

**Séance d'installation d'Annie Leibovitz
à l'Académie des beaux-arts
Mercredi 20 mars 2024**

Anna Wintour's speech

It's a great honor to be with you here today.

For a British or American person, the only thing more daunting than a French fashion show is a French academy — and by a similar principle the only thing more intimidating than Annie Leibovitz is Annie Leibovitz brandishing a sword. So I stand before you today in awe and some degree of terror.

The truth is that for the first several years of our collaborations, I was as cautious of Annie as I was astounded by her work. I had known her remarkable photographs since her early days shooting covers for Rolling Stone. Those portraits were like no one else's. Where others followed traditional lines, Annie's were wildly on the edge.

As we began to work together I came to know Annie and see how unconventional, creative, and unpretentious—so thoroughly grounded and of the world—Annie is. I had the incredible luck to watch her work, so I can tell you that Annie's gift, the way she can somehow capture a subject's essence in her frame, is akin to X-ray vision. And the span of her portraiture, the number of people she has touched, is unimaginably wide. Who has escaped her lens? Not our President, or yours. Not the late Queen of England or its current King. Musicians, movie stars, fashion designers, writers, artists, athletes, politicians of all stripes. Everyone she has photographed, as varied and singular as they could be, can attest to the uncanny power of seeing themselves through the clarity of Annie's lens.

With all of that in mind, today I'd like to try something that is perhaps impossible—which is to compare Annie, this woman of incredible complexity and reach, to a single object, her sword. It's true that I have always thought of Annie's camera as a kind of sword: powerful, even fearsome, an instrument of power. But Annie herself offers similarities too. She can parry, be playfully evasive, especially at any attempt to get inside her defenses. She does not yield her nature quickly or easily, and her deceptive ploys are many.

There's also her strength and elegance, which one might compare to the sword's broad form. There's the way she is her own highest standard. Annie is an artist with whom one can always speak directly and honestly. The harshest edit I've ever had of one of her photographs has been ten times milder than the criticism she gives herself.

One notices the sword's exquisite details: The tiny turns in the blade, the twisting vine, the little buds. No photographer I've encountered has a better eye for such details. And paradoxically none are equally quite so unpretentious and free-spirited. The flight of Annie's imagination reminds me of the way children take sticks and branches and imagine them into swords. Annie's sword is made of branches too, which have been strengthened with copper in a process conceived of by her neighbor and friend Ariel Dearie (who was inspired by the french sculptor Claude Lalanne). The sword has a patina that suggests experience and exposure to the world. One is struck by its humanity. It is of the earth, but it will last.

Though Annie is globally recognized for portraits and cultural storytelling, much of her passionate work is to do with catching and preserving the natural world that we are losing far too quickly. The organic material from which her sword was made was gathered on her property in Rhinebeck, New York, near the banks of the Hudson River: a landscape long known and painted for its miraculous light, and one that she has often photographed.

It is here that Annie's children grew up and played — in the house, the vegetable gardens, with the chickens Annie keeps, swimming in the pond. Annie is not forthcoming about her inner life even to those of us who know her well. But her daughters are at the very center of it, the source of all her energy and imagination. Surely this is what allows her to connect so deeply with each of her subjects. Annie's extraordinary body of work amounts to deep knowledge of the world — a way of cutting through, and seeing more clearly. One cannot help but think of the words of Montaigne: "Knowledge must not only be brought near the soul, it must be incorporated into it. The soul must not be watered with knowledge, it must be seeded with it. If knowledge does not modify or improve an imperfect state, it is certainly preferable not to acquire it. Knowledge is a dangerous weapon that hinders and can injure those who wield it with a weak hand that does not understand its use."

Today we honor a great woman who has come to know the world by what she sees, and has seeded that knowledge deeply in the human soul by way of her art. She wields the blade of knowledge with responsibility, and in her care it blooms.

Annie, I want to congratulate you — as a woman and an artist — on becoming a member of the Academie. And I want to thank you for working with such energy, love, and truth. With a sword in her hand, Annie may not be d'Artagnan, it's true. But with a camera, she is as dextrous and better: a formidable and unstoppable force. The thousands of photographs she has published in her life are not just a testament to her imagination and the way it will survive the future; they're her vision and plea for a better world. In that way, Annie is the most essential thing any artist can be: She is generous. Annie, today we salute you, with our appreciation and our gratitude.