

The circulation of Marilyn Monroe's iconic white dress photograph



The iconic Marilyn Monroe in 1954

Image: Sam Shaw Inc.

When thinking of a topic for this essay, Marilyn Monroe's iconic white dress photograph, taken during the filming of the 1955 film *The Seven Year Itch*, was one of the most appealing options to pick. If we're talking about widely spread pieces of media, very few are likely as widely spread through pop culture as this photograph. Over time, it has become one of the most recognizable images created in the 20th century while still being used to this day. If you ask, many people won't know where the picture was taken, or for what reason, but everyone will recognize it. That's a sign of an overly circulated image, creating an iconic image and concept.

This picture perfectly shows how celebrity culture is constructed and how visual media is reproduced, reused, and remixed.

The image was taken during the making of the film "The Seven Year Itch in New York City on September 15th, 1954. The sequence was shot on Lexington Avenue between 52nd and 53rd Streets as a publicity event for the promotion of the movie. It was never intended to get as much media attention as it did. Even if you have not seen the film, you have seen the photographs. The whole world has known for decades, although not everyone knows the story behind the photographs or the name of the photographer (Sam Shaw) who had the "flying skirt" idea in the first place.¹

In the end, it was the original publicity photos, and not the final film footage, that became so incredibly iconic.

The circulation of this picture began with newspapers, magazines, and promotional materials distributed by press that was present during the shoot, but Sam Shaw's original pictures were distributed by 20th Century Fox. The picture quickly detached itself from the film and became an emblem of glamour, sexuality, and postwar American culture. Many people nowadays recognize the image without having seen *The Seven Year Itch* itself.

The picture has been copied and remixed many times. Perhaps the most famous artistic reinterpretation of a Marilyn Monroe photograph is, of course, by the pop artist Andy Warhol. Warhol used Monroe's photo in his silkscreen images during the 1960s in a big way, making her a symbol of mass media reproduction. The works Warhol made concerning Marilyn Monroe did not always use the subway-grate photograph, but instead pictures taken for the promotion of a different movie, *Niagara*. These works of art would make for more and more copies and travel to people by the millions at a time. But because of these works, Marilyn Monroe became a cultural icon through art as well, skyrocketing the popularity of the white dress picture as well.



[Left] Andy Warhol stands in front of his portrait of Marilyn Monroe at the Tate Gallery, Millbank. PA IMAGES via Getty Images [Right] Shot Sage Blue Marilyn (1964) | Source: [dailymail.co.uk](https://www.dailymail.co.uk); taken from <https://www.artdex.com/andy-warhol-and-marilyn-a-connection-that-gave-us-iconic-art/>

The White Dress photograph, however, has inspired many physical reproductions. In 2011, the artist Seward Johnson created *Forever Marilyn*, a 26-foot-tall sculpture of Monroe's pose on the subway grate. The sculpture has been exhibited in Chicago and Palm Springs.² The statue itself was a target of criticism, some felt that it objectified Monroe in a way, while others saw it as a celebration of an American icon.

The image has also been recontextualized internationally. A good example was in Japan, where artists created a huge rice-field portrait of Monroe inspired by the famous photograph. The artwork contained 9 species of rice to create the colour gradient.² Such projects show that the photograph even escaped American pop culture and got recognized worldwide.



(Left) Johnson, Seward. *Forever Marilyn*. 2011. Seward Johnson Atelier.



(Right) STR/AFP/Getty Images, *Marilyn Monroe Depicted in Rice Paddy Art, Inakadate Village, Aomori Prefecture, Japan*, photograph, July 2013.

Besides this sculpture and this artwork, the image has been endlessly parodied in pop culture. Most of all, through TV shows, cartoons, advertisements, fashion photography, and magazine covers that recreate the iconic pose.

An example from recent years would be the Snickers Super Bowl Commercial made in 2016, starring Willem Dafoe as Marilyn Monroe.³



Snickers Super Bowl Commercial. Marilyn, Willem Dafoe (Super Bowl, 2016) [Marilyn 【Snickers®】](#)
 Multiple TV shows and animated series have used the pose in their show, most notably *The Simpsons* and *Shrek 2*. Both are remixing the pose from the picture, yet both are recognizable as the original image.



The Simpsons, season 22, episode 13, "The Blue and the Gray," directed by Bob Anderson, written by Rob LaZebnik, aired February 13, 2011, on Fox Broadcasting Company. ⁵



Shrek 2, "Fiona's Makeover," directed by Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, and Conrad Vernon (DreamWorks Animation, 2004), 00:34:20. ⁶

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Celebrities often imitate the image by putting on the recognizable dress with an upward-blowing skirt to represent Monroe's star image. Digital culture and the internet have sped up the process of distribution, as users can create memes and social-media remixes of the image. Thereby also contributing to the constant reuse and remixing of the image.

Most cases of reuse or remixing of the White Dress photograph are positive, and usually, people use the image as inspiration because of admiration for Marilyn. But the photo has also been subjected to forms of controversy as well. The legacy of Marilyn Monroe is often a

product of how well her image has been marketed after her death, in most cases this image is stellar and she's a loved figure. Her image is still to be found all over merchandise, on posters, on clothes and advertisements. This however, raises questions about ownership and exploitation.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay about mechanical reproduction, observed that mechanical reproduction changes the meaning of artworks by stripping them of their original context and increasing their presence.⁴ Marilyn Monroe's white dress photograph is just one of the examples of that, but a very major one. The more you reproduce it, the more it becomes universal. It's no longer a typical image representing the 50's, but an iconic image beyond its time.

A lot of people now know Marilyn Monroe not through her acting career, but through a single image or a small handful of images of her. This photograph has become a representation of Marilyn Monroe herself. The White Dress photo is such a good example of how iconic images evolve through circulation. Originally released as promotional film material, and in the years after has been reproduced, remixed, and reinterpreted in so many different ways. More than seventy years after it was taken, it remains one of the most widely used images of an individual and it shows that images and media often outlast and go beyond their time of production.

Bibliography

¹ "From the Inside of Marilyn Monroe's Iconic Flying Skirt," Biography, September 10, 2020.

² Anne T. Donahue, "That Silly Little Dress: The Story behind Marilyn Monroe's Iconic Scene." The Guardian, September 15, 2014.

³ Snickers. Marilyn, Willem Dafoe (Superbowl, 2016)  Marilyn 【Snickers®】

⁴ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Illuminations.

⁵ *The Simpsons*, season 22, episode 13, "The Blue and the Gray," directed by Bob Anderson, written by Rob LaZebnik, aired February 13, 2011, on Fox Broadcasting Company.

⁶ *Shrek 2*, "Fiona's Makeover," directed by Andrew Adamson, Kelly Asbury, and Conrad Vernon (DreamWorks Animation, 2004), 00:34:20.

 Fiona Meets The Fairy Godmother | Shrek 2 (2004) | Screen Bites