I approach Herb Ritts: L.A. Style at the Cincinnati Art Museum (CAM) from what I assume is the front. The understated entrance off the Great Hall makes sense given the fashion photographer's minimalist approach and preference for black-and-white. The cream exterior and the crisp sans-serif font on a black “awning” evoke a boutique. “Windows” of Cindy Crawford in Ferré and Naomi Campbell in Versace transport me to Rodeo Drive. This is L.A. style.

But immediately I encounter Madonna’s “Cherish” video and TV ads directed by Ritts. While successful, they’re not what the late photographer (1952-2002) was best known for. Pictures just inside on basic black columns are shots for designers, rather than the personal work expected in a museum show.

Thinking that I entered the wrong way, I descend to the lobby. The Doric columns guide my eyes up and down, connecting the sensual, statuesque figure of Crawford to Hiram Powers’ cold, hard sculpture of “Eve Disconsolate.” This is classical style.

So which entry is the front? Either, says Paul Martineau of Los Angeles’ Getty Museum, where the show debuted. There was a conscious effort to re-create the look of L.A.’s retail, says CAM chief curator James Crump, while the juxtaposition of a 19th century statue with 20th century images is both deliberate and a happy coincidence. Martineau just wanted the two styles to meet in the middle, to underscore how Ritts merged fine art and modern commerce by drawing upon the history of sculpture, painting and movies.

No matter where you enter, you’ll be struck by the beauty once inside. Yes, Ritts celebrated gorgeous bodies, but you’ll be seduced even further by the beauty of California sunlight. “There’s an amazing honesty to his light,” says Ritts biographer Charles Churchward, former art director for Vanity Fair and Vogue. He also praises Ritts’ simple compositions. “Stylists like to put everything on, but Herb wanted clean.”

Photography outdoors separated Ritts from studio-based New York peers. In addition to Malibu and El Mirage, Ritts used a rooftop studio. He established a fun, “organic” working environment, enabling him to cajole his subjects and develop an “anti-glamour” style of celebrity photography.