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Beauty, Aspiration, and Commerce

Ways of Looking in the Photography of Alfred Cheney Johnston

ABSTRACT Alfred Cheney Johnston (1885–1971) was among the most renowned photographers of the Jazz Age yet has received little sustained attention in academic scholarship. Best known for portraits of *Ziegfeld Follies* performers, Johnston worked within the pictorialist tradition while adapting it to commercial advertising and celebrity publicity. As Florenz Ziegfeld Jr.'s designated photographer, he worked with women widely praised as the epitome of American beauty—a condition that freed both sitter and photographer from trying too hard to "prove" glamour; instead, an atmosphere of unforced confidence permeates the images. This article argues that Johnston's studio practice was particularly effective at sustaining slow viewing through display of glamour and confidence. His photographs also document how women's expanding public visibility in the 1920s took shape within established systems of commercial promotion, offering an aspirational visibility that his images both reflected and helped construct. Through close analysis of several portraits, the article shows how Johnston's images render women simultaneously as public icons and as modern individuals asserting presence. It further examines how more directive, message-driven styles that emerged during the late 1920s and early 1930s in glamour and advertising photography rendered Johnston obsolete and ultimately marginalized him within the art-historical canon. Considered as well are the digital afterlives of his photographs, which circulate widely online as retro icons of feminine—and often feminist—appeal. In this context, Johnston's work offers insight into how commercial portraiture has shaped, and continues to inform, an aspirational vision of femininity.

KEYWORDS Alfred Cheney Johnston; *Ziegfeld Follies*; glamour photography; pictorialism; slow viewing; spectatorship; aspirational visibility; digital afterlives

INTRODUCTION

Photographer Alfred Cheney Johnston (1885–1971) was one of the most famous Jazz Age photographers, producing widely published portraits of *Ziegfeld Follies* showgirls and silent film actresses. Despite this prominence, he has received little sustained attention in academic scholarship. This essay examines Johnston's work as a case study in how commercial portraiture shaped feminine visibility during the 1920s.

Johnston worked within the conventions of commercial photography, yet his particular attention to relaxed stillness and sustained frontal engagement makes his portraits unusually effective at holding the viewer's attention. His photographs of popular female performers also capture a moment when women's expanding public visibility created new possibilities for self-presentation. The wide circulation of these images in illustrated magazines—and their continued circulation in the digital age—demonstrates the power of Johnston's construction of glamour.

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Johnston's most widely circulated photographs date from roughly 1917 through the late 1920s and fall into two categories. One group consists of portraits of actresses and showgirls appearing in publications such as *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and *Photoplay*. The women are clothed, and whatever flesh they reveal conforms to the conventions of popular magazine photography. A second group depicts women in varying degrees of undress, ranging from artful drapery to complete nudity. Although these nude photographs circulate widely today, they were not publicly exhibited during Johnston's lifetime and may originally have been intended for private circulation.[1]

A 1923 portrait of actress Clara Bow, silent movie star and the decade's "it girl," typifies Johnston's published work and exemplifies the dynamics at play in his images, both at the time of their creation and in subsequent interpretation. Bow meets the viewer's gaze with what the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery calls "pure engagement and honesty with a sultry lure." Modern viewers might see the "sultry lure" as objectification.[2] Yet Johnston's diffused three-quarter lighting, shallow depth of field, and direct presentation

Clara Bow (1923) by Alfred Cheney Johnston; courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

1. Robert Hudovernik, *Jazz Age Beauties: The Lost Collection of Ziegfeld Photographer Alfred Cheney Johnston* (Rizzoli Universe, 2006), 60–61. The exact context of the nude photographs remains unclear, and little is known about why they were commissioned, how they were consented to, or how they were meant to be viewed. The nudes may have served multiple purposes: as private fine-art studies in the pictorialist tradition, as personal portfolio images or keepsakes for the sitters and their patrons, as gifts for theatrical insiders, as figure studies for costume and stage design, and as explorations of sensuality and form in keeping with early twentieth-century fine-art photography. I do not focus on Johnston's nude photography in this article.

2. The objectification of women in photographs is a well-explored subject. See for example Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "The Legs of the Countess," *October* 39 (1986): 65–108.

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of the sitter also create an impression of unguarded candor, with Bow asserting her own individuality. She looks at the viewer with demure confidence, hair boldly peeking from a stylish striped headdress with cool bohemian flair. The forward lean and splayed fingers add an inviting informality. This illustrates what Liz Conor describes as the "appearing woman," in which self-presentation opened new cultural spaces for women to occupy, giving women models for how they might present themselves in modern public life.[3]

A similar photograph of Bow from the same series appeared in 1923 with commentary emphasizing her professional promise. The magazine noted that Bow had "already definitely proved that the judges judged wisely when they named her winner of [the] Fame and Fortune Contest," praised her performance in the film *Maytime* (1923, directed by Louis J. Gasnier) and predicted "a bright future" as studios sought to secure her services.[4] While such commentary was not ubiquitous, it indicates that Johnston's portraits could participate in a discourse that framed women as possessing individual talent and ambition—even within a system oriented toward sex appeal and commodification.

While Johnston may have intended to beautify a movie star, there is more going on in the photograph. The National Portrait Gallery frames the image within a context that presents Bow as a woman who defied traditional gender expectations, asserted control over her life, and served as an example beyond the domestic sphere. The image itself does not resolve these competing interpretations. Glamour requires selective stylization—some details are suppressed while others heightened—to engage the viewer's imagination. This portrait demonstrates Johnston's particular talent for such construction, transforming sitters into images that sustain attention and invite viewers to linger in a space between desire, admiration, and personal connection.

In this paper, I examine how Johnston's photographs helped shape the Jazz Age feminine ideal and why they continue to resonate today. Central to my argument is the claim that his images sustain slow viewing with unusual consistency, keeping competing interpretations in play rather than resolving them. By slow viewing I mean the effect of the image itself, such as holding attention and deferring closure, as distinct from a direction given to or assumed by the viewer.[5]

FLORENZ ZIEGFELD JR. AND JOHNSTON'S RAPID RISE

Johnston appeared almost out of nowhere as a successful photographer. Raised in a Westchester County suburb of New York City, the son of a bank clerk, he set out to become an artist and graduated from the National Academy of Design in 1908. He failed

3. Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 254–55. Although Conor draws primarily on Australian examples, her analysis engages Hollywood film, mass media, and consumer advertising that applies to the United States context.

4. *Motion Picture Magazine* 26 (1923), 19, https://archive.org/details/motionpicturemag26brew/page/n490/mode/1up.

5. I am aware that "slow viewing" is sometimes used in reference to a curatorial approach that encourages viewers to spend time looking at and appreciating art. The term also has a colloquial association with personal mindfulness where individuals purposefully devote attention to visual encounters. In my usage, the term refers to how the image is constructed and its effect on the viewer independent of any external framing.

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to establish himself as a portrait painter, and turned to photography, reportedly at the suggestion of family friend Charles Dana Gibson.[6] Gibson was the illustrator behind the enormously successful images of the "Gibson girl," beautiful but emotionally distant young women with upswept hairdos who were seen as the embodiment of the "new woman" at the turn of the century.

Johnston employed pictorialist photographic conventions that emphasized soft focus and painterly effects to convey mood and beauty rather than a literal record of the subject, an approach well suited to the kind of idealized femininity already familiar from popular illustration. As practiced by Alfred Stieglitz and other early proponents, the style followed a fairly consistent approach. Sitters were often depicted as portraits in the academic, or "picturesque," style of painting and were usually carefully presented as poised and dressed for effect. The pictorialist style reached maturity around the start of the twentieth century and remained influential for decades.

Johnston's early years as a photographer are not well known; he likely worked for a major New York photography studio that photographed the leading figures of the theatrical scene.[7] His photographs appeared in print under his own name starting in 1917. Remarkably, his portrait style emerged nearly fully formed: The images from that year compare well with the best work of his career. He made a grand entrance in the July 1917 issue of *Vanity Fair*, with six photographs of actresses and showgirls. Johnston landed nine more pictures in the August issue;[8] the photograph of Dolores is an example. The Ziegfeld showgirl is presented as a beautiful construct with careful lighting and composition. A luminous performance in poise, the sitter appears confident and relaxed. The contrast between the dark, richly textured costume and the soft luminosity of her face is dramatic, while her indirect gaze and relaxed hand-to-head gesture suggest both public awareness and ease. Such imagery offered women spectators a vision of cultivated elegance—grace, beauty, and composure. While the sitter is highly stylized, with carefully applied make-up and richly decorated clothing, the effect is so strong that one can look beyond the artifice to see a self-possessed individual. The image draws on a broader culture of theatrical display that encouraged a sense of intimacy between performer and audience. Johnston's photograph intensifies this effect, presenting a carefully constructed image that suggests a self-possessed presence.[9]

The July 1917 edition of *Theatre Magazine* also ran a number of Johnston's images, including his portrait of the Ziegfeld performer Eleanor Dell, which balances objectified eroticism with the appearance of intimacy and self-assurance. Evocative lighting highlights her features, while the languid body language and cigarette suggest modern independence. The draped fabric creates a classical look that contrasts with her presentation—the earrings, bobbed hair, make-up, and décolletage marking her as a fashionable woman of the time. Dell's appearance is relaxed and approachable, her slight lean toward the camera and

6. Hudovernik, *Jazz Age Beauties*, 60.

7. "Alfred Cheney Johnston," Broadway Photographs, David S. Shields, https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/alfred-cheney-johnston.html.

8. "Winners of Dominating Heights in the Follies of 1917," *Vanity Fair* 8, no. 6 (1917), 36, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112057322874&seq=150.

9. For discussion of performer-audience synergy in early twentieth-century theater, see Susan A. Glenn, *Female Spectacle: The Theatrical Roots of Modern Feminism* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 216–17.

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Dolores (1917) by Alfred Cheney Johnston.

Eleanor Dell (1917) by Alfred Cheney Johnston.

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contemplative expression suggesting both worldly confidence and emotional availability. One might imagine her as a chic friend during a thoughtful moment, mulling over something of mutual concern. It's the kind of portrait that lingers in the mind—not just for its glamour, but for the way it suggests a bold, sophisticated woman.

Johnston's emergence as a successful photographer coincided with major shifts in celebrity imagery after World War I. The growth of illustrated magazines and entertainment publications created demand for photographs of stage and screen performers. These outlets presented female celebrities as modern and independent while also rendering them objects of display, inviting both admiration and objectification. The mass media set forth competing expectations: Women were encouraged to uphold traditional ideals of morality and restraint even as they were urged toward greater visibility in consumer culture and public life. Johnston's portraits thrived within this environment, where images of women operated simultaneously as commercial products, as models of modern femininity, and as vehicles for viewers' aspirations toward visibility and self-determination.[10]

Florenz Ziegfeld Jr. propelled Johnston into the limelight in 1917 when he chose him as the photographer for his productions, including the enormously popular *Ziegfeld Follies*. Just how Johnston got his remarkable assignment is not clearly understood. One story is that while working for a large commercial studio he took photos of Ziegfeld star Dorothy Dickson who liked them so much she showed them to the boss. Ziegfeld then impetuously gave Johnston the job of photographing his stars for lobby displays. This account, from a 1935 unpublished interview with Johnston, goes on to claim that it was only after the Ziegfeld commission that Johnston bought his own camera and acquired a studio (apparently before that he had been using his mother's kitchen to develop his images).[11]

Ziegfeld's *Follies*, *Midnight Frolic*, and various Broadway musicals were at the height of American popular entertainment at the time. The shows mixed comedy with song, dance, and eye-popping spectacle. Ziegfeld boasted an intent to "glorify the American girl," and presented a male-idealized procession of beautiful and talented women on stage. These shows were more than theater: They were cultural events, widely covered in the media. While the *Follies* mesmerized masses of people, women were a key audience for the aspirational visibility of Ziegfeld's shows. A good chunk of this was driven by consumerism, such as magazine advertisements featuring Ziegfeld's showgirls hawking hats,[12] silk stockings,[13] and exercise machines ("Health and Beauty in 15 Minutes a Day"[14]). One ad for cigarettes

10. The contradictory messages directed at women in early twentieth-century magazines and consumer culture are explored by Jennifer Scanlon in *Inarticulate Longings: The Ladies' Home Journal, Gender, and the Promises of Consumer Culture* (Routledge, 1995), 231.

11. "Alfred Cheney Johnston Creates His Studio," Broadway Photographs, David S. Shields, https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/alfred-cheney-johnston-creates-his-studio.html.

12. "Where the Hat Links with the Costume," *Illustrated Milliner* 21 (1920), 43, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433031306925&seq=699.

13. "Ziegfeld Selects America's Most Beautiful Legs," *Harper's Bazaar* 63 (1929), 19, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uga1.32108057655865&seq=843.

14. "Health and Beauty in 15 Minutes a Day," *Vogue* 71, no. 4 (1928), 41, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=cub.u1830257801 38&seq=451.

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featured Johnston photographs of female Ziegfeld stars, along with one of Flo himself, endorsing Lucky Strike cigarettes as "the easiest way I know to keep from getting fat."[15]

Johnston took on his role as the *Follies* photographer at a time when the Ziegfeld Girl was seen as the epitome of quality when it came to American women. Young, white, slim, native born, and conforming to generalized notions of wholesome respectability, these women served as a kind of cultural stage that defined ideals of beauty and femininity.[16] Newspapers of the time lauded Ziegfeld as "the connoisseur of the world's most beautiful women"[17] and producer of "a beauty chorus, which is said to embraces [*sic*] many of the handsomest young women on the American stage."[18] Marcelle Earle, a performer in several editions of the *Follies* starting in 1915, noted in her memoir that "Johnston was the photographer. Only selected beauties were sent to him."[19]

With such widespread confirmation of their appeal, Johnston's subjects did not have to employ a hard sell in the studio. The women were free to relax and be appreciated for who everyone assumed they were, while Johnston could take his time and carefully frame certified beauty to its best advantage. This unhurried, unguarded atmosphere permeates the photographs; here, the performance of beauty is assumed rather than asserted.

While the Ziegfeld Girl came about initially on stage as part of a live performance, she assumed even greater cultural prominence through Johnston's photographs, which obviously differ from a Broadway show. His portraits rarely display women on stage and only occasionally dressed in their elaborate costumes. Where Ziegfeld presented women together as part of a tightly choreographed act, Johnston's camera captures them as individuals. In the theater, performance is temporal, a public event mediated through oral accounts and written reviews that situate it in the hazy past. The photographs, by contrast, suggest an enduring moment, as if they capture a private essence rather than a fleeting routine. On stage the women are components of a big public show; in Johnston's images, women appear by themselves as if inviting the viewer into a candid moment.

Laura Mulvey describes still images as mechanisms of delay—moments of arrested motion that can slow the forward drive of narrative and invite reflection.[20] This capacity is inherent to still photography—particularly so in the pictorialist tradition—but it is especially pronounced in Johnston's portraits. Removed from the flow of stage or film, his images hold their subjects in moments of composed visibility, encouraging viewers to linger. His photographs present women both as objects of desire and as distinct, self-possessed figures. Johnston's images invite slow viewing, with his subjects caught between two modes of presentation.

15. "Reach for a Lucky When You Crave Something Sweet," *Vanity Fair* 31, no. 4 (1928), 119, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=umn.31951002805944w&seq=875.

16. Linda Mizejewski, *Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema* (Duke University Press, 1999), 3, 29, 39.

17. "Strand Theater Advertisement," *Times-Picayune*, July 29, 1917, 28, Newspapers.com.

18. "Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., Will Offer In The Academy Of Music This Week The 1917 Version Of The Celebrated 'Ziegfeld Follies,'" *Baltimore Sun*, November 11, 1917, 30, Newspapers.com.

19. Marcelle Earle, quoted in Cynthia J. Miller, "'Glorifying the American Girl': Adapting an Icon," in *The Adaptation of History: Essays on Ways of Telling the Past*, ed. Laurence Raw and Defne Ersin Tutan (McFarland & Company, 2012), 34.

20. Laura Mulvey, *Death 24x a Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Reaktion Books, 2006), 3–5.

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STUDIO CONTROL AND PRACTICE

Johnston worked within the standard bounds of early twentieth-century commercial photography. He controlled the selection of sitters, directed their poses (including how much flesh to reveal), and decided which images were circulated. The economics behind Johnston's work further extended his influence. Johnston made lots of money from the publication of these images in popular magazines. Many of the women who sat for him likely were not paid for these photographs, as publicity itself was commonly understood as a form of professional currency. Johnston's name was also regularly affixed to prints and prominently featured in magazine credits, while the identities of the women pictured were dependent on editorial captioning. As a result, many of these images now circulate primarily under his name rather than the identities of the subjects.

Johnston had a conventional view of gender roles. In a 1931 interview, he remarked that "men like daintiness and delicacy about a woman," adding that a woman who did not maintain such qualities risked losing male respect.[21] At the same time, the photographs themselves convey a more complex impression. Many of Johnston's sitters appear composed and engaged, showing a sense of presence that goes beyond decorative display. Johnston's studio practice, while structured and directive, allowed for this double effect: images that satisfied the demands of glamour while also suggesting a degree of personal intention on the part of the sitter.

For many women, participation in commercial visual culture offered not only exposure but a means of shaping public identity, as self-presentation became increasingly tied to mobility, ambition, and social visibility.[22] Exactly how contemporary audiences interpreted these images is difficult to determine. Still, there is evidence that Johnston's subjects could be presented as more than faces and bodies. A Johnston photograph of Pearl White published in a 1921 issue of *Photoplay*, for example, captions her "the queen of camera emotion," noting that "she assumes a new personality every time she faces a photographer."[23] A similar visual logic is evident in Johnston's portrait of Marjorie Merriweather Post, now in the National Portrait Gallery; the image is noted as illustrating her "great poise" within a broader account of her extensive public and professional life.[24] While this modern framing cannot stand in for 1920s audience reception, it underscores the extent to which Johnston's image remains intelligible as a representation of female individuality rather than passive display.

The Post photograph is classic Johnston, demonstrating strong stylistic control. Post is positioned in three-quarter profile, her gaze directed toward the camera with an air of serene confidence. Multiple strands of pearls fall in carefully arranged loops, while ostrich plumes

21. Lillian G. Genn, "Only the Woman of Mystery Wins!," *The Long Beach Sun*, November 1, 1931, 28, Newspapers.com.

22. Conor, *Spectacular Modern Woman*, 29, 35. Conor argues that modern women understood self-display as part of a broader pursuit of mobility, self-determination, and sexual identity, and that the association between feminine visibility in mass media and individual agency was central to this development.

23. Alfred Cheney Johnston, photograph of Pearl White, *Photoplay* 19, no. 3 (1921), 20, https://archive.org/details/pho20chic.

24. Patricia H. Svoboda, "American Women's Role as Collectors, Patrons, and Museum Founders," *Journal of Antiques & Collectibles*, February 1, 2024, https://journalofantiques.com/features/american-womens-role-as-collectors-patrons-and-museum-founders.

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Marjorie Merriweather Post (1929) by Alfred Cheney Johnston; courtesy National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

pool around her seated form, creating a soft, cloudlike base that heightens the image's dreamlike effect. Johnston's soft-focus background recedes, ensuring that nothing competes with Post's presence, while careful lighting shapes her features. Beyond this cultivated beauty, Johnston captures something distinctly modern in Post's demeanor. Her posture—spine straight, shoulders back, chin lifted—suggests autonomy and self-assurance. One might think: *This is a woman conscious of her power and comfortable wielding it*.

Conor's concept of the "appearing woman" is useful in considering Johnston's portraits of Bow, Dell, and Post: They gave women the opportunity to assert subjectivity within the conventions of commercial display. For these and other sitters, the studio may have felt like a place where they could associate display with "new ways of seeing and being seen . . . in the modern scene."[25]

We have little in the way of commentary from Johnston's sitters about their experience in his studio. Robert Hudovernik relays the accounts of two, Helene Jesmer and her daughter, actress Julie Newmar. Both seemed to have had a positive experience. Jesmer, an aspiring dancer, found Johnston's photos "eye catching" and decided to drop into Johnston's studio without an appointment sometime around the end of World War I. Described as affable and kindly, Johnston asked her what she wanted. "I want to be in the *Ziegfeld Follies*," she replied. Johnston agreed to take pictures of her and to send a letter directly to Ziegfeld. Jesmer's dream came true: She appeared in the 1919 *Follies*. About thirty years later, Jesmer took Newmar to be photographed by Johnston. Newmar recalled him as "a distinguished man" and said of

25. Conor, *Spectacular Modern Woman*, 35.

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him: "The best photographers see their subjects in a transcendent light. A moment is captured that sees into the soul of the person to whatever is there and God help us, we become known."[26]

While Newmar recalled Johnston in almost spiritual terms, another contemporary voice offers a more unvarnished glimpse into how women viewed his photography. In a 1938 letter, a woman named Jeanie wrote to him, asking to pose in exchange for photographs rather than payment. The request shows her understanding of the value of the images for getting ahead (if not necessarily how Johnston worked). Rejecting the chorus line, noting other modeling offers, and appealing for help so that she might "sing for those old millionheirs [*sic*]" and perhaps even secure a $1,000 loan, Jeanie framed her request with a blend of opportunism and aspiration. Her words reveal how women could imagine Johnston's photographs as instruments of visibility and self-advancement.[27]

JOHNSTON'S ASCENDANCY IN PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE

During Johnston's heyday, from 1917 through the end of the 1920s, he was among the most famous photographers in America. In 1923, *Vanity Fair* recognized him as one of ten "Master American Portrait Photographers," alongside figures such as Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, and Nickolas Muray.[28] Johnston's pictorialist style aligned him with a number of other prominent contemporaries, including Baron Adolph de Meyer, Arnold Genthe, Charlotte Fairchild, and Ira L. Hill. Yet, as David Shields observes, the visual strategies employed by these photographers often subordinated individual personality to aesthetic effect or conceptual framing. De Meyer's portraits frequently rendered women as distant, almost ethereal figures marked by an impersonal elegance; Genthe at times pushed soft focus to such an extent that facial specificity dissolved; Fairchild often privileged setting or allegorical concept over the sitter's individuality; and Hill's fashion-oriented images emphasized costume and surface refinement rather than personal presence.[29] Within this shared pictorialist milieu, Johnston's work can be seen to stand apart for its persistent attention to the sitter as both a glamorous image and a socially legible individual.

The 1920s also saw the rise of photography for use in advertising. While Johnston himself was active in that world, he took the same slow, intimate approach that he did for his portrait work. The J. Walter Thompson advertising agency considered hiring him in 1927 but declared him "hopeless for any other work except what he ordinarily does—he puts all the lighting emphasis on the girl's head. . . . It took [Johnston] two weeks to produce two photographs that were even worth considering."[30] Johnston remained committed to his

26. Julie Newmar, quoted in Hudovernik, *Jazz Age Beauties*, 12, 60.

27. Jeanie [last name unknown] to Alfred Cheney Johnston, September 11, 1938, author's private collection.

28. "Master American Portrait Photographers," *Vanity Fair* 19, no. 5 (1923), 54, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uiug.30112042273745&seq=62.

29. "Adolph de Meyer"; "Arnold Genthe"; "Charlotte Fairchild"; "Ira L. Hill," Broadway Photographs, David S. Shields, https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/adolph-de-meyer.html; https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/arnold-genthe.html; https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/charlotte-fairchild.html; https://broadway.library.sc.edu/content/ira-l-hill.html.

30. Quoted in Patricia Johnston, *Real Fantasies: Edward Steichen's Advertising Photography* (University of California Press, 1997), 305.

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own method regardless—unhurried and interested in his subjects as participants rather than products. As Shields notes, "Johnston was one of the creators of twentieth-century glamour photography, giving his sitters erotic allure while vesting them with dignity and power."

Johnston was not only technically skilled but also adept at managing his sitters, simultaneously guiding them into poses of his choosing while fostering an atmosphere that encouraged their cooperation. In the studio, Johnston regarded himself as in complete control. Some women, he said, "are obedient subjects . . . others are rebellious. They think they have mastered every nuance of their own physical expression after hours before boudoir mirrors, and it takes patience to convince them that a favorite pose is not always the most effective pose."[31] A 1931 newspaper report described him as "a tall man with a friendly, engaging personality that accounts a great deal for his ability to get to the inner personality of those whom he photographs. This, together with his understanding of feminine psychology, has made him particularly successful in his portraits of women."[32] Johnston apparently was quite well liked by at least some of his subjects; one account has him standing in the wings during *Follies* shows with Ziegfeld Girls gathering around his "robust Pavarotti-esque figure" and hugging him with affection.[33]

In 1925, he held forth in a newspaper interview subtitled "How He Photographs What the Camera Does Not See." Asked how he managed to capture beauty, Johnston talked about his personal rapport with subjects. He would meet with a sitter before a session to get a sense of her personality and professional needs. These conversations let him set the stage for portraits. Johnston had a key insight: He believed that a literal record of a face was never enough because as he said, "your eye isn't photographic."[34] People register each other not as precise visual images but by the psychological and emotional impression they impart. Johnston aimed to capture an impression of loveliness and appeal, presenting the sitter as someone whose beauty and mystery would resonate within the entertainment world and with spectators in general. As noted, this process was given a boost by the shared understanding that subjects such as the Ziegfeld Girls were, without question, beautiful. What emerges in these photographs is a carefully shaped archetype of beauty—one produced through Johnston's technique but also through the sitter's own faith in herself. The studio functioned as a kind of stage where women could inhabit a painterly persona of classic beauty, with Johnston balancing reassurance and direction while leaving room for their confidence to register.

A great example is Johnston's photograph of *Follies* showgirl Jean Ackerman. The portrait offers a carefully staged moment of beauty and presence. The soft fall of pearls and fabric across her bare skin draws the eye without tipping into overt sensuality, while her averted gaze suggests introspection. Johnston's lighting shapes her face and shoulders with dramatic precision, yet the overall mood remains contemplative rather than assertive. The composition, while theatrical, also offers a poised study of glamour and confidence, inviting the viewer to linger rather than consume the image at a glance.

31. John B. Kennedy, "Your Face Is Your Fortune Teller," *Collier's National Weekly* 80, no. 12, September 17, 1927, 11, HathiTrust Digital Library, https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015056076733&seq=504.

32. Genn, "Woman of Mystery," 28.

33. Hudovernik, *Jazz Age Beauties*, 36.

34. Alfred Cheney Johnston, in "Hidden Beauty Reflected by Proper Environment: How He Photographs What the Camera Does Not See," interview by Violet Dare, *The Idaho Statesman*, June 21, 1925, 25, Newspapers.com.

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Jean Ackerman (c. 1920s) by Alfred Cheney Johnston; courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Johnston's photographs present an ironic challenge from an artistic perspective. The pictures are beautiful—by design. Yet the great commercial success of these photographs, promoting what could easily be considered middle-brow "girly" entertainment spectacles, likely obstructed their critical appreciation in some quarters. The qualities that made the photographs widely appealing may have encouraged their dismissal as mere decoration.

MODERN GLAMOUR AND THE LIMITS OF JOHNSTON'S STYLE

As the 1920s progressed, Johnston's pictorialist style became increasingly out of step with the changing demands of commercial photography, which came to favor a more directive approach. Liz Willis-Tropea describes a gradual move toward a "semiotics of glamour" involving visual cues tied to production techniques. Sharper focus, heightened contrast, more dramatic lighting, and faster film with higher definition allowed for complex compositions that looked more realistic even as they became increasingly stylized and manipulated. Another aspect of the emerging approach was a more overt deployment of stereotypical gender roles in posing: Female Hollywood stars, for example, came to be presented with an aggressive, exaggerated sexuality.[35]

35. Liz Willis-Tropea, "Glamour Photography and the Institutionalization of Celebrity," *Photography and Culture* 4, no. 3 (2011), 266–67. The author also notes that the introduction of automatic retouching machines in the 1930s obviated the need for Johnston's beloved, but labor intensive, hand-retouching of glass negatives.

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This was part of Hollywood's move away from the "romanticized pictorial ideal" toward highly stylized, sharply focused portraits. Fahey and Rich note that, by the early 1930s, female star portraits used manipulated light to mold facial features and alter body contours to emphasize sex appeal and to generate "visual electricity."[36] This electricity was in the service of box office receipts, which were threatened by the economic downturn of the time. Premier Hollywood photographers such as George Hurrell helped define "a system of signs" that emphatically "proved" female stars as possessing a near mythical, sexually assertive glamour. The field consolidated into a coherent studio practice oriented toward images that were jazzy—packed with modern flair and attention-grabbing enough to compete within mass-circulation visual culture. This new mode operated as a form of faster viewing, aiming for quick recognition and emotional impact over sustained interpretive engagement. Fan magazines such as *Photoplay* eagerly published such photographs and saw circulation boom. By 1930, glamour photography was redefined and pictorialism was effectively dead in Hollywood.[37]

A related change in commercial photography took place when Condé Nast hired Edward Steichen, who brought the principles of what he called "straight photography" to *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. Steichen already had an international reputation as a founding member of the Photo-Secession, which aimed to establish photography as fine art. His mature style was hard-edged and sharply focused; the ability to precisely manipulate settings and details gave him the reputation as "master of illusion . . . he was able to transform ordinary models into aristocrats and dime-store cosmetics into magical stepping-stones to love and wealth."[38] Steichen's images of women were meticulously calibrated to embody ideals—such as modern elegance or sexual availability—that could be transferred onto commodities. While these women often project confidence or allure, they remain in service of and subordinate to a product message. The advertising image depends upon abstraction of personality: The woman's individuality is far less significant than her capacity to function as a quickly grasped symbolic vehicle for consumption. Steichen rode this approach to become the most successful commercial photographer in America and his modernist style helped crowd out pictorialism from advertising during the 1930s.[39]

Johnston's pictorialist style—dominant though it was for many years—marked a transitional moment before commercial photography became fully codified into the form we are familiar with today. Like the successful photographers of the 1930s, Johnston produced images intended for commercial consumption but his soft and relaxed presentation allowed his subjects more space for intimate expression and sustained engagement. As sharpness and immediacy came to define the cutting edge of photographic practice, Johnston's style was dismissed as outmoded. He left New York around 1940, and by 1951 *Popular Photography* described him as retired and attempting "to recapture in photography the mood at least of his triumphs."[40]

36. David Fahey and Linda Rich, *Masters of Starlight: Photographers in Hollywood* (Abbeville Press, 1987), 18–19.
37. Willis-Tropea, "Glamour Photography," 266–67.
38. Johnston, *Real Fantasies*, 23–31.
39. Johnston, *Real Fantasies*, 106.
40. Arthur J. Busch, "The Amateur who Glorified the Ziegfeld Girl," *Popular Photography* 28, no. 3 (1951), 58.

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Johnston fell further into obscurity when Steichen, then director of the photography department at the Museum of Modern Art, reportedly declined Johnston's offer of his archive and effectively shut him out of the artistic canon.[41] This rejection was, arguably, less a matter of artistic merit than an alignment with the style that had come to dominate glamour and advertising photography over the preceding thirty years. Of course, Steichen himself exemplified this mode of image-making, which was defined by sharpness and overt messaging for immediate visual impact.

JOHNSTON REMAINS A PUBLIC FORCE INTO THE 1930S

Despite his waning stylistic influence, Johnston remained a popular inspiration to women into the 1930s because he helped so many of a certain type succeed. A 1924 newspaper account declares "one is always hearing about some charming young actress who can trace her success straight back to some photographs that Mr. Johnston made of her."[42] In 1927 *Collier's* noted that Ziegfeld relies "almost implicitly by Johnston's judgment regarding new candidates for beauty honors."[43] In 1931, a newspaper deemed him "one of the leading arbiters of beauty. His judgment is held in such high esteem that he has been able to set scores of women on the path to fame and fortune. He has photographed the celebrated beauties of two continents and has had a hand in glorifying many of the Ziegfeld beauties."[44] Johnston's images became so influential that he came to rival Ziegfeld's own reputation as the premier arbiter of female beauty.

Johnston was a sought-after source for mass media advice about enhancing women's appearances. In 1928, he wrote a series of newspaper articles in which he "discusses a type of feminine beauty" explaining "how it can be best enhanced by make-up and coiffure, [and] tells which color schemes and styles of gowns he considers most effective." In one piece, a large print sidebar declared the content "A New Feature for Women Readers," and that "Every woman will want to follow this series" because Johnston "is considered one of the great connoisseurs of beauty." The advice was quite specific and often tied to famous oil portrait artists. "Gainsborough Blondes," he advised, for example, "must exercise unusual care in make-up" and hair "should be kept long at the sides, so that the line of the jaw will be slightly hidden and the cheek bones accentuated."[45]

Johnston had a successful advertising career, with his photos used to sell everything from cigarettes to silk to silverware. Much of this work focused on convincing women to enlarge

41. Hudovernik, *Jazz Age Beauties*, 62. Hudovernik informed the author via email (July 7, 2026) that this account was based on conversations with photographer Clifford Scoffield, who attended New York Camera Club meetings with both Johnston and Edward Steichen during the 1920s. Scoffield recalled that Steichen did not regard Johnston as an artist and believed that his work did not belong at the Museum of Modern Art. According to Scoffield, Steichen considered Johnston's photographs better suited to the Library of Congress as a historical archive documenting the *Ziegfeld Follies*, theater, and film industries. The Library of Congress records a gift of Johnston photographic prints in 1960, although the details surrounding the accession are unverified. Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Alfred Cheney Johnston Collection.

42. Violet Dare, "Is Your Beauty Invisible?," *The Virginian-Pilot*, November 2, 1924, 21, Newspapers.com.

43. Kennedy, "Your Face," 11.

44. Genn, "Woman of Mystery," 28.

45. Alfred Cheney Johnston, "Beauty at Its Best: Delicate Blondes Must Use Extra Care in Makeup," *Springfield Leader and Press*, September 27, 1928, 7, Newspapers.com.

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their lives and their happiness through consumption. Some of his ad photos featured women actively engaged with life in a way that looked open and liberating; a prime example is his 1932 work for Old Gold cigarettes. One photograph featured a well-dressed woman on a hill, eyes dreamily skyward, with a pair of Borzoi dogs gently pulling on the leash. The image suggests freedom and effortless elegance, portraying modern womanhood as self-possessed and in harmony with the world—an aspirational vision that linked the product to that life.

Johnston's best known ad photos were for Dobbs hats, for both men and women. These images, which ran in popular magazines throughout the 1920s, are in his classic style, with subjects that appear serene, elegant, and highly relatable. Johnston is not only credited in the ads—his signature, affirming the work as art, is prominently displayed. Liam Purdon considers the influence of these images in discussing the model for Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925). In the book, Daisy refers to Gatsby as "the advertisement of the man." Which advertisement might have influenced Daisy so strongly as to evoke the alluring Gatsby—the man she loved, the one who "always looks so cool"? Purdon dismisses the commonly assumed "Arrow Collar Man" advertisements and points instead to a full-page Dobbs ad featuring a Johnston photograph in a 1924 issue of *Time*. Purdon claims the photograph conveys a man with "glamorous nonchalance" imbued with personal coolness.[46]

Old Gold Advertisement (1932) by Alfred Cheney Johnston.

46. Liam O. Purdon, "Daisy's 'Advertisement of the Man': An Evasive Self-Revelation," *The F. Scott Fitzgerald Review* 16, no. 1 (2018), 162.

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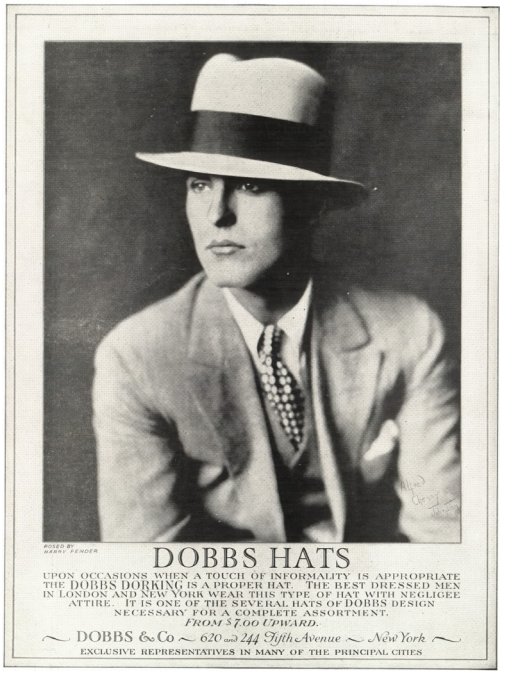

Dobbs Hats Advertisement (1924) by Alfred Cheney Johnston.

In this context, Daisy's remark does more than characterize Gatsby; it gestures toward personalized desire shaped by slow viewing. Daisy's reverie is, after all, drawn to the man in the advertisement rather than to the product. Fitzgerald might have translated that into prose, staging Daisy's attraction as the product of lingering attention rather than a glance and a quick turn of the page. This example illustrates how even Johnston's advertising images encourage viewer attention on the subject rather than the product.

In 1934, Johnston was among those whose work was shown in a New York photographic exhibition sponsored by the National Alliance of Art and Industry and the Photographic Illustrators, Inc. The event was described as a showcase for leading photographers with "modernist sensibility" who "pursued commercial photography as both an artistic endeavor and a profession, and . . . to bring attention to their work in the context of a fine-art setting."[47] Somewhat surprisingly for a photographer so deeply rooted in traditional black-and-white photography, Johnston exhibited at least one work in color. Color photography was a technically challenging enterprise at the time, but Johnston created a strikingly assertive and modern example, "A Study in Color," featuring ex-*Follies* performer Dorothy Flood. Johnston made two versions: one a technically complex carbro print, the other a photomechanical color separation to produce a photogravure. A major departure from Johnston's typical soft-focus style signals his adoption of contemporary techniques—the crisp detail, dramatic angles, and bold color of the subject's eyes and lipstick create an almost

47. "The High Art of Photographic Advertisement: The NAAI Exhibition Opens," Harvard Business School Historical Collections, www.library.hbs.edu/hc/naai/02-the-exhibition.html.

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A Study in Color (1934) by Alfred Cheney Johnston.

confrontational intimacy. Flood's direct gaze and cigarette, paired with the severe black sweater and meticulously waved hair, project a cool sophistication that embodies the harder edge of 1930s modernism. The image could serve as a striking model of feminine agency, suggesting a woman who asserted independence through attitude and style.

Despite the effort to update his style, Johnston faded from public view. In 1937, he published a book of artistic nudes entitled *Enchanting Beauty*. Despite an affirmative blurb from Norman Rockwell, which declared, "I have always been an admirer of your work," the book sold only modestly. Attempts to revive his photographic career failed and he died in 1971, essentially forgotten.[48]

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DIGITAL AFTERLIVES

In surveying online material relating to Johnston, I found little that criticizes his images—including the many, many nudes—as objectifying. Instead, his photographs most often circulate in three appreciative ways: through commerce, in the sale of prints and reproductions; through brief biographical showcases that combine details of Johnston's life with selections of his work; and, most especially, as widely shared examples of retro glamour.

Women promote a striking proportion of these references. Johnston's subjects offer a ready answer: They are models of women as individuals, poised and assured in ways that spectators admire and might emulate. This popularity also reflects the growing prominence in Western culture of what Rosalind Gill calls a postfeminist sensibility, one that encourages

48. Hudovernik, *Jazz Age Beauties*, 62.

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women to celebrate themselves in photographs demonstrating sexuality and "hotness" as markers of personal authority and uniqueness.[49] Johnston's images anticipate the logic Gill describes: appearance functioning not simply as display, but as an explicit claim to individuality and agency. It is beyond the scope of this paper to parse all the complexities of women's images in digital culture. Still, while acknowledging a persistent element of objectification in Johnston's photographs, I argue that contemporary viewers readily recognize the subjectivity that his sitters project.

In modern visual culture, there is often a semi-serious element of deliberate performance as the objectified woman, with images presented at a refracted, self-aware distance with an assumption that the viewer knows the subject knows the pose is not the reality. Highly produced celebrity imagery features performers who adopt stylized "showgirl" personas with carefully baked-in layers of self-awareness. What we see here is less personal intimacy and more disposable, effortful performance laden with calibrated messages tied to personal branding. Contemporary glamour imagery such as this can come across as too slick and corporate, a quality that throws Johnston's more relaxed and intimate-seeming portraits into sharper relief.

It is precisely that quality that modern appreciators of Johnston's style reach for. The jazz musician Diana Krall drew attention in 2012 with the release of her 1920s-themed album *Glad Rag Doll*, which had revealing photos of her in period costume "designed to evoke the work of New York photographer Alfred Cheney Johnston."[50] Noting that the women in the original photographs were "beautiful and provocative," Krall said she wanted to "do a sort of more edgier twist on that . . . [as] a feminist statement."[51] A Johnston portrait of Ziegfeld-era Barbara Stanwyck anchored a 2014 newspaper ad for "Girl's Night Out Gatsby Glitz," which promoted "A day and night of fun and shopping."[52] Online marketplaces likewise trade on Johnston's retro glamour, offering mugs, totes, pillows, posters, and t-shirts emblazoned with his iconic images, including the nudes.

Boudoir photography services aimed at women also draw on Johnston's images. Stephanie May Saujon's website offers "Midnight Frolic: 1920s Style Portraits." Saujon declares, "I love doing photo shoots in the style of 1920s portrait master Alfred Cheney Johnston." The site offers many racy client photographs showing modern women sporting costumes and draping similar to what Johnston used.[53] A website run by Tina Meerloo, who runs what is billed as "The Premier NJ Boudoir Studio," features a Johnston photograph followed by this text: "I am consistently inspired by the historical aspect of nude photography because I see it as the beginning of a self-love revolution."[54]

49. Rosalind Gill, *Gender and the Media* (Polity Press, 2007), 255–56. Although I do not fully explore Gill's argument here, it is worth noting that while she frames women's sexual display as self-expression, she also stresses that this framing conceals a contradictory internalization of the male gaze. Women are encouraged to police their bodies in pursuit of an idealized appearance ("hotness") while experiencing this self-surveillance as empowerment—a dynamic that echoes Solomon-Godeau's argument that women remained constrained within male expectations.

50. Thomas Kintner, "Diana Krall's New Working of Old Songs," *Hartford Courant*, April 14, 2013, G1.

51. Jane Stevenson, "Sexy cover a 'feminist statement,'" *The Intelligencer*, February 4, 2013, 14.

52. "Girl's Night Out Gatsby Glitz," *The Sequim Gazette*, September 24, 2014, 6, Newspapers.com.

53. "Midnight Frolic: 1920s Style Portraits," La Photographie Boudoir, www.laphotographieboudoir.com/blog/2017/8/16/midnight-frolic-1920s-style-portraits-nashville-boudoir-photographer.

54. "What is Boudoir Photography?," Meerloo Photography, https://meerloophotography.com/what-is-boudoir-photography.

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Johnston's original photographs also circulate widely on the internet as icons of retro beauty and feminine self-possession. On Bored Panda, Mariia Tkachenko offers Johnston images among "40 Vintage Shots Of Women Serving Looks, Confidence, And Charm" that "celebrate women from over a century ago embracing joy, rebellion, and unfiltered fun . . . these women were out there living boldly, posing with confidence, dancing in sunlight, or just being unapologetically themselves."[55]

His style has, inevitably, found its way into AI art platforms. Midlibrary.io offers a Johnston "style guide" to help replicating his approach in artificially generated images using monochrome, soft focus, and period costumes set against blurred backgrounds. Hundreds (thousands?) of these images exist, with more generated all the time.[56]

Many of Johnston's portraits flying around the internet are detached from the names and histories of their subjects. The women pictured are almost pure commodities. Even so, the images of these women remain vivid as early examples of self-presentation and personal style, their poise and assurance resisting the anonymity imposed on them. That Johnston's photographs continue to circulate so widely on book covers, in online marketplaces, on social media, and in AI homages speaks to their power as a model of stylized modern womanhood.

CONCLUSION

Johnston chanced upon a unique opportunity to photograph *Ziegfeld Follies* performers. When he began, Ziegfeld Girls were, by popular consensus, considered the epitome of American beauty—which freed them, to a considerable degree, from the need to perform exaggerated forms of glamour. That in turn freed Johnston to focus on capturing a confident, composed appearance. His primary intent was to produce images designed for visual pleasure—what we would now describe as objectification. His original purpose was also strictly commercial: to promote Ziegfeld's shows and the individual performers. Yet the self-assurance of the performers, combined with Johnston's purposefully deliberate studio approach, also lent the photographs an intimate, personal quality. The result is a striking combination of women presented as both visual objects and distinct individuals—a tension that remains at play in the images, encouraging the viewer to view them slowly.

During the 1920s, women were exploring new ways of appearing. Johnston's photographs, widely published in popular magazines, intersected with contemporary appeals to consumption and beauty, but they also signaled that women could aspire to appear in public as self-possessed individuals with their own intentions. Even after his stylistic influence waned, Johnston's association with images of highly successful performers kept him in the public eye as a guide to women for presenting themselves to their best advantage.

Johnston is important as a hinge figure: He used a pictorial style to become one of the most successful commercial photographers of the 1920s—but he was largely displaced

55. Mariia Tkachenko, Gabija Palšytė, and Nikita Manot, "40 Vintage Shots Of Women Serving Looks, Confidence, And Charm," boredpanda, www.boredpanda.com/playful-women-photographs-1900s.

56. "Alfred Cheney Johnston: American photographer," Midlibrary, https://midlibrary.io/styles/alfred-cheney-johnston.

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around 1930 by artists using new techniques that consolidated into a broader structural shift in commercial photography. This shift represented a triumph of faster, message-driven imagery over pictorialism's slower, more intimate approach.

The continued appetite for Johnston's aesthetic indicates that interest in slow viewing remains. It also suggests that viewers cannot entirely satisfy this interest via modern glamour and advertising imagery, which by default tends to privilege message and immediate impact over subject. Johnston's photographs had their own message, of course, but it was relatively simple compared to more psychologically calibrated imagery of artists such as Steichen and Hurrell. At its core, that message was "Look at me—I'm a confident individual who does not have to try hard to be beautiful."

One reason this message remains so compelling is that it is still readily legible—and still aspirational. It is easy to imagine why, in an era when modern visual culture steadily erodes the very confidence Johnston's subjects so effortlessly project. ■

Bill LeFurgy is an independent historian and writer based in Maryland. His research examines early twentieth-century photography, theatrical entertainment, dance history, and popular culture.

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