

Mirror, Mirror | Hometown honors for a guru of gowns

By Elizabeth Wellington
Inquirer Fashion Writer

James Galanos isn't a household name like Oscar de la Renta, Donna Karan, or Michael Kors.

In fashion circles, however, Galanos - the now-retired designer for high-society women such as former first lady Nancy Reagan and Caroline Kimmel - is a deity, a genius, a savior of American couture.

Galanos, 82, will be inducted Thursday into Drexel University's Philadelphia Fashion Hall of Fame at a lavish fete at the Union League.

The Philadelphia-born designer spent his entire career in Los Angeles. There, he brought European sensibilities to American ready-to-wear clothing.

He is best known for sheer, simple gowns that blended tiers of frothy chiffons with lace and silk. Most of the beading was done by hand. Galanos enthusiasts gush that they can turn a Galanos gown inside out and still have a beautiful garment. Other famous clients include songstress Diana Ross, actress Rosalind Russell, and socialite Betsy Bloomingdale.

"I built my career on the style of Parisian couture and workmanship," Galanos said last month, when he visited the Union League to make sure his dresses fit mannequins on loan from the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

At Thursday's fund-raiser, 35 of his dresses will be on display. Drexel professor Emil De John said the school hoped to raise \$100,000 for its fashion department.

Galanos' dresses have become a part of fashion exhibitions in museums from Los Angeles to New York. The Art Museum has more than 100 in its couture collections.

He won the prestigious Coty Fashion Award in 1954 and 1956, and received the Council of Fashion Designers of America Lifetime Achievement Award. And he was one of the first designers to have a plaque on New York's Fashion Walk of Fame on Seventh Avenue.

"James Galanos will always be remembered as *the* American couturier," said Diane von Furstenberg, president of the Council of Fashion Designers. "His impact on American fashion is huge."

Said former council president Stan Herman: "He has the most immaculate attention to detail of any designer that I know. He has always marched to his own drummer... the only person I can compare him to is Geoffrey Beene. The two of them were able to stay above the crowd and build major careers."

Galanos was born in Germantown, but his family moved to South Jersey when he was a toddler. He attended Bridgeton High School and went on to design school in New York, but dropped out.

After a brief stint as a design apprentice in Los Angeles, Galanos made his way to France, where he interned at the House of Piguet. He came back to Los Angeles and sold clothes in boutiques before opening his own store, Galanos Originals, in 1951. Saks Fifth Avenue bought his entire first collection.

He hit his peak in the 1980s, creating gowns for Reagan for consecutive inaugurations. In 1981, she wore a white, one-shoulder silk satin sheath. Four years later, the dress was white chiffon. Both were heavily beaded.

It took a while for Galanos to warm up during conversation. Like many men of his time, he doesn't like to talk about himself, choosing to let his reputation speak for him.

What does he think about today's clothes? Not much. Basically, he thinks they are vulgar.

He will say that during his career, he became friends with Reagan, Ross and Bloomingdale. Unlike celebrity designers such as Zac Posen and Douglas Hannant, however, Galanos chose to stay in the background. He never licensed his own name.

"I'm not a celebrity, I'm a designer. Today, designers promote themselves through association with their client. I didn't do that, and I don't do that."

His clients have no problem gushing.

Caroline Kimmel - who along with her husband, Sidney, is footing most of the bill for the event - plans to wear one of her ~~four~~ Galanos originals Thursday night. The first place she saw the designer's work was at Nan Duskin, and in the late 1970s, Kimmel would travel to New York to view the collection.

"I wore a navy-blue pin-dot dress to my best friend's wedding in Hawaii last summer," Kimmel said. "His clothes are so elegantly crafted... . When you wear one of his gowns, it's a special thing."

Galanos closed his fashion house in 1998. He has turned his attention to photography, and an exhibition of his work was showcased at the Serge Sorokko Gallery in San Francisco. Galanos makes abstract pieces and then photographs them.

"When I closed my business and retired, I thought retiring would be wonderful, but I had too much time. Life was empty without something special to do."

On this lazy Saturday afternoon, Galanos is impeccably dressed in a navy- blue pinstriped suit and pressed white shirt. He is the only one of our group - De John, a photographer and myself - appropriately dressed to enter the Union League, which has a strict no-denim policy.

"I'm from the late '40s, when elegance was everything, especially with women. They wore hats and gloves. We wouldn't be caught dead looking like people do today on the street."