

9.17.2006

STYLE

Section D

A NEW EXPRESSION

Classic fashion designer James Galanos finds salvation — for now — in creating art

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LOS ANGELES

On a warm August afternoon in Southern California's West Hollywood hills, the front door of an unassuming one-story stucco home opens. It is the sort of sunny, lazy day that begs for casual wear, but the person at the threshold is no slouch.

James Galanos is dressed in an impeccably cut black suit, a blue-and-white striped shirt and a black weave-patterned tie by Charvet. Of course, why would a fashion legend like Galanos make concessions to the weather, or the lowered standards of our time?

He leads a guest into a living room with black granite floors, beige boiserie lining the walls, and a minimalist couch and club chairs in a sleek gray satiny finish. The pristinely chic abode — a temple of minimalist elegance, really — speaks volumes about the man who reigned for decades as one of America's foremost fashion designers. Galanos — not to be confused with the fashion designer John Calliano, whom he is sometimes mistaken for by the non-cognoscenti — is world famous for his expert construction, original designs and a quiet manner that speaks of discretion and restraint.

But he is outspoken about *some* things. Since his retirement in 1996, the fashion scene has changed, and not, Galanos believes, for the better.

"We're living in a blue-jean world with itty-bitty tops," he says. "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."

He prefers to avoid talking about his storied career and his famous clients, who included jet-setters and Hollywood starlets such as Nancy Reagan, Marlene Dietrich, Rosalind Russell, Dorothy Lamour, Judy Garland, Diana Ross, Betsy Bloomingdale, Denise Hale and others.

"It's past history," he says, impatiently.

What he will talk about is what's next.

At the youthful age of 81 — he turns 82 on Wednesday — Galanos has started a new career — art photography. Instead of dreaming up new silhouettes and juxtapositions of fabrics, he's making paper collages that play with color, shape, light and shadow, which he photographs in a makeshift studio, the kitchen of his jewel-box home.

On Thursday, Galanos will be on hand for the premiere of his first-ever show of constructivist collages at the Serge Sorokko Gallery on Grant Avenue.

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James Galanos, in his elegant Los Angeles home, where he photographs his paper collages.



Galanos fascinated by photography since childhood

▶ GALANOS

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The Sorokkos have ties to the fashion world — the gallery owner's wife, Tatiana, is a contributing editor at Harper's Bazaar and a former runway model. They learned of Galanos' art through friend and clothing designer Ralph Rucci, who had his first-ever art show at the Sorokko Gallery in May 2005.

Galanos, normally intensely private, opened his home to a reporter to discuss his new vocation, which has given him new purpose in life.

"It's my salvation for the moment," said Galanos, who was something of a workaholic when still in the fashion business and got bored of traveling the world only two years into retirement. "I was lost."

During retirement, a childhood fascination with photography resurfaced. At his second home, in Palm Springs, he began to take photos of the garden and the Indian canyons, to hone his skills.

He sleeps only four hours a night. But one night, during a bout of insomnia, he began playing with paper. Soon he moved in to abstract designs featuring color and lighting and shadow, and printed the photographs on watercolor paper.

He leads a visitor through the living room to the kitchen, which serves as a makeshift studio. "Pardon the mess," he says, referring to a tiny stack of papers in a corner of the counter, also in black granite, which is otherwise bare.

He pulls a stack of small photos, about 5-by-7-inches in size. They are something he completed only a few days before, photos with swirling colors that look like liquid suspensions or mists from outer space. He won't discuss how he achieved the effect.

"I'm not going to give away my secrets," he intones, starting over the top of his eyes as he manipulates color. I invent things. It gives me pleasure. It excites me."

The opening night gala is expected to draw its share of fashion publicity, with attendees including the likes of Rucci, Galanos' customer and actress Dixie Carter, Rosemary Stark, widow of the late Robert Stack, Wolfgang Puck and his other half, fashion designer Gella Assela; Los Angeles interior designer David Phoenix, who has worked with Maria Shriver and Oprah Winfrey.

Some skeptics may say that the



Serge Sorokko Gallery

Serge Sorokko Gallery

he was in fashion over the years," she said. "In my view, there were only Yves Saint Laurent, Givenchy and a few others in the old guard with a great sense for color. Jimmy was more refined but with a pristine elegant sense of color — and really elegant, with a strong sense of restraint. It transcends to his art. Lots of people can be derivative. He's derivative only of himself."

"Genius, genius, genius," Rucci said of Galanos, who earned the prestigious Coty and Neiman Marcus fashion awards in 1954, only three years after going into

design sketches for \$2 a piece, to executives in the elevators of clothing manufacturers' offices on Madison Avenue.

He was offered a contract with a couple who wanted to start their own clothing line in California, and moved there, but the couple divorced before things took off.

The husband became a father figure to Galanos and sent him to Paris, where the young designer got an internship with Robert Figue by offering to work for free.

Galanos moved back to New York and then to Los Angeles, where he met Jean Louis and got a job as a sketch artist at Columbia Pictures. After the costume designer introduced him to Madame Marguerite, a seamstress, Galanos put together a handful of designs that were shown to buyers in 1951. It was the start of Galanos Originals.

His clothes were initially sold at the Amelia Gray boutique on Wilshire Boulevard, and before long, coveted by stars and socialites. Soon he was doing trunk shows at luxury department stores. His clothes were extremely expensive: skirt suits trimmed in fur sold for more than \$10,000 a piece. It was Nancy Reagan who garnered widespread acclaim for Galanos' gowns. She wore them to her husband's 1967 gubernatorial and the 1981 and 1985 presidential inaugurations.

He attended design school in New York but dropped out to sell



Photos by Associated Press

above: A brocade evening dress, left, by James Galanos at his 1964 fashion show in New York. Nancy Reagan, right, in 1981, wouldn't have anyone but Galanos design her inaugural dresses.

Left: Fashion designer James Galanos' new passion involves photographing his paper constructions, as seen in "Green & Pink," top, and "Black & White 2," bottom.

might ask whether Galanos is stretching too far — as in, can't a person who's good in one area just be satisfied with that? And, why should a fashion designer go into art?

"Those who might be critical are not important to listen to," he said. "People should be in awe of Galanos. They should listen, and learn."

There aren't many opportunities anymore to hear from Galanos, who has retreated into his home, lives alone and leads a quiet life. Having worked in his father's restaurant as a child, he does not like to cook. He eats out for breakfast, lunch and dinner, at neighborhood spots such as the Coffee Bean, Cafe Med and Le Petit Four, where on occasion, he has learned to dress down by skipping a tie in favor of an ascot.

The Sorokko Gallery is expected to be jumping the night of the exhibition, but will be without one important guest, Nancy Reagan. In a telephone interview earlier this week, she fondly recalled the first Galanos dress she ever bought.

"It was a short black dress — it sounds so simple — with a white collar and white cuffs. I think it

was \$125," she said. "I was so thrilled to have a dress by him."

He was the only one she turned to for inaugural ball gowns because his designs made her comfortable as well as glamorous.

"I wouldn't ask anybody else but Jimmy," Reagan said. "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."

Her gowns have all been sent to the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, where, some day, she said, there will be a show of her clothes, Galanos and all.

But on Thursday, it's all about Galanos and his photo exhibition, and Reagan sends congratulations.

"To just sit there and let all that talent go to waste would not have been good," Reagan said. "I'm not surprised at all by his new career. He had to do something with all those feelings inside of him, and I'm delighted he is."

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James Galanos: Photographs, collages, runs Sept. 22-Oct. 21 at Grand Central Station, San Francisco, Calif. For information, call (415) 421-1700 or go to www.sorokko.com.

A show of 60 constructivist works by the artist is on display at the Serge Sorokko Gallery, 231 S. La Brea Ave., Los Angeles. Hours: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., daily. To go go to www.sorokko.com.

works are not real art, that fashion designers — whether their names are Karl Lagerfeld or Thierry Mugler, who have also tried their hand at art — cannot be considered true artists, or that fashion itself is not an art form.

Luckily, Galanos has thick skin, friends to boost his ego and a list of museum retrospective shows — at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1997 and the Western Reserve Historical Society's Gishlain Halle Costume Wing in Cleveland in 1996, among others — to prove that at least some curators think he is an artist, regardless of the medium.

"Whether the creator is a fashion designer or a plumber, it makes no difference," Serge Sorokko says. "Is the work good? Can it stand on its own? Can we judge on its merits? These are the questions we want to ask."

The Sorokkos became friendly with Galanos through Rucci, the only American designer ever invited to show at the Paris couture show. Rucci's designs, like those of Galanos, focus on expert tailoring and originality. The two met at a trunk show at Neiman Marcus in Los Angeles and have formed a fast friendship in recent years.

When the Sorokkos heard about Galanos' photography, they went to his home in Los Angeles to take a look, but didn't expect much. They were surprised.

"I immediately had the feeling I was looking at something very serious," Serge Sorokko said. "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."

Tatiana Sorokko noted that the color palette in the photographs is similar to that in Galanos' clothing designs.

"Everything is very graphic, black and white with a hint of color, a big palette of color — that's how