

TIME LightBox

The Photo That Made Me: Martin Schoeller, New York 1998

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Date: October 1, 2014

In the latest installment in our series, “The Photo That Made Me,” in which a photographer discusses the one picture that jump-started his or her career, or simply sparked a lifelong interest in photography, TIME LightBox talks with photographer Martin Schoeller.

Schoeller is world famous for his close-up portraiture, and here he writes about his 1998 photograph of Vanessa Redgrave – one of the earliest iterations of his now signature style.

This photo really changed things for me.

Here’s a bit of background: In 1996 I worked for Annie Leibovitz, and after that I went out on my own. I’d make portraits of my friends as well as people on street corners – often on the Lower East Side. I actually set up studio on the street and build a portfolio of stark straight up portraits. But they didn’t allow for much expression, they just seemed a little cold looking. It wasn’t very profitable, and I went broke a few times in 1997 and 1998.

A little later, I came across the Kino Fluorescent lighting system (a sort of fluorescent tube lighting) and started to incorporate it into my work. This



Vanessa Redgrave, 1988

started to change things: these lights really bring out a subject’s eyes. And because I had adopted the style of a super close up portrait, my work started to stick out. Back then the mainstream thing to do was a more distanced shot with a perfect background and styling – and it was also a time when Photoshop was really becoming a big part of things.

People noticed my work. Pretty quickly, places like Worth magazine and Fortune magazine started hiring me. It seemed I could do these portraits anywhere. They were actually pretty unusual for their time. Then Time Out New York hired me. They asked me to photograph Vanessa Redgrave, but I only had ten minutes. I made a super tight portrait.

It changed everything: I went from only being assigned five jobs in 1998 – three of which were weddings – to all of sudden doing 127 jobs 1999.

I think this picture got editors’ attention. It was a mix of the right magazine (everybody would check out that publication), the right subject and the right picture, with its unusual close-up style. It was just perfect timing, too. This photo helped broaden the spectrum of my photography and started my career as I know it today.