

FASHION PARIS SPECIAL REPORT

At 30 years, Prince Charming of enhanced reality

BY SUZY MENKES

LONDON Mario Testino, a mountain of Champagne glasses behind him and a red rose on his lapel, greeted at an awards ceremony last month the friends he had made since arriving in England from Peru as a fashion-mad teenager in a lilac terrycloth jumpsuit 35 years ago.

Speaking in his distinctive treacy voice, drawing out the words “amazing” and “incredible,” the photographer looked across the ballroom, decorated like a 1930s Copacabana.

“YOU are my A-list,” he told the entire audience.

Mr. Testino loves crowds, especially caught at a party in what he calls “the freedom of people, the freedom of bodies, the joy, the energy.”

In 30 years of fashion photography, he has captured in images the hectic glamour of beach life in Rio de Janeiro or the disciplined enthusiasm of the Horse Guards for the royal wedding last April. For that historic occasion, he was not only behind the lens to create an iconic image of a cuddly “Wills and Kate” before the event, but was also highlighted on camera at Westminster Abbey for his fame as a household name.

“I am obsessed with people and how to make them look their best,” says the photographer, who turns 57 this month, and feels that “it is like a present from life” that he had six magazine covers across the world for the autumn issues.

That annual high point is so crucial in the publishing world that the movie about his friend and colleague Anna Wintour was named “The September Issue.”

The American Vogue editor says of her favored photographer: “He adores women, adores celebrity — and they adore him right back.”

There are also a slew of new awards that have come in this year to join the crowded shelves of a glass-fronted cabinet in Mr. Testino’s airy, open London office, sparsely decorated with classic

sculptures and modern art. Although the roving photographer says that he now sleeps better on a plane than in a bed.

The Moët & Chandon Étoile award from the Champagne company last month followed an honorary fellowship from the Royal Photographic Society, the GQ Men of the Year “Icon” award and another recognition from the Museo del Barrio in New York in May.

Mr. Testino looks at the array and says with the arched-eyebrow irony he has absorbed from English culture: “Someone said to my mother, ‘You must be so proud of your son getting a medal in Peru.’ She said, ‘I am — but Mario’s been getting medals since five years old.’”

“I think you are born with a certain determination, laziness or eagerness and when I have to do something I want to do it the best I can,” he continues. “But it is exciting to have an award as a record that, after 30 years of schlepping, someone is saying, ‘You made it.’”

A photograph of his mother — an elegant, upright, silver-haired woman — sits on Mr. Testino’s desk, one of “hundreds that I have all over my house.”

“She was a dresser. I remember her talking about the length of a skirt or the height of a heel. She trained me to what I do today,” said the photographer, referring to his 88-year-old mother, with her blue eyes and Irish/Spanish origins.

He recalls his childhood in Lima as one of six siblings; the “very Catholic” school where he wore a dark suit with a white collar on Sundays; and his teenage trips to New York with his father, where he was supposed to be an English interpreter but spent his time buying clothes. They included 1970s hot pants, for his beautiful older sister (while he secretly brought suitcases of wild attire home for himself.)

The liberation from this loving, middle-class childhood came with a trip to Rio at age 17, when the studious school boy with a penchant for making the nuns watch his theatrical efforts, morphed into a party boy.

Lucinda Chambers, fashion director of British Vogue and a friend of the photographer since the 1970s when, from the top of a London bus, he spotted her dressed in madcap “Swinging London” style, believes that a grounded childhood has been crucial in keeping Mr. Testino steady.

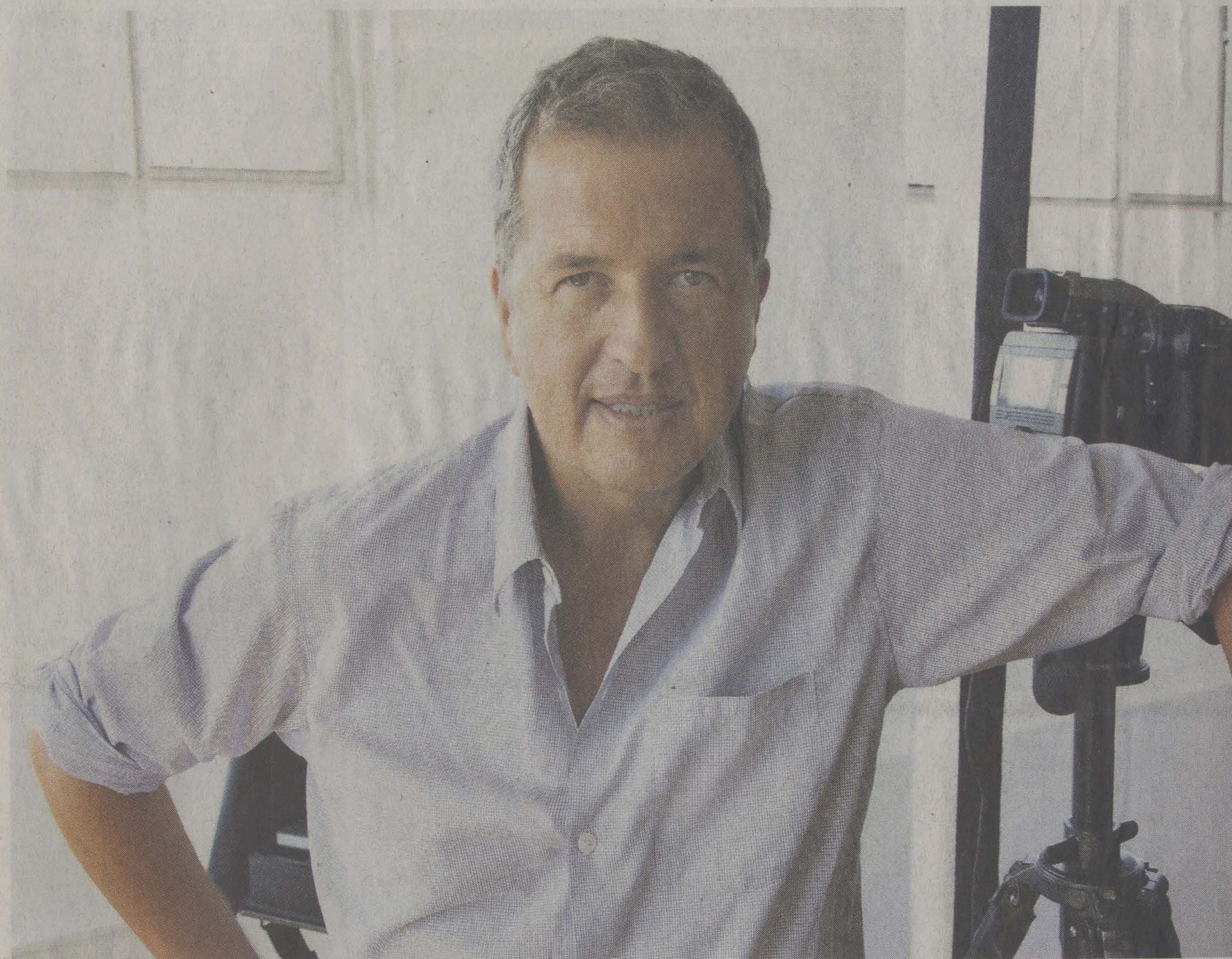
“He is very loyal and his party was a testament that he never forgets,” says Ms. Chambers, referring to a circle of friendship that includes Hamish Bowles of American Vogue, the opera director Patrick Kinmonth and a dozen others.

Mr. Testino counts as his greatest support his partner Jan Olesen, who is

ent sorts of photographer: those obsessed with the technicalities and those obsessed by the subject,” says Mr. Testino. “I ask how I can make them look their best.”

“The John Singer Sargent of our time” is how Terence Pepper, curator of photographs at the National Portrait Museum of London, describes Mr. Testino, referring to the great 19th century portraitist. Some might consider that a double-edged complement. And another photographic expert, who asked not be identified for fear of upsetting Mr. Testino, said that he was primarily a “court photographer,” flattering his sitters with no attempt to reach the dark soul or the tough reality that Francis Bacon brought to canvas.

For the famous, enhanced reality is the “Mario magic,” like his early pictures of Madonna — for which he thanks Gianni Versace for the connection — snapped in her head scarf in a car in Los



ALEX BRAMELL

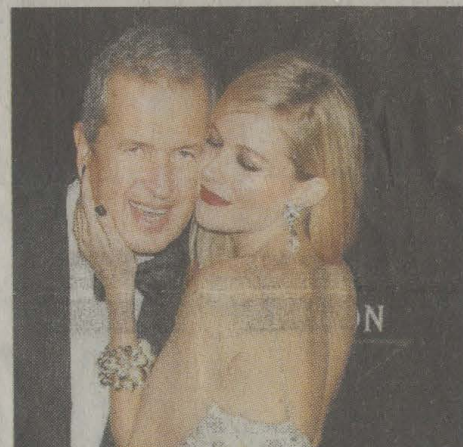


be happy and his images to be beautiful — and everybody loves working with him. It’s always good fun.”

It is tough, indeed, to find anyone with a bad word to say about Mr. Testino, although there are faint murmurs of “Super Mario’s” super ego and the fact that he has failed to embrace the possibilities of modern technology in the way of the British photographer Nick Knight.

And there is a darker shadow to his sunny personality, seen in hard core images he has published in one of several collectors’s books.

Carine Roitfeld, the former French Vogue editor, whose work with Mr. Testino in the 1990s at Gucci brought him to the apogee of a freedom and sensuality, describes their combined style as “erotic chic,” referring to their years working with Tom Ford. While the photographer says that in that period he switched from trying to emulate English culture to his more jubilant, celebratory and





RICHARD YOUNG FOR MOËT & CHANDON

Mario Testino and the actress Sienna Miller at the Moët & Chandon “Etoile” Award last month in London — just one of several prizes given to the celebrated fashion photographer during his 30th year in the business.

the company set up to serve and manage the many brands in the photographer’s roster.

“Jan has not only kept me open to a new generation, being 20 years younger, but he is one of those people who allow you to shine. He has been my passage into the new order,” says Mr. Testino, talking of his partner’s “unconditional support.”

Mr. Olesen, who was raised in Brazil and has helped open an office in São Paulo, says: “It’s a collaboration. We both listen to each other. I feel I am very lucky because I share his point of view and experience. On my side, I give him the freedom to be completely who he is.”

Mr. Testino’s skill is first and foremost to catch the moment and to bring out the humanity in his subjects.

Ms. Wintour describes the photographer, whose joyous and personal wedding images of Kate Moss made the cover and a spread in the September Vogue, like this:

“I think he really understands our sensibility. He has a style but is not trying to impose. And it is not just the look of fashion and the aesthetic, he also has a business brain.”

Mr. Testino pays homage to the “Diana years” as the moment that his career took off globally. His ability to capture, in natural simplicity, the “people’s princess,” giving luster to her escape from a gilded cage, resonated around the world.

“It was not about putting a crown on her. She was not really in the same role,” says the photographer. “She was about being a normal person, to bring her to her reality. She was in that moment.”

Catching the moment is the “Mario message,” what Ms. Chambers calls “part of a visual curiosity” that includes his interest in models as more than coat hangers and a passion for collecting art.

The royal images over 20 years have now become a document of history, especially after Prince Charles literally opened his arms and allowed himself to be photographed hugging his boys.

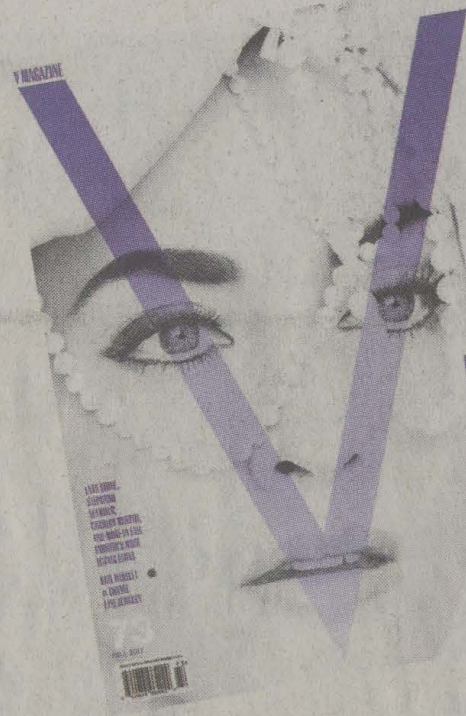
“I was so touched by the things that no one sees — that they are like a normal family,” said Mr. Testino, who, after being obsessed with the glamour of royal portraitists like Cecil Beaton and Norman Parkinson, found himself trying to communicate the “energy” and the “magic” of two children losing their mother and connecting with their father.

The hug between the newly engaged Prince William and Kate Middleton was snapped, in his typical style, after the official portraits in a room he had chosen and set up, at the end of a two-hour session, when the couple had retreated into their personal selves.

“It’s a choice — there are two differ-

“It is Mario’s ability to make you feel special. It is his natural ebullience and charm,” says the actress Sienna Miller. “No matter what you are wearing, there is a certain resonance of you as he shines a light on your personality.”

The famous “September Issue” of the 2009 Vogue movie featured Ms. Miller in Rome, in a Fellini-esque meld of seductive sexiness among a rushing crowd of priests or marble bodies in the Eternal City. Other Vogue covers have presented a smoldering Angelina Jolie or a



cheeky Lady Gaga.

“A lot of photographers like models to be blank canvases — but bland girls don’t influence me. I don’t like playing with dolls; I like playing with people,” says Mr. Testino, who says that it is her character and individuality that makes him “obsessed” with Kate Moss.

In a recent exhibition in Rome, devoted to models, the portraits bring personality, not fashion to the fore. While he also has an ability to bring glamour to non-models, like the French Vogue cover of Charlotte Casiraghi of Monaco.

The supermodel Natalia Vodianova waxes lyrical about the photographer. She says that the slightest tension on a photo shoot is dispelled by “his broad gorgeous smile and contagious laugh. He is never shies away to endlessly flatter you and brings the best out of everyone who has the pleasure to stand in front of his lenses. But underneath his extravagant personality is a sensitive, beautiful, warm and kind person.”

At Burberry, where the photographer revitalized the dowdy image of the brand, just as he did with Gucci in the 1990s, the chief creative officer Christopher Bailey expresses neatly the “Mario” legend, saying: “He sees life though the eyes of joy. He loves things to



Through Mr. Testino’s lens: top, Kate Moss, American Vogue; left, Kate Winslet, V magazine; right, Charlotte Casiraghi, French Vogue; below, Jennifer Lopez, Vanity Fair; and bottom, Salma Hayek, Allure.



MARIO TESTINO, COURTESY AMERICAN VOGUE, FRENCH VOGUE, VANITY FAIR, V MAGAZINE AND ALLURE

Several people also remark about Mr. Testino’s business outlook, even though his New York-based brother Giovanni does all the tough bargaining. The photographer, in fact, studied economics and law at college and to see him in action, when faced with a company executive to charm, is a revelation.

At a glamorous event held by the U.S. company Coach in London, Mr. Testino talked bluntly to Lew Frankfort, the chairman and chief executive of the handbag and accessories company, about the need for appropriate advertising imagery and how they could work together. Higher + Higher was set up nearly five years ago, says Mr. Olesen, to develop “long and in-depth relationships” with fashion and beauty companies.

And in return, Giovanni Testino describes his brother as always being a “whizzy kid,” joking that their 25 years’ working together “feels like 45!”

But on a more serious note he said: “Mario always had a wild side, but he had higher education and understands how to discipline talent. Nobody’s perfect, but Mario uses his intelligence. Success and power can spoil anyone — you can destroy yourself so fast with fame and glory.”

Ms. Vodianova praises her friend for being involved in charity work, including her own Naked Heart foundation for deprived and disturbed Russian children, not only raising money but traveling to Moscow to open a children’s hospital.

Mr. Testino feels deeply for his country and has bought a building in downtown Lima with the goal of funding a photographic center to advance local talent and document culture, like the images of colorful costumes from the Peruvian mountain people that he keeps on his computer. Asociación Mario Testino scheduled to open in Lima in March.

The photographer stands in front of a studio board choosing images for an exhibition in Beijing next June. He and Mr. Olesen work with a scale model representing the different rooms and themes — as they are doing for “In Your Face,” another exhibit to be held at the Boston Museum of Fine Art next year.

Yet for all his global reach, Mr. Testino has a yearning to nourish his roots in Peru, a kind of “going home” to the extent that he could bring to his native country the fruits — financial and artistic — of 35 years of work in absentia.

“We all left. You had to leave,” said Mr. Testino, referring to his siblings and noting that their mother was so pleased that his sister has returned after 30 years abroad.

The vast Mario Testino archives, which were costing such a fortune to store in Europe, have already arrived in Lima — maybe the first, faint wisp of one day coming home.