

HERB RITTS

b. August 13, 1952

d. December 26, 2002

ACCLAIMED PHOTOGRAPHER

“You’re trying to get one moment with one frame that may eventually speak for your generation.”

He was an internationally acclaimed celebrity portrait, fashion, and homoerotic photographer.

Herb Ritts was an acclaimed photographer and art director best known for his imaginative approach to predominantly black-and-white celebrity portraiture, fashion, and homoerotic photos. He emerged in the 1980s as one of the world’s top photographers.

Ritts was born in Brentwood section of Los Angeles, California. His father, Herbert Sr., was a professional furniture designer, and his mother designed interiors. Together, they helped popularize the use of rattan and other mid-century furnishings. The family lived next door to the actor Steve McQueen, whom Ritts regarded as a second father.

Ritts’s parents nurtured his creativity. As a bar mitzvah gift, his father gave him his first camera. After attending high school in California, Ritts moved to Upstate New York to study economics and art history at Bard College.

Ritts graduated from Bard in 1975 and moved back to the West Coast to help with the family business. The following year, he bought his first “real” camera and photographed his friend, the up-and-coming actor Richard Gere. The portraits of Gere garnered attention, helping to launch Ritts’s career, particularly as a celebrity photographer.

Ritts famously photographed countless personalities, including entertainers like Elizabeth Taylor, Brooke Shields, Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise, and David Bowie, and public figures like His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, the Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev, and President Nelson Mandela of South Africa. He photographed the album covers for Olivia Newton-John’s “Physical,” Madonna’s “True Blue,” and Tina Turner’s “Break Every Rule.” His work with models like Cindy Crawford, Naomi Campbell, and Stephanie Seymour helped establish the “supermodel” as a mainstay of the fashion industry and popular culture.

Throughout his career, Ritts worked with some of the top magazines in the world, including Rolling Stone, Time, Vogue, Elle, Vanity Fair, and Harper’s Bazaar. He helped create iconic advertising campaigns for dozens of brands, such as Giorgio Armani, Valentino, Chanel, and Revlon. He published many books of his photos, and his work has been featured in high-profile museum exhibitions and solo shows, both during his life and posthumously.

In addition to his photography, Ritts also directed several music videos, most notably Michael Jackson’s “In the Closet” and Madonna’s “Cherish.”

Ritts was openly gay. He was diagnosed with HIV in 1989 but did not discuss it publicly.

He contracted pneumonia in 2002, and died at the age of 50.

Ritts was survived by his partner, Erik Hyman.



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