

A Conversation with James Galanos

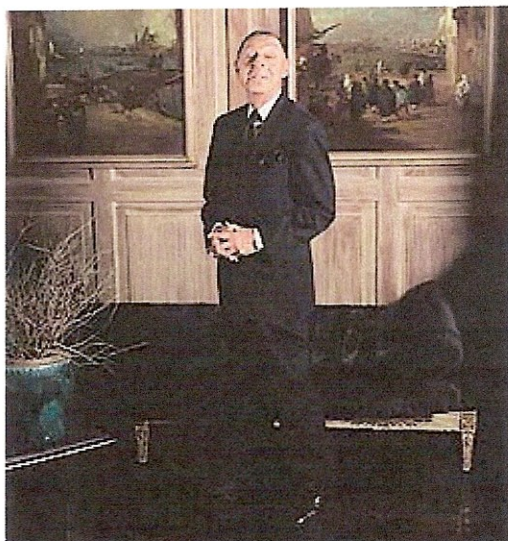


Photo by Elisa Haber, special to The San Francisco Chronicle

(James Galanos has designed gowns for such clients as Rosalind Russell, Diana Ross, Nancy Reagan, Betsey Bloomingdale and Judy Garland. He has been the recipient of numerous awards including: the Coty Fashion Awards Hall Of Fame; The Council of Fashion Designers of America Lifetime Achievement Award; Society's Stanley Award; The Crystal Ball Award from The Fashion Group, Inc of Philadelphia; The Fashion Award from the Drexel Institute of Technology; the London Sunday Times International Award; The Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce Golden 44 Award; The Los Angeles City Of Achievement; a Diploma di Merito from the Università delle arti Terme; Mayoral Proclamation, James Galanos Day. Galanos' garments can be found in costume collections around the world, and he is still making his presence known in the fashion world today)

We sat down to lunch on chicken soup and curry chicken.

In the glory days of the haute couture in Paris there were Christian Dior and Cristobal Balenciaga at the pinnacle, and of course, many lesser lights. In the United States, Norman Norell and James Galanos were their stylish equivalents. Those Americans who didn't go to Paris for their made-to-order couture ballgowns or trousseaux were content to buy Norell or Galanos ready-to-wear. The fabrics and workmanship were considered equivalent.

Except for Mr. Galanos, the above mentioned leaders are all gone though, in some cases, the name is carried on by other designers. When he decided to retire, a decade ago, he closed his doors and his business, permanently. Fashion was not going in the direction he wanted or understood. He has not been unhappy about it.

Mr Galanos has, in fact, started another life, photography. He has had several exhibitions on the West Coast, where he lives. "I had fooled around with photographs when I was a teenager," he said. "Then recently I decided to take it seriously." he bought himself a Rolex camera and after a while began to be pleased with the results.

"I'm a very conservative person," he said to me on this visit to New York. He lives in Los Angeles and recently bought a house in Palm Springs. At lunch at the hotel Pierre he was wearing a dark suit, blue shirt and dark tie. No eccentric hairdo or jewelry. He still keeps track of fashion through Vogue and Harper's Bazaar, but the bulk of his reading relates to art history and photography.

I asked him about the current controversy today whether models are too thin; Mr. Galanos says he always

liked thin models. Pat, his fitting model, was very thin and there was a problem getting other models who could fit into her clothes. The problem today, he believes, is that designers use models who are too young and who have not reached their maximum development. He certainly doesn't believe models should starve themselves, and that gangly legs can look terrible in clothes."

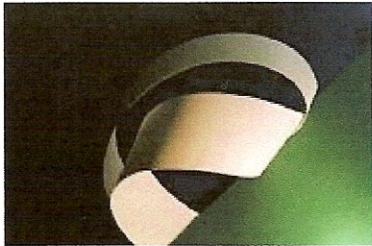
"When I started making clothes in the 1940's, elegance and formality were the rule. Now it seems vulgarity is rampant. It's encouraged by some TV shows and interviews. I don't really like it. The clothes themselves look unfinished, "The only thing that seems new is accessories. Most of the clothes are sleeveless and strapless. People themselves look messy. I hate the hair, it doesn't look groomed. It looks unwashed. I guess the fashion is to look blown and windswept. But it seems to me the hairdressers are doing a bad job of styling."

"Everybody seems to be wearing pants all the time. And everyone wants to bare the midriff. I really don't understand the mentality. It's certainly being casual. But it has nothing to do with class. Some of the clothes look beautiful, but I don't think the designers, as a whole, have made their mark.

Regarding his latest trip to the city, "I've enjoyed the crowds and the new buildings in New York, he said, especially the Neue Galerie with its Klimts and Hans Hofmann works. I did not find the Nan Kempner exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art that inspiring," he said.

Why did he decide to retire? "I had accomplished all I had set out to do. I wanted to be a designer and I won some acclaim. But the job was getting more difficult. Not the designing part, but the selling part. I had to go on the road to show my collection at the stores. I really didn't have a private life any more. I would finish one presentation and I had to go on to the next."

The first two years (of retirement) were difficult, he recalled because he had worked all his life (he will be 82 in September) But as his photography improved, he found another outlet for his creative energy.



"Untitled" - by James Galanos

Galanos still thinks of himself as an amateur in the photography field though he admits some things have turned out satisfactorily. For his exhibition at the Sorokko Art Gallery in San Francisco, he used textured paper and had all the photos framed. The idea was that the photos should be considered paintings. In his photography work, he has been encouraged by Ralph Rucci, a fellow designer who became his friend a few years ago. "He introduced me to the people at the Sorokko gallery and got my new career started," Galanos recalls.

Mr. Rucci's fashion designs also epitomize the elegant, formality that Galanos admires. Though he does not believe that the current casual trend can be reversed in short order, the case for beautiful clothes may not be entirely over.

"It's unlikely that the case for couture clothes can soon be revived," he says. "For one thing, there aren't too many stylish women around, who understand the complexities and intricacies of construction. These women certainly inspired designers. There was never perhaps more than a handful, but they were essential to the creation of lovely clothes that had more than a minute's shelf life." For himself, Galanos is not awaiting the return of those times. He has a new career!

-Bernadine Morris