



Clark, Ossie (1942-1996)

by Shaun Cole

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2003, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Along with Mary Quant and Biba, Ossie Clark defined the fashion mood of 1960s London. Most famous for his bias cut dresses and impeccable tailoring, he was also an innovator. He was one of the first to popularize motorcycle jackets, hotpants, and maxicoats, and to mix unusual fabrics such as wool tweed and silk chiffon.

Clark's clothes were worn by some of the most beautiful and famous women of the era, including Brigitte Bardot, Bianca Jagger, Marianne Faithful, Twiggy, Marsha Hunt, Jean Shrimpton, Elizabeth Taylor, and Liza Minelli. At the height of his fame he lived a jet-set lifestyle, designing stage outfits for his friend Mick Jagger and hanging out with Andy Warhol, Truman Capote, and Diana Vreeland whenever he was in New York.

Born into a large working-class family in Liverpool, England on June 9, 1942, Raymond Clark grew up in the Lancashire village of Oswaldtwistle, the village that inspired his nickname. After a period studying at technical school, Clark went to Manchester College of Art where he "learnt how to thread a needle and sew."

In 1962 he moved to London to take a place at the prestigious Fashion Design School at The Royal College of Art. Within weeks of graduating in June 1965, with a first class degree and a collection inspired by artist Bridget Riley, Clark was a success. His designs were on sale in the Knightsbridge store Woolands, *Vogue* magazine had singled him out as a major new talent, and photographer David Bailey had taken his portrait.

Clark began to sell both his couture and ready-to-wear lines in the Chelsea boutique, Quorum. Part of the success of Clark's clothes was due to the collaboration with his muse and wife, textile designer Celia Birtwell. Many of Clark's most famous items were designed around Birtwell's fabrics.

Clark met Birtwell while a student in Manchester. Despite Clark's sexual attraction to men, they became lovers. They married in 1969 when Birtwell was pregnant with their second son, but divorced in 1974, amid claims that Birtwell could no longer put up with Clark's drug habit and sexual encounters with men. Their relationship was famously recorded in a painting, *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy*, by their friend and Clark's former lover, David Hockney.

Clark had an incredible eye for the female form, creating the most flattering garments. Reputedly, he could cut a dress to fit any woman perfectly just by running his hands over her body. Clark's apparently demure dresses packed a hidden punch. A black moss crepe wrap dress printed with bluebells recalled a quasi-Regency restraint with its long skirt, high waist, and puffed sleeves, but on closer inspection it revealed a plunging back and breastbone keyhole.

Much of Clark's inspiration came from the great Parisian couturiers of the 1930s, particularly Charles James's perfectionist manner and Madeline Vionnet's bias cut designs. He also loved films, idolizing screen icons such as Marlene Dietrich and Mae West. He revered the work of Hollywood costume designer Adrian's

creations of the interwar period.

After his divorce from Birtwell, Clark's career began to plummet. Never a great businessman, he refused to compromise his style and talent in order to compete in the mass market fashion world of the 1980s. His increasing drug use and lack of a sound financial backer led to Clark's business going bankrupt in 1981 and, subsequently, to his retirement from the fashion world. In 1983 the inland revenue claimed fourteen years of back taxes and he was declared personally bankrupt.

In the late 1980s, Clark appeared to conquer his drug habit, but he was plagued by ill health. A series of operations for stomach ulcers left him drained.

In 1995 Clark invited his 27-year-old Italian lover Diego Cogolata to move in with him. They soon split up as a couple, but continued to live together.

On August 7, 1996, police were called to Clark's flat where they found his body. He had been stabbed 37 times by Cogolata. Cogolata was convicted of the murder, but was given only a six year prison term on the grounds of diminished responsibility.

Clark's work still stands out and exerts an influence on the fashion world. Tom Ford looked to Clark's designs for inspiration when he began work at Gucci around the time of Clark's death, and designers John Galliano, Stella McCartney, and Marc Jacobs have all created collections that are indebted to Clark's work.

In 2003, Clark's designs were the subject of a major exhibit at the Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

Bibliography

Clark, Ossie. *The Ossie Clark Diaries*. Lady Henrietta Rous, ed. London: Bloomsbury, 1998.

Watt, Judith. *Ossie Clark 1965-74*. London: V&A Publishing, 2003.

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).