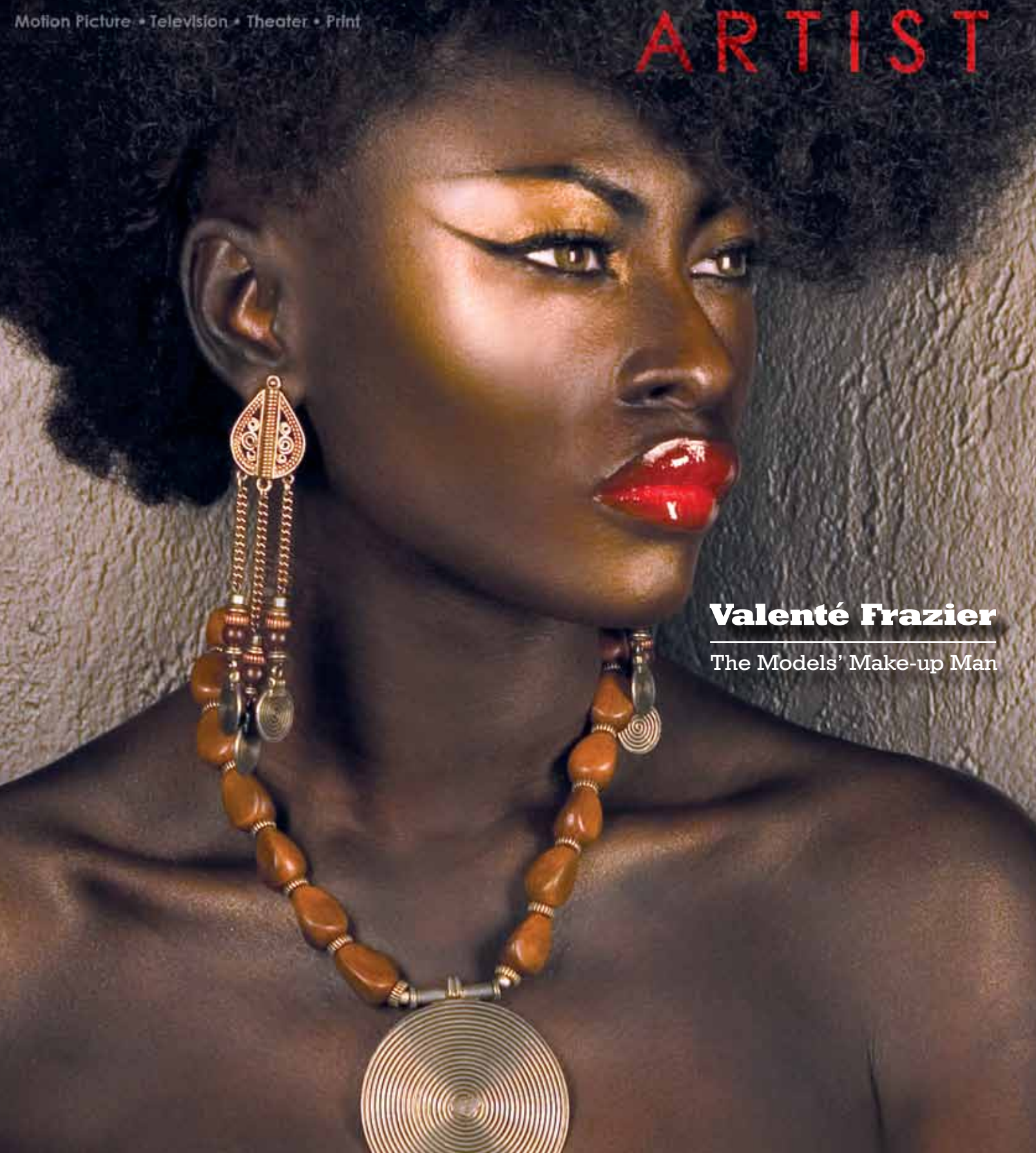


MAKE-UP

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ARTIST



Valenté Frazier

The Models' Make-up Man



Photo by Jim DeGonker

MODEL MAKER

Emmy-winning artist Valenté Frazier makes up a bevy of beauties

By Martha Calhoon

Valenté Frazier is one of the industry's leading celebrity make-up artists, thanks to his sultry red-carpet looks, a '90s-era supermodel aesthetic and a special talent for making up women of color. Iman depends on him, Tyra Banks snatched him from Janice Dickinson and Michelle Obama has personally requested him. After 13 years in the industry and an Emmy with his name on it, Frazier's success speaks to the payoffs of dogged tenacity, a winning personality and a well-placed business card.

The Virginia native stumbled into the beauty world in the mid-'90s while studying fine art at Norfolk State University. Although he was majoring in museum studies and exhibit planning, a course in fashion illustration lit a spark.

"I found myself drawn to it," he says. "I loved drawing these different faces and creating different looks for these faces."

While he was taking that class, he came across *The Art of Makeup* by Kevyn Aucoin. "It was the most phenomenal book I had ever seen," he says. "It was the first make-up book I ever purchased and I fell in love." And as he pored over images of Aucoin's smoky eyes and

refined brows, he found himself struck by the similarities between his own life story and that of his fellow Southerner.

"This guy started out just like I did: as a kid drawing all the time. To see that he had a natural artistic gift like myself—to be able to draw, to render, to draw from memory—it inspired me. It really did," he says.

Soon, Frazier added other books to his collection. He found a role model in African-American artist Sam Fine and a detailed breakdown of what all artists should have in their make-up kits from Bobbi Brown. Inspired by his new library, Frazier bought an inexpensive make-up palette and started making over his friends. "Thank God for them," he laughs. "If not for them, I wouldn't have been able to really practice."

After graduation in 1998, he followed in the footsteps of Aucoin and Fine, who both got started behind a make-up counter. With no professional retail experience or make-up background, Frazier secured the manager position at the local Dillard's fledgling Elizabeth Arden counter through a combination of charm and light fibbing. "I told them I did make-up for the theater at school," he confesses.



At Elizabeth Arden, Frazier worked with a wide range of skin tones and textures. “It really prepared me and it was a really great experience, but I needed more,” he says. So in 1999, he left Portsmouth, Virginia for New York City.

“I started calling all the contacts given to me by various people before I left, trying to see where I could fit in, assist someone, test,” he says. “It was hard. I was asking other make-up artists in department stores, filling out applications, trying to freelance.”

Frazier finally landed a freelance gig with Fashion Fair cosmetics at Bloomingdale’s and soon after, a full-time job at Origins. But his sights were set on a marble-floored M.A.C. boutique inside Henry Bendel.

Armed only with the before-and-after Polaroids he had taken while working at Elizabeth Arden, he took his résumé into the M.A.C. boutique and interviewed for a position as an artist. (Frazier interviewed for the position before his shift at Origins, with his uniform on under his suit.) He got the job.

In his two-and-a-half years at M.A.C., Frazier built up a steady clientele but, more importantly, he learned the value of building relationships. “I learned a lot about customer service,” he says, “... like sending my customers cards on their birthdays, or flowers—really learning about how to keep the customer happy and keep them coming back. Because it really is about personal relationships with any client or customer.”

In the summer of 1999, Frazier hopped a plane to the Bronner Bros. International Hair Show in Atlanta, where his hero, Sam Fine, was teaching a make-up course. “I handed him my business card and told him I loved his work,” Frazier says. They stayed in touch and Fine gave Frazier his first assisting job, on a shoot for a Noxzema commercial.

“It was the most rewarding experience, just to watch him work and create a face. I didn’t do any make-up, but I was like a sponge, just absorbing. I was able to go back to the counter and practice what I saw him do on clients and I got better and better and better at it,” Frazier says. Fine began calling Frazier

to assist on other projects.

Around that time, Henry Bendel launched a new brand in the store: a now-defunct couture cosmetic line by supermodel Iman called I-Iman Makeup. Although the launch party was scheduled on Frazier’s day off, he went anyway for a chance to meet Jay Manuel, one of his favorite artists and I-Iman’s international make-up artist.

“After the presentation was over, I stayed back and started talking with Jay, just trying to pick his brain about products and product knowledge. I told him, ‘I’d love to work with you.’” Unfortunately, Frazier’s attempt at networking looked more like a job interview to Bendel’s human resources department and he was fired the following day. But Frazier describes that as a blessing in disguise.

“I was getting restless behind the make-up counter because I started getting a taste of what it was like being out there and working on gigs,” he says. “I wanted to be out there freelancing, but I didn’t know how to do it. Getting fired really gave me the boot to get out there and be on my own.”

Frazier landed a job freelancing for I-Iman Makeup. Although the job was still in retail, being a freelancer allowed him the flexibility to take days off to test, build his portfolio and assist top make-up artists.

“This was how I got my foot in the door—by being more available when top artists needed me to assist,” he says. “Getting fired at that time showed me that I could be replaced, that nothing is permanent and to never get too comfortable or complacent, but to always strive higher.”

At I-Iman, he became a national trainer, which put him closer to Manuel. Eventually, Manuel offered Frazier an assisting opportunity.

“I learned very quickly that being a good assistant, doing what you’re supposed to do, being quiet, staying out of the way, always being there and being intuitive to the artist you’re assisting is key because they’ll always remember that and they’ll refer you to their friends in the industry,” Frazier says. “Word of mouth is so important in this industry.”



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Photo by Troy Ward

"Anyone can do smoky eyes or whatever, but the skin is really the most important thing. Once you have that down as an artist, you're good to go." —Valenté Frazier

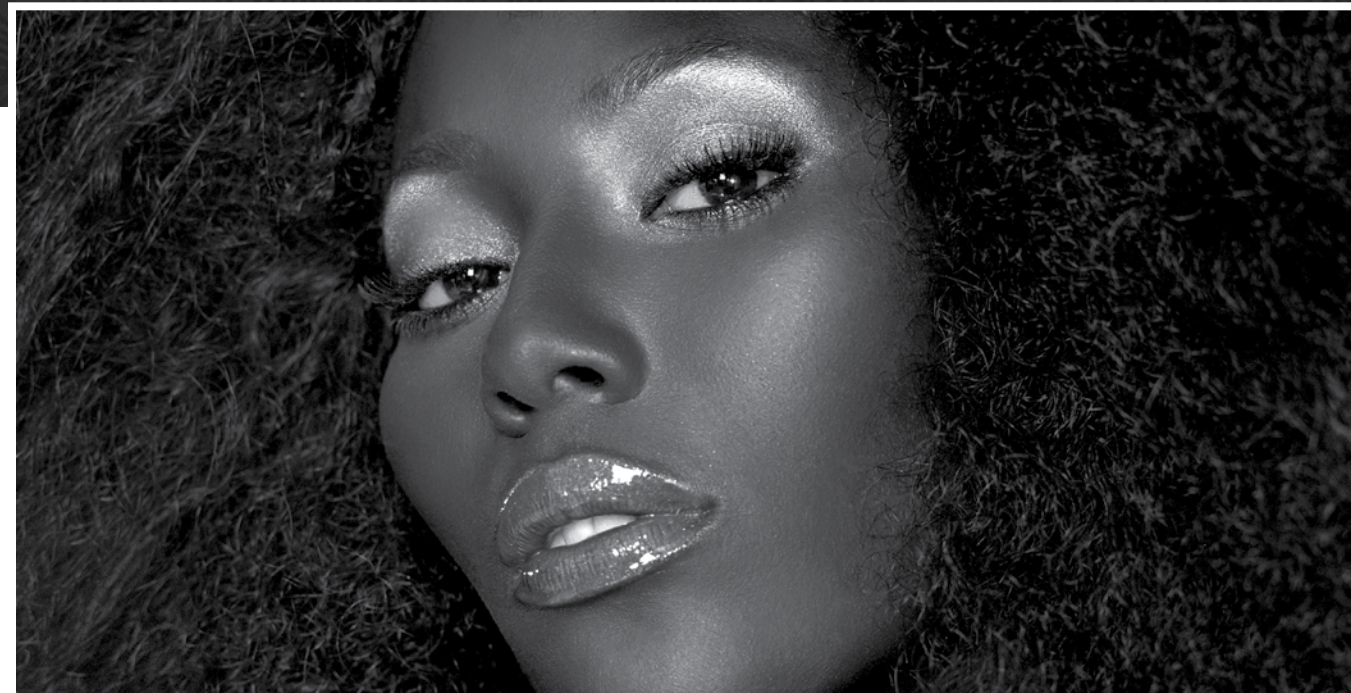


Photo by Keith Major

While working at I-Iman, Frazier assisted Fine, Manuel and a few others—testing, building his book and picking up new techniques. A few freelance jobs came in, but Frazier's big break came in 2003: Tyra Banks was launching a new TV show, Manuel told him—*America's Next Top Model*. Manuel would be doing Banks' make-up, but there might be room on the show for Frazier if he was interested. He signed on as the personal make-up artist for the famously demanding former supermodel Janice Dickinson, a show judge. When Manuel was named creative director for the show's photo shoots during the fourth cycle, he recommended Frazier as his replacement.

"Janice was not happy *at all*," Frazier laughs.

Since then, Frazier has done Banks' make-up exclusively for the show and most of her public appearances, including her final walk down the runway in the 2005 Victoria's Secret Fashion Show in New York City.

When Banks debuted her talk show that same year, Frazier moved to Los Angeles (where the show was taping) to continue on as her personal make-up artist. Luckily, Frazier had just completed a short stint doing make-up for Star Jones on *The View*, which prepared him for work on a daytime TV talk show.

"I learned things like working fast, working 'around' the talent—doing their make-up while they're briefing, looking down reading scripts, talking to executive producers and other talent—and still completing the look within the allotted time," he says. "Also, adjusting my make-up for daytime talk-show lighting, which was very different from the gorgeous key lights they used on *America's Next Top Model*."

Production for *America's Next Top Model* moved west with Banks, and Frazier found himself working with the supermodel year-round. In 2007, he won a Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Achievement in Makeup for his work on *The Tyra Banks Show*. He earned two more nominations in 2009 and 2010 for his work on the production.

When Banks' talk show ended in 2010, Frazier and *America's Next Top Model* returned to New York, where he finally had more time to build his freelance clientele. His client list now includes Iman, Angela Bassett, Vanessa Williams, Aretha Franklin, Kerry Washington, Michelle Obama, R&B singer Ciara and pop star Rihanna. Although Frazier's celebrity roster seems to be dominated by top black celebrities, he says this niche developed entirely by coincidence.

"Once you have mastered skin of color, you can do anyone's make-up," he says. "With skin of color, it's kind of a tricky balance to actually be able to use more than one shade of foundation to highlight around the eyes and down the center of the face. Otherwise it creates a flat, dimensionless palette. You really have to know how to layer it on and know when to pull back and say, 'That's enough.' Anyone can do smoky eyes or whatever, but the skin is really the most important thing. Once you have that down as an artist, you're good to go."

Frazier recently toured Brazil with Rihanna, where the two exchanged trade secrets in the make-up chair. After all, doing make-up for a sweaty, live performance requires a different approach than a stroll down the red carpet.

"I love learning tips from my clients," he says. "Tyra doesn't like permanent things like stains that are meant to last a long time because we're working often and have to change the look often. However, Rihanna is a performer, so she wants things to stay put."

Soon, Frazier will be taking his talent for networking to the Web. He and a business partner are launching makeupartistsmeet.com, a social networking platform exclusively for make-up artists.

"You can't get far in this industry without networking, plain and simple," he says. "Had I not networked with other make-up artists more advanced than myself, I probably would not have had the chance to assist these individuals, thereby getting my foot in the door. Even on the advanced level, we are still networking and fostering new relationships. You never know who your next big lead will come though." **MA**