

Designer James Galanos' legacy extends beyond fashion

Carolyn Zinko | on October 31, 2016



Photo: Vasha Wilson, SFC



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James Galanos attends the 2006 debut of his constructivist collages at S.F.'s Serge Sorokko Gallery.

James Galanos, an American fashion designer who had a long career dressing elites, including Nancy Reagan, and a more recent chapter as an art photographer, thanks to a San Francisco gallery, died of natural causes at his home in Los Angeles' Hollywood Hills neighborhood Sunday. He was 92.

Mr. Galanos was world famous for his expert construction, original designs and a quiet manner that reflected his own discretion and restraint. His label, Galanos Originals, founded in 1951, was known as elegant and understated, although he mixed chiffon with flannel, leather with lace, and mohair with pearls long before anyone else thought to.

Although he avoided the spotlight, he preferred from the start to work with women who could afford \$10,000 skirt suits trimmed in fur. Among them was Reagan, whom Mr. Galanos dressed for the 1967 inauguration of her husband, Ronald Reagan, the newly elected governor of California, and later for his 1981 and 1985 presidential inaugurations.

"I wouldn't ask anybody else but Jimmy," Nancy Reagan told *The Chronicle* in 2006. "It was just a natural. I don't know of any clothes that were made as well as Jimmy's — you could almost wear them inside out. The fabric was great. Everything about them was so special."

Longtime friend Ralph Rucci, another American designer, said Mr. Galanos' clothes were the most expensive ready-to-wear garments in the United States because "they were couture," in effect, made as well as one-of-a-kind pieces. Mr. Galanos' career was influenced by an internship in Paris with Robert Piguet, who trained renowned French designers Christian Dior and Hubert de Givenchy, and time as a sketch artist at Columbia Pictures under legendary costume designer Jean Louis.

"He was invited to show at Paris couture many times, but he didn't want it — he was humble," Rucci said of Mr. Galanos, who was born in Philadelphia to Greek immigrants. "He had a brilliant creativity based on his rich cultural studies and observations and travels."

Rucci recalled watching at a spring 2004 couture show in Paris as de Givenchy, who was also in the audience, walked up to Mr. Galanos to pay his respects, saying he considered him "the greatest designer in America, if not the entire world."

Despite his reputation for privacy, Mr. Galanos became more outspoken following his 1998 retirement, particularly about how fashion was changing — in his opinion, for the worse.

"We're living in a blue-jean world with itty-bitty tops," he told *The Chronicle* in 2006. "What a bore. These women look dirty. They look unkempt. The masses are a mess. Whoever perpetuated the bare-belly look ought to be hanged."

In 2006, Mr. Galanos embarked on a new chapter as an art photographer.

To deal with insomnia — he slept only four hours a night — he began playing with paper in his kitchen. He moved into abstract designs with color, lighting and shadow, and printed his photographs on watercolor paper.

His first show of constructivist collages was held on Sept. 21, 2006, at the Serge Sorokko Gallery in San Francisco, thanks to an introduction by Rucci, a friend of the gallery owner's wife, Tatiana, a former runway model and fashion writer.

Serge Sorokko had not expected much when he visited Mr. Galanos' home to see whether his work was worthy of show, and was pleasantly surprised.

"I immediately had the feeling I was looking at something very serious," Sorokko told *The Chronicle*. "With Galanos' work, I felt it was absolutely, uniquely original. If we are to believe that what Jimmy was creating in fashion is in its best manifestation, art, then what he's doing now in this genre is a continuation of art in a different milieu."

Mr. Galanos' nephew, Vincent Polisano, the president of the James G. Galanos Foundation, said his uncle was predeceased by two sisters and is survived by a third, Dorothy Chrambranis of Langhorne, Pa.

The foundation, Mr. Polisano said, recently donated 700 pieces from Mr. Galanos' atelier archive to Drexel University, to bring his work back to the state where he was born. It will be housed at the Robert and Penny Fox Historic Costume Collection of the Westphal College of Media Arts and Design.

The university also plans to publish a book on Mr. Galanos and build a library in his honor. In addition, the foundation will establish scholarship funds for fashion students, Polisano said.

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