

CALENDAR

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His designs
are suitable
for framingBy BOOTH MOORE
Times Staff Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — He is the last in a breed of gentleman designers — the only American working today who can rightfully be called an haute couturier, having been invited in 2002 by the Chambre Syndicale in Paris to show his made-to-order collection there alongside a handful of others, mostly Europeans.

Ralph Rucci is sophisticated and discreet, someone who has been known to call a woman "madam" and mean it in the best way. He sells \$80,000 alligator coats to those willing to pay for them, which is to say, he doesn't dress the red carpet set.

Rucci's technical abilities, his choice of fabrics and finishings, are awe inspiring even to others in his field, including his friend and mentor, L.A. designer and Nancy Reagan favorite James Galanos.

In the running Monday in New York for American fashion's highest honor, the Council of Fashion Designers Womenswear Designer of the Year Award, it seems Rucci, 47, is hitting his stride. He's been nominated before, but has never won. This time, he is up against brand

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Couturier has an artistic bent

[Rucci, from Page E1]

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But this," he says, referring to his art, "this allows me to float above the business."

Which is why he is immersing himself in a host of creative outlets. On the business end, he's contemplating how best to grow his company — retail stores, a men's collection, his first fragrance — while maintaining his own exacting standards.

"I don't know how to dress everyone," he says. "I know what I can't do and what I can do well. I think what has occurred in Hollywood is so disturbing. You have people called stylists borrowing clothing and jewelry to place on people who have no style. It's a conveyor belt of mediocrity."

Asked what he thinks of Jennifer Lopez's collection, shown at Bryant Park immediately after his in February, he says diplomatically, "no comment," but offers that he probably will not be showing there again.

But it is his artistic side that finds him here at the Serge Sorokko Gallery off Union Square, presenting his first exhibition of paintings and works on paper.

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says, ascending the stairs past a dramatic mixed-media work in black and white titled "Passageway" that inspired a double-faced cashmere coat in his fall 2005 collection. "I spend about 80% of my time as an accountant, as a CEO and president of my company. It is numbers, numbers, numbers and meetings ... even now my hotel room is filled with fabrics because this is a moment when I can study them.

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Low-profile designer

Rucci has floated above the fashion business for some time now. He does not advertise, so his clothes are not regularly featured in magazines. Unlike today's celebrity designers, he eschews the spotlight, preferring to work alone, without design assistants. And rather than starlets in his front row, he has socialites — Denise Hale, Deeda Blair and Tatiana Sorokko, the wife of Rucci's art dealer and a former model.

"Ralph's clothes are for women who don't need to prove much," says Sorokko, who modeled throughout the 1990s for all the top houses, including Rucci's, and owns more than 40 of his couture pieces.

At the gallery, about 50 works are on display through June 26, priced from \$3,500 to \$25,000.

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— RALPH RUCCI
on his paintings and works on paper

Completed over the past two years, they represent the creative beginnings of both his couture and his ready-to-wear Chado lines. "X-Infanta" is a screen print on chiffon of a woman's face, Botticelli-like, draped over a painted canvas. The design was translated into silk at a mill in Como, Italy, for the fall 2005 Chado collection.

Rucci stops to touch a daub of gold leaf on the abstract work "80 Days and 80 Nights," a precursor to a gold bullion bodice on a suede dress from his most recent couture collection. There are also several collages with pockets of cashmere suspended from thread. Rucci is fascinated by the concept of suspension, which shows up often on his garments. A shift dress shown in New York in February had tiny knots suspended throughout, like constellations in a night sky.

Art dealer and friend Serge Sorokko is sensitive to the blurred lines between fashion and art

now that Giorgio Armani has been exhibited in the Guggenheim and Chanel at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. "There are quite a few great designers making wonderful little sketches, but those are not serious art. And what Ralph is doing has nothing to do with that," he says. "If you believe, as I do, that some fashion can be art, then there is nothing wrong with someone being an artist/fashion designer, and going into another genre." Ten pieces have sold so far.

To Rucci, his debut in the art world is a personal journey, something he says calls to mind his first fashion collection — a homage to couture presented in Manhattan. "We didn't sell one piece. I had no money. I started with a loan from a relative. I wheeled my rack of samples down the street because I couldn't even afford a trucking service," says the designer, dressed in a black suit and a crisp white Charvet shirt, made to his own specifications by the famed Paris menswear store. "But I was so proud of that first collection. I still am."

It was the discovery of couture that drove him to the fashion business in the first place. The son of a South Philadelphia butcher, he attended a Jesuit prep school before going on to graduate from Temple University with a major in philosophy.

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Presenting
a portrait of
the designer
as an artist

[Rucci, from Page E12]

While in college, he was doing a paper, working in the library stacks, when he came across an Irving Penn photograph of a bride and her lady-in-waiting. "One was dressed in sculptural white gazar [a silk organza] and the other in trapezoidal black gazar," he remembers. "And I saw it somewhat like Robert Motherwell's 'Elegies to the Spanish Republic,'" he says, referring to the abstract artist's seminal series. Rucci looked at the clothes and thought, "Who is this fashion designer who has tested the waters of fine arts?"

It was Cristobal Balenciaga, and Rucci was obsessed. He began to study the work of the great couturiers — Charles James, Madame Grès and Madeleine Vionnet. Then, after enrolling in classes at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, he was hired by Halston. Ever impatient, he lasted only two years before leaving to start his own line.

Rucci remembers that his conservative parents were horrified. "I am the only son, all my cousins are male, and they are all doctors, so they were mortified. They said, 'How can you live like



KIRK MCKOY Los Angeles Times

KINSHIP: Ralph Rucci at the Serge Sorokko Gallery, which is presenting the first exhibition of his art. Co-owner Tatiana Sorokko wears a creation modeled after "Passageway," the painting on the wall.

that?"

Chado's birth

The truth is, Rucci wasn't sure either. From the start, it wasn't easy. He even ended up in the welfare office appealing a writ of eviction. "I had to call and beg people to come look at the clothes," he says. "Every door

was shut to me."

Then he woke up in 1993 with a revelation. "I said, 'I don't care. I am an adult and I have been doing this all my life.'" In a drastic departure from his earlier work, he made a collection entirely in black and chocolate brown. "And that's when it started to click." He began anew, renaming the la-

bel Chado, after the solemn Japanese tea ceremony with 331 steps, reflecting his love of Asian culture.

In 2001, Rucci was ready for the next step. So he wrote a letter to the Chambre Syndicale De La Couture, French fashion's governing body, asking if he could show his couture collection in

Paris. To his amazement, his request was granted, and in 2002 he became the first American since Mainbocher before World War II to show during couture week. The collection was beyond decadent, with a laser-cut knitted sable kimono, dark green Russian broadtail pants teamed with a cashmere tunic and cape, and cashmere sweaters embroidered by Lesage. Although Rucci does not disclose couture prices, made-to-order suits typically begin at \$15,000, and embroidered pieces can cost \$80,000 or more. Most of his ready-to-wear pieces, including trapeze line jackets and tapered pants that go up to a size 20, cost around \$5,000. But the quality of the Chado line, Neiman Marcus fashion director Joan Kaner says, is unparalleled. "I always ask him why he bothers to do couture because everything he does is couture."

It was at a trunk show at Neiman Marcus Beverly Hills that Rucci first met Galanos in 2003. "I have always adored the ground he walked on," Rucci says. "And I was eating lunch in a back office one day, with my sleeves rolled up, and he poked his head in." They have been friends ever since, with Galanos calling often to offer advice. "Jimmy critiques me. He says, 'Stop doing this' or 'do more of that,'" Rucci says. "I love and respect him."

Galanos traveled to Paris to see Rucci's fall 2003 couture show, which left him speechless. "If I had to compete with that," he says, "well, I couldn't." (Galanos retired in 1999.)

Rucci often speaks of things in spiritual terms. He described his first couture show as "a religious experience." Many of his clothes have inspirational messages scrawled on the fabric in a Cy Twombly-like scribble.

And his expression for something life altering — such as the mounting of his first art exhibit — is, "It's like a church." He's a very serious fellow, and if there is a critique to be made about his clothes it would be just that. His eveningwear can be stiff and overly sculpted—a high-waisted silk faille "Infanta" dress, for example. On a personal level, he is formal, and can be intimidating. "I like that," he says, while insisting that he can let loose too. "Sometimes in the studio, we all put on wigs and dance around. But I don't need to show that side to everyone."

Rucci has 50 people working for him now, but not one assistant designer. "I am searching for a new vocabulary in every collection and I can't be around people because you know when you find it and you know when you are not there and it's a very scary moment."

While in San Francisco, he opened the first of several planned in-store boutiques at Neiman Marcus. He is hoping to launch men's wear next year, and a fragrance soon after, as well as shoes and handbags. But there are no plans for a lower-priced or diffusion line.

"Why would I?" he asks. "I have created an audience for which I can make things as luxurious as possible."