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CHARLES JAMES

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BY

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COVER PHOTOGRAPH

Mrs. Ronald Armstrong-Jones (later, Anne, Countess of Rosse) swathed in spirals of pink and black tulle at James's Bruton St. salon. Charles James was in attendance at the photography session and devised the coiffure on the spot, to blend both with the gown and with the setting, as he assured his client.

The walls of the salon were covered with tufted pale blue satin and "moderne" and French Second Empire furniture competed for attention with the skins covering the highly polished floor.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr. Nicola Gordon-Bowe,
for her help and untiring interest.

Lord Rosse,
for his help.

Countess of Rosse,
for her inspiring thoughts on Charles James, and interest.

Gill Hewitt,
for introducing me to the world of Charles James.

Lisa Sexton,
for inspiring and understanding.

Paula-Jane Shutter,
for believing in beautiful dresses.

*For Anne, Countess of Rosse,
and to an era and style
that is now but a dream.*

*It is a glory - to have been tested,
to have had our little quality and cast
our little spell. The thing is to have
made somebody care We work in the
dark - we do what we can - we give what
we have. Our doubt is our passion and
our passion is our task. The rest is
the madness of Art.*

Charles James's favourite passage from Henry James, *The Middle Years*.

(Taken from Genius of Charles James)

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INTRODUCTION

My tutor, Gill Hewitt, introduced me to the world of Charles James in 1986. I had never heard of Charles James before and, due to his early work with millinery and my own interest in millinery, I felt an immediate affinity with him.

Millinery plays a major role in my life and work. I have worked for International Milliner, Stephen Jones, and at his studio, I was introduced to millinery as a sculptural art form. Millinery has helped me to conceive, cut and shape in garment construction and to always consider my garments three-dimensionally, so, discovering Charles James was a breath of fresh air in this commercial world of fashion we have today.

Charles James was passionate about his work as I am about mine, and he believed in fashion as an art form as I do. I find his endless dedication to making beautiful timeless garments touching and his uncompromising dedication beyond reasonable description.

I began to research Charles James's work in the summer of 1987. I wrote to the Countess of Rosse, requesting any information she may have to offer. Charles James felt very strongly about the client-couturier relationship and the Countess of Rosse was one of his premiere clients. Every major article dealing with Charles James mentions the Countess and the part she played in his life. Thus I felt it necessary to somehow make contact with her. On this occasion I did not receive a reply from her. My tutor advised me to write to Lou Taylor, Head of Dress and Textiles Dept. at Brighton Polytechnic which I did once again requesting any information. She promptly replied, informing me about The Genius of Charles James, a catalogue to the 1982 retrospective on his work at the Brooklyn Museum, which the majority of his work.

Subsequently, I contacted the Brooklyn Museum with this information and received a very simple reply explaining the mentioned catalogue existed but was out of print. The catalogue was not to be found

in any of the Irish libraries but the staff at the Library of the National College of Art and Design located and borrowed the catalogue from a British library.

In December 1987, I attempted to make contact with the Countess of Rosse again, this time through her son, Lord Rosse, who lives in Birr Castle in Ireland. Lord Rosse promptly replied and offered to help me in any way he could. He mentioned his mother would be with him in Birr at Easter and the possibility of meeting her then. I telephoned Lord Rosse and explained to him that Easter would be too late, I then offered to travel to Nymans, where the Countess lives outside London, if she would see me. Eventually through my tutor, Dr. Nicola Gordon-Bowe's intervention and help I visited the Countess of Rosse at 5 p.m. on Sunday, 7th February 1988. The meeting and subsequent interview proved invaluable to my research and gave me an insight into the real Charles James.

Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned and paid to paint a portrait of a client's wife. The customer never got the picture.

Leonardo da Vinci kept insisting he had not finished it, and took it to France when he went to work for Francis I. Today, the "Mona Lisa" hangs in the Louvre, never delivered to its rightful owner.

So, we must forgive geniuses their transgressions, and remember them only by the beauty and inspiration they give us, their legacy to us.

Through this thesis I hope to justify the above statement.

CHAPTER 1

CHARLES JAMES, A LIFE

Charles James was born at Camberley in Surrey on July 18th, 1906. His mother, Louise Brega, was a beautiful Chicago heiress, who had met his father, Colonel Ralph Haweis James, an instructor at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst in England.

Charles James's upbringing was typical of his background. It gave him social and family connections and attitudes that were crucial to his career in couture. Though he was to spend much of his life in America, he never lost his upper-class English accent nor his snobbish outlook. James's social connections and, in particular, his lifelong friendship with Cecil Beaton, which began at Harrow, helped him greatly in later years.

After a time at Harrow, it became clear that James would not follow family tradition and enter the services. He was eventually removed from Harrow because his friend, Cecil Beaton, was seen wearing make-up to a the dansant and for a while he was coached for a musical career in France.

At the age of 18 he was sent to Chicago to work under a friend of his father's in the electrical business of utilities magnate, Samuel Insul. This did not interest James so he fled to Oak Street in the bohemian quarter of Chicago and opened a hat shop with a milliner he had known since childhood. Here he took on the challenge of creating the most sculptural of all apparel. There is no evidence of how and where he came by this decision and training. His father was so disgusted with him that he refused to allow him to work under the family name. James, using the name of a schooltime friend, called his shop, Charles Boucheron (Fig. 1).

His sisters were not allowed to visit or mention him and he was taken off the Chicago debutantes list because of his outrageous



Fig. 1 Charles James working as a milliner under the name, Boucheron. Here he shapes a felt hat on Marianne Van Rensselaer before Cecil Beaton's camera.

reputation. He did not mind as he already had enough of fashionable contacts, and other relatives could not be prevented from patronising him, wealthy clients like Mrs. Adlai Stevenson Sr., Helen Hayes and Irene Castle, all ordered from him in Chicago.

Financed by the highly regarded Pirie family, James set up another hat shop, this time in New York. His working years were to be characterised by financial backing from wealthy and influential families whom he had charmed. His life would be punctuated by brief stops. He would make hotels his home, find a source for quickly borrowing money and then move on, usually hounded by creditors and having offended his patrons.

The salon in New York was decorated with cobalt blue floors and lemon yellow walls, the only furniture being barrels on which he displayed his hats. The wilder fashionables of the day fell in love with him, and he began dressing the international beauties, who would become his clients for the rest of his life.

After a few triumphant months in New York, he crossed the Atlantic and opened his first couture business in London's Bruton Street, financed by his hat shop in New York. Charles James really found his stride in the London of the thirties. He had a flair for the spectacular, the temperamental genius and gesture that was just right for that era. He chose to receive visitors to his navy and white lacquered Bruton Street salon, lounging in a cloud of white tulle.

London's fashionable and beautiful people were charmed by him and it became fashionable to meet at his Bruton Street salon every Thursday during 1930. Cecil Beaton introduced him around and the clients poured in. Mrs. St. John Hutchinson brought Matisse and they chose the blouse in which he painted her (Fig. 2). His clients at Bruton Street included the Hon. Mrs. Bryan Guinness, Tchelitchew, Queen Ena of Spain, The Ranee of Dudukota, Anita Loos, Alicia Markova, Lady Mosely, Virginia Woolf, Nancy Cunard and the



Fig 2 Drawing of Mrs. St. John Hutchinson by Matisse
wearing Charles James Blouse, 1930.



Fig. 3 (on facing page)

Figure 8 skirt or wraparound culottes from 1940. Contemporary fashion writers were at a loss to describe the impact of the design. The caption to this photograph reads,

*Bare-ribbed dress carried to the heights of daring, with a sarong skirt, wrapping the legs, in an ingenious figure 8, made of
It's not a beach dress, but only for a night in the South!*

(Genius of Charles James)



The
latest spiral model
by
CHARLES JAMES
fitted with
"LIGHTNING" zipp
fastener

'LIGHTNING'
zipp fastener

This advertisement features a vintage photograph of two women in elegant, light-colored dresses. A large, stylized zipper graphic is superimposed over the image, curving across the scene. The zipper pull is prominently displayed. The text is arranged in a classic, elegant font, with the brand name 'LIGHTNING' in a bold, outlined typeface. The overall aesthetic is that of a 1930s fashion advertisement.

Fig. 4

Countess of Rosse. His rise was meteoric. Vogue had discovered him within a couple of seasons. He never had any formal design training or apprenticeship, learning his brilliant cutting and draping from studying the human body, from the craftsmen who worked for him and from his peers.

Here in London, his most memorable garments were his wraparound culottes (Fig. 3) and his taxi dress (Fig. 4) which exploited the new coloured plastic zip. (He and Elsa Schiaparelli were the first to exploit the zip in 1930, which had previously been used for the sole purpose of golf bags.)

In 1936, he travelled to Paris where he opened a branch of his salon at the Hotel Lancaster in Paris. Not yet 30, he was competing with the established Parisian couturiers. Here at the Hotel Lancaster lived Jean Cocteau, who was an old friend. Jean Cocteau took over Cecil Beaton's role socially and the clients began to roll in once again. Here he made sensational clothes for ladies of birth and wealth. His circle expanded to include French cafe society from Gertrude Stein to Colette.

His first major showing in Paris introduced his acclaimed evening wraps made from grosgrain millinery ribbons (Fig. 5). These spectacular garments took the fancy of the French fashion world and on viewing them, Paul Poiret, widely thought to be one of the great innovators of dress design in the 20th century, was inspired to tell James,

I pass you my crown, wear it well.

(Genius of Charles James)

In 1939, Charles James fled Paris, possibly due to the imminence of war but mainly because of his mounting debts.

He moved back to New York and began designing for the House of Elizabeth Arden. This partnership with Mrs. Thomas Jenkin Lewis,



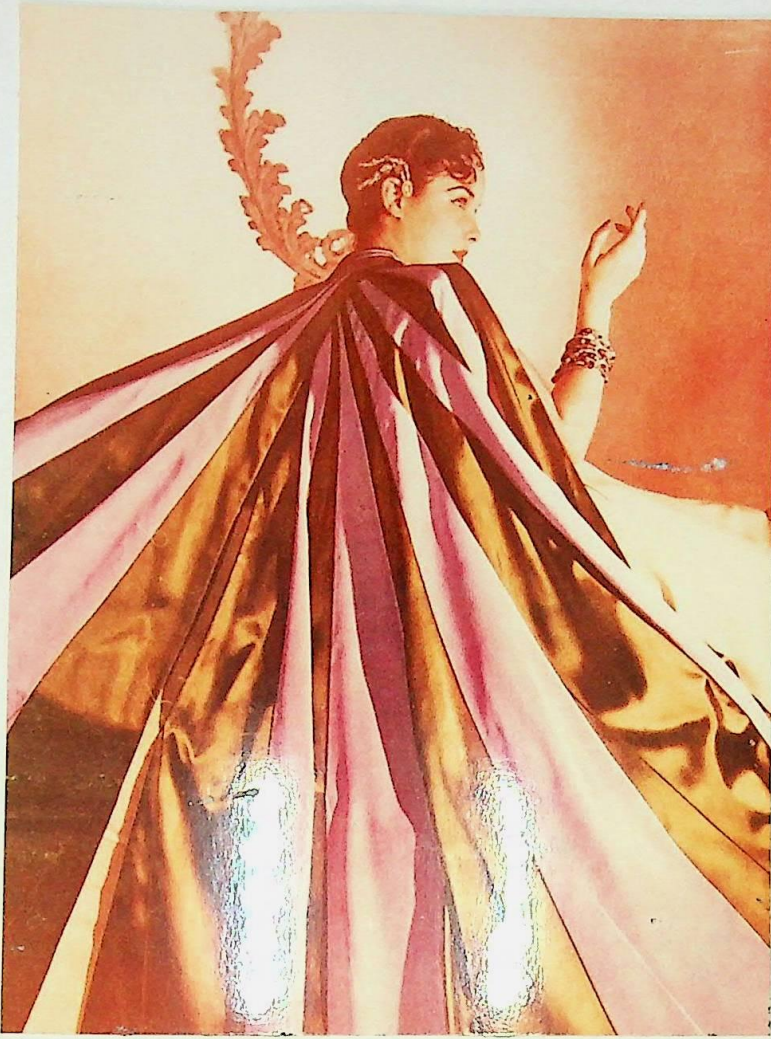


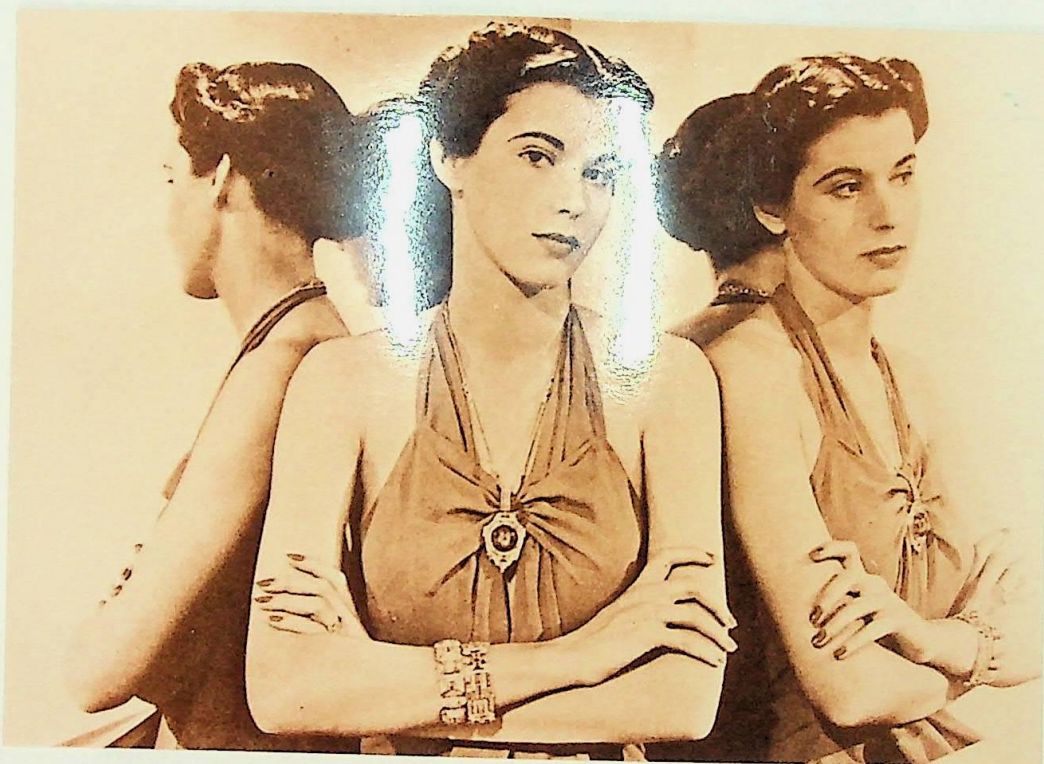
Fig. 5) (on page facing)

Designed initially in 1937, this evening mantle has become one of the garments most readily identified with Charles James. It combines his colour sensitivity, his mathematical precision, and his use of the unique - in this case two wide sweeping wings of cabana stripes, constructed from a selection of pre-World War I ribbons unearthed by James in a Parisian Market.

(Genius of Charles James)

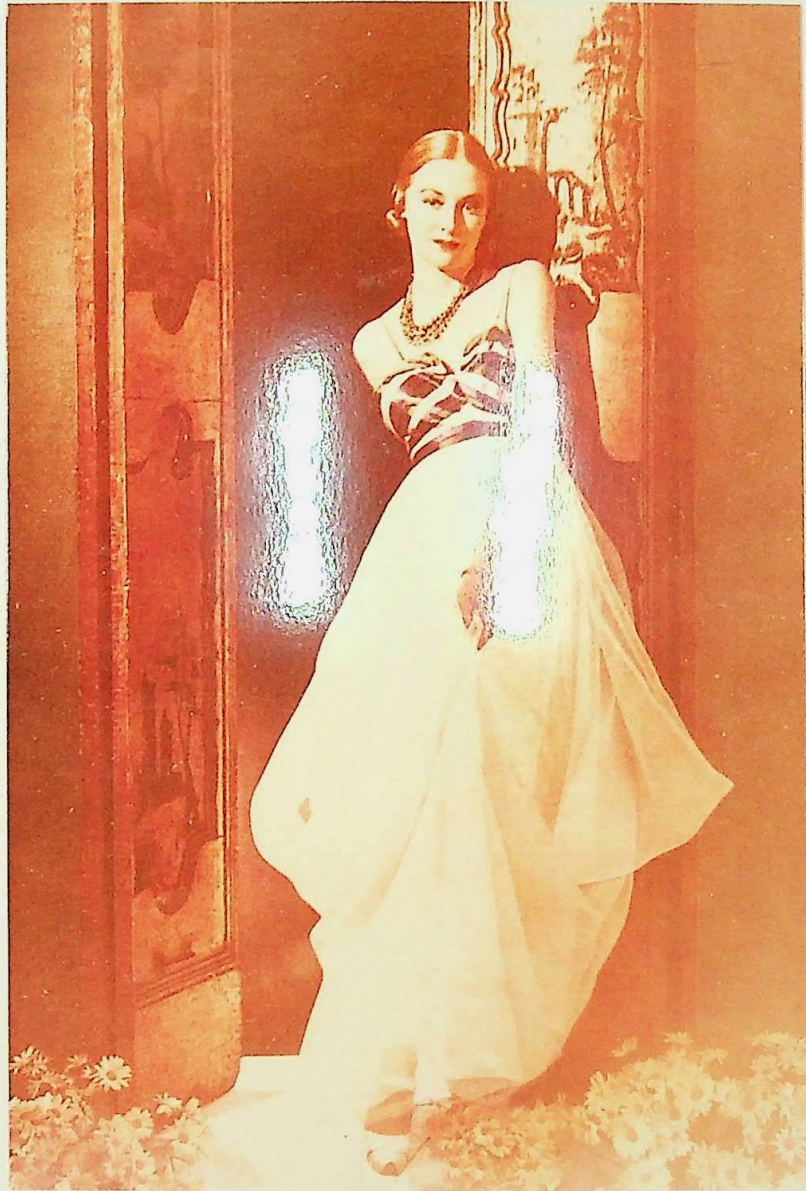


Lady Charles Cavendish, wearing a coat in light-blue
grosgrain, with wings at the back, 1937.



Evening top in cherry crepe, photographed
by Cecil Beaton for U.S. Vogue, 1937

James achieved contemporary classical elegance
in this 1937 evening dress. Constructed from
only three pattern pieces.



A variation on his Ribbon Cape (Fig. 5)
using millinery ribbons.

Modelled by Joan Fontaine for U.S. Vogue

1937

(Elizabeth Arden), lasted for three years. However, she began to dislike his designs and choice of fabrics and there were rumours of plagiarism between the two. The end of the partnership came when she overheard her salon being referred to as the "redlight" salon. (James had enhanced the salon with an exquisite red candle which turned in the window). His time at Elizabeth Arden had been beneficial as it helped to place him in the forefront of fashionable society in New York.

In 1945, with some financial help from a friend of his mother's, he opened a small custom-made salon on Madison Avenue. At this stage, he began to sell to the established department stores. Even at this early age, his stunning evening dresses were acquired by museums (Brooklyn) and he was in the position of seeing his dresses regarded as art, which he relished for the rest of his life. He became obsessed with being preserved as well as being observed. He devised a scheme through which his most prestigious American client, Millicent Rogers (Fig. 6) could evade tax by donating his dresses to the Brooklyn Museum, having worn them once. (These dresses were so memorable, they were worn but once anyway). Thus, the majority of the Charles James's pieces at the Brooklyn Museum once belonged to Millicent Rogers.

In 1947, James returned to London, taking with him a display of day and evening dresses. He was honoured with a showing at Hardy Ames' salon, which received much acclaim. Following this event he was celebrated at a midnight extravaganza at the Hotel Plaza Athénée in Paris. Millicent Rogers said of the event,

It excited much adorable comment, and the showing represented as much his own conception of fashion as the fashions demanded by his clients.

(Genius of Charles James)

Through the thirties and forties, Charles James's couture establishments flourished in three capitals. It was to be his brightest hour. At last he was making business profitable and was widely



Fig. 6 Millicent Rogers, wearing one of the creations Charles James made for her. This photograph was taken when she was 70 years of age!



A Promotion for a collection of dresses, designed
by Charles James for Elizabeth Arden, 1944.



Egg Yolk Yellow satin evening coat.
U.S. Vogue, 1947.

regarded as a great couturier. He had risen from being an obscure, but inventive, milliner to becoming one of the outstanding couturiers of his day. He had risen above other couturiers of this era and his entire approach to couture was that of an artist not a dressmaker. Francis Rose said of him,

Charles James chose silks and furs instead of stone or paint as his media, built sculptures and created paintings around the living flesh.

(Genius of Charles James).

When Eleanor Lambert invented the Best Dressed List, over half the names on it were customers of James.

He began to believe that, as an established designer, he should have a larger hand in the management area. Couture was, and is, an unreliable area of fashion, forever dependent on the often volatile clientele - the elite few, who have their creations made to measure. James's attempts at combining time-consuming couture, his extravagance and uncompromising endeavours at making couture commercial would be his downfall. He believed the French fashion companies were the only ones aware of combining commerce and couture and that they did it with such style.

Working from New York, where prominence was measured by money and mass production rather than taste and experiment, he longed to be among those who, on a professional level, would understand what he wished to achieve. He refused to sell his creations wholesale and strove to maintain his sale of original models. He felt the manufacturers should search out, purchase and adapt models from couturiers, for him the couturier was the author, the manufacturer, the publisher. He was forever involved in squabbles over plagiarism and even filled the walls of his workrooms with photographs from the popular press of ideas, which he had begun. On one hand, he did not disagree totally with plagiarism as he felt that a good deal of piracy helps establish a signature but he wished dearly to be paid for this privilege, or at least, dream up some sort of business

idea, which would be profitable to him. He once said,

*I am the most copied person in the world.
In the old days when they copied me and said
so I was flattered. Today, when they copy me,
I feel extremely deprived of revenue. My
clothes are on different schedules going into
eternity.*

^ (Genius of Charles James)

In 1949, financed primarily with family money plus contributions from two of his regular clients, he set up Charles James Services Inc., established with exclusive rights to control and promote the use of the name "Charles James" in commercial fields of design. As the company went more deeply into debt, he set up subsidiary companies to raise more money and to rease the liabilities of growing creditor pressure by diverting funds. James believed turning over a new leaf (starting another company) would restore financial equilibrium. These smaller companies licensed many products including accessories, (Fig. 7). Unknown to his clients, James began to sell his custom-made dresses to them while selling the design through his subsidiary companies to larger department stores without his name attached. Lest his clients should discover this, he sidetracked any questioning by yet again pleading plagarism.

His company began to train production personnel into supervisory/training teams versed in James's manufacturing requirements and techniques. These teams were then hired out to companies. This did not prove very profitable but, at least, James was satisfied that what he was licensing was produced to the standards he required.

By 1954, Charles James Services was still surviving. New space was found and he expanded activities to include wholesale manufacturing of garments to be sold through retail stores. In the same year, a limited partnership, formed to manufacture garments for private clients, was established. This was Charles James Associates,



Fig. 7 A selection of accessories designed by Charles James throughout his career, 1926 - 1978.

financed by two other clients, who in return would each receive a number of original dresses. Finances dropped dramatically at this time due to tax evasion and eventually, all of the companies merged. This merging later worked against James in his attempt to settle tax claims and sell one of the companies at a net operating loss. James's total business receipts from April 1954 to March 1955 were £112,693, while expenditure ran to £310,266.

The couture business, which in the popular mind is associated with a great deal of money, was for James more a matter of glamour than profit. His suits were now selling at £800, yet James estimated he spent between £1,000 - £3,000 in experiment and research on each garment. He believed then that at least £500,000 a year was needed to maintain a couture business in the proper style. Life Magazine wrote about him as a designer's designer, so exclusive that he was customarily broke. Even at £700-£1,500 per dress, ^{quite} he loses money since he sells only about 100 per year to devoted clients. James's couture output in 1954 was approximately 36 garments, priced to allow him a profit margin of £500 per garment. Four years later, he was to design just five custom made garments, the profit margin uneconomically remaining the same for these.

CHAPTER 2

CHANGES

In July 1954, a major change in James's personal life was marked by his marriage to Nancy Lee Gregory (Fig. 8), a wealthy heiress from Kansas City. Eyebrows were raised amongst society as he was quite open about his bisexuality. Nancy James stirred his imagination and became his muse and she inspired many of his creations. Aware of Charles James's nature, she also provided considerable financial support. According to James, a major revision of his work was initiated by his marriage, his bride having a Modigliani - Cranach - like posture and silhouette. In less than three years, there were two offspring, Charles Haweis James Junior and Louise Brega James.

Inspired by fatherhood, James designed a collection of childrenswear (Fig.9). It ranged from infancy to three years. When the range was launched in Chicago, white capped nurses carried the garments on stage. Princess Grace of Monaco attended and bought the whole collection. Observers hailed the collection's simplicity, but the lack of fluff and frills had to be corrected for the market.

With the revolutionary Sixties approaching fast, clothing habits changed dramatically. Hats were discarded and headscarves became the norm, loose-fitting carefree clothing was embraced by society much to Charles James's dismay. The longed for success became even more elusive. Fewer women had the money to spare on elaborate ball gowns and these evenings which enhanced Charles James's best work were fewer or much more informal.

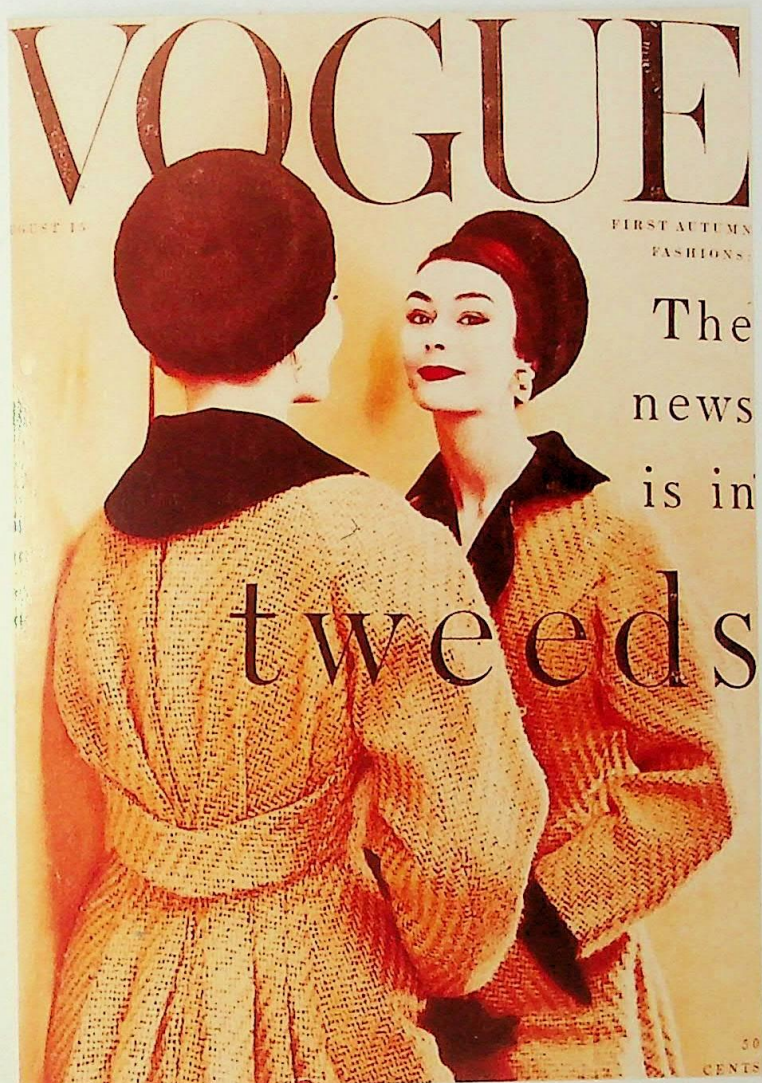
One cannot help feeling he lived at the wrong period in history; had he lived a century earlier when ladies' wardrobes were permanently being filled and emptied and ladies just sat around, upholstered beyond belief, draped over chaises longues, then and only then, would Charles James have been satisfied.



Fig. 8 Mrs. Charles James (Nancy Lee Gregory) photographed by Cecil Beaton in 1955, at her husband's Madison Avenue salon in the bustle dress.



Fig. 9 Some of Charles James's Childrenswear
designed in 1954.



Vogue Cover, 1954

Charles James's sunset-yellow and brown tweed winter coat.



Tunic or Pagoda Suit. 1955

This suit represented to James his best attempt at tailoring a suit, and his \wedge for it reflects his sources: Near and Far Eastern tunics. The near U-point construction at the jacket hemline evolved from a line of models in which tapering lines were a key ingredient.

1 photo?

Life in the early Sixties began to go very sour for Charles James. Lawsuits and subpoenas were a daily threat and monetary sources had dried up. A lawsuit against a fashion plagiarist wrecked his marriage. Although he won the case, the costs ruined him and his wife had a nervous breakdown. Against her orders, Mrs. James's disapproving mother got into the hospital and whisked Nancy off to Kansas City. She never saw her husband again. Nancy James had made substantial loans to finance the various businesses her husband had devised and in all of them she lost large amounts of money. He always spoke well of his wife and was genuinely deeply saddened when their marriage, like all of his partnerships, was dissolved. Through the clothes he made for her, he made her into one of New York's most elegant women at that time.

In July 1957, the U.S. Treasury Department's agents seized the offices and contents at James's studio for non-payment of and withholding of taxes against Charles James Services. Charles James then attempted to set up a type of workshop with the aims of teaching, publishing textbooks, offering apprenticeships and industrial services, and donating designs to schools and museums. The organisation would be non-profit-making, (was it ever?), and James would once again be able to continue on his creations. His application to the U.S. Treasury Department was refused as they were continuously discovering companies and subsidiaries of these companies which he had set up. (Charles James set up nine different companies throughout his career).

In 1959, when this failed he sought funding in the form of scholarships but he received only small amounts. He was given a small workroom share in a design school in Chicago but James found it difficult to continue having come up with so many pitfalls in his attempts to begin a new company. Without major funding or income-producing activities Charles James Inc. and Charles James's many subsidiary companies lay dormant, never to be active again.

James's assistants finally departed from his company, having put

up with much upheaval since they began working together. James tried one last conspiracy. Three clients offered to back him in a new company in return for no fewer than seven model garments each. The garments would be owned by the company and would take part in an original design collection for travel. Alas, one of the clients withdrew her support, due to dissatisfaction with James's attention to her wardrobe, and the others followed. This was his final business enterprise.

In 1964, Charles James took up final and permanent residence, again in a hotel, this time in one with a character to match his own. It was there at the Chelsea Hotel on New York's run-down West 23rd Street that he would spend his last years.

One of the most productive friendships of his entire career was his meeting and collaboration with the young illustrator, Antonio Lopez (Fig. 10), who introduced himself to James at a restaurant in 1964. Charles liked him and realised that through him he had found an opportunity to acquire a graphic record of the masterpieces of his great years. This project lasted for ten years, during which time Antonio sketched and catalogued all of James's work. Work was frequently carried on through illuminating nights, with James explaining the shapes, directing the models's posture and introducing Antonio to an elegance far beyond the commercial work he had known.

These "seminars" were held with students and friends and James's most loyal disciple, Homer Layne, a Tennessee farm boy, who became his faithful worker and saw him through to the end. Homer oversaw and organised these gatherings which always took place in the early hours of the morning - a time James felt, when the most profound work was accomplished. Photographers would join in the gatherings and he would teach them what to look for in a design and the best way to photograph the point of interest in the most flattering shadows and light.

James often fitted and showed the clothes on his own body, when a

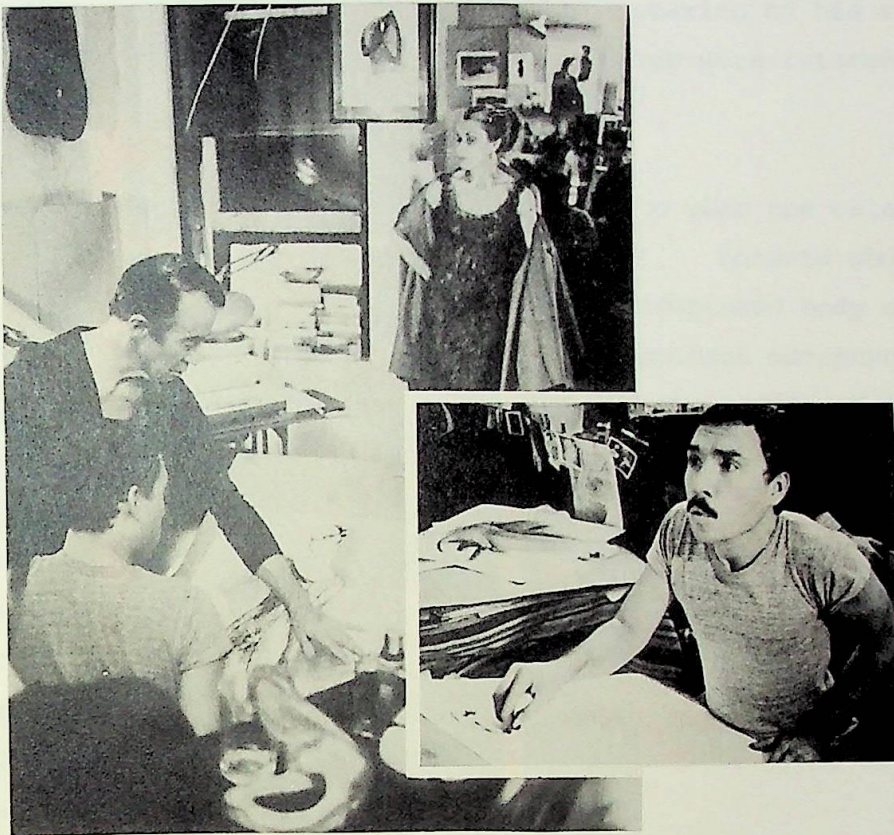


Fig. 10 Antonio Lopez and Charles James during a drawing session at the Chelsea Hotel in 1974.

model was not available or if he was displeased with the model's posture. The point was to demonstrate the intricacy of cut and shape on a human form, whoever it fitted.

He was generous to his students. When they were invited to big parties, he often lent them garments from his collection so they could experience first hand the wearing of his shapes and fit. Unfortunately, the clothes often were returned damaged.

Once Antonio and his model were allowed to wear the celebrated 1938 white satin quilted jacket (Fig. 11). Antonio photographed the jacket on the bare-chested, muscle-sculptured body of a football player astride a shiny Harley Davidson motorcycle. James's feminine opera jacket, placed in the saddle of the giant machine had the fantasy effect of a space-age warrior's.

James began to tour the lecture circuit. He referred to them as "Injector Courses", i.e. injecting certain knowledge (his working methods) without interfering with the particular college's present curriculum. After his first lecture, he was asked to disassociate himself from the Institute having run foul of a staff member.

He continued to lecture throughout his last years, with lectures entitled "The Calculus of Fashion", which dealt with the scientific aspects of design and with techniques in which artisans should be trained to enable them to translate the ideas of artists into mass produced clothes. Another series of lectures was entitled "Metamorphology", which dealt with changes in fashion and its effects.

A splashy benefit was produced at the Electric Circus in New York, in which 85 James's designs, created between 1929 and 1963, were shown as part of a multi-media programme, with sketches of the garments by Antonio Lopez. The Show, at forty dollars a ticket, was to benefit, at James's request, not fashion students, but the

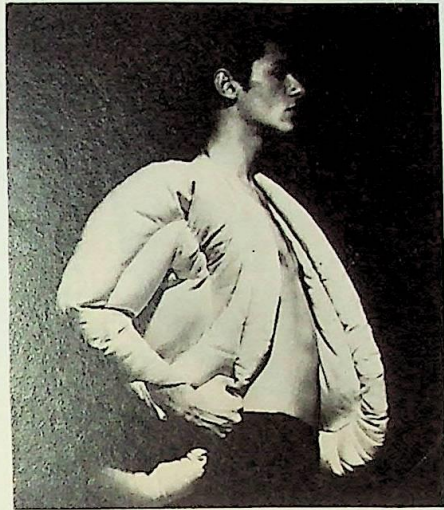


Fig. 11 The celebrated swan jacket, created in Paris
in 1937.



Charles James's white satin quilted evening jacket, created in Paris for Mrs. Oliver Jennings in 1937. James filled the jacket with eiderdown. The concentric rows of stitch holes make a statement about his search for perfection. Charles James suggested that this jacket inspired the Air Force quilted jackets of World War II, better known as bombardier jackets.

engineering students at the Pratt University. James's last major exhibition, during his lifetime, was held at the Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York, in 1975, entitled "A Total Life" (Fig. 12). The exhibition consisted of garments created throughout his career as well as illustrations of two hundred of his original structures by Antonio Lopez.

James suffered physical decline in his last years. His erratic working hours, dependence on drugs, and poor eating habits were exacerbated by diabetes and kidney disease. Money to support him came in small but continuous amounts from understanding friends, a few scattered lectures and, much to James's dismay, the sale of what Salvador Dali referred to (Harper's and Queen, Sept. 1979), as the first soft sculpture - his masterpiece quilted jacket which was bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1976, for six thousand pounds. The vast public acclaim he had always sought eluded him to the end.

He had not felt well and hadn't been out of bed since the previous Wednesday. Over the 'phone, his doctor had ordered him into hospital but he disliked the habits of the nuns at St. Vincent's and had refused to budge. He had lain there alone with only his decrepit beagle, Sputnik, for company. His attendants thought it was just another cold but on Friday, when his friend and assistant, Homer Layne, came back from Abraham & Strauss, the Brooklyn department store, where he worked part time selling cards, he found him too weak to move. Even after Homer was allowed to call the ambulance, he had talked a little, "Hospitals are only waiting rooms for the morgue", he sniffed and kept the ambulance attendants waiting for a full five minutes while he finished primping. He was carried down from his sleazy rooms on a stretcher (a means of departure not unknown for residents of the Chelsea Hotel) and taken directly to the Intensive Care Unit at Cabrini Health Care Centre.



Fig. 12 Charles James with Sputnik, his beagle, and Jerry Hall in a dress he designed in 1929, at the opening of his one-man show at the Everson Museum, Syracuse, New York in 1975.

He slipped into unconsciousness and at 2 a.m. on Saturday, 23rd of September, Charles James died at the age of 72. The official cause of death was bronchial pneumonia and arteriosclerosis.

Homer was not allowed to see him, and no one else tried. Homer and another assistant, Michael Gomez, were relieved about one thing. By dying on a Saturday, James had given them the rest of the weekend to get the most important things out of the hotel before Stanley Bond, the manager, came on duty on Monday morning.

Since no rent had been paid for six months and eviction papers had been served, there was a good chance that the contents of the rooms might be seized and sealed. So, throughout Saturday evening and most of Sunday, they hauled portfolios, pictures and dress forms a few blocks East and South to Antonio Lopez's loft overlooking Union Square.

*(Extract from Harper's & Queen, Sept. 1979
Retrospective Article on Charles James).*

His companion and protege, Homer Layne, was to be his chief beneficiary but because of a series of wording irregularities in his self-drawn will, New York State would not accept it for probate. It was directed that the estate go to his children, who in turn, transferred it to their mother. Mrs. James and her children, wanting to observe the intent of the will, then turned the estate back to Homer Layne. Thus at the end, this man famed for keeping his promises, and going broke, kept his final promise.

When the attendants, who carried Charles James out of the Chelsea Hotel on a stretcher, asked him in a humouring way,

Who are you then?

he found the energy to draw himself up from the stretcher
and said,

*It may not mean anything to you but I am
what is popularly regarded as the world's
greatest couturier*

(Harper's & Queen, Sept. 1979. Retrospective
article on Charles James)

and he was.



Austine Hearst in Satin Trousseau Coat, 1948.

CHAPTER 3

THE LADIES WHO LUNCHEd

*I am not a designer, a designer designs what's
in the mind. I am a couturier and a couturier
uses his client as inspiration.*

(Genius of Charles James)

Charles James felt the client couture relationship was the life-blood of fashion. No problem could be resolved or nothing invented without the client (he claimed to have chosen the women he dressed). They were not only women of great affluence but possessed a particular elegance and aristocratic charisma and posture. He believed the dialogue between couturier and client was what solved the special problems, and the results were the foundation of the twice-yearly collections shown to buyers and manufacturers, who purchased the triumphs of this couturier client marriage for mass copying and adapting.

He loved the women he dressed and boasted that he never had an uninteresting client. His client list included the Countess of Rosse, the Beaton sisters, Lady Diana Cooper, Elizabeth Arden, Jenneifer Jones (who even when wearing Dior dresses, insisted on having James's underbodices - she said it was like being in a well upholstered armchair), Mrs. Vincent Astor, Gypsy Rose Lee, Mrs. Douglas Fairbanks, Paulette Goddard, Marlene Dietrich and, of course, Millicent Rogers, a clothes collector, who was both his perfect form and greatest patron.

He made Gypsy Rose Lee's last public appearance dress. She came on in a magnificent full length, cherry gown and behind her were five girls, all naked. As she walked down the catwalk, she took off parts of the dress and from these discarded dresses, the five girls were magically clothed. Problems arose when Gypsy Rose Lee was billed for five dresses and she thought she should only pay for



Marlene Dietrich, modelling a dinner sheath,
which James considered a classic.
U.S. Vogue, 1944

one.

Some women were made wait months - even years - for the dresses they had ordered. One squeak of protest at the endless fittings and a patron might be ejected half-dressed and hysterical from the atelier. James was never entirely pleased with his dresses, thus, the working and reworking of a particular dress. Diana Vreeland said that he would far rather work and rework a beautiful dress than have that dress appear at a party. One society matron, who had waited a year for her dress while James continually reworked it, stormed the workroom and took possession of the dress. She had paid \$1,200 for her dress and she wanted to wear it. James did not see it that way and sued her for the return of his unfinished work.

While preparing my thesis, I felt the need to interview one of Charles James's clients. After much correspondence and telephone calls, this need was finally fulfilled.

On Sunday, 7th of February 1988, at 5 p.m., I met and interviewed the Countess of Rosse. Millicent Rogers was Charles James's premiere client; next on his list would probably have been the Countess of Rosse, sister of costume and set designer, Oliver Messel. Oliver Messel was part of Cecil Beaton's social circle, so from this, one can gather that the Countess mixed within these circles also. Although she did not meet Charles James through Cecil Beaton, being part of this circle was advantageous considering Charles James's snobbishness.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DOWAGER, COUNTESS OF ROSSE

Nymans Handcross, Haywards Heath, on
7th February 1988 at 5 p.m.

Lady Rosse

I was introduced to him by quite an old lady called Miss Crozier. It wouldn't mean anything to you - but she did say that this young man (he didn't work in Bruton Street, it was before he worked in Bruton Street) and I think it was through me getting so much and all my lovely things that he made for me that helped him. He used to be very very naughty to the people he didn't like. I can remember very well indeed - in Bruton Street - a fattish, frightfully rich American lady who was a little bit fat, and he had a way of talking like that (Lady Rosse began to impersonate Charles James), I don't know why. "I can't possibly make anything for an old frump like you" and how he didn't lose all his clients, I mean all his clientele, I really don't know.

He made clothes you see half-finished and then he'd suddenly change his mind, and turn them upside down. I mean, wear them the wrong way round. It ended up being the other way round to what it started by being. I can remember one dress I think, I still have, which was a sort of spiral dress... the zip went round you and round you, and it was almost impossible to know how to put it on.

Philip

He was one of the first to use zips. I read in some literature about him.

Lady Rosse

Is he alive still?

Philip No, he died in 1978.

Lady Rosse

He uses the most brilliant but, of course, you've read about him, haven't you... a most brilliant person, and I would easily and always have put up with him, but he was a little eccentric. He talked this.....!" but I'm not going to make anything for an old frump like you" I can actually remember him say that.

Philip What did she say?

Lady Rosse

What did she say? In those days, he had become rather famous so he could afford to say it. And then he had a wonderful vendeuse called Miss Barnes... wasn't it?

Philip

I read about her. You mentioned her initially. What exactly did she do?

Lady Rosse

She can go, "You come with me Anne", "Miss Barnes can look after that woman". When the woman heard it! He was absolutely ruthless with what he said to the people because the clothes were almost impossible to know how to put on, especially when he changed his mind and made it back to front, half way through the thing..... But he was frightfully generous to me...

Philip

You mentioned in your article when Bruton Street was closing down, he sent all the clothes around to your house in a taxi and dumped them on the ground in your hallway.

Lady Rosse

Yes! But he was.....

(Then Lord Rosse enters with a dozen peach-coloured roses

I (Philip) had bought for her birthday).

Lady Rosse (To me) Oh, thank you darling, how wonderful of you to come. (Then to Lord Rosse)
Pop it anywhere here, pop it on this table.

(Then the Countess shows me an original Charles James evening cape in burgundy silk tafetta, simply cut, with a vee-detail at the back. This garment is quite rare as it has a Charles James label that just says, "Charles James, Bruton St., London").

Now, this one really delights me. You see, he didn't always have his labels on.

Philip

This is actually the first Charles James I've seen in reality! Was there a particular reason he didn't have his labels on?

Lady Rosse

I think he didn't have labels early on! Why, I thought he was so wonderful and frightfully generous to me. He'd make a thing, and he'd say, "I can't be bothered to go on like that, but you can have what I've cut out and finish it and because you are a dressmaker, you can finish it yourself, or something like that". And a lot of these things were the things he actually gave to me. I remember the spiral dress - it was impossible to know how to get into it - He was a brilliant dressmaker. What makes you interested in him?

Philip

Well, he began as a milliner, and I've just begun as a milliner, which is what I've taken you to see, some of my hats.

Lady Rosse

Hats?

(At this point, I produced my hats from a large container and modelled them myself).

(Interview continues with the Dowager Countess referring back to the spiral dress.

Lady Rosse

Instead of closing here, it would go round here and come round here and here.

Lord Rosse

Can you remember what other people he used to dress (Mum)?
Can you remember who used to go there?

Lady Rosse

I can't..

Philip

Millicent Rogers?

Lady Rosse

I don't know. There was wonderful dress he made for me when I went to America, a lovely.... but that was a romantic dress, not a difficult dress. But he was so generous, if he had an idea, and in the early days, I was the only person who would put up with him because he changed his mind as to how it buttoned up or zipped up like that. But did you ever know him?

Philip

No, I never met him. I wish I had.

Lady Rosse

Well, keep in touch, that's the thing!

(At this point I decided to let the Countess have one of my hats if she so wished, and to my delight, she chose the extraordinary "Tunnel of Love". She made me try it on and explain to her how it should be worn).

Lady Rosse

Put it on yourself, let it come over the eyes.
Now what d'you do with that?....

Philip

When I get it back I'm going to post it to you.

Lady Rosse

Oh, thank you so much (This line she stress and repeated with genuine gratitude).

Philip

I was reading in some literature about him. He said, "I am not a designer. Designers design what's in the wind. I am a couturier and a couturier uses his client as inspiration" What inspired him about you?

Lady Rosse (Intrigued to know how the hat "Tunnel of Love" should be worn).

You have to work out which way it goes mmm.....
that's Charley James all over. Well, that's awfully kind of you, now is there anything more you want to know about Charley James.

Philip

Who were his contemporaries? Or did anybody at the time have a similar style as him or ideas?

Lady Rosse

Do you mean, who were his clients?

Philip

Was there anybody then or has there been anybody since that designed like him.

Lady Rosse

No! Certainly not! (stressed).

Lord Rosse

At the time who was closest to him in design?

Lady Rosse

Do you mean, who wore his clothes?

Lord Rosse

No, no. Of the other couturiers of the time, if you didn't go to Charley James, who would you have gone to?

Lady Rosse

Let me see... There was an Irish woman who I thought was a very clever person and she was. Irene Gilbert. She was very original.

Lord Rosse

She has a lot of Irene Gilbert's clothes. Of all the Irish designers, you used Irene Gilbert more than anyone.

Lady Rosse

Oh, yes, always Irene Gilbert, never Sybil Connolly. There was a German as well, Wolfangel.

Lord Rosse

You went more to Irene Gilbert than anyone else.

Lady Rosse

Yes, by a long shot, because she was the cleverest. But I'll tell you what, going back to Charley James. You see he didn't always make up his mind how to finish something so he'd very sweetly give it to me if I'd like to do it myself. If I'd like to think out how he could finish it.

Lord Rosse

Do you think it was the same with all of his clients, saw how someone wore it and then only decided how to finish it off.....

Lady Rosse

Very, very, very good wishes to you.

Lord Rosse Would you mind if Philip took a picture Mum?

Lady Rosse

Not a bit

Philip

Would you wear my hat?

Lady Rosse

Certainly, I'll wear your hat. I knew that was coming.
Wait a moment, let's see which way I'll wear it...
Is there a looking glass in the room.. It's like saying
is there a doctor in the room?

Lord Rosse

There's a glass here, Mum. Is this one good enough here?

(The Countess picked up the "Tunnel of Love" and said)

This is the one I fancy most! But I may not wear it
the way you might like me to.

Philip

Whatever way you choose to wear it pleases me!

(Then the Countess stands in front of the mirror and
flirts with herself in the mirror with the hat).

Lord Rosse

Would you like a glass of Dubonnet, Mum?

Lady Rosse

I think I'd rather like to wear it like that and then
I'd like to have a lovely brooch to attach to the end here.
Would that work? Yes, a lovely diamond brooch. Would
that be right. Does this look O.K.? I don't have any
hairpins to keep it like that but I shall hold it in place.

(The Countess came and stood beside the lamp for some of
the photographs and when she posed for the photographs,



I felt she did it with such style and poise and it came naturally to her as if this was to be the most important photograph ever).

Lady Rosse

Do you have a maison in London?

Philip

No, not yet.

Lady Rosse

You must get hold of somebody young and very beautiful, those are the sort of clients you ought to have, and I am sure I can think of lots of people once you get established and I shall come to you too.

Lord Rosse

And people, who like acting a bit; people who aren't too self-conscious.

Lady Rosse

You mustn't mind me saying this and mustn't mind people, I won't say looking a bit ridiculous but people looking a bit original, wearing your things.

I love the idea of always being over one eye (referring to the "Tunnel of Love" hat).

Now, is that all you want, let me know and I'll certainly help you.

Lord Rosse

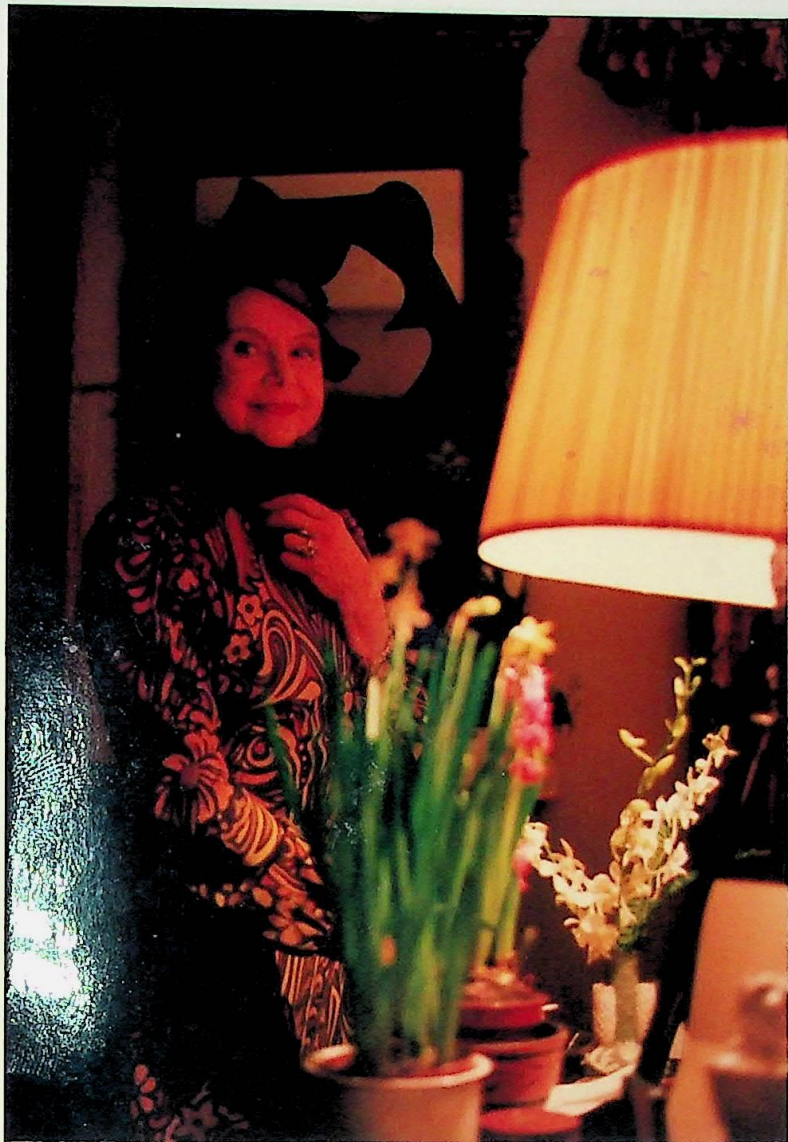
I think those are lovely... lovely. Curiously enough, I'm dining tomorrow night in Dublin with Paddy and Nicky Bowe. Why don't you sit down again, Mother?

Philip

Did you know Diana Cooper?

Lady Rosse

Of course, I knew Diana Cooper. As a person? Diana



Lady Rosse Diana Cooper was a great beauty but remember, she knew she was a great beauty.

Philip

Did you know Wallis Simpson?

Lord Rosse

Tell Philip the story about "those stones".

Lady Rosse

Oh, it's too cheeky!

Lord Rosse

Oh, do tell him.

Lady Rosse

I went to a very smart dinner party at Coole House, you must remember this was a very long time ago, and we were all going on to a marvellous ball, and she hadn't been invited, in those days, and so she walked up to me at the dinner before the dance and said, "Say you, where d'ya get those lovely stones from?" I said very grandly, "I'm afraid they are family jewels". I didn't think she was very charming, but I think, in a way, in the end, she made him happy didn't she?" Ladies didn't think much of her.

Lord Rosse

Generally, she was thought of as a pretty good upstart.

Lady Rosse

You've seen the book of her? I can remember so well her saying "Say where d'ya get those stones from?" Which was a very cheeky remark as if I was a sort of lady of loose morals.

Philip

Was she brash?

Lady Rosse

By all means, ask me any more questions.

Lord Rosse

Could you show Philip this one too (referring to a second Charles James evening coat draped on the couch beside her).

Philip

The colour combinations are always quite strange. (The coat was lemon and chocolate brown, and baffled me as to how it was cut. It was impossible to figure out how such a beautiful cut was achieved with such little seaming).

Lady Rosse

Well that you didn't know quite how to control, in a sort of a way. I was so pleased to find this one (the burgundy wrap) with Charley's name on it. You never knew exactly how to get into it.

Lord Rosse

Well, that proves your point that it was difficult to know how to get into it. I love the idea of his not making up his mind how to finish it until he had got you for the first or second fitting.

Lady Rosse

But don't mind being a little eccentric, and don't be like Charley James and insult your clients, You seem a bit different.

Philip

Were his clothes considered avant-garde?

Lord Rosse

Do you think, Mum, that a lot of people at the time thought that his clothes were considered eccentric?

Lady Rosse

Frightfully, but they WERE. I mean you didn't know which was the back and which was the front.

Lord Rosse

And so everyone thought him fairly crazy. Yes?

Lady Rosse

When I first went to Charlie, he was very difficult to understand..... Is Miss Barnes alive still?

Philip

I don't know.

Lady Rosse

You don't know?

Lord Rosse

I'm sure if she were alive he would know.....

Lady Rosse

The main thing about him in my mind is his way of speaking, a sort of an accent.....

Philip

Was he a social climber?

Lady Rosse

He was a non-social climber, and he just did the things he wanted and he didn't mind at all if his clients weren't pleased with him or their outfit. In fact, he thought it was the client's fault if they weren't pleased. No, I did find him... He is by far to me... I'll just tell you this as a last bonne bouchee, as they say!! To me Charley James was the most brilliant designer - he did do hats too now I come to think of it. I don't know if I've got any. I don't know... I can't remember. .. but remember this is all very long ago.

Philip

Do you think his clothes are timeless?

Lady Rosse

I certainly do.

If you wanted to learn how to wear them, of course, they do.

Lord Rosse

You could as well wear them today as then.

Lady Rosse

Absolutely. But I wish I had got some other things to show you that he had made. It was this spiral one... how the Dickens do you get into it, a thing that goes like that and then round like that.

Lord Rosse

Like a sari?

Lady Rosse

Yes, in cotton, in rough cotton.

Philip

So, when I get the "Tunnel of Love" back, I shall send it to you and you can wear it in public and shock everyone.

Lady Rosse

Well, I hope you have a marvellous.... make yourself have a wonderful career, but don't insult your clients, flatter them.

Philip

When was the last time you wore any of his clothes, or have you worn them in the last 20 years or so?

Lady Rosse

I'm not sure if I could remember... I think I could...
The thing to me was his voice, and I suppose he was,
was he American Indian? A little something you get
that in that picture.

Well, it's been so nice seeing you and I wish you good
luck and let us hear what happens to you, and do sign
my visitors' book, and I shall have it when you're
famous.

NOTE ON INTERVIEW WITH THE COUNTESS OF ROSSE

The Countess of Rosse felt, as I do, that Charles James was unique, his contemporaries were not contemporaries at all. The Countess felt the only designer, who ever touched upon a Charles James' note, was Irene Gilbert. She too, was an extremely temperamental person and was considered to be very neurotic. She was considered to be very talented and her work had an international but secluded audience. She began her training with Madame Grés in Paris, where she developed a love of the art of draping; she preferred to create her models, especially her eveningwear on the stand. (Charles James created from the stand also). Her clothes were considered feminine and she had an exceptional sense of colour. She worked extensively with McNutts Fabrics and with the Wynne Sisters of Avoca Handweaving. Her eveningwear was often in Irish fabrics and much of her work was Irish inspired. She achieved fame only when Ireland became part of the international couture movement. She closed her salon in 1968 in a fit of depression and emigrated to France. All photographs of her work, she destroyed, fearing piracy. Her most famous clients were the Countess of Rosse and Princess Grace of Monaco.

The Countess of Rosse mentions finishing off some of Charles James's dresses herself. She was highly regarded for her dressmaking skills and made many of her own clothes. She was also capable of completely changing a design if she felt the need to do so. Many of the garments she made are in storage at Birr Castle and the collection includes a christening robe she made for her son, Lord Rosse.



Countess of Rosse wearing "Tunnel of Love" hat at
Nyman's, 7 February 1988.



Millicent Rogers:

Charles James's Premiere Client.

MILLICENT ROGERS

Millicent Huddleton Rogers was Charles James's premiere client. Their association began in the 1930s, when she and her friends first visited the London salons. Millicent Rogers was a style setter. She possessed a nearly perfect figure for the day and had an unparalleled eye for clothes. Her chameleon-like elegance was expressed through her selection of couturiers: Schiaparelli, Mainboucher, Valentina, and James. Each of them had as much of an individual statement to make as their client, and she wore all of their creations with great panache.

The frenzy of the association began at the close of World War II and was only to diminish when her ill health and death separated them. James acknowledged her contribution to his lifetime's work through an exhibition of clothes he had created for her, held at the Brooklyn Museum, entitled Decade of Design, in 1948.

The following year, 1949, Mrs. Rogers in recognition of James's standing as an artist, made a large donation to the Brooklyn Museum of original garments, copies, half muslin models, muslin and paper patterns. As a standard oil heiress, her financial position was secure, as an inimitable woman of style, her taste was unassailable, and as a client, and patron of James, her role in his creativity and production was matchless.

When James wrote her obituary in American Weekly, he praised as an inspiration and guide, the woman who,

knew as no-one else did how to bring out the best of my talent as a creator of fashion.

(Genius of Charles James)



Mrs. Austine Hearst, modelling a pale blue duchess
satin evening coat for U.S. Vogue

CHAPTER 4

WORKROOM HABITS

*A good design should be like a well-made sentence,
expressing one idea at a time.*

(Genius of Charles James)

Where other designers sought financial rewards, glamour and social status from their fashion contribution, James worked alone in the solitary workroom he cherished above all else. He said,

*It took twenty years to train and assemble workrooms
that could execute to perfection my ideas.*

Much of the time was spent in retraining workers from outdated and sloppy dressmaking habits. In 1945, James tore down the wall separating his workroom from his salon and replaced it with a near floor-to-ceiling glass wall, so clients and visitors could see the art of the craftsman in full flower. He spent enormous sums of money teaching his workers the technique to construct his new shapes.

James was forever studying armour, with its exacting cut, taking patterns of it and relating it to garment patterns. His feeling for shape also sprang from his early years in millinery, where felt hats are moulded, dissected in sections, and then reassembled, with the seams providing a third dimension of line and contrasting colour bindings.

At the peak of his fame, James spent a month at a sculptor's studio, working on clay forms that resulted in a revolutionary new dress dummy, which anticipated a whole new posture. This was based on the measurements of his patron, Standard Oil heiress, Millicent Rogers, and a long study of 150 years of costume to see what body measurements had not changed in that period of time. He incorporated into these new dress forms, the measurements that never changed.

James created an atmosphere of high tension in his workrooms. Workers and apprentices told horror stories. Miss Barnes who was his assistant in the Thirties recalled one of the cutters

at Bruton Street saying,

*Il s'appelle une maison de couture, mais c'est une
maison de torture.*

(Genius of Charles James)

The students stood his excesses for as long as they could because of his brilliance. Miss Barnes recalled times when a dress would be nearly finished at 4 a.m. He would come around and rip the whole thing apart and start again.

One time, the whole workroom was putting the finishing touches to a variation of the "Four Leaf Clover Dress" for the Brooklyn Museum, when James raced in and declared the Philadelphia Museum wanted one too, so rather than make another dress, he cut the dress in half and sent one half to Brooklyn and the other half to Philadelphia.

He made his clothes sit differently by always cutting the waist on a curve. He said of himself, that if he were known for only two things, it should be the celebrated displacement of the dart and the wall of air he put between the body and the fabric. He felt that a design should be fitted away from the figure in order to allow a breeze of air to linger between the body and the fabric. He felt it was the air that was sculpted not the fabric.

He believed his designs were not luxuries, they represent fashion research - in which vocational talent, an inquisitive mind, and skills were involved. James reputedly spent three years and \$20,000 just to perfect a straight sleeve. The result was a one-inch longer sleeve that permitted the wearer to move without dislocating the waistline, bunching the collar or splitting the gusset. His style in naming colours: - orange was pumpkin, pink was bull tongue; beige was biscuit, was highly original.

To impress upon the staff the seriousness of their endeavours, a large workroom sign stated,

If you have to make a mistake, make a new one.



CLOVER LEAF BALLGOWN (illustration facing)

The showstopping gown of James's career, in his own estimation as well as that of the press, is the "Abstract" or "Clover Leaf Ballgown" commissioned by Mrs. William Randolph Hearst to wear to the Eisenhower Inaugural Ball in 1953. Mrs. Hearst proceeded to make the ballgown a part of the international scene, appearing at the Queen Elizabeth II Coronation Ball in London, and a similar function at the Palace of Versailles.

The serpentine hemline formation appears to be the result of James's mulling over the outline of his 1948 clover leaf shaped beret. While the foundation structure rigidly controls the contours of the gown, it undulates softly, reiterating the pliability of the cloth. This gown puts forth all of James's sensitivity to hue and colour.

The garment is constructed from thirty pattern pieces, twenty eight of which are cut in duplicate. The garments consists of a combination of fabrics: cream satin, black velvet, cream taffets and white faille, with a combination of cotton flannel, taffeta boning, nylon mesh and an unwoven fabric to upholster the dress. At the apotheosis of his career he reshaped Mrs. William Randolph Hearst Jnr, making her body something it wasn't. (This he believed was the art of dressmaking). He lifted her breasts, pushed her hips and abdomen forward, dropped her back waistline, and achieved a posture like the breast of a swan.

The dress weighed nearly 15 pounds, yet the enormous skirt moved with the grace of a feather, balanced perfectly on the separately constructed bodice and the undulating waistline that distributed the weight over the hip bone. Over the gown she wore a short jacket, completely covered with five dozen fresh gardenias, attached five hours before the gala and then stored in the refrigerator of her Washington Hotel, awaiting her triumphal entrance into the White House Inaugural Gala for President Eisenhower.

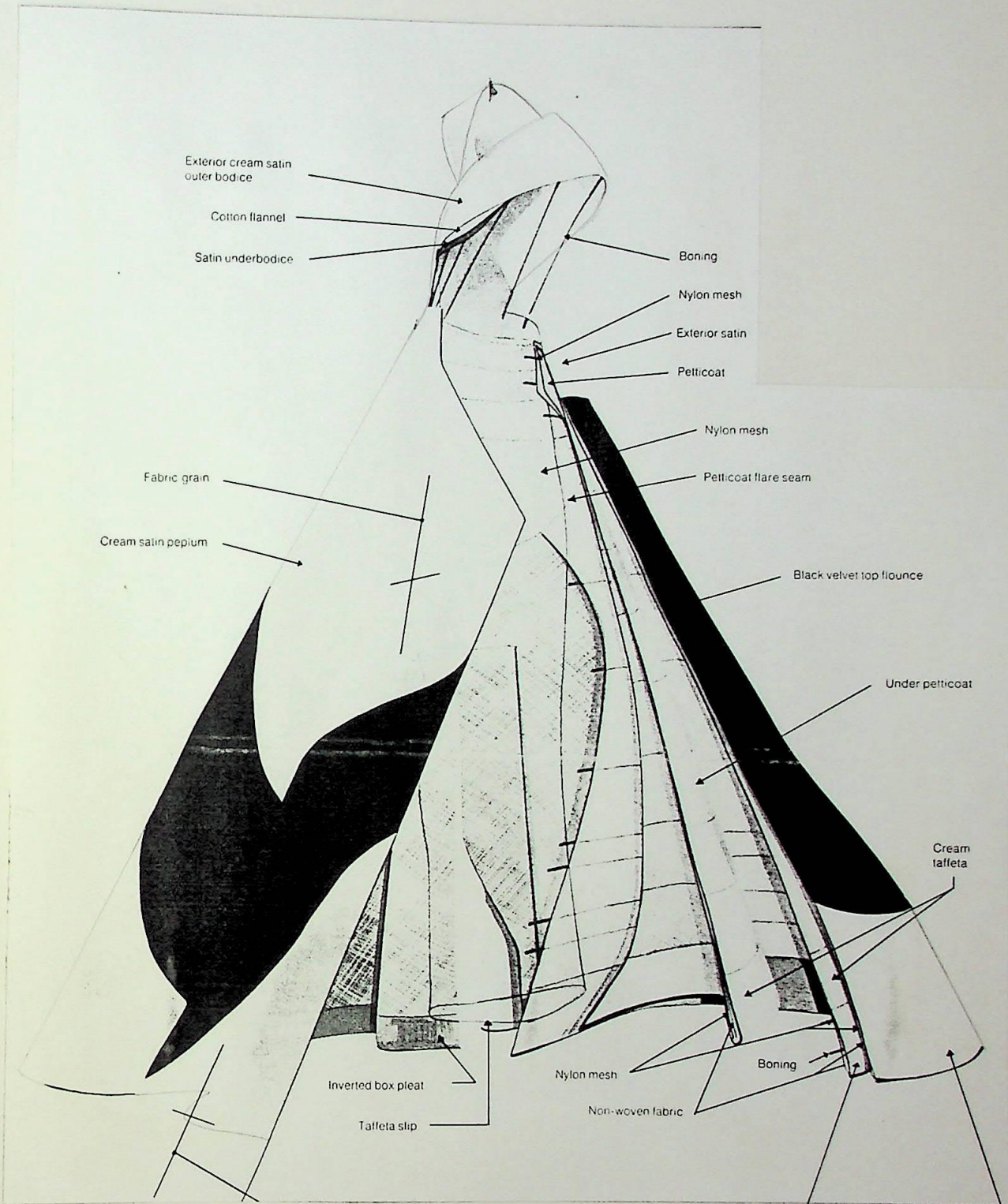


Diagram of "Four Leaf Clover" Dress.



Black & White Evening Dress in faille and duchesse satin. Undated. Charles James's working methods tended to dictate the use of fabrics that hold their shape: gazar, faille, satin and double-knitted and double faced wools. He never used prints, preferring to highlight the construction with obvious seams, the construction providing the pattern.



THE ROSE DRESS (illustration facing)

Charles James had a great fascination for flowers but the fragility of flowers was never carried into his work. In 1950, Charles James was commissioned by Flair Magazine to design a gown for a special Springtime "Rose" Issue.

The "Rose" dress is a brilliant abstraction of the rose in that every artful ruche contributes a dynamic grace to the female figure. The rib-tight bodice of blush-rose satin unfurls about the shoulders in an effect of rose petals. The skirt of tea-rose faille, narrow as a stem from the front, pulls back into one exuberant sculpture of folds.

CONCLUSION

In an industry where complex personalities are very much the norm, Charles James stands out as one of the most complicated, contradictory and different. No designer has worked as close to the spiritual centre of the couturier's profession. In the making of clothes he was an artist involved in a passionate collaboration with material, form and an inspirational client.

Over the years as he worked for and won the loyalty and support of some of the world's most distinguished women, he unerringly destroyed almost every working and social relationship with his erratic habits, eccentric attitudes and fluorescent temper. He was an atrocious businessman, yet he devised an elegant and sound means for utilizing the I.R.S. business - and charitable - donation deductions to place his gowns in museums and still keep his clients happy.

James tried his hand at all areas of design but it is his creations for evening attire that established the height of feminine elegance for over twenty years.

James believed that his garments were works of art and that their ultimate destination, after their useful life in the wardrobes of some the world's best dressed women was over, should be museum collections. James, a perfectionist was short of money and short of time. To cope with these problems he was capable of borrowing a dress back from one client and making it available to another.

Diana Vreeland said of him,

repetition He would far rather work and rework a beautiful dress ordered for a certain party than have that dress appear at that party.

James Galanos said of him,

A single James creation is worth the whole output of a 7th Avenue year's work!

CECIL BEATON, Photograph of 8 Dresses

The greatest number of his masterpieces lie under the category of gowns for formal attire, some of which are captured in this fashion photograph of 1948 by Cecil Beaton.

Although designed over a period of ten years, the gowns are stylistically homogenous and both singly and in combination, express an aura of timeless aristocracy. Throughout James' career, the bond established during school days remained strong. Cecil Beaton documented his observations through a variety of means, camera, sketchpad, pen and ink, and frequently he imposed his own aesthetic statement on their joint endeavours.

The snow-white walls and ice-white mirror and chandelier of the neo-classical surroundings here provided Beaton with vividly elegant, yet almost neutral background against which to photograph a bevy of James's most provocative ballgowns. Taken individually, each of the gowns is a strong statement, grouped, an artist's palette is awash with colour of the most refined tones, blending beautifully with the surrounds



Diana Vreeland said,

I knew Charles James from 1927 or 1928 when he ran up and down Southampton Beach in beautiful robes showing his millinery on his head.

(Genius of Charles James)

Mainbocher said of him,

Charles James is madly in love with cut.

(Genius of Charles James)

Long before he died, Charles James was history. Most of his clothes were in museums. Young writers, who were tired of tyrannical silliness of fashion dictators, came to him to get in touch with the real, timeless art of fashion.

He felt he should be paid by the billion dollar clothing industry in the same way as an industrial designer, who invents a new fuel injector or landing gear is compensated by the aeroplane industry.

My clients are the guinea pigs of fashion. They set the styles on which the industry depends. The industry should pay them to wear my clothes, and they should pay me for the privilege of copying.

(Genius of Charles James)

Chanel and Schiaparelli only ever agreed on one thing and that was the brilliance of Charles James; both wore his clothes. Balenciaga wrote in a telegram to Charles James,

Charles James is not only the greatest American couturier but the world's best, and the only dressmaker who has ever raised it to an applied art form.

(Genius of Charles James)

Enhancing the figure by hue and cut rather than a slavish following



Pale Blue Satin Evening Dress with Vulture Fan.
Date Unknown.

of fashion whims - this approach to the art of dress made his work timeless. Every era of dress involves the adornment of woman. Thus, by concentrating on the woman and the female figure, his garments were beyond association with an era or a time; his garments are as fashionable (although "fashionable" suggesting right for the moment may the incorrect terminology) today as they were when he created them throughout his career.

Cecil Beaton said in 1970,

Women do not make great entrances anymore; in the Thirties, each luxury liner had a great staircase to the ballroom for that purpose alone - to make an entrance.

(The Thirties in Vogue)

James was totally aware of the enormous dollar value of the designer's name. In the early Fifties, he said

My name is my capital.

(Genius of Charles James)

It was twenty years later that Pierre Cardin showed every one just how valuable a designer's signature was to the multi-million dollar licensee business. That was to make today's designers very rich.

With the decline of fashion and of women as decorative, the giant industry slowly shifted to the needs of working women. Mass manufacturing developed expertise in technical areas to produce quickly and efficiently.

James was born into the wrong century. His genius would have been in harmony with the tightly corsetted Victorians. He fought a heroic battle to reshape and fit into a century that was in search of comfort rather than the constraints of the 19th century. To Americans born after World War II the gospel of fashion was freedom and ease.

*p. White -
Waste
?*



Ivory Satin Dress with Front Drape Detail.

The skirt section is cut in one piece.

Undated.

James said,

There is no going back , study the past to know why, not what - and from the why, dream and do. There is no shortcut to creation. There may also be no profit, but the search for the idea, found after a long, exhausting struggle stands on its own merit.

(Genius of Charles James)

His greatest of many mistakes was to have wished to make a fortune in a business which, in the United States, could barely provide a living. Today's designers grant licences, tie up with retail outlets, give their stamp of approval to chocolate boxes and car seat covers, ^{as} creating made-to-order costumes and fitting them for individual women rarely generates much of a profit.

Madame ^Gres once said that her private clients have lost her many millions each year.

What he always dreamed of was the sort of carte blanche the French textile millionaire, Marcel Boursac, gave Christian Dior - limitless backing and limitless freedom. In that case the result was a boost that put the French fashion industry back on top after the war, gave work to thousands and was a shot in the arm for the whole French economy. No such tradition existed in America, or even in England.

The press quoted James frequently, and what he had to say did not endear him to the fashion establishment:

American fashion is just a huge public relations machine - sketch artists claiming they can fulfil the function of a couturier. Fashion as we know it, is the province of amateurism; the amateur buys or woos prominence in the press without devoting time to becoming the artisan of his craft.

(Harper's and Queen, Sept. 1979).



Cream and Chocolate Evening Dress in Duchesse Satin.
Undated.

**KEY DRESSES
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James's final phase began, as had his career with millinery. His last fashion journal cover with a grey felt, sectioned with beige satin binding helmet. This helmet-like headcovering reflects a purification of line from his own earlier work.

U.S. Vogue, 1952

(Illustration facing)

A Charles James-inspired evening dress by Catherine Walker of
the Chelsea Design Company. Spring/Summer, 1987.



Famous for his acidic comments, which did not endear him to anybody:

I would have liked to dress Mrs. Kennedy - if she had the face of a girl instead of the face of a man.

(Harper's & Queen, Sept. 1979)

He accused Eleanor Lambert, the arch-publicist of American fashion, of deliberately blurring the difference between haute couture and ready-to-wear and failed against the fashion mafia that had shut him out. The fashion establishment, in turn, said he was nuts... a brilliant artist, but quite, quite mad, and worse they implied he was becoming obsolete.

He was extra-extravagant. He lived in hotels, ordered room service, and never compromised on workmanship or material. He could never understand that he could not somehow find a way to be rewarded for his talent. He turned in desperation really to the study of mass market clothes-to Seventh Avenue. He did not realise the field was vastly different from the world of couture. What happened to him could have ruined Christian Dior or Balenciaga or any other creative talent without the discipline or restraint of business management. Those who have succeeded as designers seem to have been those capable of adaptation to our society and the business world of their times, those accepting and guided by business advisers. Most of his mass market attempts miscarried. If Charles James had found a business manager whom he could trust, he could have reaped his deserved golden harvest. He should never have aspired to creating for the working person.

James influenced many designers: Halston (who worked for him for a time), Adolfo, and Scarsi.

I will always remember the magic of wearing one of Charles James ravishing, romantic ballgowns, remembering being transformed by him like Cinderella into a radiant princess.

Everyone turns when I sweep into the room, the gentlemen in admiration, the ladies in envy.

In the sensation of the evening, a triumphant opera star, showered with bouquets and a standing ovation, a prima ballerina bringing down the house. I am a star.

(Austine Hearst, Genius of Charles James)

The magic spell cast by Charles James came into my life on opening night of the Metropolitan Opera in 1948. As in a dream, there appeared on the grand staircase three women gowned and jewelled in ceremonial magnificance, like exotic birds from an enchanted forest. Wearing a white satin and black velvet gown that suggested a swan, Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt Whitney stood out, diamonds and emeralds filling her strapless neckline, a glittering flowered tiara of diamonds and platinum enriching her hair.

The second woman in a cascade of Tiepolo-blue satin accentuated with navy blue velvet bodice, her shoulders clouded in yards of blue tulle, was opera singer, Risë Stevens.

The patrician posture of the third woman resembled a Boldini portrait from the Belle Epoque. Her gown was a deep garnet-red satin, the bodice moulded from velvet, the skirt asymmetrical folds of satin, with a fan of starched white pleats, bursting from the side. She was the actress, Gypsy Rose Lee. I had colluded with a fashion world envisioned and perfected by a master dressmaker of the century.

Charles James, the James women in their new-shaped gowns remained a burning memory.

(Bill Cunningham, Genius of Charles James)

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