Interview

'You have to be mad, good, or both'

Lunch with the FT: Vidal Sassoon might not describe himself as the Bill Gates of hair but he is the founder of a $41bn industry. And the 83-year-old is still zealous about the profession he revolutionised. By Vanessa Friedman

When the celebrity hair mogul Vidal Sassoon – or, to be entirely accurate, when the celebrity hair mogul Vidal Sassoon's people – told me he wanted to have lunch at the Monkey Bar in Manhattan, my cynical self leapt to certain conclusions: that, for example, Sassoon had chosen this restaurant because of its fame as a people-watching schmooze fest, thanks to owner Graydon Carter, aka editor of Vanity Fair magazine and the host of a mega Oscars party, who presides over meals from a banquette; that Sassoon would take a walkabout as he entered, past regulars such as author Fran Lebowitz and TV anchor Charlie Rose, meeting and greeting. In conclusion, that the whole point of choosing this place was to demonstrate, in the short space between hostess and table, the extent to which Sassoon has transcended shampoo to become a celebrity.

These suspicions were only reinforced when, arriving for my date with Sassoon, I was shown to a banquette right next to the banquette where Carter and Vanity Fair publisher Edward Menicheschi were hosting Tom Murry, president of Calvin Klein.

Here we go, I thought, sitting at the edge of the bench facing the door so I could watch the show. But I was wrong: seconds later, as discreet as could be, there was Sassoon, standing next to the table, a sprightly, if elderly (he is 83) man in signature black-framed glasses, cropped white hair, blazer and button-down shirt, a scarf knotted, ascot-style, around his neck and a big smile. "So lovely to meet you," he smiled, and shuffled around the table so we could sit next to each other. "It's so wonderful to be here," he whispered. "You know, I lived here for three months when I first came to New York in the 1960s to open my salon."

> 'People want to be cared about. If you ask me if six years of socialism would be good for America, the answer is yes'

Here? In this restaurant?

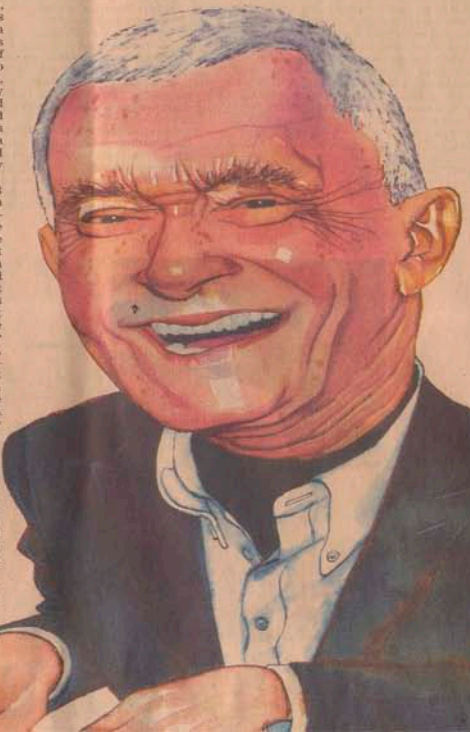
"Well, in the Hotel Elysée upstairs. Marlon Brando used to hang out here. We liked it because the entrance wasn't too demanding. You didn't have to say hello to 12 people." Sassoon's memory is sharp, and he leads him to talking about his first salon, "which is where the Ungaro store now is on Madison Avenue, which was owned by a man named Richard Salomon who was president of [cosmetics brand] Charles of the Ritz and a Brown man, he went to Brown University and then the Sorbonne, and then . . . where was I?" – he is also fully comfortable with the idea he has earned everyone's patience: the waiter will stand happily for several minutes as Sassoon peruses the menu and finally decides on a cup of tomato soup and a Cobb salad; I move from carrots to celery sticks until my chopped salad arrives, and listen.

"Hair is the only natural substance that grows on every human form and you can cut and angle into it," he says with amazement in his eyes. "It's the only thing where you can take something alive and create shapes!" He has a messianic zeal when it comes to this subject, but it is as much about giving others the freedom he found in the industry as it is crusading to get it taken seriously. Hair, after all, was his gateway to the world – he was born in west London in 1927, spent time in an orphanage because his father left and his mother Betty couldn't afford to take care of him, and now has his name on a global empire – and if other people don't get that, or don't take it seriously, well, that's their problem.

"The general impression does seem to be that hairstylists crept out from under a rock, or ended up doing it because they couldn't do anything else," he admits, as his soup arrives. "There is a lack of respect." Then he pauses and says happily, "Warren Beatty [in Shampoo] did our image a world of good. What a delightful man. You have to understand," he continues, carefully spooning his soup away from himself – the movie explains how Sassoon took elocution lessons for three years to rid himself of his cockney accent, and is a stickler for manners – "when I was starting out, what you had were hairdressers."

Indeed, Sassoon ended up in this profession not because of any desire on his part, but because his mother had a "premonition". He went from his apprenticeship with Cohen to the West End salon of the legendary Raymond, "the greatest extrovert I'd ever seen; he would come down during Ascot week in a pink morning suit."

As a hairdresser, Sassoon says, "I had no special gifts at all, but I



for modern architecture in London. "There are a few modern buildings there now, but Prince Charles still has to put his foot in it every 10 minutes," he says. "It's not his job! It's outrageous." Now we are on politics. In the world according to Vidal, hair leads to architecture leads to the Conservative government.

"I met Samantha Cameron – I sat next to her at a Tate gallery dinner – and she seemed delightful, but I don't know him," he says, sipping. "But I think the policies are dangerous to say the least. All those students screaming about tuition [costs] going up and student movements are what start the next revolutions." He recalls with approval Britain's establishment of welfare state. He thinks they might do good things for the US.

"The freedom of America is wonderful, but it would be better if it was combined with the discipline of the UK," he says. "Communism died, thank goodness; fascism died, thank goodness; and then we had capitalism for so long it almost seems natural, but there's nothing natural about 25m unemployed people [the approximate current US figure]. People want to be cared about, and it looks like the government doesn't care too much, sadly. If you ask me if six years of socialism would be good for America, the answer is yes."

In fact, Sassoon would rather talk about politics than, say, politicians' hair: when I bring up Kate Middleton, he just says her hair is "kind of neither here nor there"; mention Michelle Obama, and he says, "Oh! What wonderful straightening techniques they have today."

He continues, "I have learned to stop criticising or worrying about other people and what they think, and just do what I do." Of late, one of the things he has done is take the unusual step of writing (as opposed to hiring a ghost-

table) and my cynical self disappears under the table. Still, I suspect Sassoon is quite aware of what she had been thinking. He has lived with the world's prejudices against hair guys for a long time – ever since he was 14, and began his apprenticeship with hairdresser Adolph Cohen in London's East End. The story of how he got from there to here is, in fact, why Sassoon is in New York instead of Los Angeles, where he has lived since 1975. His life is the subject of a documentary, the imaginatively titled *Vidal Sassoon: The Movie*, produced by Michael Gordon, the man behind haircare giant Bumble & Bumble, and Sassoon is here for its premiere.

Though originally conceived as an 80th birthday gift to Sassoon, who is effectively the godfather of modern hairstyling, the movie is also an argument for reassessing his importance to what, according to the business information service Datamonitor, is now a $41bn industry. Sassoon was, after all, not only the first global name in haircare but the first person to put his name on products, to have a school, to export his style; he is the man who paved the way for John Frieda and Charles Worthington and Paul Mitchell. He is – no hyperbole – the Bill Gates of hair.

Not that he would put it that way exactly.

The way he puts it, without a hint of irony, is that he is "the American dream. I am proud of what we accomplished. If you are in something for 70 years" – he beams again – "you have to be mad, or good, or both."

When discussing his career Sassoon is neither falsely modest nor enormously egotistical; he is not embarrassed about pulling out a crib sheet of names from his inner breast pocket, where he has jotted things down so he doesn't forget, but he is equally aware of how mediagenic his statements can be (a while back, in 1980, he had his own TV show, called Your New Day).

If occasionally he gets lost in his stories – talking, for example, about the Monkey Bar

sleep on my trousers so they would stay looking pressed." He also learned the way the profession worked: "Women would come, three or four times a week, to have their hair done in these elaborate concoctions that the hairdresser understood, but no one else could replicate. The client was trapped; the hairdresser had the knowledge, and she had to keep returning."

After spending a year in the Israeli army in 1948 – he is Jewish and volunteered to fight in the war for Israeli independence – Sassoon had a different idea. "All around me, things were changing: fashion, architecture, politics, and I thought hair had to change too. I thought it had to become democratic. I said to myself, 'If I haven't changed things in five years, I'll stop.' So I decided to cut hair instead of just 'doing' it. That way, anyone could come to the salon, because they only needed to come every eight weeks. My peers were shocked! They said I was giving away secrets."

Sassoon didn't care. He saw the advantages to be gained from mass exposure. "People came in! Every day. And once other hairdressers saw that, they began to

Monkey Bar

60 East 54th 60th Street,
New York, NY10022

Sparkling water x 2	$16.00
Today's soup	$11.00
Cobb salad	$18.00
Chopped salad	$12.00
Cappuccino	$4.25
Camomile tea	$5.25
Total (including tax)	$72.40

appreciate what I was doing. I don't see the point of dying with knowledge," he smiles. "It's fun to be first."

These are not new stories, but when Sassoon tells them he looks as excited as if he hasn't told them hundreds of times. His soup is gone and his salad has appeared, but he isn't paying it much attention; his mind is elsewhere, back in 1963, when he invented the five-point cut, a haircut based on the architecture of the face. British Vogue magazine gave the new style an entire spread and Sassoon became a superstar. He was the main attraction in haircutting "shows" where he would cut hair on a stage in front of a paying audience and he opened salons in New York and Los Angeles. Next he opened a school, and then he created his own hair products, and then his name was on every chemist's shelf.

Eventually, in 1983, he sold the business to Richardson-Vicks, which in turn was bought by Proctor & Gamble, but the only regret Sassoon will admit to (other than getting divorced from his second wife, Beverley Sassoon, with whom he had four children, including a daughter who died of a drug overdose; he has been married to Ronnie Sassoon, his fourth wife, since 1992) is not being able to go to college and study architecture. One of his obsessions is the Bauhaus – he says Mies van der Rohe had the best eye for shape ever and, as far as he is concerned, shape is the basis of everything – and for the 50th anniversary of the Sassoon brand in 1992, they held a party at Dessau, one of the school's homes, in a building by Walter Gropius.

"It was wonderful," Sassoon says, waving away an invitation of dessert. (He was one of the earliest fitness fanatics, embracing Pilates as much for health as because he was on his feet 14 hours a day. He is still very trim, and orders only a camomile tea.) He is furious that there is not more support

"It took me years, and it was terribly difficult: I had to learn a whole new skill! It's a lovely feeling to work, you know," Sassoon says with a beatific smile, putting me on notice that at this stage in his life and this meal, he will not rise to any bait. "It gives you a sense of being, rather than having been." Under the table, I give my cynical self a kick in the ribs.

'Vidal Sassoon: The Movie' is released on May 20 in the UK

Vanessa Friedman is the FT's fashion editor

DEFINING IMAGES

Whose hair is it?

If, in the late 1980s, Christina Christoforou had been friends with the American pop star Michael Bolton, she would have had a gentle word in his ear about his hairstyle.

"I mean, it was tragic," she says of the soft-rock singer's extraordinary "mullet". "But at the same time, in my head, that's Michael Bolton, he goes together with that hair. He's the guy with the strange, weird mullet, you know? That's him."

Christoforou, who was born in 1974, is the London-based artist behind the *Whose Hair?*, a book of illustrations that depicts celebrities, politicians and film stars using only their surprisingly recognisable haircuts. Readers are encouraged to guess at figures from Che Guevara to Simon Cowell and, in doing so, Christoforou shows just how important a part hair can play in defining image.

Why, I ask, hair? "Basically, it surrounds the face and defines and emphasises the features. It can transform someone completely. If you change your hair you can become a different person, whereas if you suddenly change the way you dress or if you buy an amazing pair of shoes, that's never going to do that for you," she says.

For Michael Jackson, Christoforou sketched four styles that spanned his career. "If you look at it closely, you can see how the hair gives you clues about his personal history, about how he progressed – from the Jackson Five 'afro', and then, slowly, slowly, his hair, stylistically, turns 'white'. I found that moving, how his hair alone gives you clues about him."

It took Christoforou almost five months to draw the book's more than 100 meticulous mops. She says the most difficult style, but also her favourite, was that of Jimi Hendrix. "It's just so free, it's like each hair has its own personality. Also, it appears opposite Mary Quant, and the contrast is so extreme; I think that's why I put those two together. Her hair is so controlled and shapely next to his, it makes it so much more evident that he was all about freedom as an artist."

Christoforou says she is not an expert on hair. She just had a simple idea and followed it up. "For me, it's more about identity than fashion. I wanted to pick people who had influenced the world in some way, but also to draw people from less glamorous backgrounds, who maybe you'd be surprised to recognise. It's not just about celebrities, but about us, about how we are all so exposed to celebrity iconography that we can actually recognise someone just by their hair."

Padraig Moran

'Whose Hair?' (Laurence King) was published last month

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