



## Amies, Sir Hardy (1909-2003)

by Shaun Cole

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Sir Hardy Amies was for 48 years the Queen of England's official dressmaker. As a couturier he was known for his restrained, conservative, but beautifully tailored suits and dresses. He was also famed for his self-confessed snobbery. "I can't help it," he said, "I'm immensely impressed by all genuine upper-class manifestations."

Born in London on July 17, 1909, Edwin Hardy Amies was the son of a civil servant and a saleswoman at a firm that made clothing for members of the Court. After leaving school in 1927 he worked in France and Germany, where he became fluent in French and German.

He returned to England in 1933 and was appointed designer at London's House of Lachasse. By 1935 he was managing director as well as chief designer. Lachasse closed in 1939 with the outbreak of World War II.

During the war, Amies served in the intelligence corps. He also continued designing as he worked with the British Board of Trade to design clothes for the domestic market that conformed to the requirements of the clothes rationing program, as well as luxury couture to sell abroad.

On leaving the army in 1946 Amies bought a bombed out house at 14 Savile Row and set up his own couture house. In 1951 the then Princess Elizabeth asked Amies to design some day clothes for a tour of Canada. This was the beginning of a long and productive relationship.

In 1955 Amies became, by appointment, one of the new queen's dressmakers. He continued in this position until 1990 when he felt it was time for younger designers to dress the queen. In 1989, in recognition of his long service as the queen's dressmaker, he was made a Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order.

Amies' clothes for the queen were often criticized for making her look dowdy, but Amies defended his designs, maintaining that the queen's dresses suited her: "She feels that being terribly chic is not friendly to her audience. She doesn't want to dazzle people," he said in 1989.

His reserved royal outfits, in the clever fluid tailoring that became his signature, followed the maxim that "day clothes must look equally as good at Salisbury station and at the Ritz bar."

As well as creating couture dresses, Amies had been creating a ready-to-wear line since 1950. In the early 1960s, he created a dynamic line of menswear based on the athletic male body. His men's clothes had a huge influence on men's high street fashion when he became the design adviser to Hepworth's, a chain of tailors.

Amies was frequently asked to design uniforms and special clothes for groups such as the Oxford University Boat Club and London Stock Exchange guides. Like many other fashion designers he designed costumes for the stage and film, most notably for Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968).

In May 2001 Amies sold his business to the Luxury Brands Group. Upon Amies' retirement at the end of 2001, Moroccan-born designer Jacques Azagury was appointed the house's new head of couture.

Sir Hardy Amies had a zest for life. As Colin McDowell wrote in his obituary for *The Guardian*, he "appreciated the good things in life and was a connoisseur of good food, fine wines and firm male flesh."

In his old age Amies was relaxed about acknowledging his homosexuality, often referring to it in a witty (and somewhat bitchy) fashion. Speaking of his royal dressmaking rival Sir Norman Hartnell, he said, "It's quite simple. He was a silly old queen and I'm a clever old queen."

Amies and his partner, Ken Fleetwood (who was design director of Hardy Amies Ltd), were together for 43 years until Fleetwood's death in 1996.

Amies, who had in his early life dreamt of becoming a journalist, had a quick intelligence, sharp wit, and sparkling sense of humor, all of which are apparent in his autobiography, which appeared in two parts, *Just So Far* (1954) and *Still Here* (1984).

Sir Hardy Amies died on March 5, 2003.

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### **About the Author**

**Shaun Cole** is curator of Designs at the Victoria and Albert Museum. He is author of *"Don We Now Our Gay Apparel": Gay Men's Dress in the Twentieth Century* and has curated numerous exhibitions, including "Graphic Responses to AIDS" (1996), "Fashion on Paper" (1997), and "Dressing the Male" (1999), as well as two innovative "Days of Record" to document Tattooing (2000) and Black British Hairstyles and Nail Art (2001).