

## CULTURE



(L to R) Barbara Jordan, U.S. Congresswoman from Texas, New York, July 14, 1976; Jerry Brown, Governor of California, Sacramento, California, March 20, 1976; Katharine Graham, Chairman of the Board, The Washington Post Company, Washington D.C., March 11th 1976. All photographs by Richard Avedon.

# Arresting brilliance: Richard Avedon at NMAJH

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From the first time I set eyes on Richard Avedon's work I was enamored with the energy and wit in

his images. It wasn't too hard. The first set of photos I came across was the famous photo shoot at a circus and its most iconic image, "[Dovima with Elephants](#)," in a Harper's Bazaar article.

Known for capturing the freedom of fashion at the time, and breaking the rules with shoots that are striking with glorious motion and unforgettable settings, Avedon's portraits are the most arresting images.

Philadelphia will soon have the chance to experience an exhibition of Avedon's most political and compelling portraits at the [National Museum of American Jewish History](#), the only U.S. venue chosen to feature "Richard Avedon: Family Affairs," a collection from the Israel Museum, in Jerusalem, that opens April .1

Although he is considered one of the best fashion photographer of his generation, it has been said that Avedon's real passion was in the portrait and its ability to express the essence of its subject.

One of the known anecdotes around the photographer, as told by Martha Schwenderner of The New York Times, involves the Duke and Duchess of Windsor. "In 1957, Avedon was commissioned to take a portrait of the couple, who were notoriously photo-savvy. Knowing that they were dog lovers, Avedon is said to have told them that the taxi he had taken to meet them had run over a dog (which wasn't true)."

The resulting [image](#) had gone down in photographic history.

By the 1960s, after having been a staff photographer at Harper's Bazaar for more than a decade, Avedon turned his creative lens to civil rights workers, politicians and cultural dissidents. This is the time when Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X and Julian Bond were immortalized by him.

"Family Affairs" features two monumental projects by the photographer, both illustrating his highly innovative approach to portrait photography.

The first is a set of four group portraits, including a massive mural of the iconic beat poet Allen Ginsberg and his family, as well as three additional portraits shown at a smaller scale — Andy Warhol and Members of the Factory; The Chicago Seven; and the mission council.

The second is a series of 69 portraits titled "The Family," that Avedon created after being commissioned by Rolling Stone to cover the 1976 presidential election. Foregoing traditional photojournalism for the assignment, Avedon used his Deardorff 8x10 camera to create arresting black-and-white portraits of each of his subjects.

He created a visual essay on the nature of American politics at the moment when it was most conspicuous, including 1976 presidential candidates Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford; A.M. Rosenthal, managing editor of the New York Times, famous for publishing the Pentagon Papers; and W. Mark Felt, later revealed to be “Deep Throat.”

“‘The Family’ component of the exhibition, given its focus on political power in the days leading up to the 1976 election, seems particularly well-suited for exhibition in Philadelphia, the country’s epicenter for the bicentennial celebrations,” said Dr. Josh Perelman, chief curator and director of exhibitions and collections at NMAJH. “And as the country prepares for a presidential election in 2016, the portraits evoke comparisons between the nature of political leadership then and now.”

Born in New York in 1923 to a Jewish family, Avedon’s father Jacob Israel Avedon was a second-generation Russian immigrant who owned the clothing store Avedon’s Fifth Avenue. His mother, Anna Avedon, came from a family that owned a dress manufacturing business.

After building an impressive portfolio throughout the second half of the 20th century “with fashion and portrait photographs that helped define America’s image of style, beauty and culture,” in 1992 he became the first staff photographer at The New Yorker, a position he kept until his death in 2004.

“The moment an emotion or fact is transformed into a photograph it is no longer a fact but an opinion,” Avedon once said. “There is no such thing as inaccuracy in a photograph. All photographs are accurate. None of them is the truth.”

“Richard Avedon: Family Affairs” runs from April 1 to August 2.

*Banner image: Allen Ginsberg’s family. Photograph by Richard Avedon© The Richard Avedon Foundation*

*From the Collection of The Israel Museum, Jerusalem*