

A BESTSELLER BY

Thanks to Ikea, White Rose (aka Pjatteryd) is now among the world's most popular pictures. But



ANY OTHER NAME

the man behind the lens hadn't even realised he was the creator of a global hit. By **David Usborne**

The story of a pin-up

Harold Feinstein swept Turkey for the first time this summer. In Britain, he's been huge for years, all the way from the suburban cul-de-sacs of Croydon in the South to Glasgow and Edinburgh in Scotland. By Christmas, he should be all over Taiwan like a rash and well on his way to becoming a smash in both Boston and Chicago too. If you think your house or flat is Feinstein-free, look again, because he is everywhere.

Don't know who I'm talking about? That is forgivable. But you should, because of what you are about to learn. Feinstein, who is 74 and lives with his wife in a small town in Massachusetts, is a photographer. Here is the exciting bit: it could be that there are more pictures by Feinstein on the walls of sitting rooms, bathrooms and landings around the world than by any other single photographer. In the realm of photography, Feinstein is what Beckham is to football or JK Rowling to books. He has conquered the globe. Well, not quite, but he is getting there. Better still: he has done with just one image.

But how? Here is a clue. There is a Swedish chain of home-furnishing stores that has been in Britain since the late 1980s (Croydon was the earliest of its British outposts). It is expanding very fast. Its first Istanbul store opened in May. It comes to Taipei, Boston and the Windy City in November. This chain sells other things too. Meatballs with lingonberry sauce, for instance. And it sells posters and prints. Not many, but a few – and among them is a square of canvas, 22in by 22in, which they call "Pjatteryd". (Pjatteryd is a medium-sized town in Sweden.) The image printed on the canvas is of the silken white petals of a single rose. Yes, it is a Feinstein picture. In Britain, it costs £18.99.

But the sweetest part of this tale has yet to come. Until a few days ago, when we gave him a call, Feinstein says he didn't have a clue about any of this. He didn't even know that Ikea sold a picture of his – or at least, he had forgotten. He was a bit monosyllabic at first. He said "Wow" and "Jeez" a lot.

Before any of this happened, Feinstein was a photographer with a pool of admirers, to be sure – but hardly a large one. Taking

pictures since he was 15, he got respect working occasionally in black and white for the old *Life* magazine. He was best known for his shots of beachgoers at Coney Island. By the time he was 19, the master photographer Edward Steichen had selected one of his images for an exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. It's still part of the museum's permanent collection. He worked on and off with Eugene Smith, one of America's greatest photo-journalists, helping him with printing techniques, and taught students in his studio in a loft apartment in the Chelsea neighbourhood of Manhattan.

But Feinstein, if truth be told, was never on the A-list. "Perhaps, he should have been, but he wasn't", is how Charles Schwartz puts it. Schwartz, a dealer in Manhattan, was good friends with Feinstein years ago but has since lost track. Told of his old pal's late-season bloom, he was more than a little startled.

Bloom is actually the right word to use here. It all started when Feinstein – never call him Harry, by the way, his brother-in-law is called Harry and they don't get along – deserted Manhattan a few years ago and moved to Massachusetts. It was soon after his arrival that his work turned botanical. Experimenting with new digital cameras and printers, he began a love affair with plants and flowers. He took pictures of leaves and of stems and of peas in their pods. And petals. Lots and lots of petals. Friends gave him flowers, nurseries gave him flowers and he picked and grew flowers for himself.

He also got it together to turn

them into books. He has published five botanical books since just 1999 and another is in the works. Call his pictures a bit "chocolate-box" if you like, but people respond to them. "Harold Feinstein's gorgeous images are almost pornographic in their luscious detail. Can blossoms such as these really exist outside of dreams", raved *British House and Garden* magazine in 2000.

By his own admission, the books have already brought a big turn-around in his fortunes. "I used to be broke," he explains. "I bought into a certain script that an artist is passionately responsible to his work but not much else. He is a drunk and always broke. That may have been fine when I was a kid. But I didn't find that drinking helped my art. And I didn't find that being broke helped much either." He pauses, adding: "Prosperity is no impediment to the creative process."

The popularity of the books created another unexpected niche for Feinstein – poster sales. Some photographers turn up their noses at their work being stuck to the walls of student digs or dentists' waiting rooms, but not Feinstein. He gets good royalties from the business, when he can keep track of it. "I know that not everyone has the money for an original print, so I am happy that people can buy me for \$20 (£11) or so," he reasons. "I have work in museums. But I like to reach people, and let's face it, people don't go to museums much."

Where people do go – in quite astonishing numbers, in fact – is Ikea. And Ikea just gets bigger



'Not everyone has the money for an original, so I'm happy people can buy me for \$20 or so'

and bigger. The company is coy about exact numbers. That "Pjatteryd" is a best-seller is about all they will reveal. But an Ikea best-seller means lots and lots and lots of zeros. Consider, for example, that in 2004 alone a total of 400,755,000 shoppers visited an Ikea store. (At the last count, there were 201 of them in 37 different countries, including China, Russia and the United States.)

And this doesn't take account of those shopping at Ikea through its catalogue and on the Internet. Last week the company shipped its 2006 catalogue (with the rose picture included) to no fewer than 160 million people around the world. If less than 1 per cent of Ikea shoppers stop to buy the Feinstein rose then that still represents millions sold. And that would be in just one year. Millions, Harold, millions! What a fantastic deal for you!

Or not. Harold takes a while to get over the shock of this news. In fact, he is briefly a little puzzled. Eventually, he dredges up a memory. He remembers someone at Ikea expressing some interest in one image from his first book, called *One Hundred Flowers*, published in 1999.

"I think they contacted me to be able to make some prints or to buy some photos for their own use. But maybe they did it through an agent, I really don't know," Feinstein says this while wondering out loud where his wife is, because she is better at this stuff than he is.

It quickly becomes clear he was quite unaware that Ikea has been selling one of his pictures all this time, let alone that they became such must-have items.

Moreover, as best as he can remember, he has never received a cent from the company. Not so much as a free Swedish meatball, with or without lingonberry sauce. "I do get royalties for a lot of my work, but I don't think I have every gotten anything from Ikea," he says.

Feinstein is likely right that he hasn't been paid directly by Ikea royalties would have come from Artgroup, the London company which buys images for the furniture company. Sian Rees, the publishing director of Artgroup, believes that Feinstein sold rights to so many of his pictures to Artgroup, a few might have slipped his memory. Moreover, Artgroup confirmed that Feinstein was paid regular royalties.

The suggestion that this relationship, that Feinstein claims he never knew even existed, may have turned him into the most hung, blu-tacked or drawing-pinned photographer alive elicits its good-natured chuckling. "Of course it's true, it's absolutely true. It must be true!" he jokes. "I need to speak to Ikea at once. I think I am going to cut a crown out of gold paper and put it on my head right now."

What is most impressive is that if the story turned out to be hogwash – if Ikea has made a mistake and the rose turns out to be by another photographer entirely – Feinstein probably wouldn't mind too much. "The key word is doing what I love. I live with the woman I love, I do the work I love – and I get paid for it." The flowers, he says are "an endless miracle. I have never been religious, but I look at these flowers and I say, my god, I mean truly. I look at the variety of them, the magnificence of them. I haven't got over it, I will never get over it and when I do, I'll quit."

"I'm impressed by the popularity of my image at Ikea, I am. But my passion really is in my work. I am writing a book about photography and the name of the book is *When your Mouth Drops Open*. When your mouth drops open, you click the shutter. That's my rule."

But push him and Feinstein will admit that the Ikea revelation has been a bit of a mouth-dropping moment for him also. I know he is more interested than he is letting on because he has phoned me twice today already. "David, I don't know who to call at Ikea. I have tried, but I can't find the real person. Can you find out for me? I have got to speak to them."

It's not that he thinks for a moment that they have ripped him off. Ikea credits him for the work and clearly did their legal homework about acquiring the rights to use the image. But there is one thing he would still really like to know. Just how many people around the world are looking at his rose right now?

Photographs that shook the cash register

'Le Baiser a Hotel De Ville' (Kiss at the Town Hall), Robert Doisneau 1953

Doisneau acquired a worldwide reputation for his portrayals of the Nazi occupation and post-war life in his beloved Paris. His most famous portrait of a Parisian couple sold more than 500,000 copies around the world. Just before his death in 1994, two couples took Doisneau to court, claiming a share of the fortune it had made him. However, neither couple was able to prove that the photograph was of them.



'Tennis Girl', Martin Elliot 1977

A symbol of its era, *Tennis Girl* has been much parodied over the decades. Cartoons abound and Kylie Minogue and Anna Kournikova are only two of the many celebrities who have replicated the pose. Its massive sales, estimated at around 2 million, were a phenomenon unlike anything before in the trade. It was the start of major expansion for poster manufacturer and retailer, Athena.



'L'Enfant', Spencer Rowell 1986

A defining image of the late 1980s with the new message that it was OK for a man to be in touch with his feminine side. No single photo has ever

rivalled *L'Enfant* in terms of sales. Reproduced on everything from posters to clocks, estimates vary between 4 and 6 million. The model, Adam Perry, became well-known for his claim that he slept with 3,000 women following its success.



Men on a Girder having Lunch, Anon 1930s
The black-and-white print of construction workers hovering precariously over Manhattan, New York is one of the biggest-selling photographs of recent times. The unknown photographer took a series of candid shots which are available in a variety of formats.

Louise Jack