

AT HOME WITH
SLIM AARONS

Teaching the Rich To Say Cheese

By CHRISTOPHER MASON

KATONAH, N.Y.
“**T**HIS fireplace heats the whole house,” Slim Aarons said, pointing to the ravenous fire warming his book-lined living room on a frigid afternoon earlier this month.

Mr. Aarons, 85, the photographer whose images of the beau monde at leisure appeared in *Town & Country* and *Life* magazine for nearly half a century, was extolling the design of his 1782 clapboard farmhouse, where he has lived since 1953.

“The farmers were so smart,” he said, referring to the original owners. “They planted black walnut trees in front because their leaves were the first to shed in the fall. So the house gets the warm winter sunlight when it needs it.”

For Mr. Aarons, adroit planning is crucial. “I’m a great believer in form and design,” he said. That guiding principle is apparent in his kitchen, where a drawer next to the oven is impeccably organized, with every conceivable implement for baking. Similarly, the stairway to the cellar is lined with virtually every household necessity, including various types of glue, all tacked to the wall.

That organizational zeal is also evident in Mr. Aarons’s photos of swells. Once, he dragged away a



John Peden for The New York Times; inset, Slim Aarons/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

giant freezer blocking a 15th-century mural that made a splendid setting for a portrait of a Roman princess.

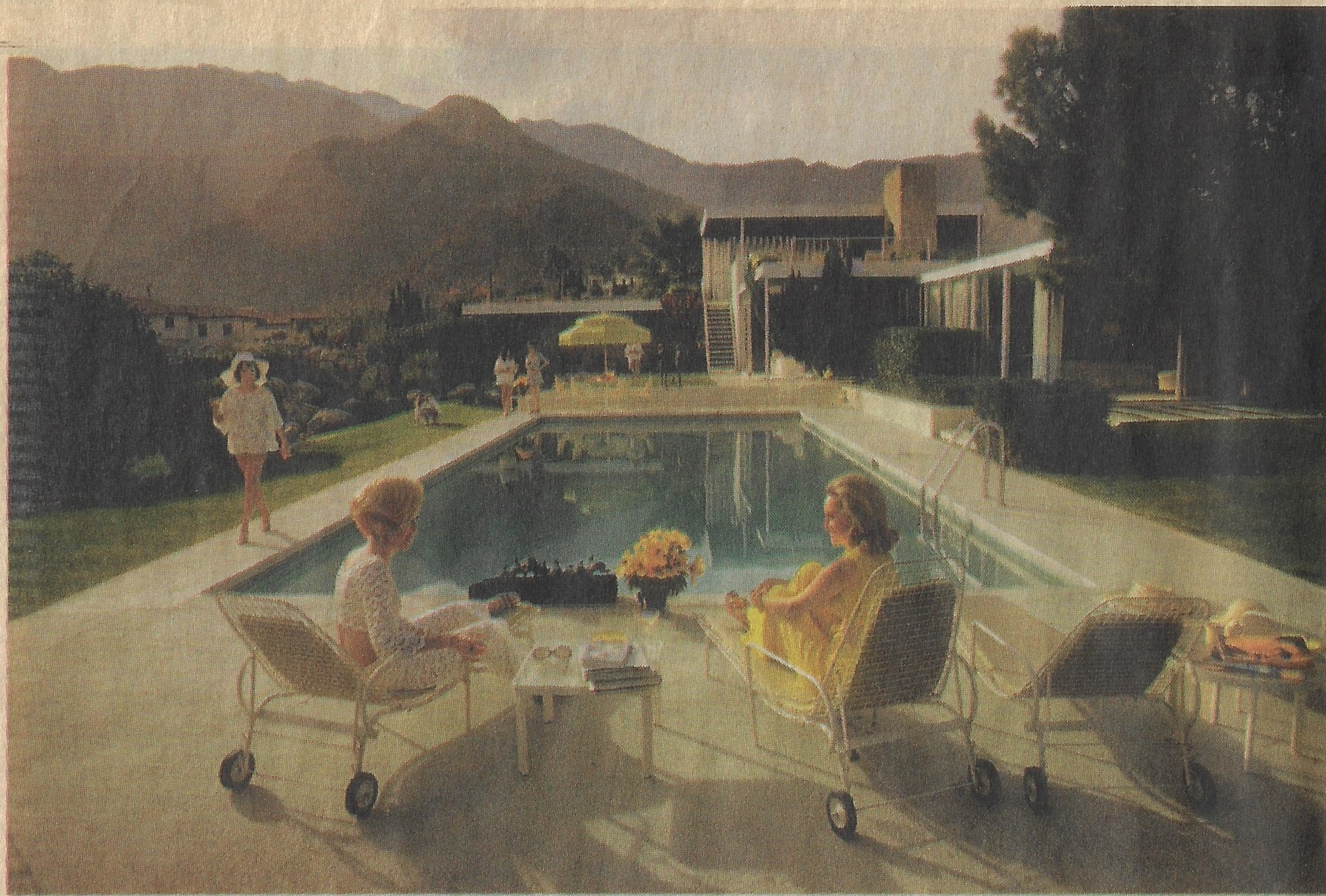
Frank Zachary, the former editor of *Town & Country* and Mr. Aarons’s former boss, called him “the photo laureate of the upper classes.” After a stint as an Army photographer, Mr. Aarons was sent around the world by

Diana Vreeland, the fashion editor of *Harper’s Bazaar*. “Once Upon a Time” is a somewhat tardy follow-up to Mr. Aarons’s first book, “A Wonderful Time (Harper & Row, 1974), which is similarly filled with pictures of beautiful, wealthy, famous people having fun. Today it is a cult object.

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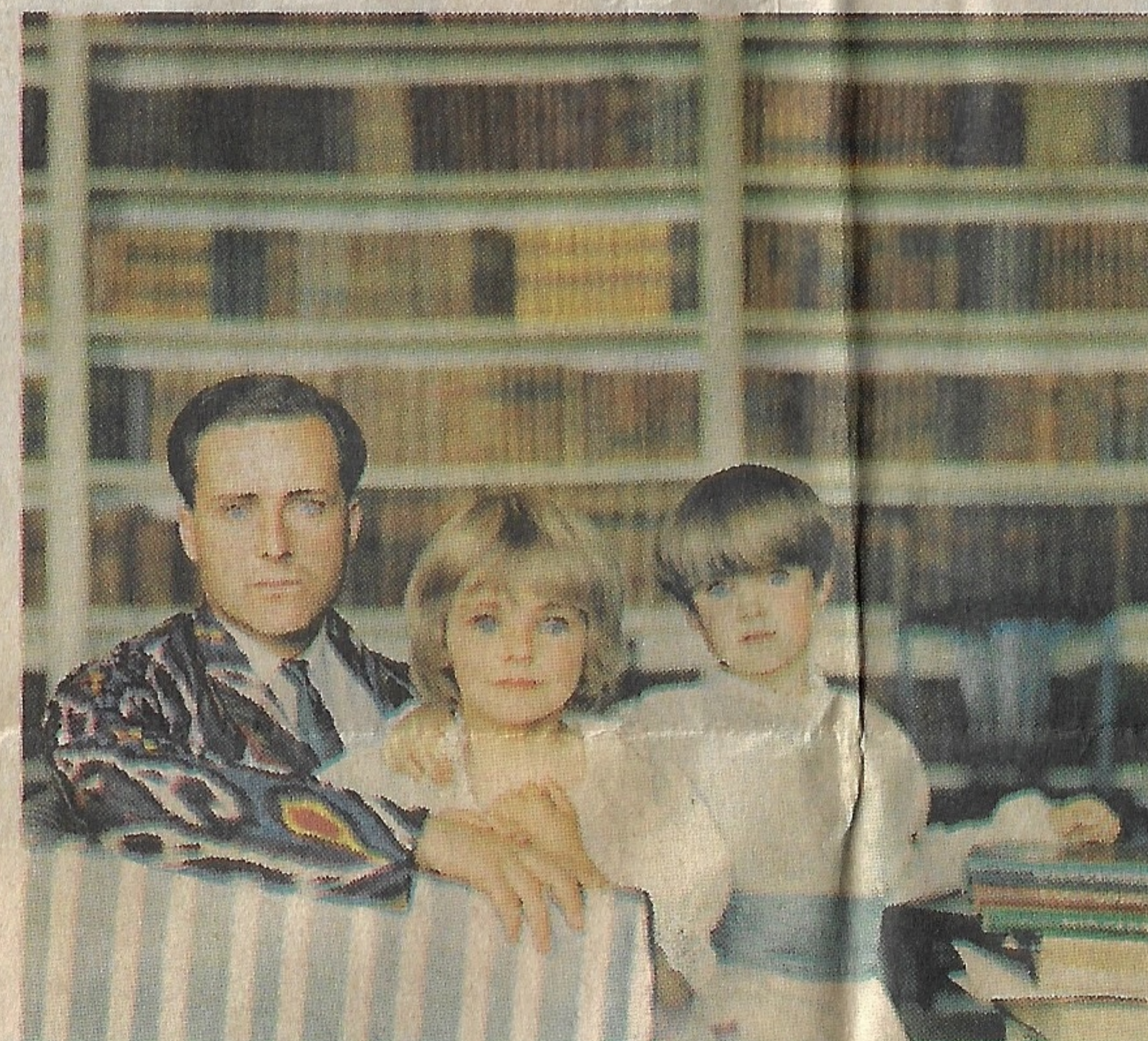
CLICK The photographer Slim Aarons, at left outside his farmhouse, captured the beau monde at play. Above, a portrait of the movie producer Kevin McClory and his family on a Sunday drive in the Bahamas.



Photographs by Slim Aarons/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

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HIGH SOCIETY The film director Franco Zeffereilli, above, photographed by Slim Aarons in 1984 in Positano, Italy. Above left, a widely imitated 1970 photo taken by Mr. Aarons at the Edgar Kaufmann house in Palm Springs, Calif. Far left, Mr. Aarons's 1963 portrait of Desmond Guinness and his children at their Irish castle; left, Mr. Aarons's portrait in pink of the actress Joan Collins, taken in the mid-50's.

Yesterday, Jane Stubbs, the rare book dealer, had two vintage copies for \$1,325 each in her store at Bergdorf Goodman.

"It's selling for \$2,000 on eBay," Mr. Aarons declared proudly, more than once. "I'm just trying to figure out why they're buying it," he added, with more than a whiff of false modesty.

"I'm just an ordinary guy," Mr. Aarons said. "I just picked a niche nobody else did." Luckily, it was a world that everyone wanted to read about. The society beauties Mr. Aarons photographed were gossip-column celebrities of their day. "Every woman in America wanted to be Babe Paley, C. Z. Guest or Gloria Guinness," he said.

Those glory days have passed, and Mr. Aarons has bid adieu to the city. He said he now preferred living in the country and rarely ventured into Manhattan, only an hour away. "I don't go to New York anymore," he said. "I went when it was great and beautiful." He was referring in part to the 1950's, when he paid \$32 a month for a one-bedroom apartment with a terrace on 57th Street, near Park Avenue.

Mr. Aarons's society portraits include the now familiar image of Mrs. Guest, blond and icily beautiful as she holds the arm of her 5-year-old son, Alexander. They are standing at her mother-in-law's Palm Beach estate, where a fanciful temple to the goddess Diana stands sentinel between pool and ocean. That image adorns the cover of Mr. Aarons's new book, "Once Upon a Time" (to be published next month by Abrams), which has become an inadvertent memorial to Mrs. Guest, who died on Nov. 8.

In Katonah, Mr. Aarons, who claims to abhor personal publicity, was ready to roll. An interview with him is not for the faint-hearted. Nor the hungry. I arrived for lunch at 12:30, and there was no sign nor mention

of food until 4:30, when a lunch of locally smoked salmon was served. At last.

Mr. Aarons likes to talk. After a marathon six-hour soliloquy, during which he scarcely stopped for a breath, I was a nervous wreck. But Mr. Aarons was just getting started. "Don't you want to see the rest of the house?" he asked.

Wearing a light-blue shirt, open to reveal an old-fashioned blue-and-white polka dot ascot and chinos long enough to accommodate his prodigiously long legs — he is 6 feet 4 inches — Mr. Aarons led me upstairs to his workroom. There, surrounded by old-

fashioned projectors, were boxes of negatives labeled "Arizona Millionaires," "Hugh Hefner & Chicago Playboy Club" and "Bahamas and S. America" — images that might end up in another volume of photographs.

In the living room, where a pair of gleaming English hunting horns stood ready to be sounded. Mr. Aarons showed off his books. "I have every single thing Mark Twain ever wrote," he said.

"No fancy words," he added, admiringly. "Every trip I traveled, I always carried Mark Twain with me. The greatest read in

the world. I read 'Tom Sawyer' every year."

The house contains an eccentric assemblage of trophies and memorabilia. In a dark hallway, Mr. Aarons pointed a flashlight at a wooden weather vane. "Desmond Guinness gave me this," he said, referring to the scion of the Irish brewery fortune. "It used to hang on his door at college." The inscription, in bold letters, said: "It's a Lovely Day for Guinness." Another tour revealed a mural depicting Mr. Aarons' farmhouse and the countryside around it. "I got tired of putting up wallpaper," he said.

Mr. Aarons said he liked living in Ka-



THIRD EYE Mr. Aarons's Leica, above, atop a photo of (from left) Clark Gable, Van Heflin, Gary Cooper and James Stewart; left, the photographer.

John Peden for The New York Times, above and right

tonah, near Bedford. "All the movie stars have moved in," he said, chuckling. "Ralph Lauren lives just across the lake from here. Bob Pittman lives right here on the corner, and the grandson of Commodore Vanderbilt lives just over there," he said, pointing to a nearby field.

Last weekend, Mr. Aarons attended the funeral of C. Z. Guest, an event that inspired many of the congregants to remark afterward that her passing signaled the end of an era of grace and style.

Embodying that nearly extinct era, Mr. Aarons was something of a star at the luncheon that followed at Templeton, the Guest estate in Old Westbury, on Long Island. Everywhere he turned Mr. Aarons was in demand. John Olsen, a senior marketing executive at Tommy Hilfiger, came up to pay homage. "We have copies of your first book around the office, and we refer to it all the time," he said.

"No matter your background or your walk of life or circumstance," he continued, Mr. Aarons's pictures evoked "a simpler time when everyone looked very happy."

"And obviously very rich, too," he added.

Mr. Aarons had spent two hours standing on his feet, reminiscing about Mrs. Guest. Suddenly, he looked dizzy and on the verge of losing his balance.

He accepted an offer to accompany him to his car, where a driver awaited him.

In the doorway, he fainted and collapsed in my arms. When the cry went out for a seat for Mr. Aarons, Jane Holzer, the former Warhol superstar, obliged by fetching a leopard-skin armchair.

"I'm 85," he declared. "Can't stand up that long." After regaining his composure, Mr. Aarons climbed into a waiting car for a good snooze. He was driven home, and two days later he was eager to talk some more about his book.