

## Introduction

For an ambitious photographer, a regular place in the pages of *Vogue* would seem a most desirable attainment, especially in the latter half of the 1960s when photographers of such renown as Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and Norman Parkinson could be counted on as contemporaries. For Jack Robinson, that aspiration was realized, and in his time he was able to view through his lens the foremost names in arts and letters, the actors, musicians, writers, and directors who were also advancing their artistry, and an appearance in *Vogue* was an appropriate endorsement of success.

His time as a professional photographer was relatively brief, a mere seventeen years, and only in the last half dozen of them was he connected with *Vogue*. He was to spend far more years as a stained-glass designer in Memphis, Tennessee, an entirely separate career path that came into existence after the complete abandonment of his New York life. Few of those who knew him in that post-metropolitan period were even aware that he had once been integral to the glamorous milieu of fashion, and had photographed many of the most famous names in the western world. In Memphis he was reticent, remote, and unassuming, a small, lean man with an eccentric habit of wearing shoes much larger than the size his feet required, and given to occasional bouts of irascibility.

Why did Jack Robinson, having so successfully reached such heights in his profession, then give it all up and disappear entirely? How could he flee the excitement of New York to spend the rest of his life, another twenty-five years, pursuing an entirely different career in a southern city far away from Manhattan?

He was 69 when he died on December 15, 1997, in the Methodist Central Hospital in Memphis. He had been admitted a month earlier after telling his physician that he was suffering severe abdominal pain. It turned out he was in the late stages of pancreatic cancer. After his death there were no relations to claim the body or make funeral arrangements. Eventually a pastor at the hospital telephoned Dan Oppenheimer, the owner of the Rainbow Stained Glass Studio. His was the contact name Jack had given on his hospital admission form. For many years Jack had worked alongside him, and the two men had developed something of a friendship. It was not without difficulty. Jack was a dedicated loner. He made a point of never inviting anyone to his apartment, and rarely referred to his past life. Only Oppenheimer was aware that there had once been a photographic career in New York, but he knew little more.

It fell to Oppenheimer to take care of Jack's affairs, and it turned out that he had been made



**Jack Robinson's stained-glass window design,  
St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, Memphis**

the sole beneficiary of his will. His first visit to Jack's small apartment in an elegant building in mid-town Memphis was a revelation. It was strangely ordered and tidy, as shipshape as the quarters of a Marine master sergeant. The cutlery, plates, and dishes were sufficient for only one person, with not so much as a second cup to offer a visitor a coffee. Oppenheimer recalled: "It was the most organized and neat studio apartment I have ever seen. Everything was in order, lined up according to size, shape, color, and utility. Even the buttons in his sewing drawer were lined up by size. All white of course, because all his shirts were white tailored dress shirts, either from The Custom Shop in New York or Alfred's, the now defunct men's clothier in Memphis."

It was only after Jack's death that Oppenheimer finally realized that Jack was gay. In all the years that they had worked together, the question of Jack's sexual orientation had never arisen. Traditionally, more chivalrous southerners are reluctant to pry into personal matters, and he had always assumed Jack to be asexual, noting that he seemed little interested in developing intimate relationships. "He tended to close doors on people for reasons I don't think I ever knew," said Oppenheimer. However, his friend had known that there had been an involvement with



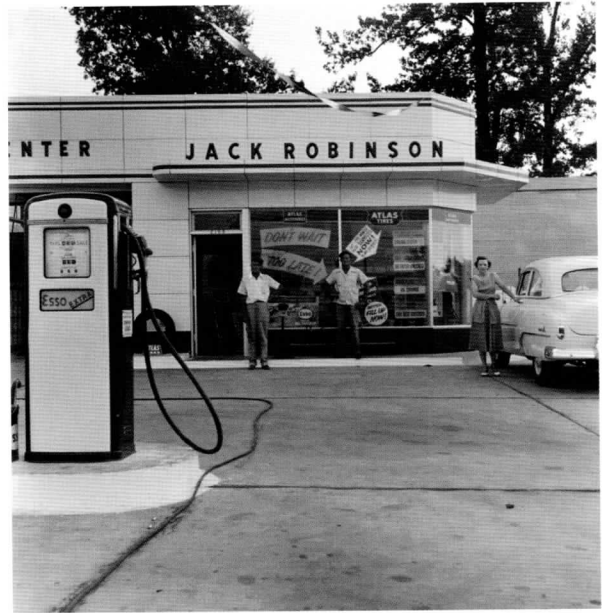
**Joni Mitchell, 1968**

Alcoholics Anonymous and that Jack had made a point of carefully avoiding liquor. From this he had inferred that in a buried past were the reasons why he avoided close contacts.

The biggest surprise during the inspection of the apartment occurred when Oppenheimer opened the main storage closet. It was stuffed with cardboard bankers' boxes, each filled to the brim. In them were prints, negatives, contact sheets, appointment books, and back numbers of *Vogue*, together with mounted portraits, letters, and memos, the distillation of the photographic career that had ended twenty-five years earlier. In total some 150,000 images had been hidden away for decades. As Oppenheimer sifted through them, he discovered that Jack had captured the essence of an extraordinarily creative era in music, the performing arts, and literature. The Summer of Love, Woodstock, the British rock invasion, folk rock, the acid generation, all were caught and preserved, not in performance, but in subtle, sensitive portraiture of its leading exponents. The entire collection had been bequeathed to Oppenheimer in the trusting expectation that he would ensure its survival for posterity. Accordingly, he would go on to devote many years to realizing his wishes, and today the remarkable Jack Robinson Archive is at the heart of the



Louis Armstrong, The Absinthe House, New Orleans, early 1950s



Jack Robinson's father's service station, Memphis, date unknown

Robinson Gallery of Photography on South Front Street, Memphis.

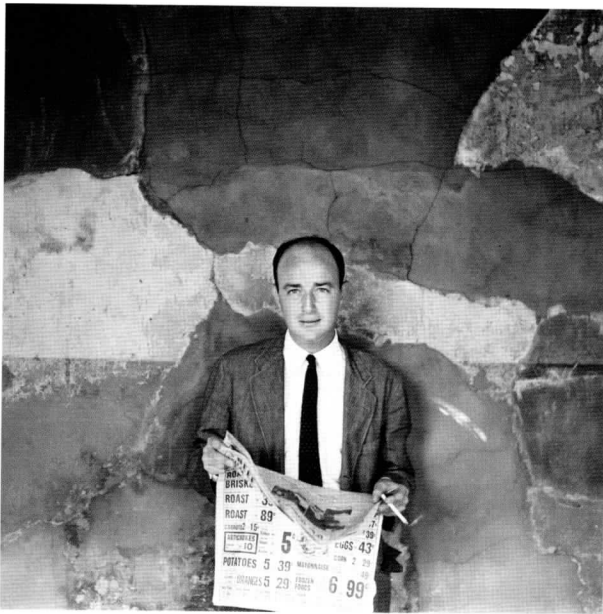
Jack was born on September 18, 1928, near Meridian, Mississippi. His father, Jack Robinson Senior, at the time made his living selling farm implements for International Harvester. Young Jack was the second son, and his mother, Euline Jones Robinson, seems to have been the strongest influence in his early life. His early childhood and adolescence was spent in Clarksdale, Mississippi, and he attended high school there, graduating in 1946. He was regarded by his fellow students as shy and distanced from the social life, with no interest in sports but having a developing talent for drawing and painting. While at high school he also became interested in photography.

Clarksdale is home of the crossroads of the blues and rock 'n' roll, and played an important role in Jack's music appreciation. His record collection contained Broadway show tunes, opera, classical music, rock 'n' roll and a disproportionate amount of blues, and rhythm and blues. He went on to Tulane University, New Orleans, taking a pre-med course with the intention of eventually becoming a doctor. In New Orleans he got a job at an advertising agency designing ads. He was an accomplished graphics artist and photography was his side passion and hobby. Lee Bailey

(1926–2003), an author, artist and designer, who later became a regular contributor to *The New York Times* and contributing editor of *Food and Wine* magazine, was his confidant and promoter in those days and was in no small part responsible for promoting Jack as a portrait photographer to the city's social elite of the day.

New Orleans in the proto-beatnik era of the late 1940s had an intensely energetic artistic community centered on the French quarter. In the era of Tennessee Williams, Dixie's Bar of Music on Bourbon Street was a hangout for artists, writers, and musicians, and the focus of a flourishing gay scene that would have been stifled by the law in almost every other American city. In the easy-going, raffish haze of New Orleans, Jack began his professional photographic career, his reportage of nightlife and Mardi Gras subsidized by commissioned portraits of social notables.

After several years of mingling with artists and musicians, he embarked on a trip to Mexico in the company of some friends, including Betty Parsons, a prominent New York art dealer who was known as "the den mother of abstract impressionism". Her West 57th Street gallery had shown Pollock, Rothko, Rauschenberg, and others. Parsons, an encourager of talent, urged



Lee Bailey, early 1950s



Mardi Gras on Bourbon Street, New Orleans, early 1950s

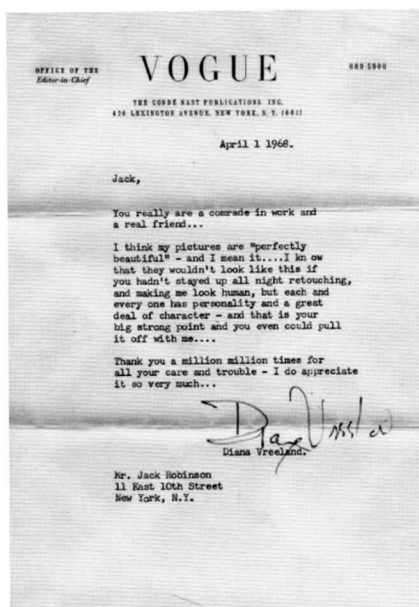
the twenty-six-year-old Jack to forsake the bohemian south and move to New York and, with a few well-chosen introductions, attempt a plunge into fashion photography there. Her assistance provided the necessary lift-off, and his talent was soon recognized by the business, with lucrative advertising commissions (for which, with Seymour Chwast and Milton Glazer at Push Pin Studios, he would later win awards) as well as fashion reportage allowing him to gain a foothold in a highly competitive field. Carrie Donovan, who in late life became a national figure on the strength of her appearances in Old Navy commercials, and then an influential fashion writer at *The New York Times*, took a shine to him, and they worked together on many stories, occasionally traveling to Europe to report on the fashion scene. Through other connections, he achieved a cover for *Life* in 1959, a photograph of the elegant model Isabella Albonico wearing an elaborate choker for a fashion special.

In 1965 Donovan joined the staff of *Vogue*, then under the editorship of the doyenne of the fashion world, Diana Vreeland. Born in Paris in 1903, raised in New York by her American socialite mother and well-connected British father, Vreeland had for over thirty years reigned supreme as the fashion editor of *Harper's Bazaar*,

creating an entirely new aesthetic for fashion photography in which the clothes were imaginatively contextualized by brilliant art direction. She defined fashion as youth, flamboyance, and fantasy, and extended its appeal across the social spectrum. One of her most celebrated coups had occurred in 1943 when she had selected a nineteen-year-old New York model and dressed her simply for a *Harper's* cover. The subsequent image won the girl an immediate summons to Hollywood and a contract to star in a new film opposite Humphrey Bogart—it was the transformation of Betty Joan Perske into Lauren Bacall.

Vreeland achieved immortality of a sort in a 1957 Hollywood musical. In *Funny Face*, Fred Astaire played a photographer modeled on Richard Avedon and Kay Thompson was an autocratic fashion editor clearly inspired by the Vreeland persona. When she decrees “think pink” it seems as if the entire planet suddenly erupts in vivid hues of fuchsia.

Sam Newhouse bought Condé Nast, publishers of *Vogue*, in 1959, and in 1962 Vreeland was appointed editor-in-chief, taking up her post at the beginning of the following year. *Vogue* was the ultimate bi-weekly fashion magazine, a faithful arbiter of taste and mirror of its time. Its authority



**Diana Vreeland's letter to Jack Robinson, April 1, 1968**



**Vogue style editor Carrie Donovan (center) and model Veruschka (right), c.1966**

was unquestioned and Vreeland assumed the most powerful position in decreeing what should be worn. Allegedly she had once pulverized her art department by brandishing the layout of a double-page spread with a nude model lying face down on a beach, a hat resting on her buttocks, and the headline "Spend the summer under a big black sailor".

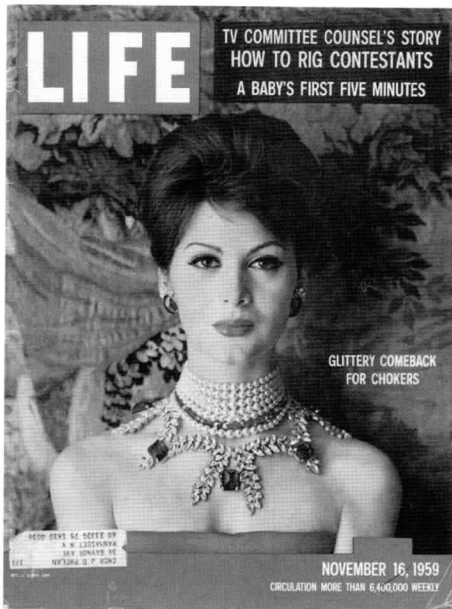
The 1960s were a perfect time for her, an explosive age of transition when fashion flourished alongside art, music, literature, media, and social mores in the sudden and intensive exploration of fresh possibilities. The new jet age of travel had brought the entire world within a few hours' reach, and budgets expanded to meet the demands of ever more extravagant imaginations and locations. The star photographers of the time included Irving Penn, Richard Avedon, Norman Parkinson, David Bailey and, following Carrie Donovan's introduction of him to the magazine, Jack Robinson. Because Vreeland had so successfully plugged into the *zeitgeist*, *Vogue* was a principal style-setter, promoting its favorites, be they Warhol or Dylan, Lauren Hutton or Veruschka, and providing a media platform where Joni Mitchell and Leonard Cohen could mingle with Jacqueline du Pré and Daniel Barenboim.

Jack worked hard for *Vogue*, establishing

a particular niche on account of his easy access to celebrities. In contrast with his later life, he seems to have been a gregarious member of the trendsetting elite. He contributed with regularity to the "People Are Talking About" section, a particular pet of Vreeland's where her finger anointed the up-and-coming figures expected to storm the heights of fame, a process that would be significantly assisted by *Vogue's* approval. He also shot a great deal of fashion, much of it for another regular feature, "*Vogue's* Own Boutique", in which, under Carrie Donovan's direction, celebrities disported themselves in carefully chosen clothes and were shot spontaneously on the street or in various boutiques across town. While models knew how to deliver in such circumstances, movie stars and untrained socialites required harder work. Vreeland was highly appreciative of his talent. "You really are a comrade in work and a real friend," she wrote to him after he had photographed her. "I think my pictures are 'perfectly beautiful' and I mean it," she continued, and paid tribute to his skill in reaching for the character, even pulling it off with her. "Thank you a million, million times."

His skill as a portraitist attracted many renowned sitters. Not all of them posed for *Vogue*. Gloria Vanderbilt's family commissioned him





**Jack Robinson's photograph of Isabella Albonico on the cover of *Life*, published November, 1959**



**Times Square Records, New York City, early 1960s**

privately. He is known to have photographed Berry Berenson for Revlon's first "Charlie" campaign. His address books were crammed with personal numbers of the famous. Photographers who are "in" enjoy attention not so much for whatever charm they may possess as for their ability to make their subjects look good. Jack seemed to strike the right notes with those he photographed, but at times could be singularly charmless to others. He was known to berate underperforming assistants rudely in front of sitters, or suddenly to fall out with loyal friends and disappear into a private world. It could be that drugs were having an effect.

He began as a pot-smoker but was very likely exposed to harder stuff, which was readily available in that era. Starting in 1966, he became acquainted with the extravagantly eccentric Andy Warhol circle of hip high life, centered on the Factory, the infamous 47th Street studio, with its aluminum-foil-covered walls and a constant rotation of bohemian figures, the Warhol superstars. Later there would be more parties, wild weekends on Fire Island. Paradoxically, it was a transition from marijuana to Scotch that really began Jack's fall. Dan Oppenheimer has observed from the preserved appointments books how his handwriting began to deteriorate, as though synapses were starting to malfunction.

In journalism, as in life, all things must come to an end, and in 1971 Vreeland was suddenly fired from *Vogue*, after having defiantly ignored the prescient warnings from Carrie Donovan that she was in danger. It was a decision made by the Condé Nast business administration, concerned that her extravagant style was not being countered by increasing advertising revenue, and a fear that she was no longer the cynosure of the age. Here was a convincing marker that the 1960s were finally over, and for many the 1970s would be its hangover time. Vreeland was succeeded by her assistant, Grace Mirabella, and a new, more down-to-earth era began, with US *Vogue* becoming a monthly. Mirabella would reign for another seventeen years when, after tripling the circulation, she also was dismissed, and replaced by Anna Wintour.

Not long after Vreeland's departure, Jack entered a crisis induced by his chaotic lifestyle. His drinking seriously affected his work and his assignments trickled away. Beset by financial problems, he first sold his Steinway, a treasured possession, and then relinquished his studio, which was on a fashionable block of East 10th Street in Greenwich Village. It was as 1972 concluded that he turned his back on New York and returned to his southern roots, broken, bitter, and alcohol dependent.



**Andy Warhol and Gerard Melanga, 1966**



**Jack Robinson, self-portrait, 1960s**

He settled in Memphis, to be close to his mother who was dying, and even though he lived in poor accommodation, he still found the resources to feed his addiction. Gradually, however, he sobered up. Having already dabbled with Alcoholics Anonymous in New York, he enrolled in a program at the instigation of a friend. He moved into a better apartment and resumed painting. Eventually he ceased to drink and took a job as design assistant to the artist Dorothy Sturm at Laukhuff Stained Glass.

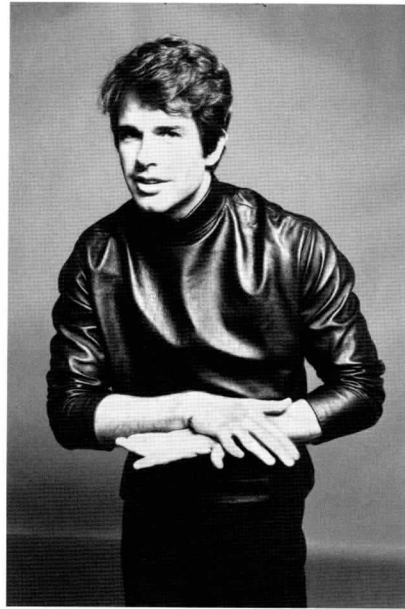
Memphis sits on a bluff of the Mississippi River looking across to Arkansas and is Tennessee's biggest city, in its day a great cotton trading port and lumber center. Its world fame today derives largely from its music culture, as the launchpad of Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, Jerry Lee Lewis, Otis Redding, B.B. King, and scores of other illustrious names in rock, blues, gospel, and sharecropper country. It is a city celebrated in literature by many authors, among them William Faulkner, Shelby Foote, Thomas Harris, and John Grisham. Tourist attractions include Elvis's Graceland, Sun Studios, and Beale Street—"the home of the blues" and the twice-daily ritual at the art-deco Peabody Hotel in which a small platoon of ducks waddle to and from the lobby fountain. Memphis is also where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in 1968.

The Lorraine Motel where it happened is now the National Civil Rights Museum.

Jack applied himself to the decorative arts medium of stained glass with enthusiasm and, when he met Dan Oppenheimer of Rainbow, his reputation in the business was well known. For a while, he quietly freelanced for Oppenheimer's company before leaving Laukhuff to work with him full time. They both developed improved ways of glass etching, using photography. Some of Rainbow's contracts were impressive. It was from Memphis that the Holiday Inn hotel chain began, and Oppenheimer won contracts for many of their restaurants, along with the first franchised T.G.I. Fridays, an extravaganza of stained glass. A major commission came as a result of the photographic etching process that had evolved from a technique Jack had worked on with Oppenheimer. This method was used by a Memphis glass company to carve the 55,000 names in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Jack's love of the darkroom and experiments was one of the main reasons he had sought out Oppenheimer. His last big collaboration was a series of windows reflecting Christianity, Judaism, and Islam for the Danny Thomas memorial pavilion at St. Jude's Children's Research Hospital, the dome of which is a prominent Memphis



Clint Eastwood, 1969



Warren Beatty, 1967

landmark. It was a project won with Jack's design, following an international design competition. Jack detailed all of the portraits and other painted areas and Susan Reuter did the actual glass painting. The two of them had a falling out and it was at this time that Jack was banished from the studio to work from home. He spent the last two years of his life creating exquisite designs that now attract visitors from all over the world, and Oppenheimer feels that even recent works completed owe much to the inspiration Jack brought to the studio. In the latter stages of his creation, he made the will in which he left everything to Oppenheimer.

The legacy was an extraordinary archive, and Jack's photographs provide an intriguing view of the celebrated figures of the time, positioned invariably in the simplest of settings, and plain background. Usually he wanted his sitters to provide all from within, to project their personality without him defining a context to help them along. It is a technique in complete contrast to the careful portraiture of portraitists such as Arnold Newman, who would usually insert their subjects into an appropriate setting, so making a specific editorial statement. Jack's more austere approach was by no means unique, and was a style frequently employed by Richard Avedon, Irving Penn, and others.

His studio shoots were relatively relaxed. He had an easy way of connecting with his subjects, so that they loosened up until he had the result he was seeking. He used a Hasselblad and 120 film in the studio, expecting to shoot his way through half-a-dozen 12-exposure backs, and from about eighty exposures he would select two or three for the art director. He did not shoot Polaroids first to check lighting and poses but preferred to work instinctively. He prided himself on his knowledge of his equipment and did not bracket his shots by varying the exposure. An examination of his contact sheets shows continuously evolving expressions and movements. When he shot material for the "*Vogue's Own Boutique*" feature he used 35mm, usually one of his Leicas or a Nikon. He would sometimes resort to flash, but generally preferred the available light, which from time to time would be poor. Nevertheless, he would carry on shooting his unposed subject, aware that he would later have to push the negative in the dark room, using an enhancer such as the highly toxic Victor's Mercury Intensifier.

He did not crop much, judging by the few marks made with his red grease pencil on his contact sheets. His compositions were usually created in the viewfinder. Most of his shots are direct, unfussy, and very rarely furnished with





Elton John, 1970



Melba Moore, 1971

props, the exceptions often being instruments—Elton John's piano, Joni Mitchell's guitar.

There is an explorative sensitivity in his work, which could be a consequence of his sexuality. Some of his portraits are remarkable in that, with even the most macho of men, a trace of the feminine side of their psyche seems to emerge. Warren Beatty, then the most celebrated of Hollywood womanizers, becomes in black leathers a gay icon, and when revealed donning his neckwear, a narcissistic fop. Has anyone else ever thought of disporting Clint Eastwood in knitwear? Or having Michael Caine strike a camp pose with one elbow on a mantelpiece?

His women on the other hand, even when he goes in close, are more distanced, sometimes even sculptural in form, as in the case of Melba Moore, or Tina Turner and her Medusa mane, and the simple elegant profile of Julie Harris. Occasionally he departs from the plain, uncluttered approach and deposits or, more realistically, finds his subject in a confused setting—Diana Vreeland's office, Lauren Bacall's drawing room, for instance—but the location is so personal that it is simply an extension of their essence. His studio portraiture is superior to his reportage because he is able to control the myriad factors that make a good

photograph. Yet his lighting technique is straightforward, with key, fill, and back lights deployed in most cases in the standard manner. He does not allow dramatic effects to subvert the impression given by his sitter, which is why his pictures so many years later retain their fresh appeal.

It is his sense of composition, often the quality that defines an excellent from an average photographer, that places him in the foremost rank. A portraitist requires much more than technical skills. Essential is the ability to bond with his sitters. For Jack to acquire his desired results, he needed to establish a relaxed and comfortable rapport with them. He may well have sensed that this ability was beginning to elude him, until he was forced to turn his back on the brief career that for a few years had flourished. He is not the only artist to have quit completely. That he was able subsequently to pursue an entirely different creative occupation that owed little or nothing to his former one was a considerable achievement. Fortunately, his important photographic legacy has been satisfactorily preserved, making it possible to continue savoring his precise glimpses of moments in time.

George Perry