

James Galanos: Height of Elegance

James Galanos dressed the best with a style rarely seen today

[Rod Hagwood](#) / November 16, 2007 / [Shopping](#)

Lest you think designer James Galanos — who has spent a great deal of his retirement from the pinnacle of the fashion world in 1998 here in Palm Springs — is mellowing, then you need to know this: Only this past spring he caused a ruckus.

The scuttlebutt has it that, in May, Galanos had dinner in Los Angeles with Michael Vollbracht, who had been the head designer for the Bill Blass label for the last four years. The two lamented the state of a fashion zeitgeist obsessed with celebrity and youth.

No one but the two of them knows if that conversation escalated into what fashion critic Robin Givhan termed “a moment of Paddy Chayefsky clarity” when writing about that pivotal luncheon in *The Washington Post*; but while jetting to a trunk show in San Francisco afterward, Vollbracht decided to resign, leaving the venerable house of Bill Blass without a designer for the third time since Blass himself retired in 1999 (and then died in 2002).

“The ladies loved his clothes,” says Galanos in an even tone, sensing that his words could ignite again. “I think the organization wanted something else. I felt very bad. Michael has always been very respectful to me. You know, I just received a nice letter from him.”

The topic has been a slow but steady burn for Galanos. The first salvo was back in 2002 when he blasted the fashion industry in *WWD* magazine for only showing on the catwalks and in glossy ads shock-value clothes targeting young girls with model-like bodies. He deftly laid the blame at the doorstep of Hollywood stylists, which had the double delicious factor of being ironic: Hollywood-based designer takes swipe at Tinseltown tastemakers.

Today he says, “Hollywood is so different now. They all have stylists, so that on the red carpet they all look like clones. The great movie stars in my day bought their own clothes. Their style came through.

“What I see now is geared to young clients. There is nothing in *Harper’s* and *Vogue* magazines that you can wear. Everything is blue jeans and things you can see through. Everything is hanging out. Now who can wear that except the young? Now that’s all well and fine, but young people don’t know fashion. They are all about a statement or a mood in magazines now. It’s geared to sex, not clothes.”

At the New York designer shows this year (fall in February, spring in September), the look is beginning to shift to sophisticated, mature-looking designs.

We should have been listening to Galanos all along.

“I just want to put fashion behind me,” he says. “I’m 83 years old, and fashion is something from the past. My time was up. It’s a blue jeans world. It’s totally different. To me, they just look messy.

“I keep thinking, ...” here he pauses, editing himself and looking for the perfect word with that same laser-accurate perfection that defined his designs. “I keep hoping elegance will come around.”

Paris to New York

James Galanos knew he wanted to be a fashion designer when he was 7 years old, during the height of the Depression in 1931. He began his career in stodgy Philadelphia and then in anti-fashion south New Jersey.

“Believe me,” Galanos sniffs, “That has nothing to with anything. I grew up there, that’s all.”

Ah, but thinking that he could engineer fabric around a woman’s curves for a stunning effect — that was his first audacious moment. There were many to follow.

In New York, he enrolled in the Traphagen School of Fashion in 1942 and dropped out eight months later to dive into the real world.

“I learned draping there,” he says. “I wasn’t a painter or anything like that, but I knew how to draw. My father drew. He would sit in the drawing room and paint. So I watched him, and I was actually pretty good at sketching.” Armed with an audacious belief in his talent and very little else, Galanos started selling his sketches.

Today he prefers not to talk about his salad days with the same romance as other designers who have achieved financial success.

“I just didn’t want to depend on my father, who worked very hard as a restaurateur. So I made sketches and tried to sell them on Seventh Avenue,” he says. “I would go up and down the elevators all day. I would sell them for two or three dollars a sketch. If I got five or ten, I was thrilled.”

A few lucky meetings later and he was at MGM and Columbia movie studios in Hollywood doing design grunt work, but making invaluable couture contacts — all under the auspices of famed costumer and good friend Jean Louis.

In the 1940s, word of mouth and burgeoning talent earned him a sponsor, who sent him to Paris in 1947, just as the French fashion industry was dusting itself off after the War and occupation.

“Paris was coming back to life,” Galanos says. “It was a great time to be there. I went to Balenciaga and Dior. I just wanted to work and learn.”

Couturier Robert Piguet hired the young Galanos and threw him into his stable of designers alongside Pierre Balmain, Marc Bohan, and Hubert de Givenchy.

In 1951, he returned to the West Coast (“I still wanted to pursue my dream in America”) and set up an atelier, where he produced his first eponymous collection: French chic with a soupçon of sportif from California. Saks Fifth Avenue buyer Doris Fields and Amelia Gray, whose boutique

was a must-stop for Beverly Hills socialites and stars, responded enthusiastically. His fit model Pat Jones helped spread the word.

“She was fantastic,” Galanos says. “I fell in love with her. I liked the way she moved. And she liked me for some reason. For 40 years, she was my muse, my alter ego. When she went to New York, everyone stopped her and asked her where she got her dresses because they were so different. Pat called me and said, ‘Send samples.’ I did. I think it was 15 to 20 pieces. We showed in an apartment in New York’s Hampshire House.”

That was 1952, and Galanos was on fire. Legendary magazine editors and style mavens such as Diana Vreeland, Eleanor Lambert, Eugenia Sheppard, and Virginia Pope became fans, ensuring he’d become a household name (well, in certain socialite households) within months. Back in Hollywood, he was whipping up costumes for Rosalind Russell, concert gowns for Dorothy Lamour, and little black dresses for Marlene Dietrich.

“Word got around quickly,” Galanos says. “Overnight, we became what you call a sensation.”

On Exhibition

“He has incredible craftsmanship,” says Sharon S. Takeda, senior curator of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and costume and textiles department chief. “He is a master couturier. But he also had a lot of ideas — incredible ideas. I remember this one [outfit] that was a bodysuit with this hand-beaded, see-through dress over it. You could see that there was thought there — lots of thought.”

Takeda included Galanos in the LACMA exhibit *Breaking the Mode: Contemporary Fashion* from the Permanent Collection, alongside the likes of Rei Kawakubo, Christian Lacroix, Alexander McQueen, Issey Miyake, Thierry Mugler, Junya Watanabe, Vivienne Westwood, and Yohji Yamamoto — all designers who redefined beauty by taking advantage of advancing technologies. And they are all considered master tailors who raised artisan to artist.

“Like artists, they work with positive and negative, light and dark, smooth and textured,” Takeda says. “Designers create in form, color, and texture. With Galanos, it’s a bit of that Old World technique with some new ideas about fashion. He held his own very well with some very avant-garde pieces. People in the know recognize the timelessness of his work. That is what puts him up there with the masters.”

Galanos’ work is on exhibit until March 9, 2008, at the Philadelphia Museum of Art in a show titled *A Passion for Perfection: James Galanos, Gustave Tassell, Ralph Rucci*.

Through Nov. 10, 2008, his work with former First Lady Nancy Reagan (the inaugural gowns are iconic) will be chronicled in *Nancy Reagan — A First Lady’s Style* at the Ronald Reagan Library in Simi Valley. Galanos, Diane Von Furstenberg, Carolina Herrera, and Oscar de la Renta hosted an exhibition opening event in November.

“Of course we met in the early ’50s,” Galanos says of his longtime collaboration with Reagan. “She shopped at Amelia Gray. We used to sit in the back room and just talk and talk. We became very close friends. Of course, I did both inaugurations when [Ronald Reagan] was governor of California. When he was president, Adolfo did the swearing-in suits for her, but I did both inauguration gowns. Of course, everyone got all up in arms with that one-shoulder gown I did for her.”

Other designers stress and strain for that kind of status. Galanos, like all masters of their art, makes it look easy.

“There’s no doubt about it. He’s an icon,” says Peri Ellen Berne, who gave Galanos the Rodeo Drive Walk of Style Award on Oct. 18, the final day of Fashion Week in Los Angeles. In addition to Nancy Reagan, self-avowed glamazons Betsy Bloomingdale and Connie Wald hosted the event. “He makes beautiful, elegant clothing with luscious embellishments. He spares no expense in making a woman feel like a princess,” Berne says. “In the history of California fashion, he is in the forefront.”

And now he is a photographer. After retiring, Galanos picked up the camera and began experimenting with light, color, form, texture, and context — his old friends from fashion design.

“The truly, truly talented can’t stop creating,” says Serge Sorokko, who owns an eponymous art gallery in San Francisco that exhibited Galanos’ photographs in 2006 alongside works by Andy Warhol, Marc Chagall, and Cy Twombly. “With Galanos, I see an artist searching in a different milieu. It’s just the tools of his trade have changed. He’s doing collages now instead of working with fabric. His work is constructed in an abstract way. It has a constructivist feel to it. I realized I was witnessing something new. These were photographs that immediately struck me as original. You know, we see so much that is derivative or pretentious or that tries to shock for shock’s sake. But Jimmy is highly original. His work is an extension of his art as a couturier. We sold a lot of art. People were flabbergasted.”

“I never had time before,” Galanos says. “I would spend 12 to 14 hours a day all week doing the fashion business. I started taking pictures in my garden in Palm Springs, and then I did some landscapes at the Indian Canyons that were received well. That was certainly good for my ego. I really love it. I get excited.”

Sorokko has seen that renewed enthusiasm up close.

“We went to Russia with him, and he couldn’t put his camera down,” he says. “This 83-year-old would run up and down stairs as nimble as he could be. We were hard-pressed to keep up with him. He is such a perfectionist. And I have not seen a more elegant man in my life. But he is not just humble; he is unassuming. That is such an endearing quality for such an iconic figure. The designer Ralph Rucci was with us once and Jimmy was trying to [discount] someone who was praising him and being very modest. Ralph finally told Jimmy, ‘Oh stop it. You are Galanos.’”

Galanos cannot bear some of what others have said about him. He talks over the praise, bringing it to an uncharacteristically abrupt and jarring halt.

“I am just another person who did what I wanted to do,” he says. “We were taught to be nice and to be honest. If I said something, I meant it. I am James Galanos. That’s it ... for what it’s worth.”

Portrait Photography by John Aigner

Grooming: Winston Torr

Production & Post-production: Naizoo.com

What does James have to say about working with Rosalind Russell, Nancy Reagan, Diana Ross, Marlene Dietrich, Dorothy Lamour, Judy Garland, and Ali McGraw? [Click here to find out...](#)



Galanos won the Council of Fashion Designers of America Lifetime Achievement A