



## The Secret Life of Objects

17th September  
2013 - *ongoing*

Mon 12.00 pm – 4.00pm  
Tues – Fri 10.00am – 4.00pm

Theatre Collection  
Foyer  
21 Park Row BS1 5LY

An exhibition exploring some of the hidden histories of the  
Theatre Collection's most interesting items.

*Through examining the 'life stories' of objects we will look at their  
changing significance through place, time and the people who owned them.*

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Theatre Collection



*Vivien Leigh, studio portrait 1943, photographer John Vickers*

## Faces of Theatre: Portrait Photographs by Angus McBean and John Vickers

11th-15th November 2013

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## Faces of Theatre: Portrait Photographs by Angus McBean and John Vickers

Welcome to the Theatre Collection's exhibition for the University of Bristol InsideArts Festival.

In *Faces of Theatre* we have chosen to showcase the work of two theatre photographers, Angus McBean and John Vickers. The images have been selected from the Theatre Collection holdings and are from the London Old Vic Archive, Mander & Mitchenson Collection and the John Vickers Photographic Archive.

For this exhibition, we are focusing on portrait photography and exploring the particular ways both McBean and his studio assistant, Vickers, composed and lit their subjects. The photographs selected illustrate McBean and Vickers' technical mastery as well as their own particular style. As you will see, Vickers was clearly heavily inspired by his mentor, McBean, throughout his life and learnt much from him. What is less well known is how, in turn, Vickers brought his technical expertise in the darkroom to bear on McBean's early work. It is evident that, to a greater or lesser extent, both photographers influenced each other's practice.

The exhibition is in two parts:

- 1. Royal Fort House Drawing Room: Photographs by Angus McBean.** A display of 19 original hand printed portrait photographs.
- 2. Royal Fort House Ante Room: Photographs by John Vickers.** Banners exploring the photographer's work accompanied by a slideshow of selected portraits.

The exhibition is supplemented by additional Angus McBean photographs on display in the Theatre Collection premises at 21 Park Row.



Lynn Fontanne (1887-1983), British-American actress.  
Portrait, 1930s



Jean Genet (1910-1986) French novelist, playwright, poet, essayist and political activist.  
Portrait 1956

## Selected John Vickers Portraits



Lilian Braithwaite (1873-1948) British actress.  
Portrait, 1944



Michael Redgrave (1908-1985) and Rachel Kempson  
(1910-2003).  
Portrait, at home, undated

## Acknowledgements

This exhibition has been curated by the Theatre Collection in conjunction with student volunteers from the University's History of Art department. Particular thanks are due to the students who worked so hard and enthusiastically with us to curate the exhibition and write sections of the catalogue text: Caitlin Lloyd, Alexandra Olczak and Rowan Pereira.

The John Vickers Archive was kindly donated to the Theatre Collection by Sarah Vickers in 2008. It contains 21,000 prints, 16,500 glass plate negatives, 20,000 film negatives, 1,800 slides and 25 boxes of manuscript material. Since then, behind the scenes, many of our volunteers have been diligently working to sort, list and repackage this wonderful Collection.

ArenaPAL Picture Library generously provided digital versions of so many of Vickers' glass plate negatives and prints which you have seen in this exhibition.

The exhibition has been supported by the University of Bristol InsideArts Festival.

Without all this vital work this exhibition would not have been possible.

Thank you to everyone who has contributed in so many ways.

We hope you enjoy the exhibition.

Jo Elsworth (Director),

Laura Gardner and Bex Carrington (Keepers)

## Drawing Room: Angus McBean (1904-1990)



*Angus McBean, self portrait, undated*  
© Harvard Theatre Collection, Harvard University

*“He played that life was happy; that all women were lovely - even Edith Evans; he played that love was everywhere. This philosophy made him delightful to be with, impossible to talk to and infinitely sad..”*

(Quentin Crisp, tribute to McBean, 1990)

Born in Wales in 1904, Angus McBean’s early fascination with silent films, particularly those starring Lillian Gish, inspired him to take up photography. At the age of 15 he sold a gold watch left to him by his grandfather in order to purchase his first camera, a Kodak Autograph. After his father died in 1924, McBean moved to London in the hope of obtaining a job. After seven years of restoring and selling Liberty’s furniture, McBean was offered a position assisting prominent society photographer Hugh Cecil, who taught him photographic techniques specific to portraiture. The story goes that after he left Liberty in 1931, he grew a distinctive beard as an emblem of his refusal to conform and be a wage earner. A year after the apprenticeship McBean set up his own studio in Victoria.

1936 marked a crucial turning point in McBean’s life when theatre photography, his lifetime hobby, became his established profession. Ivor Novello played a decisive role in this transition by

## John Vickers Photography Banners

### Experimentation: composition

Ann Todd and Miki Iveria in *Lottie Dundas*, Vaudeville Theatre, 1942/1943

### Experimentation: techniques

Jean Genet, portrait, 1956

### In Character

Michael Redgrave in *Hamlet*, London Old Vic Company 1950

Laurence Olivier in *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, London Old Vic Company, 1945/1946

Paul Robeson in *Plant in the Sun*, Unity Theatre, 1939

### Lighting: dramatic

Lynn Fontanne, portrait, 1930s

### Lighting: soft

Lilian Braithwaite, portrait, 1944

### At home

Fay Compton, at home with dogs, 1944

Mr & Mrs Michael Redgrave, undated

Tricolour Carbo, Chromatone and Wash-off Relief then led him to develop exciting new special effects using combination printing and masking techniques. These proved to be of great value in his commissions from Advertising Agencies such as Kleenex and Smirnoff. The special effects he developed included impressions of movement, which lent themselves to good reproductions on low quality papers, such as newsprint.

Vickers' west London studio flourished and by 1945 he had salaried staff and usually had at least one pupil benefitting from his technical guidance as his studio assistant. He was also an inspirational teacher of photography. His placement as a part-time lecturer at Ealing School of Photography led him to develop a strict and thorough syllabus for his pupils, crucially teaching them the *mechanics* of the profession rather than just the *use* of the medium itself. He included subjects such as copyright law and practice, contract law and insurance. These skills, whether learnt at college or in the studio, were essential to his pupils as they set out on their careers. One of his studio assistants was Mario Testino (1954-), who has become one of the world's most well known and celebrated fashion and portrait photographers .

Vickers also published several books on the medium and the profession, such as *The Old Vic in Photographs* (1948) and *Making & Printing Colour Negatives* (1960). According to some documents in the John Vickers Archive, he liked to think of himself as an artist with scientific associations or vice versa, for he saw no reason for the separation of the two. What is certain is that he successfully combined them both in his portrait photography. To date, Vickers has not received as much critical attention as he deserves. We hope this exhibition begins to address this.

hiring McBean to photograph his production of *The Happy Hypocrite*. Delighted with theatrical masks McBean had created for the play, Novello instantly commissioned him to take portrait photographs of the show. Throughout the 1930s and 40s, McBean, inundated with numerous theatre commissions, helped to launch the careers of theatre stars, notably Vivien Leigh, whom he photographed throughout her thirty year career. In 1936, Novello said to McBean:

*"I've found a girl with a dream of a face, which will give you no trouble at all... she's called Vivien Leigh".*

McBean described his relationship with Leigh as "*a love affair in camera*." One of McBean's elegantly constructed and beautifully lit portraits of Leigh became legendary, resulting in the Post Office printing the image on a commemorative stamp. In addition to Leigh, McBean's portfolio of theatre stars included John Gielgud, Laurence Olivier and many more.

It was during the 1930s that McBean employed John Vickers to work as his assistant. (Later, in a similar way, Vickers also became the official photographer for leading British theatres including the London Old Vic). McBean's particular technique, his striking compositions and effective use of light, proved influential on Vickers. By the late 1940s McBean secured the position of official photographer for a number of leading British theatres including Sadler's Wells and the Old Vic.

McBean is perhaps best remembered for his surrealist photographs. From 1936 - 1937 *The Sketch*, a leading magazine at the time, commissioned McBean to produce a series of "Surrealised Portraits". McBean constructed playful studio sets,

creating unique mise-en-scenes, in which he would position the head of a celebrity. McBean's most iconic surrealist image presents Audrey Hepburn emerging from a desert landscape, amongst classical columns, generating an otherworldly ambience. His amalgamation of theatre prop design with photography resulted in witty, surrealist images and established his legacy as the pioneer of "stage-managed celebrity photography", a tradition which photographers including Annie Leibowitz have continued.

There was an idiosyncrasy in McBean's work - his success lay in his ability to adopt a surrealist style, while simultaneously repressing its objective of provoking an impulse or shock within the viewer. The comical nature of McBean's carefully constructed mise-en-scenes demonstrates his resistance to disturb the viewer.

McBean's career came to a temporary halt in 1941 when he was arrested for homosexual activity. He served a four-year jail sentence. Despite this interruption, McBean, adamant to re-establish his profession and reputation as a photographer, set up a new studio in Endell Street, London.

Throughout McBean's career as a professional photographer he produced a series of self-portrait Christmas cards. In a similar manner to his commissioned theatre portrait photographs, McBean situates himself amidst props, such as a marble 'Greek God' bust and papier mâché masks of Ivor Novello and Greta Garbo. His use of technical trickery such as through the techniques of montage and double exposure further demonstrate the influence of surrealism on his photographs. The series confirmed his witty photographic style revealing his charismatic personality. Quentin Crisp's tribute (page 4) confirms this. Several of these Christmas Cards, sent by McBean to Vickers, survive within the John Vickers Archive.



*Laurence Olivier as Hotspur in Henry IV Parts 1 and 2, New Theatre, 1945-1946*

took a blurred self-portrait, behind the silhouette of which a sharp focus snapshot of a flying seagull can be glimpsed. The second anecdote suggests John's more Bohemian status as a young man at the age of eighteen, when he was dismissed from Liberty's store in London on account of his startlingly coloured shirts and long hair. An interesting co-incidence is that both McBean and Vickers worked for Liberty when young and both were dismissed. This

certainly gave them something else in common!

Vickers' reputation as a photographer extended beyond the boundaries of mid-twentieth century theatrical productions and associated celebrities. He also worked at Pinewood Studios and later, as his theatre work declined, he moved into advertising photography and private commissions of 'society' portraits.

Although initially starting his career as a professional photographer in the shadow of McBean, Vickers brought his own talents to light with his interest in the scientific processes behind the medium. He was said to have improved the consistency of McBean's prints by introducing additional elements to the studio, such as a Kodak Time-Standard Developer, a thermometer and an alarm clock. From McBean, Vickers gained the experience and technical knowledge he needed in order to set up his own photographic studio in 1939, including concepts of good composition and the use of dramatic lighting for stage photography.

The next phase in his career focused on theatre photography. By the end of it, Vickers had documented over 1,000 productions in established and highly regarded institutions like the London Old Vic. Experimentation with the newly available technologies such as



## Ante Room: John Vickers (1916-1976)



*John Vickers, self portrait, undated*

*“That day I took courage to call on McBean happened to coincide with his decision to take on a full-time dogsbody... So I jumped at the offer... I couldn't be stopped from working evenings and weekends as well... I learned a lot of those things which aren't mentioned in the textbooks, from Angus.”*

(John Vickers, undated)

As Vickers stated himself, the guidance and influence of Angus McBean on his photographic career was of paramount importance. If it were not for McBean's decision to take on the young Vickers as his studio assistant, one wonders where else the passionate Bohemian artist-photographer would have learned the tricks of the trade of theatre and portrait photography; the combination of which formed the foundation of his subsequent success.

Several anecdotes frequently crop up in documented writing about Vickers' life – two of which give true testament to his passion and talent as an artist-photographer. The first is a popularly cited account of his first ever photograph - this being an accidental one. The story goes that having bought his first camera - a No.0 Brownie - from a church jumble sale at the tender age of twelve, John took his purchase to St. James' Park in London, where upon proudly inspecting the front of his prized possession he mistakenly

Later, in the 1950s and 60s, McBean extended his diverse oeuvre further by producing colour photographs for LP covers. Most prominent of these was for the Beatles debut album *Please, Please Me* (1963), which he photographed on EMI's balcony in Manchester Square. Paul McCartney later commented:

*“it was always a pleasure to do something a little different and a photo session with Angus was just that. He had a lively wit and an artistic bent, which was fun to be around.”* (2006)

McBean's extensive range of work, from surrealist images to theatrical portrait photographs, prompted Cecil Beaton to regard him as:

*“the best photographer in Britain.”*

## Portraits by Angus McBean on display in the Drawing Room

1. Studio portrait of Mary Ure, 1954
2. John Gielgud as Sebastien in *Nude with Violin*, Globe Theatre, 1956
3. Robert Helpmann as Sebastien in *Nude with Violin*, Globe Theatre, 1956. Note: Robert Helpmann replaced John Gielgud in the role of Sebastien in November 1956
4. Leslie Bricusse in *An Evening with Beatrice Lillie*, Globe Theatre, 1954
5. Ernest Thesiger as Polonius in *Hamlet*, Phoenix Theatre, 1955
6. Mary Ure as Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Phoenix Theatre, 1955

7. Studio portrait of Richard Attenborough, not dated
8. Studio portrait of Beatrice Lillie, 1958
9. Studio portrait of Penelope Dudley Ward, 1937/1938
10. John Neville as Hamlet, London Old Vic Company, 1957/1958
11. Emlyn Williams as Morgan Evans in *The Corn is Green*, Duchess Theatre, 1938
12. Studio portrait of Vivien Leigh, taken during 1955/1956 Stratford Season
13. Studio portrait of Mary Ure, not dated
14. Noel Coward as Garry Essendine in *Present Laughter*, Haymarket Theatre, 1947
15. Michael Gwynn as Justin Allister in *The Gift*, St Martin's Theatre, 1953
16. Peter Sallis as Virgil Penny and Jill Melford as Jane Penny in *Into Thin Air*, Globe Theatre, 1955
17. Joan Tetzel as Susan and David Tomlinson as Henry in *The Little Hut*, Lyric Theatre, 1950
18. Publicity photograph for *The Happiest Days of Your Life*, Apollo Theatre, 1948
19. Publicity photograph for *The Globe Revue*, Lyric

Hammersmith, 1952, featuring William Chappell

**On Display in Theatre Collection, 21 Park Row**

1. Coral Browne, *Hamlet*, London Old Vic Company, 1957/1958
2. Barbara Jefford, *Macbeth*, London Old Vic Company, 1958/1959
3. Eden Gray and Sebastian Shaw, *The Gift*, St Martin's Theatre, 1953
4. Paul Daneman, *Henry VI, Parts I and II*, London Old Vic Company, 1957/1958
5. Mary Ure as Ophelia, *Hamlet*, Phoenix Theatre, London, 1955
6. Michael Hordern and Derek Francis, *Julius Caesar*, London Old Vic Company, 1957/1958
7. Coral Browne and John Neville, *Hamlet*, London Old Vic Company, 1957/1958
8. Michael Hordern and John Phillips, *Julius Caesar*, London Old Vic Company, 1958/1959
9. Michael Bryant and Brian Bedford, *Five Finger Exercise*, Comedy Theatre, 1958

All photographs from the London Old Vic Archive, John Vickers Archive and the Mander & Mitchenson Collection