

# Va-Va-Valentino

Not since Jackie Kennedy made a splash on the fashion scene has Valentino been so synonymous with modern style

By Phoebe Eaton

Photographs by Karl Lagerfeld

**T**he elevator door opens, and you sense his presence immediately; that cologne in the air doesn't lie, and of course he is here, somewhere in the wings, straightening his country-squire Caraceni blazer and pressing a dimple into a tweedy necktie. But first on the scene is his butler, who shows you down the inlaid-wood corridor, in the style of St. Petersburg's Hermitage, to an espresso velvet sofa in the parlor. A Diet Coke appears, riding a linen coaster that has been delicately stitched with the initial *V*—announcing the impending arrival of both your host and *V*, a new fragrance *pour les femmes* due for a stateside decanting in August.


In short order, he appears, the man his New York doormen downstairs and so many others call "Mr. Valentino" (though the surname is actually Garavani, backed up by the monogram on his shirt).

He looks energetic and trim, and his skin is the deck-chair brown of legend—but then, he has always known where to find the heat, in the fashion business and in pleasure. Right now, he's mad about Rio. ("The Brazilian people have unbelievable bodies," he says.) A score of straw bracelets climbing up one wrist are apparently all the rage in Brazil, and he says he never takes them off, not even to shower.

Friends there call him *Va-Va*, and today *Va-Va* is thrilled sideways: There is report from the annual debutante ball at the Hôtel de Crillon in Paris. "The girls looked sensational! And every one of them had a couture dress," he says triumphantly.

Haute couture is an art form with an oxygen tank now strapped to its back. In a 1980s couture season, Valentino used to sell something on the order of 400 of his labor-intensive sable-trimmed suits, those gowns beaded to the breaking point or blooming with rosettes. "Now if we sell a hundred, it is huge," he says with a shrug. "Life has changed." Client Oprah Winfrey devoted a recent episode to this shamanistic pursuit of his anyway. Now age 72, ►





One of Valentino's early life lessons came from his mother: "I don't care to have 10 things during the year," she would say. "I prefer to have four—but I want only the best"

Despite his being based in Rome, Paris is a Val-friendly town. He has shown his collections there since 1975. From left: Business partner Giancarlo Giammetti, the designer and model Marija Vujovic. Dress, price upon request, and pumps, \$1200, **Valentino Couture**. 212-772-6969. See *Where to Buy* for details. Hair: Neil Moodie for Windle Salon, London; makeup: Tom Pécheux with Shiseido The Makeup

going on 73, Valentino is being hounded for his autograph at the baggage carousels of America.

"This is a very religious thing for a lot of women, having clothes modeled on their own bodies. But, of course, the prices are crazy," he admits. "Material is more expensive. Embroidery is *extremely* expensive. Everything is sewn by hand, and it's impossible to tell my girls—some of whom have been with me for 30 years—to go faster."

Nostrils flare and the lip underneath suddenly purses into a visible V. "But don't you want ice in your drink? I think he forgot it," Valentino observes, slightly agitated by the lapse in service.

**V**alentino is a man of dramatic likes and dislikes. He thinks women over 25 should forswear the miniskirt because the legs have already started to go. It makes him crazy, says party perennial Nan Kempner, when she throws a simple T-shirt atop his pleated mousseline skirts. With little prompting, Valentino takes a measuring tape to the personal styles of his big spenders: The Italians, in certain instances, are slightly overdone; the French, too proper.

"If you want to see a beautiful woman with an easygoing chic, you see it here, in New York," he says.

How startling—yet obviously gratifying—it was for his younger self when paparazzi snapped the most famous woman in the world strolling through Central Park in a pair of slacks, those signature sun goggles and a silk scarf knotted under her no-nonsense jawline, stamped top to bottom with his name—*VALENTINO VALENTINO VALENTINO*. She was "Mrs. Kennedy" when they first met; the year after Jack died, she was hunting down mourning outfits.

"But after a little while, we became very, very close, very nice friends, and she never, never *imposed* herself," says Valentino. She trusted him whenever he said, "Jackie, this is for you."

Just one time, after a special delivery, did Jackie get on the phone to Rome. "It's too Hollywood," she complained about a summery cinnamon dress with a sprinkling of flowers, "—not that I have anything against Hollywood, but I look too much like a movie star. It's not my style."

"Jackie, listen," said Valentino, "did you try the dress with the right shoes? Was your hair done?"

"I put on high heels, my hair was done and I even put on some music," she assured him. "The dress doesn't work."

Of course, in those days he was also consorting with Sophia Loren, Gina Lollobrigida, Audrey Hepburn, and Elizabeth Taylor, who had come to town to film *Cleopatra* at Cinecittà Studios.

"Liz Taylor was a beautiful woman, she is still," says Valentino, shifting in his claw-foot 18th-century Russian chair. But with that face—and those vault-chilled diamonds—she didn't need the distraction of hula-dancer blossoms in her hair when she accepted all those awards, and Valentino told her so. Later he would catch her on TV, ignoring his counsel.

"Don't spend your time always screaming to me because you want this and this and that and that," he remembers Taylor, a friend of more than 40 years, arguing. "*I am a peasant!* I am not an elegant woman."

The world's *crema di eleganza*—Valentino is still dressing them all. "He has an unerring feeling of what women want because he's

out with them," says Nan Kempner. "He's part of the group." There are his great dames: women like Lily Safra, Susan Gutfreund, Lynn Wyatt. And always the ladies-in-waiting: Marie-Chantal of Greece, Serena Boardman, Jennifer Creel, Princess Rosario of Bulgaria. In the fall, Valentino and his business partner of 45 years, Giancarlo Giammetti, threw a birthday dinner for Gwyneth Paltrow at Giammetti's Paris apartment, her raspberry cake crowned with a bright-red candy apple.

Not that fickle Hollywood could afford to forget him. On the contrary: At this year's Golden Globes, Jennifer Garner asked to be the one and only wearing a dress in Valentino's trademark red—in this case a flamenco-flouncy vintage number. The next morning, as scarlet dresses were yanked from everyone else's fittings, recalls Valentino's PR man, Carlos Souza, "I was the most hated man in California." For the Oscars, winner Cate Blanchett by prior arrangement was the only actress in Valentino, period.

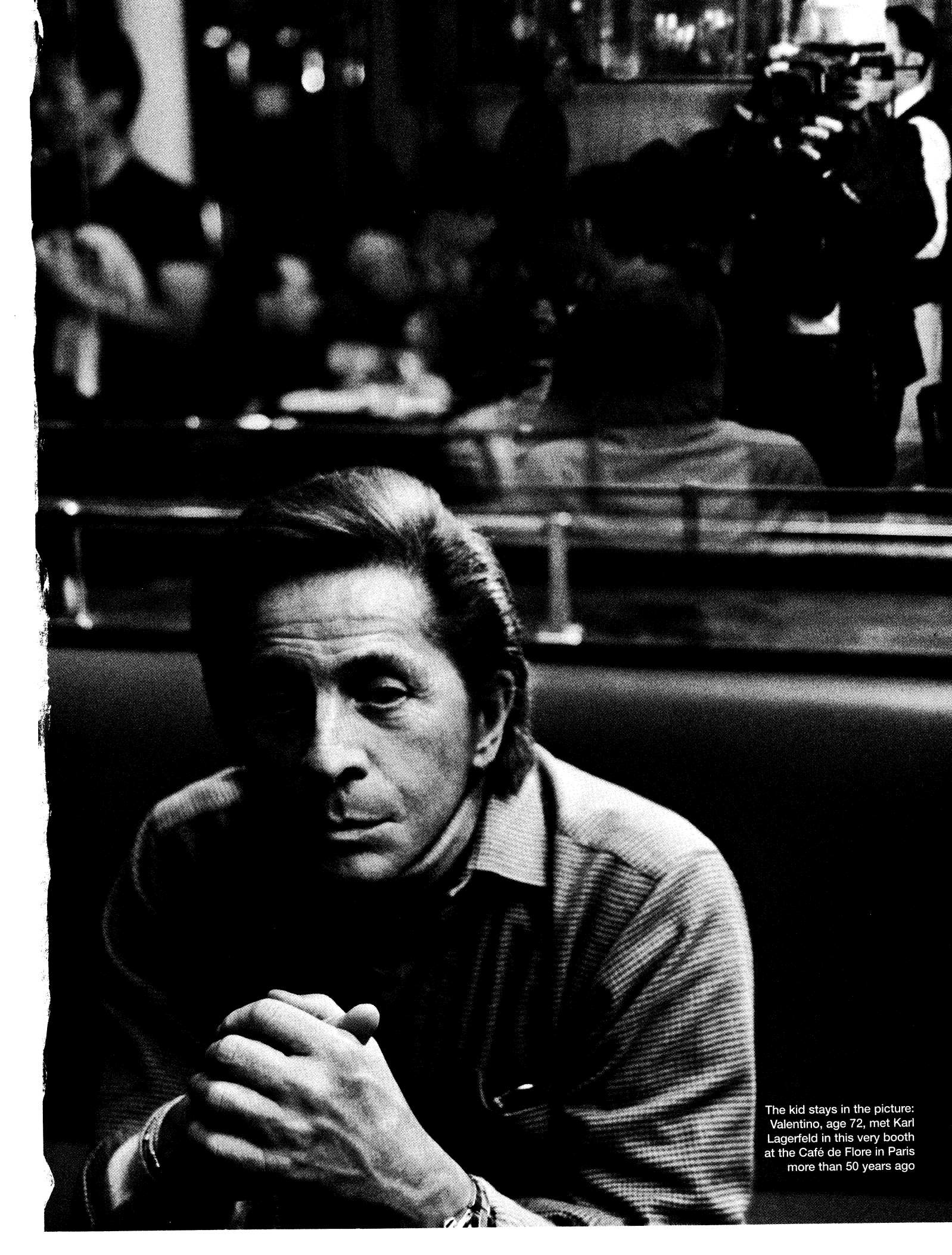
Valentino admits he misses the flair of a Jackie, a Princess Diana, a Marie-Hélène de Rothschild: "People try to be like them, but it's almost impossible." Today it's a lark to re-create one of Jackie's toga dresses for an Oscars-bound Jennifer Lopez. Valentino remains shorthand for exquisite taste in any venue: If Julia Roberts can dazzle the Academy in a classy vintage ball gown, why shouldn't Lil' Kim put on a pink Valentino suit to face the world at her perjury press conference?

It's why all the money-to-spare still want him to do their weddings—but he doesn't say yes to just any proposal. Long ago, Valentino made Marisa Berenson a memorable off-the-shoulder *Gone With the Wind*-style gown. Somewhere, she says, there's a picture of him ironing it just before she headed down the aisle.

**G**rowing up in Voghera, a little town outside Milan, Valentino almost never saw his father, the front man for an electrical-wire company, without a jacket and tie. Valentino's mother had a dressmaker, as did so many women of her generation. "I don't care to have 10 things during the year," she would say. "I prefer to have four—but I want only the best." A black coat with a fox collar that she had proved almost Fellini-esque in its significance to an impressionable boy who, as a grown man, likes to luxe things up with a little fur.

His parents wanted a doctor in the family, but when Valentino pleaded to study fashion in Paris at age 17, they didn't say no. The end of the '50s was a pompous moment. Fashion shows were in the evenings. "And the names!" says Valentino. "Rockefellers! I mean, *everybody* was there." He first worked for the designer Jean Dessès—"The Greek," as Valentino calls him. The Greek was known for the draped dress, as Valentino is today. After five years, he pushed on to Guy Laroche, where he took up in a tiny, tiny corner next to a window. By the time Valentino was in his late twenties, Marella Agnelli and the rest of Italy's aristo-goddesses were fluttering through his new studio on Rome's Via Gregoriana, soon a designated jet-set hub.

In 1998, Valentino and Giancarlo Giammetti pocketed some \$300 million when they sold the label to a conglomerate that flipped it to the Marzotto Group four years later. Losses in the tens of millions quickly ebbed as Marzotto focused on rekindling the U.S. market, launching a younger line (Valentino R.E.D.) and expanding on a cheaper one (Valentino Roma). In the States, ►



The kid stays in the picture: Valentino, age 72, met Karl Lagerfeld in this very booth at the Café de Flore in Paris more than 50 years ago

sales grew by more than 50 percent last year, thanks to the newer, younger customer. And all of Valentino's lines are showing jumped-up orders for spring, a vote of confidence for his taffeta bombers, pagoda-tiered skirts, threaded-porthole detailing and blingy VAL belt buckles. Told the buckles look credibly hip-hop, he blinks obliviously and says he has actually revived them from his '60s archives. For fall, the onetime pantsuit pioneer paired Edwardian bootlegs with biker-gang Brando chapeaux.

"Marzotto has a great, great, great respect for me," says Valentino. "Like something precious, I am kept under a crystal bell. Nobody can touch me."

And nobody lives as well, either, says Marisa Berenson. That's why invitations to dinner or to sleep over at Valentino's houses in Gstaad, Paris, London—his villa on Rome's swanky Appia Antica, where five anxious pugs await his return—are seriously prized. "He and Giancarlo are masters of entertaining," says society dervish Marjorie Raean. "They remember everyone's name."

"Valentino is very funny and loves to laugh," says Elizabeth Hurley, a frequent guest. "We often sit around and cackle like hyenas." He has a knowing aura; he has somehow seen everything, everywhere. The night before, old friends Misha Baryshnikov and Peter Martins came over. Valentino is a man of culture who likes his Wagner and tunes in to local classical radio when it's just him at home.

In the month of August, home is the *T.M. Blue One*, a 154-foot yacht named for his parents (Teresa and Mauro) and all mahogany minimalism. "People have copied it," he acknowledges grimly. Nan Kempner marvels at the thread counts in the bedrooms, the full-size wood-paneled bathtubs. "He cossets you," she says.

And everyone loves what he's done with the Château de Wideville, his Louis XIII-style pile 25 minutes from the revolving door at the Ritz. "It's a *small* castle," Valentino says modestly. Still: It has a moat. Last year, he invited the queen of Thailand to tea, and she showed up with an entourage of 40. Nevertheless, there are rules. Friends who arrive in blue jeans are banned from certain rooms.

Tending to the garden is famously his new hobby, but it is hard to picture the hands that cut Sophie of Hapsburg's wedding gown mucking about in those rosebushes.

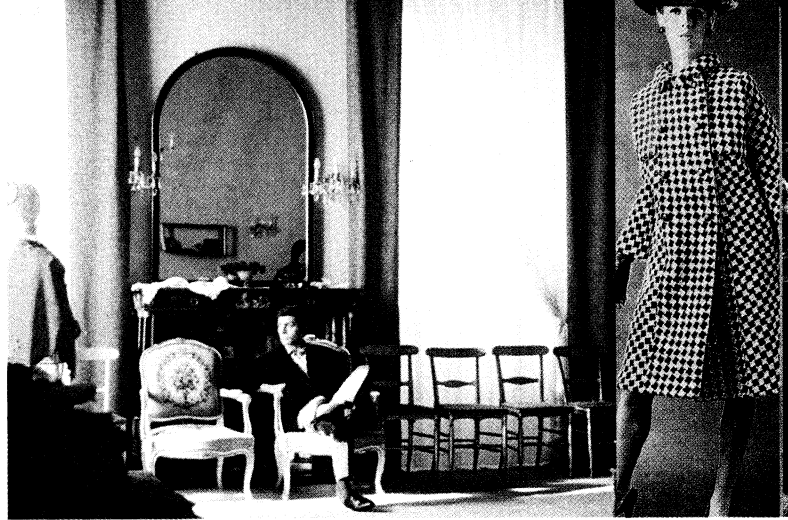
"I am not comfortable down in the dirt. No. Impossible. No," says Valentino. That would be outlandish. "I direct," he says.

Above our heads hangs a 17th-century Bresciano, and Valentino points out the man in the portrait reaching to cut a lemon from his tree. Robert Mapplethorpe was a friend, and a black-and-white calla lily and some anemones have also been plucked for these walls. A Warhol *Flowers* was removed some time ago to his London townhouse, Valentino informs me.

"I was very close friends with Andy, and I saw those paintings on the floor at the Factory. You had to jump over them!" he says. "Now they cost \$4 million to \$5 million." He chuckles, and one senses he wishes he'd bought more of them. That groovy abstract painting over there is a Philip Taaffe serpent, he says.

What is the serpent in Mr. Valentino's garden? Only his age. Now comes news that Valentino may retire in the next several months. There is a long sigh; he is clearly conflicted about his much-speculated-upon departure.

"Painters paint until they die," he says, finally. And for now, those bold strokes keep on coming. ■



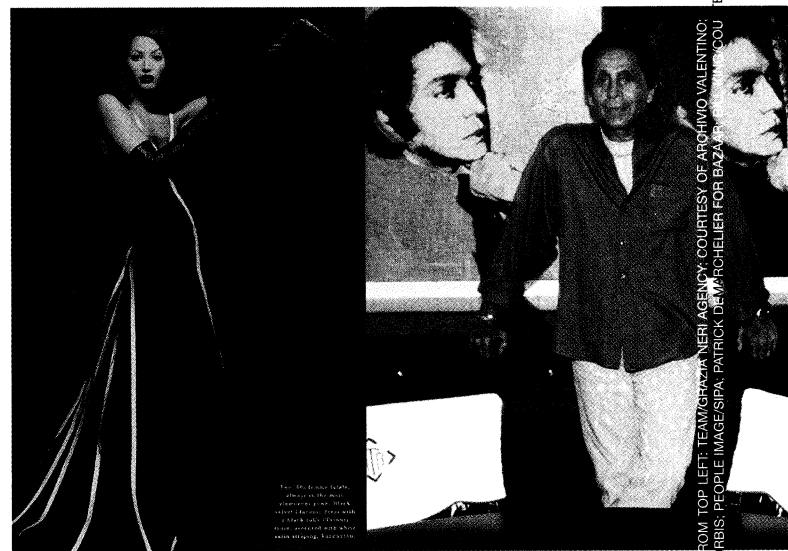
1960  
Valentino, in his 20s, in his Rome atelier on Via Gregoriana

1965  
The B&W obsession begins



1968  
A Bill King photo from *Bazaar*

1970  
Val and Jackie sightseeing on Capri



1992  
Christy Turlington in a *Bazaar* couture story

1999  
Valentino (and Warhols) on his yacht, *T.M. Blue One*

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: TEAF/GRAZIA NERI AGENCY; COURTESY OF ARCHIVIO VALENTINO; BETTMANN/CORBIS; PEOPLE IMAGE/SIPA; PATRICK DEMARCHELIER FOR BAZAAR; PHOTOFEST/COU