



Scavullo, Francesco (1929-2004)

by Linda Rapp

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Photographer Francesco Scavullo is best known for his work in fashion and for his eye-catching magazine covers, especially those that he created for *Cosmopolitan*. He was also such a masterful portrait photographer that the *Washington Post* declared him "the court painter of our time."

Scavullo was a life-long New Yorker, born in Staten Island on January 16, 1929. When he was six, his family moved to Manhattan, where his father had bought a chic supper club.

It was the elder Scavullo's dream that his son would one day follow him into the business, but it soon became evident that the youngster's interests lay elsewhere. He was fascinated by images of beauty. The boy loved to go window-shopping on Fifth Avenue with his mother, and he pored over her fashion magazines at home.

The aspiring young photographer began by taking snapshots with his father's camera, drafting his sisters as models. As his skill improved, he worked on posing and costuming them to look like glamorous movie stars.

While still in his teens Scavullo got his first professional photography job, taking pictures of passengers boarding cruise ships, which he found boring except for the moment when he was able to photograph glamorous movie star (and gay icon) Carmen Miranda.

Upon graduating from high school in 1945 Scavullo found a job at a studio that produced fashion catalogs. He soon moved on to *Vogue* magazine, where he worked with prominent fashion photographers Cecil Beaton, John Rawlings, and Horst P. Horst. Scavullo spent three years as Horst's assistant, during which time he studied Horst's methods assiduously, learning how to employ camera angles and lighting techniques such as using muslin filters or bouncing light off a white umbrella to make the most flattering pictures possible.

At the age of nineteen Scavullo made his first cover photo for a 1948 issue of *Seventeen* magazine. It so impressed the editors that they immediately signed him to a contract. Scavullo remained with *Seventeen* for two years, often traveling to exotic locales for fashion shoots.

Following the success of the first cover, Scavullo's father, accepting that his son was never going to become a restaurateur, bought a Manhattan carriage house that Scavullo converted into a combination home and studio. He continued to live and work there for the next five decades.

Scavullo married model Carol McCallson in 1952, but they divorced a few years later.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s Scavullo was consistently in demand for fashion photography, but a turning point in his career came in 1965 when *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown hired him to develop a new, sexier look for the magazine's covers. Taking complete charge of selecting the models, wardrobe, make-up, and hair-styling in addition to plying his matchless photographic skills, he created the



Francesco Scavullo at the G. Ray Hawkins Gallery, West Hollywood, during the 1980s. Photo by Chris Gulker. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

image of the "Cosmo girl."

"Scavullo brought a new voluptuousness into fashion photography, celebrating the sexuality of women's bodies and the strength of their desires," observed Val Williams. Scavullo went on to shoot every *Cosmopolitan* cover for the next thirty years. Beginning in 1972 he was assisted by Sean M. Byrne, who became his life partner.

Some of Scavullo's work was controversial, including a *Cosmopolitan* centerfold of a nude Burt Reynolds and photographs of young Brooke Shields that some found disturbingly sexual.

Scavullo turned Gia Carangi, a lesbian teen-ager from Philadelphia, into one of the first "super-models." When a heroin addiction made it almost impossible for Carangi to find work, Scavullo continued to employ her. He then supported her for several years until she died of AIDS.

Scavullo created memorable images for posters for movies, including one of Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson for *A Star is Born* (1976, directed by Frank Pierson), and for Broadway shows, such as a portrait of Julie Andrews in Blake Edwards's *Victor Victoria* (1995).

Mikhail Baryshnikov engaged Scavullo to photograph the dancers of the American Ballet Theatre in motion for a 1981 souvenir program. The stunning shots formed the basis of an exhibition that was shown in a nationwide tour.

Over the years Scavullo made portraits of a long list of celebrities. Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, Cher, Mick Jagger, Halston, and Gore Vidal were but a few of them.

After four nervous breakdowns, Scavullo was diagnosed as a manic depressive in the early 1980s. He spoke out publicly about the disease, urging people to learn more about it and to get treatment for it.

Scavullo worked until the very end of his life, and both his passion for photography and his artistry remained strong.

Scavullo died in New York on January 6, 2004. He is survived by his partner in life and art, Sean Byrne.

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