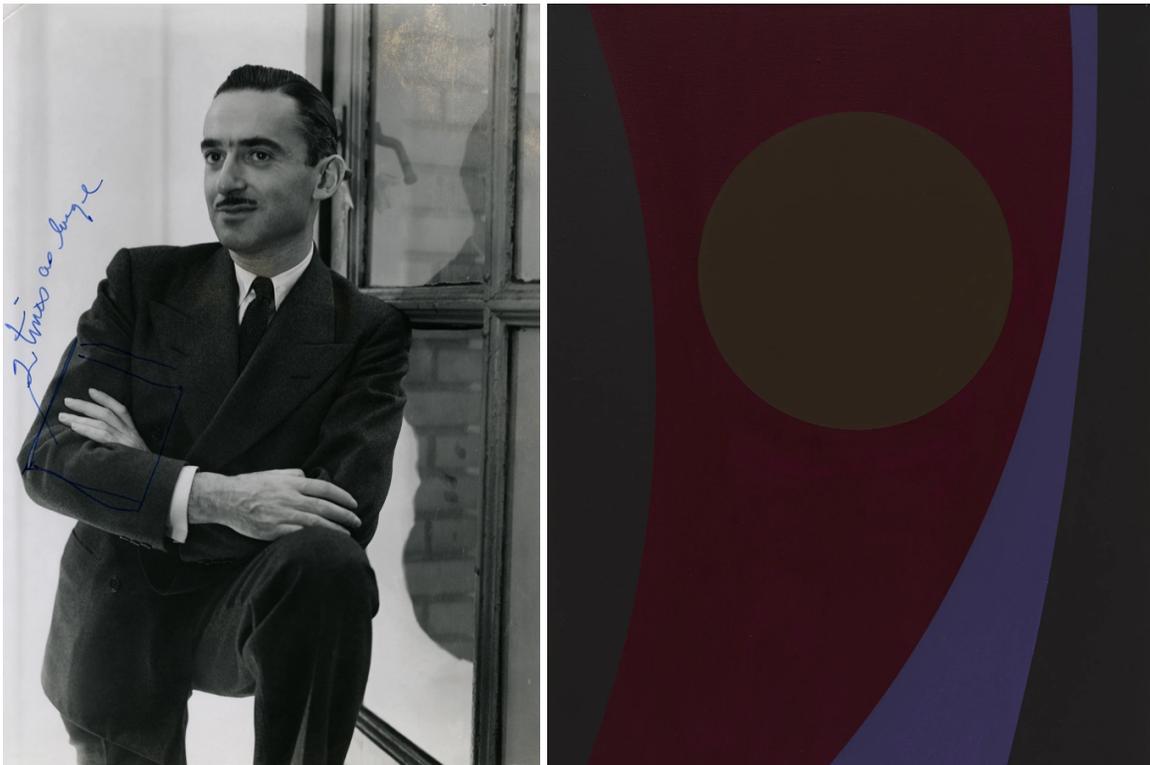
Messy but Not Confusing

While Liberman worked at Condé Nast, another top-notch art director across town—also a Russian émigré—Alexey Brodovitch, was at Harper’s Bazaar. Alexander rebuked his competitor for “making the magazine attractive to women, not interesting to women”. Instead of playing catch-up, Liberman tried to carve out a different aesthetic. Though Liberman’s layouts were at time deliberately messy, they were never confusing.

“I think many works of art are screams.” —Alexander Liberman

The Artist in his Studio

Throughout his career, Liberman maintained a whirlwind social life. Beginning in 1948, he spent summers photographing European artists, including Henri Matisse, Marc Chagall, Marcel Duchamp, Constantin Brancusi, and Pablo Picasso. In 1959, the Museum of Modern Art in New York exhibited these photographs. Later, they were gathered in Liberman’s first book, *The Artist in his Studio*. Among other books were *Marlene* (1992), dedicated to Marlene Dietrich, and *Then* (1995)—a retrospective album of acquaintances from Paris long ago to Miami in the 1990s.



Left: Alexander Liberman, 1945. Photo by John Rawlings / Condé Nast via Getty Images. Right: Untitled painting by Alexander Liberman, 1961. Oil on canvas. © Alexander Liberman Estate. Courtesy of Vallarino Fine Art.

“Color for me has always been a problem because I find color in a deep sense weakens a work.” —Alexander Liberman

Sculptor & Painter

At the beginning of the 50s, struggling to forge an identity as an artist, Liberman began painting in an abstract post-Impressionistic manner and sculpting. He divided his time between his office and studio, explaining that he thought of art as a dangerous full-time profession. Liberman’s highly-recognizable sculptures are assembled from segments of steel I-beams, pipes, drums, and other industrial materials often painted in uniform bright colors. His sculptures and paintings are currently in many collections including the Metropolitan Museum, Corcoran, Guggenheim Museum, and the Tate Gallery in London.