

STYLE & FASHION

20 ODD QUESTIONS

MARIO TESTINO

A snapshot of the photographer

NAME A CELEBRITY, any celebrity: Madonna, Kate Moss, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Bruce Willis. Chances are they've stood in front of photographer Mario Testino. "I spend my life looking and choosing and approving and changing," says the 58-year-old Peruvian, whose work regularly appears in *Vanity Fair* and *Vogue* the world over. "At the end of the day, my eyes are really tired because everything that I do is to do with looking: I have to choose what I am going to do, where am I going to do it, how am I going to do it, with whom am I doing it, what light will I use..."

Those eyes have helped make Mr. Testino one of the most high-profile fashion photographers of his generation and a sought-after portraitist whose clients include the British royal family.

Though he's best known for capturing modern glamour in sumptuous fashion spreads, Mr. Testino has taken on traditional garb in his latest project. "Alta Moda," an exhibition that opens Saturday in Lima before heading to the U.S., includes 27 large-scale photographs showcasing people from Cusco, Peru, in native costume and dress.

"I went to do a shoot for British *Vogue* in Peru and I wanted to do it all around the [subject of] celebration," he says. "In Cusco, they have a lot of parties where everybody dresses up." Mr. Testino was so impressed by the costumes he saw while shooting the piece in 2008 that he started to document them. "I borrowed a backdrop from the [Peruvian photographer] Martin Chambi's archives and used this on all the portraits. And then when I had enough, I decided that it would be great to show them because people don't expect me to do something like this."

I've had a few lucky breaks. One of them was Madonna asking me to photograph her for Versace.... She spoke with a hairdresser who I work with a lot, called Orlando Pita, and asked him if he could introduce us. We spoke on the phone and she arrived to see me at the Chateau Marmont driving herself in a convertible car. I was so shocked when I saw her. I imagined her arriving with security.

I am obsessed with fine art. I was obsessed by clothes for so many years but when I became a fashion photographer, it was taken over by fine art.

People always ask me not to undress them. People see that I undress everybody in my pictures, and they are always asking me 'Is it naked?'

My philosophy is to give as much as you can. Treat everybody the same and in the end, it comes back. Life is like a boomerang. If you give good, it comes back good; if you give bad, it comes back bad.

I am really inspired by people that really put themselves out there to achieve greatness.... If you really put the work in, you get the results.

My most vivid memories have everything to do with the sea. I have spent my years drawn by it.

One of my greatest experiences in life was photographing Princess Diana. It's not only that the experience itself was amazing, but she opened a door for me because I then went and started photographing the royal families of Europe extensively. It brought out a side of me that I find quite relevant, because I am mostly known for my sexy images in the fashion business and, in a way, this brings out my love for tradition, for a way of showing family and the longevity of people.

My secret skill is being able to put myself down to make people feel OK. When I go to photograph somebody, there is always a sense of uneasiness from the people that I am going to be photographing.... I usually make a fool of myself, but sometimes I perform so much that somebody said: 'Mario, this shot isn't about you. It is about me.' But that just breaks the ice.

I am the most passionate when I am in South America. Rio de Janeiro just brings the passion out of me. The city has something...it is the light, the temperature, the people, the energy.

My favorite thing is Rudolf Stingel's small little painting of a virgin, because I love [his] modernity attached to the traditional take of it. I come from a Catholic country, so my aesthetic was greatly influenced by all the paraphernalia that goes with religion.

My favorite all time film is "The Party" with Peter Sellers because of its humor, aesthetics, fun, ridiculousness. It's got it all.

I've been given a few [pieces of] advice in my career. Manolo Blahnik gave advice to a friend of mine when he asked him if he could help me and he said 'The only one that can help Mario is Mario.' Great advice. My other great piece of advice came from Tonne Goodman from *American Vogue*, who said to me one year 'You know, Mario, you always put light in front of everybody but sometimes you're at a dinner party and there's a person sitting next to you and there's no light where they are sitting and they look more beautiful than ever.' She opened my eyes to light.

If I weren't a photographer, I would love to be a singer, a performer—but I am not sure if I am completely gifted in that way.

The most stylish city is Copenhagen. I was just there and I was saying the whole time how impressed I was by the style of everything, from the salt and pepper in the restaurant to the signs in the street. They just seem to apply style to everything.

If I could own one piece of art, I would quite like one of those [Jeff Koons] spoons that were exhibited at Versailles a couple of years ago. They have a sense of ridiculousness and grandness, and you can't quite define why you desire it but you do.

The only place where I really feel I can get away is when I get a boat in the South of France or Italy. That's when I am most detached from everything. You forget the days of the week.

—Edited from an interview by Javier Espinoza.



Clockwise from left: Ben Tiede; United Artists/Getty Images; Mario Testino; Getty Images (2)



STRIKE A POSE Clockwise from far left, Mario Testino; a scene from 'The Party'; traditional Peruvian dress in Chahuaytire, from 'Alta Moda'; Mr. Testino at the 2005 'Diana, Princess of Wales By Mario Testino' exhibition in London; Rio de Janeiro



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