



# *reflected* GLORY

*A woman's relationship with her reflection is about much more than vanity. Mirrors cast a light on what it is to be human – and no app or new technology can improve on that, says Christa D'Souza, as Vogue contemplates images from its archive*



**I**magine looking at yourself in the mirror for the first time. You can't, of course, but supposing you could. How earth-shattering that must have been for man, when he gazed into a pool of water millions of years ago and suddenly realised that the figure moving in symmetry with his was neither an enemy nor a playmate but he. They say that discovery was the birth of human awareness, for what other creature, except perhaps the dolphin or elephant, can look at itself in the mirror and know that it is itself? But then, who's to say there isn't another form of life out there capable of allowing what is essentially a plate of silvered glass to 100 per cent ruin its entire bloody day?

A hot afternoon in Birmingham, and I have just pitched up at the spanking new branch of Harvey Nichols. With its "immersive tunnel" entrance surrounded by LED screens, battery of style concierges and pay-by-tablet system, it looks to be the most digitally sophisticated fashion store Britain has ever seen. And mirrors – as architect Carlos Virgile of Virgile & Partners, which designed the 45,000sq ft space, explains – play a very large part in it. He leads me to the vast VIP changing-room lounges (complete with "modesty" hatches for sales assistants to push items through) where, connecting the men's and women's sides, a gallery of pivoting, full-length mirror panels create multiple reflections. "Think Mme Chanel," beams Virgile, "descending her famous faceted-mirror stairs at 31 Rue Cambon!"

As yet unopened, the ground-floor area is still strewn with bubble-wrapped merchandise, and with its sleek polyurethane ceilings, iridescent walls, mirrored columns, mirrored clothing rails, even, all playing off each other, it feels like being in a giant jewellery box.

"That's exactly what we wanted to create," says Virgile, "a huge mirrored effect. And we wanted to make the structural columns almost disappear, so we clad them in full-height mirror panels with lighting that enhances the corners and 'frames' the mirror. It offers the customer the possibility of looking in every area of the store."

Key, too, is the quality of mirror, particularly in the changing rooms – ideally 10mm thick, "silvered" with silver nitrate (not the aluminium that is used to back mass-manufactured mirror) and with no inconsistencies in the glass to distort reflection. Good (brave) call, this. It must be so tempting for retailers to dupe us.

Next up, Virgile's particular pride and joy, the 360-degree "delay" mirrors in the style-concierge lounge. Imagine a three-panel mirror with a video screen attached to the central one. By setting the in-built camera to a five to 10 second delay, you can do a little catwalk turn in your outfit, watch yourself afterwards, and then share said footage via Twitter, Instagram or email "for that final reassuring opinion", as Virgile puts it. It is the ultimate tool for the 21st-century narcissist, this mirror that thinks it's a camera, or the other way round, and if Kimye don't yet have matching ones, they soon will.

"Smart" mirrors may sound gimmicky but they are the future. Take the patented MemoryMirror (or Memomi) being rolled out in selected American department stores. Invented by Palo Alto techie Salvador Nissi Vilcovsky, it uses cameras and sensors to create an avatar of you the shopper and, via your hand gestures, allows you not only to see yourself doing runway but to scroll through different colours and styles without actually having to leave the changing room. Or what about the interactive mirror unveiled by Panasonic earlier this year which, by using in-built, high-definition cameras, allows you to pick out your every flaw and then suggests the right product to make you the fairest of them all. In other words, the days when a sales assistant had to rustle around for a hand mirror so you could see what you looked like from behind? They are long, long gone.

**T**he mirror. The looking glass. The flattering glass, as it used to be called in the 16th century when Venice held the monopoly on the industry (before the French stole its best mirror-makers for Versailles). Let its power never be underestimated. The way it echoes light and can sex up the blah-est of spaces (cases in point: artist Phillip K Smith III's spectacular

mirrored shed, *Lucid Stead*, in the middle of the Californian desert, or Alyson Sholtz's genius idea of a mirrored picket fence); the way it can fuck with your mind. Remember the final scene in the 1947 film *The Lady from Shanghai*, in which Rita Hayworth and Orson Welles chase each other to death in a mirror maze? And what about those freaky eternity mirrors that go on and on and on... just like the crazy mirrored loos at Ottolenghi's Mayfair restaurant, Nopi. If you want to recreate that feeling you used to get smoking too much weed at college, I recommend getting locked in one of them. Two interesting asides: a) most people get panic attacks if they look at themselves in the mirror for too long; and b) you cannot be a schizophrenic if you are

## **"Smart" mirrors may sound gimmicky but they are the future... Kimye will soon have matching ones**

congenitally blind. (It goes without saying that looking in the mirror while on an ayahuasca retreat is a very bad idea indeed.)

And let it not be underestimated how intimate the act of checking yourself out in one is – the reason, perhaps, communal changing rooms never properly caught on. If you were around in the Seventies you might remember the ignominy of it all, being surreptitiously surveyed while surveying yourself and so on, but if not, ever been caught out making mirror face (subtle jut of the chin, slight rearrangement of the mouth, minute turn to best side)? And beware of the two-way mirror, not just a feature of the "Nothing to Declare" channel. Believe me, there are a whole number of innocent reflective surfaces on central London streets, behind which banks of bored office workers sit.

Vanity, reassurance, a stick with which to beat ourselves. These are just some of the psychological cues that draw us to the mirror. But there are others. "I'm really just using the mirror to summon something I don't even know until I see it," the photographic artist Cindy Sherman, whose subject matter is only ever her, once said. But what are we actually >





*Above left:* mirror, signal, manoeuvre – Jerry Hall checks her maquillage at the “Vogue motor show”, October 1976. *Above right:* applying glam-rock coloured contacts, June 1972. *Left:* Edie Campbell in a reflective mood, March 2015. *Right:* illustrator Eduardo Benito’s art deco looking glass, November 1926. *Below:* enchanted by her own image – a reclining Vicki Wise by Helmut Newton, May 1968



doing when we look in the mirror? Are we looking at ourselves or are we looking *for* ourselves wonders Caroline McHugh, founder of Idology, a mentoring company that advises, among others, Fortune 500 companies, artists and schoolchildren in India. Why should that be the sum of “you”, when there is so much more to “you” than that?, as she said at her excellent TEDx Talk a few years ago.

From Birmingham to the idyllic environs of Ludlow in Shropshire to realise a childhood fantasy of mine; that is, to see how this inert object, which was used by scryers as a magic portal to look into the future – this thing that can be such a cruel traitor and yet such a dear, dear friend – is actually made.

Here I am then, wearing an oxygen mask in a skylit, slightly medicinal-smelling workshop with Mr Mirror Man, aka Rupert Bevan of Rupert Bevan Ltd, a bespoke furniture company that specialises in top-quality, traditionally made mirror (mottled, tinted, “wavy”, inlaid with fabric, whatever you want), about to do just that. A handsome, public-school type who collaborates regularly with Nick Jones (those fabulous bevelled-mirror cocktail cabinets they have in the rooms at Soho House Miami? They’re his), Bevan explains how traditional mirror-makers, like typesetters, are a dying breed. The actual process, he adds, hasn’t changed much since the 1880s, the only difference being that mercury is no longer used. (In those days the average life expectancy for a mirror-maker was 27.)

Having washed a piece of glass and placed it on an easel, one of the company’s in-house glass artists, Rebecca Eccles, is now about to nozzle-spray it with a perfectly calibrated, deceptively clear mixture of silver nitrate and ammonia. Pssssh, there it goes, like an airbrush, spraying minute droplets of paint. And then the magic happens. Reminiscent of that scene in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, in which the White Witch petrifies her enemies into stone, so the rectangle of glass suddenly transforms into silvery mirror. Forget laminating, it is impossible not to get hooked by the process. Is there any object or >



surface in my house that *wouldn't* look better silvered up thus?

"I love mirrors," says Julie de Libran, creative director of Sonia Rykiel, whose second show for the brand was based on the interplay between mirror and light. "I collect them and have them all over the house, not necessarily to look into but to reflect light. I think my husband gets a bit fed up with them sometimes."

"I inherited that from my mother, who also collected them, but I learnt about the dialogue we have with mirrors by reading some of Sonia's writings on the subject. For that

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a/w '15 ready-to-wear show I wanted to show the contrast between the cold, truthful mirror and the softness of velvet. That contrariness is so deep and profound, it's like love and hate."

"Mirrors don't lie," as Rykiel herself, a self-confessed mirror junkie, once famously pronounced. And she is right, they do not. Or they should not. Remember the Skinny Mirror that everyone was talking about a couple of years ago, with the convex curve in it to make you look like you'd lost 10lb? Anyone been to a certain shop on New Bond Street, the changing rooms of which are so ludicrously flattering they ought to be cited under the Trade Descriptions Act? Tsk, tsk, too, though, to the boutique a couple of doors down, with the looking glasses that make your car wing mirror (in which you catch yourself by mistake, in the cold light of morn, with no make-up on, having drunk half a bottle of wine the previous night) seem forgiving. Oh Lord, and what about the Truth Mirror? That's the smartphone app – based on a device created by Catherine and John Walter in the Eighties involving two mirrors placed at a 90-degree angle with the seam taken out – that "unreverses" your reflection and lets you see yourself as others see you, rather than how you see yourself. (Brace yourselves for this one. How come no one told me I have a head shaped like an upside-down broad bean?)

Maybe we need a degree of separation. "The mirror is not you," as the legendary choreographer George Balanchine once admonished. "The mirror is you looking at yourself." But how, in this narcissistic, polyreflective world, can one do that? Doesn't society – biology, actually – collude in having us gaze at, compare with and critique ourselves at every possible waking moment?

One way is to try a "mirror fast", a trend created by various American bloggers a couple of years ago. By Kjerstin Gruys, for example, the 29-year-old who for 52 weeks before her wedding abstained from looking in any reflective surface other than her car's rear-view mirror (crucially she also instituted a selfie ban). A post-doctoral fellow in gender research at Stanford, with a vague resemblance to Amy Schumer, Gruys ended up writing a book on the experience: *Mirror, Mirror Off the Wall, How I Learned to Love My Body* (she is also a former anorexic). In it she concludes that by abstaining from looking at herself in the mirror she gained back 90 hours of her time. But is it possible to detach one's appearance from one's self esteem?

"Absolutely!" she emails from California. "I don't think it's realistic or even helpful to completely separate appearance from one's self, but the less we orient our sense of self-worth round our appearance, the healthier we'll be. I think one's behaviour should reflect one's values, and what is healthy for one woman may not be healthy for another. That said, I urge all women to give some serious thought to whether or not there is a point of diminishing return when it comes to our time, money and emotion spent on appearance."

Hear, hear. Aren't there certain situations when you can't think of anything you would like to do less? When you are eating, for example. Or having sex. And what on earth was I thinking on our last big redecorate, having a full-length mirrored cabinet placed bang in front of the loo?

If you are into Bikram yoga and, like me, can't do it without a mirror, you'll likely have a favourite spot in front of a particular one – woe betide anyone bag it first. But how liberating it is, once in a while, to do "proper" yoga, where mirrors in class are all but spat on? "We have them for Pilates and barre studios because

they need them," says Jonathan Sattin, the diplomatic co-founder of Triyoga, "not in yoga studios because we think they become the focus."

And if you believe in feng shui, you'll know never to place a mirror at the bottom of stairs for fear of cutting off heads and feet. Or to hang one opposite your front door – apparently this pushes the energy right back outside. As any feng shui expert will tell you, time and again, businesses fold for making that mistake.

**O**n the other hand, what about the situation when you'd give your kingdom for a decent one? Like in a lift, before arriving at a party. Or when you need to put your make-up on in the office before going out for the evening and all the loos are engaged. Ever tried putting it on via Photo Booth? No mean feat, take it from me. Meanwhile, what is the current etiquette for using a compact at table? Can it be pulled off, in a retro kind of way, if the compact is a vintage art-nouveau triangle from Fabergé? Or is retouching in company totally *infra dig*? This relates to an irritating new east London trend of having "You look gorgeous", or words to that effect, scrawled on bathroom walls above sinks in lieu of mirrors. Fine if you are someone who is so busy you don't have time to pee, let alone look in the mirror, but for everyone else (you and me) it is just one big bore. And while we are on the subject of annoying visual sallies, what of the toilets on Virgin trains which have "Hey there, good looking" written on the mirrors (in an annoying Brush Script-like font, to boot)? A moratorium on mirrors being written on at any time, please. As my fellow journalist and Virgin train passenger Nicola implores via email: "Don't let them do this. Mirrors are no joke."

According to a paper published in *The Behaviour Research and Therapy Journal*, an adult woman looks at herself in the mirror an average of 38 times a day; for a man it is 18. Typically, the age at which a baby recognises its own reflection in the mirror, ie becomes aware of being aware, is between 20 and 24 months, the point when we are supposed to make leaps and bounds in cognitive development. "I am, therefore I >



think,” as Gordon G Gallup Jr, the Seventies psychologist who co-wrote *The Face in the Mirror: the Search for the Origins of Consciousness*, so cleverly put it. But if mirrors did not exist would we not have to invent them? To slightly paraphrase the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard, “Bourgeois society has its mirrors, primitive society has its masks.”

To be totally lacking in judgement, to feel neither this way nor that when one looks in the mirror. To know instinctively, of an evening, that you look just fine as you are. That would be marvellous. But is it humanly possible? Should it be humanly possible? As counterpoint to all this mythologising we do of ourselves via social media, doesn't modern humanity demand “something silver and exact” with “no preconceptions”, as Sylvia Plath once described it, in order to literally and figuratively take that one piece of jewellery off?

“We need to be aware of why we are looking in the mirror. Are you looking to critique or compare yourself? Are you looking to flatter yourself? Are you looking to see if you have a piece of spinach between your teeth?” So speaks Phillippa Diedrichs, senior research fellow at the Centre for Appearance Research at the University of the West of England and a member of the Dove Self-Esteem Project global advisory board. “The bigger issue here is being aware of the role appearance plays in your life and ideally keeping it in its place. If you are disproportionately focused on the way you look as a way to make yourself feel good or bad, that can be problematic. On the other hand, for those who exhibit pathological avoidance behaviours – for example, avoiding your reflection because you are unhappy with the way you look, – mirror-exposure therapy, where a therapist will guide you towards neutral mindfulness, can be used to actually improve image, too.”

My little mirror journey has ended. Although of course it has not. This afternoon I am going to the hairdresser's, one of the few public places where we are given permission to gaze at ourselves for as long as we want. While I now know that mirrors can't help their potent effect over us, for both good and bad, I can't help but hope that the one I always sit in front of at George Northwood is going to be as kind as it generally is. ■







*Opposite:* Jessica Stam models Dior Haute Couture amid the gilded 18th-century opulence of the V&A's Norfolk House Music Room, October 2007. *Above left:* hat, gloves, compact... the essential accessories of Fifties femininity, August 1953. *Above:* through the looking glass – photographer Tim Walker gets into the shot with Kate Moss, December 2013. *Left:* mirror group – draped eveningwear modelled in the powder room at Harrods for a shoot by Norman Parkinson, March 1975



*Left:* you've been framed – Jean Shrimpton photographed at home in Wales by David Bailey, October 1972. *Right:* "a lady never makes up her face in public." "Doesn't she?" Cathee Dahmen challenges the societal norms, June 1971