

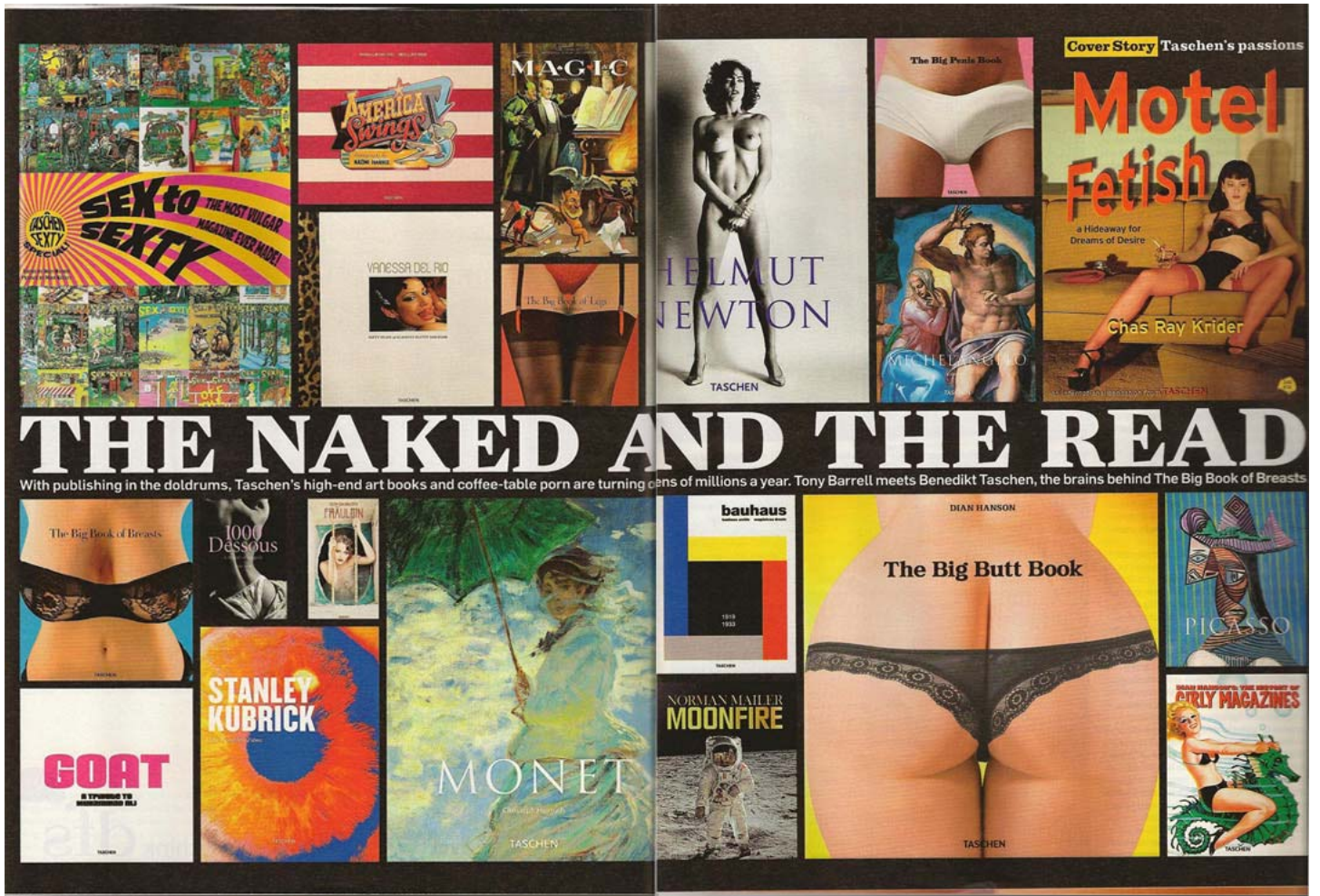
THE SUNDAY TIMES
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Who murdered Benazir?
'I'll protect you if you're
nice to me' — Bhutto's final
days by Christina Lamb

Legend of a survivor
David Vann on a British
yachtsman's will to live

All about the bottom line

How high art and saucy snaps have made a fortune for the world's cheekiest publisher



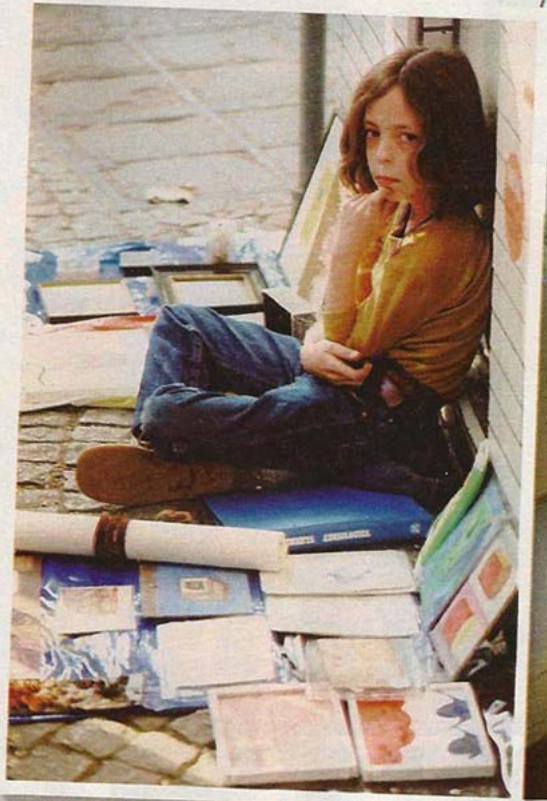
Mention “Taschen” at a gathering of reasonably literate people, and – after some joker has blessed you for sneezing – somebody will usually raise the subject of the “kind of books” that this unusual German company publishes. They might wink and use language like “daring” and “near the knuckle”. They’ve never, ever, looked inside one of those books themselves, but oh my! Those pictures! How on earth do they get away with it?

Come with me to a Taschen bookshop and I’ll show you what the fuss is all about. It might be an idea to leave your dear old maiden aunt behind. There’s a Taschen shop right in the heart of Europe, in the lovely cobbled Place du Grand Sablon in Brussels, amid the posh chocolatiers and the smart antiques dealers. There’s another one in California, on North Beverly Drive, among the beautiful fashion stores and swanky mansions of Beverly Hills. And, closer to home, there’s a Taschen shop in London, in the quiet and exclusive Duke of York Square in Chelsea.

Do you like art? Here are some wonderful Taschen books on Picasso, Monet, Bacon, Duchamp, Dali, Tamara de Lempicka... Or do you prefer architecture or movies? There are some great big tomes on Frank Lloyd Wright, Zaha Hadid, Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick. And there are nice books on oriental carpets, record covers, tattoos, posh hotels and the Crusades as well. Ooh, look at this one – Vanessa del Rio: Fifty Years of Slightly Slutty Behavior. It’s about a porn star. And this one has photographs of a young woman showing her... Crikey. And this one’s actually called The Big Book of Breasts. It has hundreds of photographs and some interviews with big-breasted women, and it’s £34.99.

For 30 years now, this prolific company has been publishing what it darned well wants to. High art, low art, respectable or rude: it’s all good business to Taschen. If you didn’t know, you could probably guess that it isn’t run by a consortium or trust, with grey committee members tediously humming and hawing daily over whether to publish this or that. No, Taschen is the creation and property of one man, and its output is the spontaneous expression of that man’s singular range of tastes and enthusiasms. Benedikt Taschen is an anachronistic freak in the modern world of books: an autocrat, a tycoon, a highly visible figurehead whose surname appears in capital letters on the billions of volumes that Taschen churns out. He’s Howard Hughes and Hugh Hefner with a dash of Citizen Kane. No less a personage than Billy Wilder – creator of the classic movies *Some Like It Hot* and *The Seven Year Itch* – once said that Taschen reminded him of “an old-time Hollywood figure – a studio head, someone who is in firm command and has his hand in everything”.

“Benedikt doesn’t do any consumer studies or work with focus groups,” says Dian Hanson, who



has edited what Taschen calls his “sexy books” for nine years. “He publishes what he likes, and that’s what he’s done from the very beginning. I was told by somebody when I first came to the company, ‘Our job is to *learn* Benedikt – learn what Benedikt wants and what he likes, and bring that to him.’ And that’s still what I do. And people say, ‘Doesn’t Benedikt have his finger in everything?’ Well, no, not on a day-to-day basis – but the finger is there in our brains. It’s pushing the switches from within.”

Taschen didn’t get where he is today all by himself: he did it by seeking out talented and useful people and recruiting them. Hanson used

with him, and they said I should go ahead and meet him, but that he was very jaded and very German. And when we met I realised he wasn’t jaded at all, he was just very shy.”

For several years, Taschen wooed Hanson – professionally, not sexually – asking her repeatedly to come and work with him: they could make beautiful books together. And it was the female pornographer who was outraged by the businesslike publisher, rather than the other way round. “He just shocked me all the time during those years with the things he told me he wanted to do – all this porn – and I said, ‘You can’t do this. You make art books. You’re going to

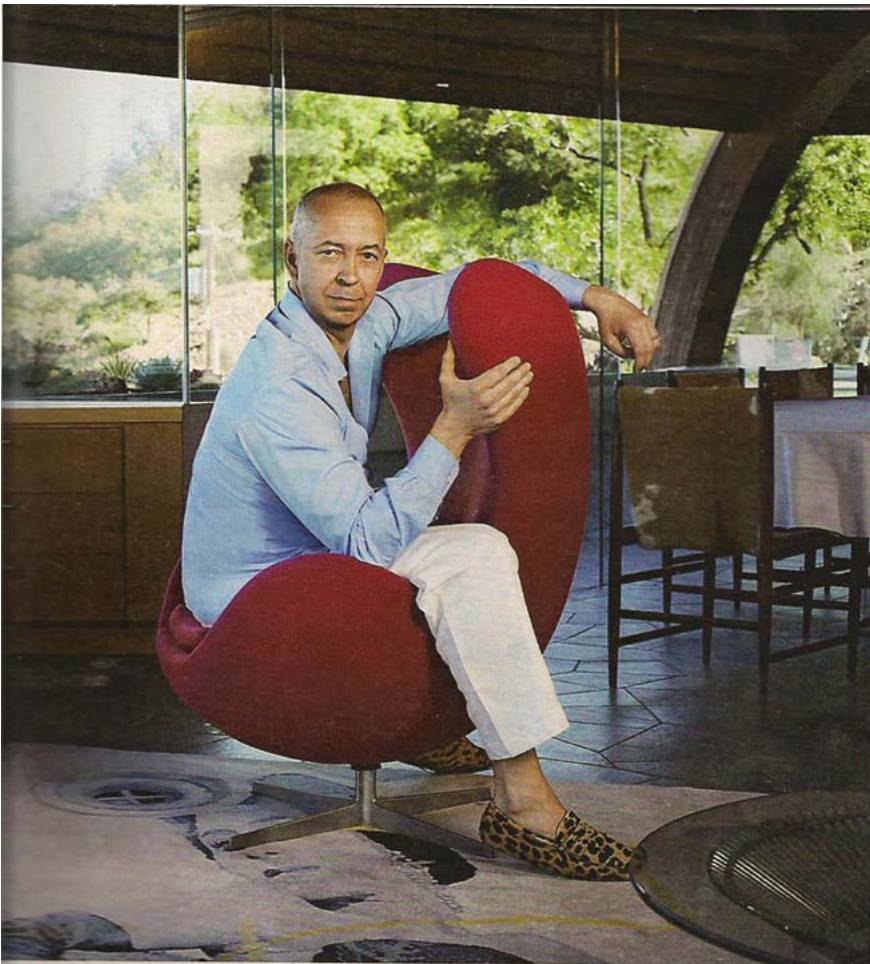
BILLY WILDER ONCE SAID THAT TASCHEN REMINDED HIM OF ‘AN OLD-TIME HOLLYWOOD FIGURE – A STUDIO HEAD, SOMEONE WHO IS IN FIRM COMMAND’

to be an editor of saucy men’s magazines in New York, including *Leg Show* – a pictorial paean to women’s pins. One day in the early 1990s, she received a mysterious call from Taschen’s company, saying that Benedikt was coming to New York and wanted to have dinner with her. The thrusting Teutonic tycoon was in his early thirties then, and his company was quite a respectable publisher of reasonably priced picture books on Magritte and Matisse and Marilyn Monroe, but it turned out that he was privately a big fan of *Leg Show*. “And I was terrified: I had no idea about this man. But I did know a couple of people who had done books

ruin your career!’ And he said, ‘We can do anything we want.’ And he was right.” He also got his way: after Hanson’s magazine publisher died in 2000 and she saw the business going downhill, she joined the Taschen team. Things were about to turn very sexy indeed.

Like many of its books, Taschen’s headquarters in Cologne manages to be beautiful and dirty at the same time. It is a grand villa from the 1880s with neoclassical columns and pediments, a rare survivor of the 262 allied bombing raids on this city in the 1940s, standing proudly in a tree-lined boulevard. However, it is built of grubby-looking brown sandstone, and

Cover Story



flanked by a shabby Tex-Mex eatery and a discount supermarket fronted by stacks of cheap toilet rolls.

In various offices inside, members of Taschen's staff pore studiously over piles and piles of pictures — reproductions of paintings, fashion photographs, architectural views and shots of naked women — in search of visual perfection. Benedikt usually gives them Friday afternoons off, but many of them show no signs of packing up, absorbed as they are in their work. Suddenly there he is, this dapper, short-haired 49-year-old man in a smart grey jacket and grey-striped open-necked shirt, walking briskly into the building. People are pleased to see him here: though the business started in Cologne and this was once his main HQ, his centre of operations is now Los Angeles, and he spends much of the year jetting around the world, meeting people and working up ideas for irresistible books.

Over a delicious duck salad prepared for the two of us by Taschen's official chef, he talks in heavily accented English about his upbringing and his early forays into business. It is not a rags-to-riches tale: he was born in Cologne on February 10, 1961, to well-off and indulgent parents, both of them doctors. "I was kind of born under a lucky star," he says. "My mother and father were the most liberal and supportive parents. They believed that a child educates itself, so they let me do whatever I wanted to do. Whatever I did was supported, and that was certainly the backbone for my whole life."

Here, already, we find the seed of his company's "We can do anything we want" credo. Does he have any early memories of seeing sexy pictures or books? "Well, my parents had a large library, and when I was very young I read Henry Miller and many other books. As a child, you know, if you look for something you will always find it. I remember seeing paintings by Rubens and other artists, of hundreds of voluptuous bodies together."

Some of his father's patients were artists, and they would sometimes pay their medical bills with art. "We often had artists around at home, and I was interested in their work. When an artist sees a young child is interested in what they're doing, it's flattering for them, because they love to talk about their work anyhow. And I always felt regarded as less of a child and more of an adult."

For reasons he can't remember now, little Benedikt started obsessively drawing his own colourful pictures — of vampires. At the age of nine he decided to make some money from them, and set up a stall at the Cologne international art fair. "I remember I was not allowed to go there on my own, so my parents and my sister came with me." He made the equivalent of about £300. "I had the prices on the backs of the pictures. People would ask, 'How much is it?' and I would say something like, '30 marks.' They'd say, 'Oh, I'll give you



Top left: Benedikt, aged nine, selling his vampire artwork in Cologne

Top: Taschen in his octagonal home, the Chemosphere, in LA

This picture: the house (above), raised on a concrete pole, seems to hover in space like a UFO

Cover Story

Right: an image of God as creator, from Taschen's reprint of the Luther Bible of 1534

Below: the thumping GOAT (Greatest Of All Time), a tribute to Muhammad Ali

five,' but I always insisted on sticking to my price, and people were very surprised about that." A photographer fortuitously captured this magnate in embryo: a little boy with long brown centre-parted hair, sitting cross-legged in blue jeans on the floor with his strange, vampiric art works arranged neatly around him.

Comic books became a passion for Taschen, and in 1980, aged 18, he opened the Taschen Comics shop in Cologne, with financial help from those marvellous parents. The very first Taschen publication followed, setting the tone for the modern Taschen empire: a collection of comic strips featuring a bare-breasted blonde adventuress called Sally Forth, created by the American cartoonist Wally Wood as a tonic for US troops in the 1960s. He now uses the lessons he learnt 30 years ago, when he was collecting and selling comics, to reach and satisfy the geekiest and most loyal of customers. "I learnt how the psychology of a collector works. A collection is an obsession: what you like to have obsesses you so much, and you love it if somebody else takes it seriously as well. Because of this, whatever we publish, we have to give 100% and make sure people are completely happy with it. Whatever the subject, we just try to cover it with as much respect as possible."

Taschen graduated from comics in 1984, with a fateful decision to buy 40,000 remaindered copies of a book on René Magritte, which he shifted for a fat profit, learning that there was a big market for art books out there. He soon began to satisfy it by publishing books on Salvador Dali and Annie Leibovitz, and gained a reputation for bringing reasonably priced art books to the masses, exploiting the simple idea that if you include text in different languages, you can sell the same edition in various countries.

Then he started producing his spectaculars: limited editions that were ridiculously epic in



their scale and ambition. Two of the most famous are GOAT, a whopping 20-inch-square tribute to Muhammad Ali, bound in leather of the same pink as the boxer's first Cadillac (special Champ's Edition, £9,000), and Sumo, a 27½-inch-tall monster featuring the defiant, statuesque female nudes of the late photographer Helmut Newton (which also rose in price to £9,000).

GOAT stands for Greatest Of All Time, so what does Sumo stand for: Something Under My

TASCHEN SEEMS JUST AS HAPPY TO PUBLISH A BOOK OF EXPLICIT GAY CARTOONS AS A PERFECT FACSIMILE OF THE LUTHER BIBLE OF 1534

Overcoat? Taschen laughs. "That's great. I just wanted to find a title, and I said, 'Why don't we call it Sumo, like a Sumo wrestler, because it's so big?' and Helmut loved it as well. It's interesting – this book became so famous, and yet the title is not even printed on the entire book. It was only on the packaging, on the box around the book."

His books don't just break coffee tables: they also crash headlong through perceived barriers between high and low art. Taschen seems just as happy to publish a book of explicit gay cartoons by the artist Tom of Finland as he is to bring out a perfect facsimile of the Luther Bible of 1534, reproduced from a rare copy of the original. "I certainly don't believe in this high-and-low distinction," he says. "What's high art and what's low art is a matter of fashion. What is respectable now might be different tomorrow, and will certainly be different 100 years from now."

At the top end of Taschen's output are some highly respectable stunners. Stanley Kubrick's *Napoleon: The Greatest Movie Never Made* is a 10-volumes-in-one analysis of the great director's unrealised epic about the despotic emperor. It includes everything movie buffs might want to know about the film that might have followed *2001: A Space Odyssey*, if it hadn't been scuppered by nervous studio heads.

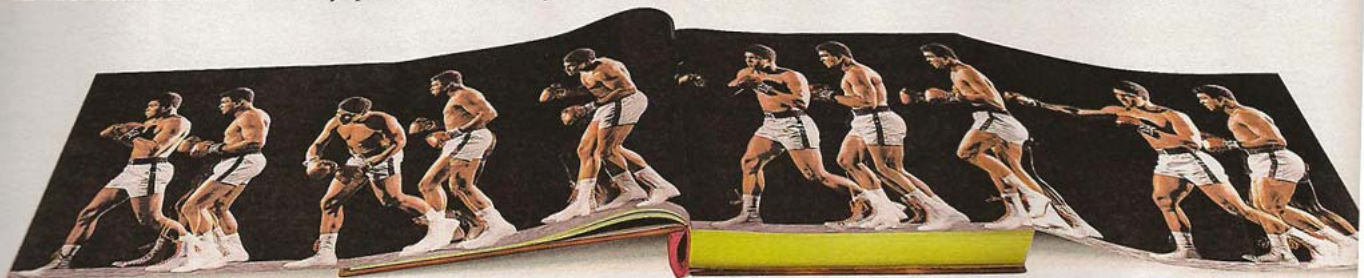
Another epic book, *MoonFire*, celebrates the first manned moon landing with hundreds of photographs and maps from the Nasa vaults, plus Norman Mailer's mammoth feature on the event for *Life* magazine. Its first edition was, cutely, a limited run of 1,969 copies, echoing the year of the Apollo 11 mission, and a dozen of them came with a real chunk of lunar rock. There's good news for readers who balked at *MoonFire*'s stratospheric £900 price tag: a cheaper, compact edition has just been published to mark Taschen's 30th anniversary, costing a mere £27.99.

Taschen recently conjured up one of the finest works ever produced on the subject of magic tricks. *Magic: 1400s–1950s* covers half a millennium of illusions and prestidigitation, capturing the world's greatest magicians in more than 1,000 rarely seen posters, photographs and engravings. Predictably, it is

disappearing from bookshelves across the world. "One reviewer just said that *Magic* was the greatest book they'd had the honour to review," beams Taschen. "That makes me so, so happy."

Dian Hanson is candid about the Taschen "cloak of artistic credibility" that allows the naughtier books to go on display without a rumpus. But isn't there a risk, I ask Taschen, that those books soil his reputation as a serious publisher? "I'm still surprised that they get so much attention," he replies. "You know, it's much harder to make a sophisticated sex book than an architecture book, because there's such a fine line between what you can and can't do; the presentation has to be exactly right."

When I ask Hanson the same question, I get a different answer. "I think some of the people even within the company feel that way. There are people who wish we were a pure art >>>



Cover Story

Right: Taschen and Helmut Newton prove that size matters. The whopping Sumo sold for up to £9,000 a copy

Below: Newton's erotic photographs are right up Taschen's street



company and didn't do these kind of books, and yet these books are so much the reputation of Taschen. Some people think that's all we make."

A Home Office report in February warned that British children were increasingly exposed to sexual imagery. With millions of Taschen books entering family homes around the world, isn't Benedikt worried that young children will get a peek at something they shouldn't?

"Not at all," he retorts. "You can see a million pictures on the internet. So our couple of books should be the least of anyone's concerns." That seems something of a cop-out, like the BNP defending itself by saying there's much worse racism to be found online. "The books we do on sex are for an adult readership and not for children or underage people. For the people who like it, they are happy with it, and if people don't like it, they don't have to buy it. We are not missionaries, telling people they have to look at this and that." When I ask if he has any taboos — if there is anything he would not publish — he thinks long and hard before saying only: "I'm totally against anything which has to do with child abuse and violence."

Hanson offers more insight. "He doesn't really like S&M if it's directed at women," she says. "And he doesn't like to mess with any kind of religion — so you're not going to see naked nuns." That should allay the fears of many residents of Taschen's birthplace — a city so Catholic that its vast gothic cathedral boasts physical relics of the Magi.

At one point, Taschen declares: "We're proud of what we do and we have nothing to hide." The contents of many of his books will back that up. But the company does draw an opaque veil over its revenue and profits. "You know, it's a private company, we don't have to publish numbers, and I don't want to bore people with too many numbers," Benedikt tells me when I press for figures. "Our business is making beautiful, desirable books, and we are not accountants."

But an American media-analysis company called Simba Information reckoned recently that Taschen sold more than £30m worth of books in a single year in the US alone; and Sumo, which sold out in a

limited edition of 10,000, would have grossed tens of millions of pounds. Asked how many copies The Big Book of Breasts has sold, and its companion volume The Big Penis Book, Hanson says: "I have a rough notion, but sales always tells me not to say these things. They say, 'If you quote this, they're going to want to know what other books sold.' But it's high. I can say that. The Big Penis Book will undoubtedly be the bestselling book of my career, and there have been about six printings of each. And what's interesting is that the breast book sold extremely well among women as well as among men."

'HE DOESN'T REALLY LIKE S&M DIRECTED AT WOMEN, AND HE DOESN'T MESS WITH ANY RELIGION, SO YOU'RE NOT GOING TO SEE NAKED NUNS'

Benedikt Taschen certainly seems to have plenty of spending power. In LA — where he lives with his third wife, Lauren, and their baby son, Laszlo — he owns the Chemosphere, a 1960s space-age residence above Mulholland Drive that you expect to see Thunderbird 3 blasting off from. It reportedly cost him about £660,000 in 1997; and in 2001 he bought another, larger house nearby for closer to £800,000. "He is building himself a little empire there in the Hollywood Hills, making himself a grand estate in the old style," says Hanson. Taschen enjoys living among "curious,

unpretentious and inspiring" creative types there, such as David Hockney. "He has a house round the corner, though he's not in Los Angeles very often these days. I don't know him very well, but to my mind he is one of the greatest painters alive. I have been stalking him for years in the hope that he might do a book with me. Maybe it helps when he reads this!"

Taschen has a substantial art collection himself, which remained private until he put it on show in Madrid in 2004. Last year he sold three Jeff Koons sculptures for a total of around £6.5m, and he regularly gives works of art to his three children from his first marriage. But he seems much happier to talk about his latest book projects. "We're doing a great James Bond book for the end of next year, with the Broccoli family, for the 50th anniversary of the Bond films." And next month sees publication of The Big Butt Book, edited by Hanson, who has spent four years rummaging in archives for posterior shots.

"It was hard knowing what to do with this book," she muses, "because there are two distinct groups of bottom-lovers. One group likes the tight, high, very youthful buttock, and the other just wants them as big as possible. And it was much harder than the breast book and the

penis book, because up until the last decade, photographers, certainly in America, just weren't photographing butts."

Taschen isn't a pushover for every raunchy idea that is put in front of him. "A while ago I showed him some photographs by Leigh Ledare, who had been photographing his mother nude — she's a stripper — since he was about 21," recalls Hanson. I just loved it — the perversity of it and the artistry of it — but Benedikt looked at it and said, 'I... think... not.' Sometimes if I go

'Please, please, please,' he gives in to me, but there was no giving in on this one.

But Taschen's judgment is by no means infallible. Two years ago he published Sex to Sixty, a collection of cartoons from a dodgy 1960s American magazine of the same name. "It's hillbilly humour, which plays with all the taboos in such an absurdly funny way," he enthuses. The cartoons, which commonly include pneumatic topless women are a riot of off-colour jokes about nurses, baby-sitters, wife-swappers, lesbians and inflatable dolls. "But it was one of the worst-selling titles we've had for

years. It seems I was the only one who thought it was funny." Sometimes, doing what you darned well want comes at a price ■

