

Response to Filler, Martin (2009) ["The Mighty Penn,"](#) New York Review of Books, 19 October, 2009.

In our vigorously and light-heartedly postmodern, reception-idolizing present authorial intentions might not be considered the definitive last word as regards to the interpretation of an image. Nevertheless, while ignoring or by-passing non-visual sources such as the image-makers own texts that might provide a clue as for those original intentions can easily lead to eminently poetic-sounding interpretations, they turn out to be completely arbitrary, boundlessly subjective, and academically unsustainable. This way of proceeding with interpretation of visual materials thus constitutes a mighty dangerous trap. In anointing Irving Penn's *Cuzco children* (1948) an unsurpassable masterpiece portrait and "irrefutable proof positive" that Penn "had a heart" ("The Mighty Penn," *NYR*, November 19, 2009, p.21), Martin Filler seems caught tightly in just that trap.

On his magazine assignments to "exotic" destinations (be it New Guinea, Cameroon, Morocco, the Republic of the Dahomey, or Peru) fashion photographer Irving Penn often moonlighted as a deep-feeling amateur (or dilettant?) artist-ethnographer. On these escapades, he set out to realize his youthful dream of photographing "disappearing aborigines in remote parts of the earth". Images from these trips were finally compiled in his 1974 book *Worlds in a Small Room*

[1](#)

In his prologue to the book, Penn exults that, to his surprise and to his heart's content, "[t]aking people away from their natural circumstances and putting them into the studio in front of a

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camera did not simply isolate them,
it transformed them

. [...] As they crossed the threshold of the studio, they left behind some of the manners of their community, taking on a seriousness of self-presentation that would not have been expected of simple people. [...] they rose to the experience of being looked at by a stranger." A stranger, a rather particular, peculiar stranger.



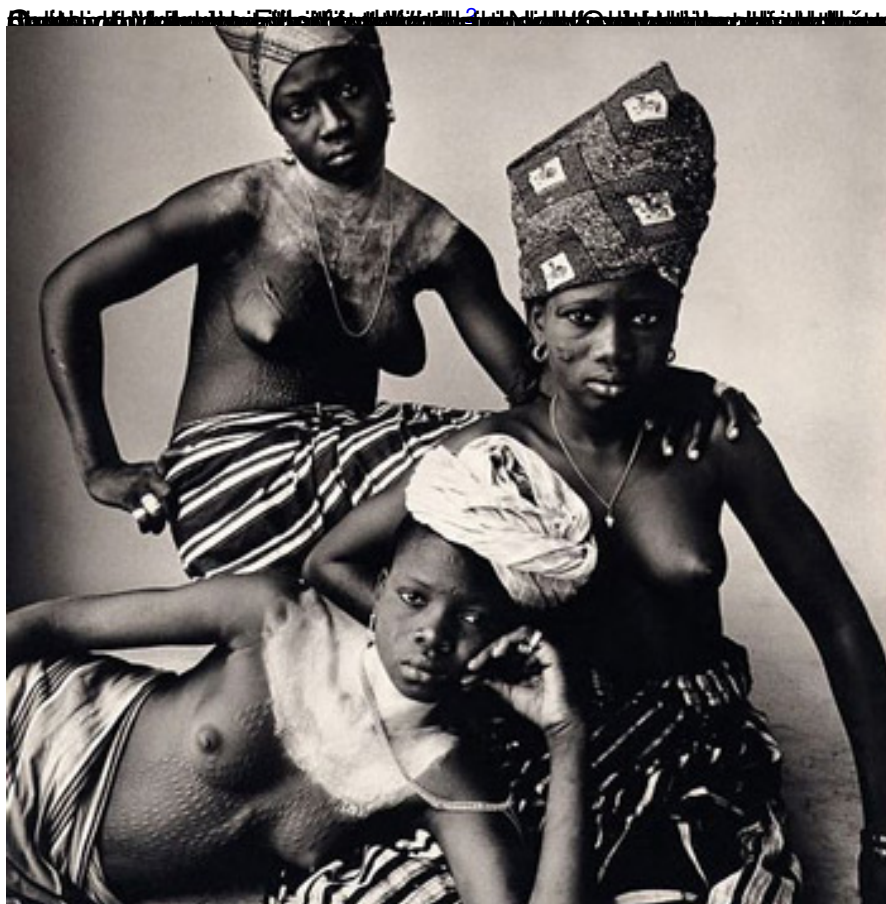
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