



It is a flawless evening. Just the sort of perfection one comes to expect from Anna Wintour. While venerable socialite Deeda Blair chain-smokes outside, former Lacroix muse Anh Duong huddles with New York swan Marina Rust. Aerin Lauder giggles with Lauren duPont, and Hugo Guinness makes wry comments to Elliott Puckett as Wintour, editor of American *Vogue* and the world's most powerful fashion connoisseur, presides over the dinner party hosted by Calvin Klein designer Francisco Costa. They have all come, in theory, to toast the publication of Wintour's latest creation, the lush tome *Vogue Living: Houses, Gardens, People*. But, in truth, they are there to pay homage to a slight, bespectacled man: its author, Hamish Bowles.

As European editor at large, Bowles is the self-described ambassador for *Vogue*, travelling the globe for the past 15 years to fashion shows, fabulous homes and celebrated soirées. He mingles with an extraordinary array of tastemakers, whether it be having an espresso with Miuccia Prada, gardening with Marella Agnelli, or being a guest at everything from Malcolm Forbes's birthday to Dita Von Teese's wedding. "There is no one like him in the world today," declares *Vogue*'s formidable fashion news director Sally Singer.

He serves not just as some Wintour help-meet, but as an invaluable adviser, protégé, and embodiment of *Vogue*'s DNA. Yet to Wintour's credit, she has given him the freedom to forge his own identity as an editor, author, curator and guardian of one of fashion's greatest private collections of couture.

For Bowles, being one of the world's most important fashion and decor editors isn't just a job, it's a way of life. He is a veritable walking Google of the history of design and fashion. "He will be

looked upon as one of the greatest chroniclers of fashion and decor in our time," exclaims Wintour, who says she considers him not just "an indispensable superstar", but "my great friend, great escort, and good companion. I'm always thrilled if Hamish is free." When Diana died, it was Bowles whom Wintour asked to accompany her to the funeral.

Bowles is able to make a clever nod to the past and then take it to the next level. Bowles looks at a woman in a dress and sees, as Roland Barthes expressed in his essay *The Language of Fashion*, between the lines. He is a visionary who can sense a radical idea, like the world of Alexander McQueen in the making.

"He's pure genius," observes the photographer Mario Testino, who credits Bowles with transforming him from a Peruvian "beach bum" during their bonding at *Harpers & Queen* in the mid-Eighties. "He has the makings of a Diana Vreeland; he has the sharpest eye there is." Unlike Vreeland, though, Bowles doesn't overcompensate for a lack of self-assurance by being a grand diva. While he embraces the style of Cecil Beaton, Stephen Tennant and the other "Bright Young Things", he is no snob and finds little need to appear posher than he is. He observes his various orbits – whether it be fashion or society – in an unusually inclusive way. He is often the centre of attention – not because he desires to be, but because he is genuinely the epicentre of fashion, decor and society in New York, London, Paris or, for that matter, Jaipur and Tangier. Flitting around town in lavender Gucci patent-leather loafers, Bowles – wearing his neo-Edwardian suits with a mean twist – appears frail as a sparrow, but he has a tough interior (you have to be steely to survive at *Vogue*). >>

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING HAMISH

He's the right-hand man of legendary American *Vogue* editor Anna Wintour and has a contacts book that reads like an A to Z of the great and the good of fashion and design. Jeffrey Podolsky meets style leader par excellence Hamish Bowles

PHOTOGRAPHS NAME NAME



<< You can hardly see him – let alone find room to sit – in his *Vogue* office in New York. It is a veritable rainforest of *Country Life* and foreign decor magazines, endless press releases, scouting pictures, and years of notebooks filled with lightning sketches of what he's viewed on fashion runways. There are pyramids of fashion monographs, a library of books on the floor, and a white Preen mother-of-pearl sequin dress in the midst of it all. What little decor there is consists of a blown-up reproduction of a 1934 Cecil Beaton watercolour of Elsie de Wolfe and a paper collage portrait of himself swinging his quilted Chanel bag, a goodbye present from his days at *Harpers & Queen*. "I find pristine desks to be downright antiseptic and disquieting," harrumphs Bowles, who admits that Wintour "would be pretty alarmed" at the sight of his office. "You tend to go to her. Despite what people may think, the door is always open." Besides, adds Wintour, "I'm not sure there's room in there for me."

Bowles is discussing the book mentioned earlier, his new coffee-table tome of *Vogue* interiors pieces, the publication of which is designed to coincide with *Vogue Living*, the new design magazine which Bowles affectionately calls his "baby".

The book covers Bowles's extraordinary range of interactions with celebrities and socialites: Gianni Versace's camp Casa Casuarina, where Bowles watched Donatella make pasta in a pencil skirt and stilettos; a ladylike Madonna at Ashcombe from where disco songs reverberated

through Wiltshire; or Chanel muse (and Bowles's good friend) Amanda Harlech cooking roast chicken. "One proposes and Anna disposes," says Bowles, chuckling, of the collaborative effort between himself and Wintour, "but she knows what works."

Although one thinks of Bowles first as a fashion marvel, if it weren't for his love of interiors, he might never have landed Stateside. After American *Vogue* photographed his minuscule, lavender London flat while he was an editor at *Harpers & Queen* in 1992, he received an "irresistible" call from Anna Wintour offering him the job of living editor. "Anna is extremely direct," says Bowles of his instant taking to her. "She might be a little brusque, but you always know where you stand; it's a very healthy environment to work in."

He arrived in New York at a time when it was throbbing with tangible signs of wealth. Bowles suddenly found himself sitting across from Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis at a Carolina Herrera fashion show, or next to shiny set icons such as Betsy Bloomingdale and Pat Buckley at a Bill Blass presentation. He was initially a bit overwhelmed by both New York's coruscating consumerism and *Vogue*'s exuberant personalities, such as Polly Mellen and André

Leon Talley. When Wintour called him in to shoot a home in the Hamptons, Bowles just assumed she was speaking of a Mark Hampton interior. "I was fresh off the boat," he says with an endearing flick of his hair. "But Americans have always had a soft spot for daffy British." After some teething troubles,

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Bowles's rise was swift: within four years, he assumed Talley's mantle as *Vogue's* European editor at large, which allowed him very personal contact with the world's top designers, travelling to Arles to watch a bullfight with Françoise and Christian Lacroix, for example.

Bowles's passion for fashion began at age 13, when he started collecting fashion ephemera: chain-mail guinea purses, embroidered 19th-century slippers and Edwardian shoes. He was already immersed in British *Vogue*, adoring the works of Ossie Clark, John Bates and Zandra Rhodes and living a precocious childhood, surrounded by elderly matrons, at Costume Society lectures on 19th-century Swedish court dresses. "It's a bit frightening," he now admits. "My parents were always a bit indulgent of my idiosyncrasies."

Bowles – who grew up in a middle-class family on a farm in Kent and in North London – was also rebelling against his parents' bohemian lifestyle. His free-spirited mother, Anne, who to this day loves nothing more than painting her gypsy caravan, and his more demure father, David, a university provost from whom Bowles inherited his love of literature, would spend holidays travelling around England in a VW camper (he has a sister, Sarah, now 41). His father would grind to a halt when the young Bowles saw a junk shop. "I was always very determined and focused," says Bowles, who would feign headaches in order to skip French class and bid on frocks at Christie's. "I've always lived beyond my means – I started young."

He was something of a fashion wunderkind. At 14, he won special mention in a British *Vogue* talent contest and the editor Bea

Miller arranged for him to see his first fashion show by Bill Gibb starring Jerry Hall and Andrea Dellal. "Every young boy's dream," he recalls. "It was fabulous." But it was at Saint Martin's School of Art that he truly flourished. Having been something of a social misfit in secondary school, Bowles suddenly "Found myself with people who knew what I was talking about". He was in the midst of the tail end of the New Romantic movement, surrounded at the Blitz Club by such style-blazers as milliner Stephen Jones, who says that Bowles "was certainly larger than life. Was he a prodigy? Absolutely."

Bowles blossomed sartorially, favouring Edwardian shooting-party tweeds or a black fedora and scarf à la Toulouse-Lautrec's Aristide Bruant, and in doing so gained a new-found self-confidence. And, of course, he was always collecting. He survived on bread and cheese to purchase everything from the straw hat worn by Julie Andrews in the stage version of *My Fair Lady* to an £80 etching by Belle Epoque artist Etienne Duval (which still hangs in his overstuffed midtown apartment). "I would rather starve than not look at that lovely picture," he says. But most importantly, Bowles honed his laser-like eye for design in the midst of such brilliant talents as John Galiano, who now says, "When Hamish says my show is sublime, masterful or rich, I know I have done my job."

At 19, his love of reading, coupled with his winning a competition to edit the teenage issue of *Harpers & Queen*, prompted him to leave art school, where he was studying clothing design, for a job on the magazine. There, he was inspired by the creative whimsy >>

<< of Amanda Harlech, whom he soon succeeded as junior fashion editor. He began producing self-consciously epic and mannered shoots “that almost bankrupted the company”. By 22, Bowles was its youngest fashion director (editor Nicholas Coleridge made him promise not to reveal his age). “I was propelled to be grown up,” Bowles says. “It was very much my launching pad.”

It's been quite a leap to his life of globe-trotting to society's most glamorous dos. “He has the best social connections of anybody I know,” Wintour says. “His Rolodex is golden.” At Malcolm Forbes's 70th birthday party in Morocco, Bowles collapsed from sunstroke after waiting two hours to meet Elizabeth Taylor. At friend Dita Von Teese's wedding to Marilyn Manson, Bowles arranged for the great corsetier Mr Pearl to do cinch to her bodice. In the past year, he's attended jeweller Marie-Hélène de Taillac's New Year's Eve soirée in Jaipur, Elton John's 60th birthday party, and Valentino's 45th anniversary party in Rome, where he advised his minions on the presentation of Valentino's retrospective. And he is a perennial at New York's exclusive Metropolitan Museum's Costume Institute fête – this year, he escorted Queen Rania of Jordan dressed in an outrageously colourful silk-brocade Tom Ford Poiret flower dressing gown.

Bowles leads a life on the run. While holding forth, his mobile rings; it's the photographer François Allard regarding tomorrow's photo shoot in Paris, of which Bowles only learnt this morning. Then it is off to Rio to celebrate Thanksgiving with *The New Yorker's* Michael Roberts, a quick jaunt to Los Angeles to see decorator Katherine Ireland, a New Year's Eve visit to Egypt and, come January, the couture collections in Paris. Annual holidays usually include summers spent in Tangier with Christopher Gibbs, in Ibiza with Testino, and at Janet de Bonnet's Provence estate.

Despite his *Vogue* duties, Bowles acknowledges that it was his high-profile curatorship of the wildly popular Jackie Kennedy exhibition at the Met that put him on the map. He drew upon his vast knowledge of couture from his own collection of 1,500 dresses, housed in three separate storage spaces across Manhattan (Bowles recently “went a bit wild” at the recent Nan Kempner auctions).

He has just returned from a meeting with Anna Wintour and Diego della Valle, who were seeking Bowles's input on some designers the Tod's magnate is considering. Famously tight-lipped, Bowles is silent regarding what they discussed. Some find Bowles disarmingly reserved. “I'd hate for people to think that I was standoffish, but maybe I can see that,” he says. “I don't have a natural ebullience like the Americans.”



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He is equally taciturn about what lies ahead. For the immediate future, he'd like to concentrate on *Vogue Living*, but coyly hints at one day going back to being a designer, and will surely curate more museum exhibits. “He won't stand still, that's for sure,” says Stephen Jones. Bowles goes out every night of the year. – “I don't like not doing anything” – whether it be a night at the opera, theatre or cinema, where he relishes the relatively low-brow *Mission: Impossible*. “I'm not a pure aesthete!” he exclaims. He suddenly realises that his tickets for *La Traviata* are for next week, hastily finds a friend to join him at the stage production of *Xanadu*, and wades into the throng of Broadway tourists with a quick nod and a wave goodbye. “I just go from one thing to the next,” he says. ■

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Vogue Living: Houses, Gardens, People by Hamish Bowles is published by Knopf and is available from BooksFirst priced £40.50 (RRP £45), free p&p, on 0870 1608080; timesonline.co.uk/booksfirst

