

A life in pictures

Lord Snowdon's private life has often hit the headlines, but a major new book and exhibition puts his photography back in the spotlight. **David Clark** reports



Lord Snowdon has led, by any standards, a colourful life. Born into an affluent and well-connected family, as a young man he knew major figures in the arts, including Marlene Dietrich and Noël Coward. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, he dropped out of university to begin a successful career in photography, before becoming the first commoner to marry into the Royal Family for more than 450 years.

Snowdon's turbulent personal relationships, his close connection to the Royals and his work on projects such as designing the Snowdon Aviary at London Zoo, have often relegated his contribution to photography to the sidelines. Now two new projects, both titled *Snowdon: A Life in View*, put the focus squarely on Snowdon's photographic work and its legacy.

The first project is a new exhibition of Snowdon portraits at the National Portrait Gallery, which mixes famous images with unpublished work. The second is a major retrospective book covering all aspects of his wide-ranging 60-year photographic career.

Snowdon's privileged background has led some to suggest that it was easier for him to succeed than others without his social advantages. However, Helen Trompeteler, who has curated the NPG exhibition, believes that this view fails to appreciate his talent, determination and capacity for hard work and has

led to the range and quality of his photography not being fully recognised.

'Snowdon has been an incredibly versatile artist across many different media,' she says. 'Within photography itself he's been one of the most versatile photographers of his generation in terms of the genres he covered: documentary work, theatre and ballet portraits, literary portraits, fashion, advertising and Royal photography.'

'To some extent audiences think of him as solely a photographer of the Royal Family and the cultural great and the good, but he also did a lot of pioneering photography for *The Sunday Times* in the 1960s, which is lesser known today. At that time, he really brought very important issues to national attention. Those photo essays, covering issues like old age and loneliness, mental illness and the disabled, were groundbreaking. Unfortunately, many people haven't seen that whole body of work.'

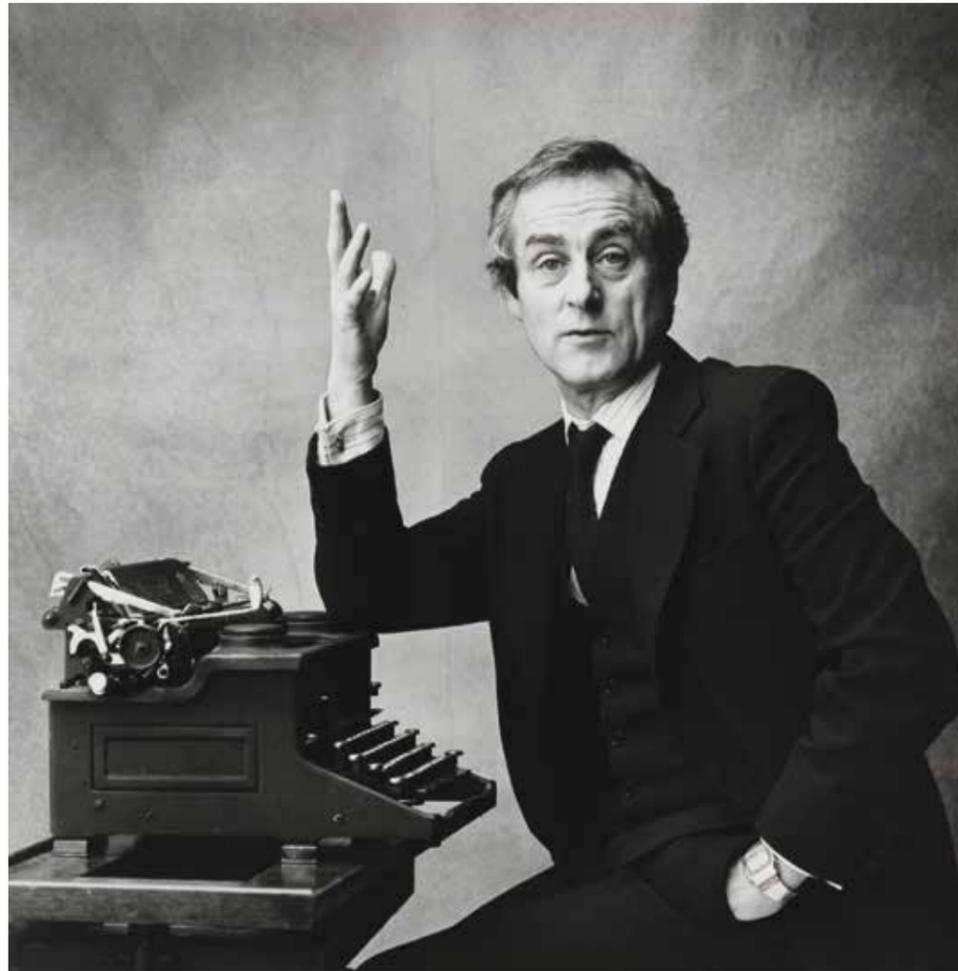
The National Portrait Gallery exhibition, drawn from a collection of 130 prints, which Snowdon recently donated to the gallery, includes some of his most famous portraits. Sitters include artist Henry Moore, author Graham Greene, musicians David Bowie and George Melly, actors Charlotte Rampling and John Hurt and a number of other famous faces in the arts.

As many of the portraits are unfamiliar images from famous sittings, or unpublished images



Anthony Frederick Blunt,
24 October, 1963

ALL PICTURES © SNOWDON



Sir Harold Evans, 3 April, 1980

‘There are usually no lights in the studio, because I infinitely prefer daylight’

from alternative sittings, they give an interesting insight into the way he worked and selected images for publication. ‘The exhibition is as much a record of his working practices as the subjects he photographed,’ says Helen.

Mainly shot on location and sometimes in a studio, the display is an inventive and insightful collection of portraits whose freshness and simplicity springs directly from Snowdon’s straightforward and unpretentious approach.

Working methods

Snowdon’s portraits, as with the vast majority of his other work, were taken using natural light – whether in a studio or on location. In the book *Snowdon: A Life in View*, he reveals that his studio measures just 10ft x 14ft, with a 7ft-high glass roof covered in frosted plastic to diffuse the light. White reflectors bounce additional light into the

studio space and he uses a variety of plain backgrounds.

‘Within the emptiness and the terror of a plain background, I try to capture something that is not only a likeness of a person but says something about them,’ Snowdon writes. ‘I want my sitters to be recognised. There are usually no lights in the studio, because I infinitely prefer daylight. Black velvet curtains down one side cover the windowless wall, and I use black blinds on the rails to change the direction and the amount of light. Every surface in the studio that is not glass is painted black.’

Using a variety of cameras, from Leicas to medium-format Hasselblads, Snowdon’s first goal when shooting a portrait is to arrange the environment exactly as he wants it.

‘On location, I nearly always find the background too busy and end up rearranging a room and taking out



Peter Edward Cook, 3 November, 1967



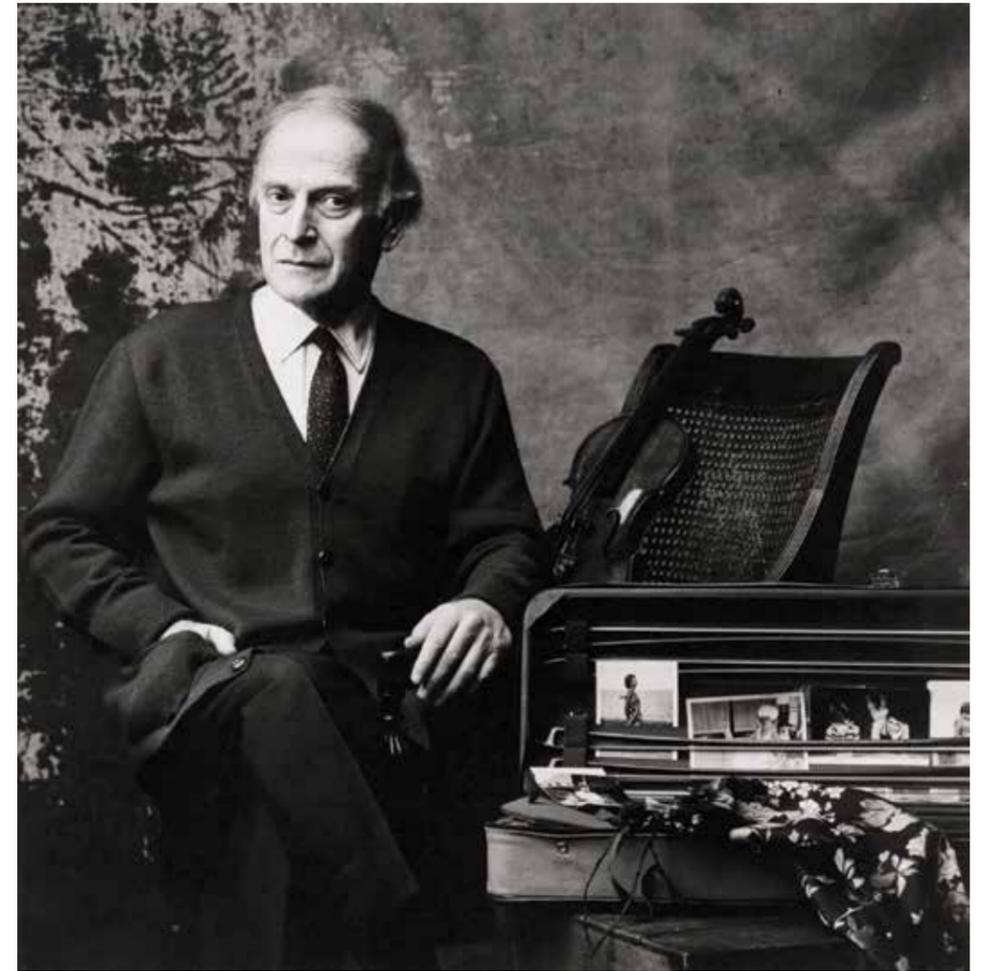
Princess Anne and Prince Charles, 1956

anything distracting,’ he continues. ‘I prefer to find a plain space, which I use like an improvised studio. I often end up in an attic using the light from a skylight or in a garage with the doors open.’

Although, like many other portrait photographers, he thoroughly researches his subjects, his technique with sitters is totally different to the way most portrait photographers work. Instead of flattering his subjects or a flow of encouraging chatter, Snowdon reveals that he deliberately leaves awkward silences while photographing, or uses other techniques to provoke a response.

‘It is not always a matter of making people feel totally at ease,’ he writes. ‘Often the only way that one can break through someone’s prepared face is to make them slightly uncomfortable, physically or mentally... I may, perhaps, ask them to hold a pose for longer than natural, or I make a remark about the sitter or their work that surprises them and then watch for an immediate reaction.’

This unconventional approach has



Yehudi Menuhin, violinist and conductor, 1981

‘FOR ME, this image shows how clever Snowdon is at storytelling in a very simple way,’ says NPG exhibition curator Helen Trompeteler. ‘This portrait was taken just after Menuhin had stopped playing his violin engagements, but before he went on to a second career in conducting.’

‘Just through the use of having his case open with family photos on show, you just get this very evocative sense of an artist’s life lived on the

road. You just get a slight glimpse of Menuhin’s personal life and there’s a certain wariness in his expression.

‘That tension in some of Snowdon’s photographs, when the subject is looking wary and vulnerable, often gives a sense of someone’s character. This portrait is obviously carefully arranged, but it shows that through the simple use of personal props you can say a lot in terms of storytelling and narrative.’

resulted in consistently strong portraits which often show familiar subjects in an unfamiliar light and get under their skin. The sitters, either reacting to something Snowdon has said or enduring one of his deliberately awkward silences, often reveal an inner self that can be thoughtful, preoccupied, guarded or relaxed.

Snowdon’s Royal portraits, beginning in 1956, are an important part of his work. Earlier images, such as the portrait of Princess Anne and Prince Charles standing either side of a globe, are formal and carefully arranged. However, his images

John Bellany, 26 April, 1990





Nell Dunn, 21 January, 1982

of the Royal Family, shot over many years, gradually became more informal and personal, to some extent paving the way for today's official Royal photographers.

Contribution to photography

Perhaps one of the reasons Snowdon's range of photography isn't more widely known or appreciated is his own reluctance to promote it. He says he doesn't like talking about his work and dislikes what he calls the 'mumbo-jumbo' often used in discussions and analysis of photography.

One telling quote in his new book shows the dissatisfaction he often feels with his work. 'The game is up when your work is published,' he says. 'After taking photographs for so many years I suppose I should have gained more confidence or got better at it, but I find neither has happened – the dread of starting is just as bad, the disappointment on seeing the results is even worse.'

Photographers, however, are often not the best judges of their own work and Helen Trompeteler is in no doubt about Snowdon's importance as a photographer.

'Snowdon's photography, in all the genres in which he worked, was about having a direct approach and removing all artifice,' she says. 'He brought inventiveness, wit and humour to fashion photography and was part of a movement in which photographers really pushed the boundaries of this genre.'

'One of the things he really contributed to portraiture as a genre was the candid informality of his work. He moved away from the staged theatricality of some of his predecessors, such as Cecil Beaton, and he brought freshness and youthfulness to the genre. The informality of his work was enlivening.'



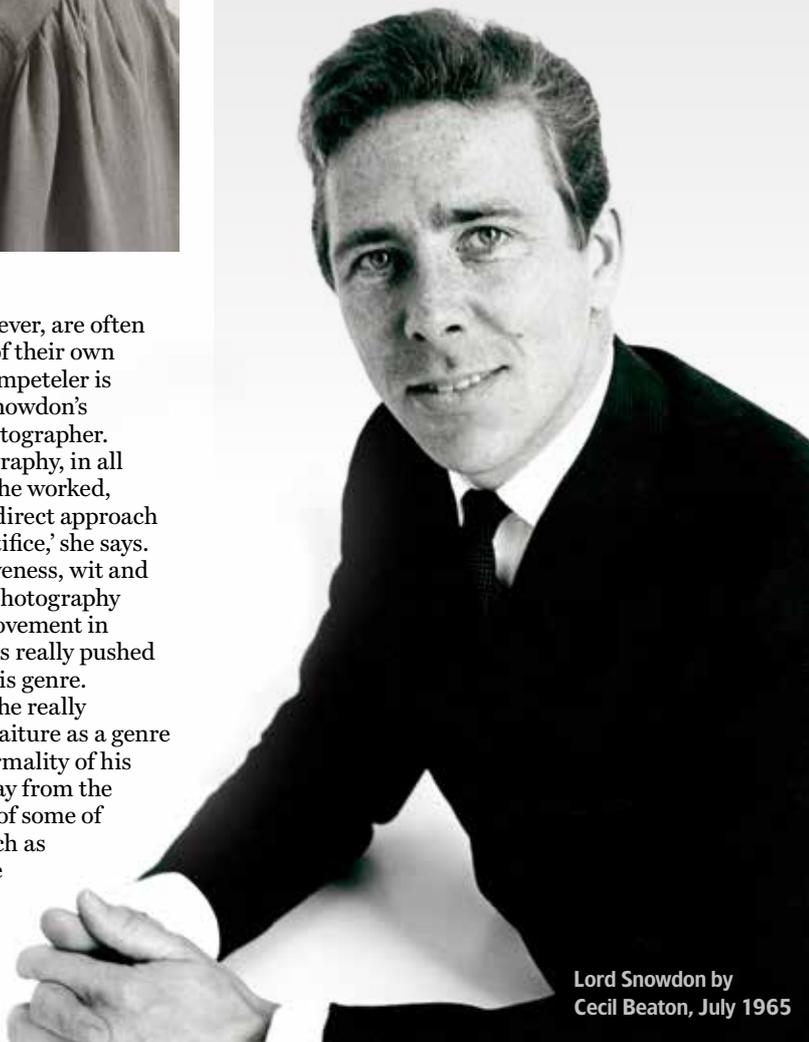
Lord Snowdon: the back story

SNOWDON, originally Antony Armstrong-Jones, was born in 1930. His father was a barrister, his mother became Countess of Rosse and his uncle was Oliver Messel, the renowned theatre and ballet designer. His parents divorced when he was five and he contracted polio at the age of 16.

After failing his second-year architecture exams at Cambridge, he began an apprenticeship with 'Baron', a society photographer, and set up his own studio soon afterwards. He worked for magazines such as *Tatler* and *Picture Post*, then later *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. His documentary-style book *London* was published in 1958.

He married the Queen's sister, Princess Margaret, in 1960 (they divorced in 1978) and was created 1st Earl of Snowdon in 1961. He co-designed the Snowdon Aviary at London Zoo from 1961-3. He shot portraits and reportage for *The Sunday Times* from 1962-90 while publishing six books of work and making seven television documentaries in the 1970s alone.

He has photographed for *Vogue* since 1964 and the *Telegraph Magazine* since 1990. At the age of 84, despite being wheelchair-bound, Snowdon continues to shoot professionally.



Lord Snowdon by Cecil Beaton, July 1965

MAGNUMS © SHUTTERSTOCK

The exhibition **Snowdon: A Life in View** is on display until 21 June 2015 at the National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place, London WC2H 0HE. Website: www.npg.org.uk. The 368-page book **Snowdon: A Life in View**, is published by Rizzoli (RRP £50) and includes a range of his portrait, fashion, documentary and personal work. Website: www.rizzoliusa.com.