

Georgina Grenville

Three decades of the iconic model

South African model Georgina Grenville walked the runway for Gucci and Versace, appeared in prestigious fashion magazines and has been immortalised by countless celebrity photographers. Her career began by chance in her teens – and now, three pregnancies later, the 36-year-old iconic model is more popular than ever.

By: Robert Nordberg

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Images: Andreas Kock/ Cameralink <https://www.cameralink.com/>

“I’ve come a long way from the farm,” says Georgina Grenville to DV Mode, who meet her during a fashion shoot for the magazine in Stockholm. It’s a clear autumn day and Georgina Grenville, dressed for the day in jeans and a black sweater, looks comfortably relaxed. While hairstylist Linda Shalabi curls her hair, she takes the opportunity to breastfeed her daughter, Noa, who is two months old. The rest of her family – partner Michael Cohen, five-year-old son Zachary and six-year-old daughter Luna – remain in Paris, the city that has been her base for the past seven years.

Although she is working more than ever before – after her third child the job requests have only increased – she turns down a lot of opportunities. Family comes first, and she doesn’t like to be away from home for long periods. Now, life as a mother of three is more important than the limelight.

*“Tom Ford booked me immediately for the campaign – he and photographer Mario Testino have shaped my career.”*

“I’m afraid of them seeing too much of the industry. But it’s fun to have the opportunity to bring them to work sometimes and show them what I do. When you have children, you have to give them a lot of time. I’m glad that I’m able to. But I’ve found that to be a good mother, you have to be away from home sometimes. If you’re always there you take things for granted. Now I’m happy when I get home to the kids again, even if I’ve only been gone for a day. And I have a great relationship with my children. It’s important to have a balance.”

Ever since she was 14, the world has been Georgina Grenville’s place of work. Before she was thrown into the frenzy of the fashion industry, she skateboarded with her brothers in the South African coastal city of Durban, where she grew up. Her family moved there when she was six, but she was born in the former British protectorate of East Griqualand in South Africa. At the time, the country was ruled by apartheid, but Georgina Grenville had a liberal upbringing. She often dreams about the beautiful surroundings of her childhood with deep valleys and hills.

“I had a privileged upbringing. I didn’t dream of being in the fashion industry, I just ended up there kind of by chance.”

Her parents separated early and met new partners, so Georgina Grenville grew up with four parents. To boost her daughter's self-confidence, her mother, a university professor, enrolled her in a modelling course. The agent who ran the course encouraged Georgina Grenville to enter a modelling competition, which she went on to win.

"I remember calling my mum the night before the competition and crying because I still couldn't walk in high heels."

Her win led to a modelling contract and trips between Paris, Milan and Japan. The turning point came when she moved to New York at the age of 18. A meeting with Gucci's then creative director Tom Ford changed everything. The fashion house was revived under Tom Ford's direction, and Georgina Grenville became the face of the brand.

"Tom Ford booked me immediately for the campaign – he and photographer Mario Testino have shaped my career. Often when I give interviews I get asked 'what makes you different, why do you get so much work?' I think it's luck and it's about being in the right place at the right time."

In 1996, Georgina Grenville appeared in a supporting role in the British TV series *Absolutely Fabulous* as the character Gucci girl, something she considers to be the highlight of her career.

"I was like: 'OK, now I've made it – I was in *Absolutely Fabulous*.'"

*"I remember calling my mum the night before the competition and crying because I still couldn't walk in high heels."*

Another milestone was her first cover for American Vogue in the Florida Keys.

"We flew down for the day because photographer Steven Meisel wanted to be back in New York that night so he wouldn't miss an episode of Dawson's Creek."

Her friendship with Tom Ford has lasted throughout the years. When he held his last Gucci show, Georgina Grenville had the honour of closing the show as the last model to step out onto the catwalk.

"We met recently in Paris, we had dinner and saw his film *A Single Man*. It's a fantastic film, it's so Tom Ford, his aesthetic is so good," says Georgina Grenville.

The nanny has long since taken Noa from her mother's lap and it's time for the photo shoot. "I'm ten kilos heavier than before I gave birth to Noa, so now I'm most comfortable in the rock chic look. Maison Martin Margiela's minimalist fashion is another favourite. I don't understand why people think you would want to dress in floral dresses when you are four sizes bigger than normal – it's crazy!"

Maybe it's not just looks that have taken Georgina Grenville to the top.

"I think personality played a bigger role in the past. This might sound unfair, but today models are more like they were in the 1960s. They show the clothes. But in the 80s and 90s,

the models had personality and character. Just look at Kate Moss, Stella Tennant, Shalom Harlow and Amber Valletta. They have the looks, but they also have strong personalities.”

Georgina Grenville lives a busy life and is constantly taking on new challenges. There was a time when she found working in Paris difficult because she didn’t speak the language, but today she loves the city and her apartment in the 7th arrondissement, from where she can see Napoleon’s tomb and the Eiffel Tower looming over the horizon.

“I used to say to my agent in New York: ‘I’ll only do shows in Paris if you travel with me, and I don’t want to talk to anyone who’s French,’” she laughs.