



## Ellis, Perry (1940-1986)

by Linda Rapp

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Perry Ellis first made his name as the designer of a line of casual but stylish sportswear for women. His prestige grew rapidly, and so did his repertoire. He soon began designing men's wear as well, and eventually added collections of shoes, furs, linens, and fragrances. His successful career was cut short by his early death, rumored to have been the result of complications from AIDS.

Perry Edwin Ellis was the only child of Edwin Ellis, the owner of a fuel company, and Winifred Roundtree Ellis, a homemaker. He was born March 3, 1940 in Portsmouth, Virginia, and grew up in nearby Churchland, which has since become part of the larger city but was a rural area at the time.

The Ellis family was financially comfortable, and they were able to send their son to private primary schools. He continued his education at public Woodrow Wilson High School, one of the state's best secondary schools. After graduating in 1957 he enrolled at Old Dominion University and commuted to the campus in Norfolk.

Old Dominion was part of the system of the College of William and Mary, and after a year and a half Ellis transferred to the main campus in Williamsburg. He graduated with a degree in business administration in 1961.

Without any specific career plans but with a definite desire to avoid the military draft, Ellis enlisted in the Coast Guard reserve after his college graduation. In the required six months of active duty, Ellis was assigned various jobs from maintenance work to serving in the Presidential Honor Guard, but he never went to sea.

Once back in the civilian world Ellis enrolled at New York University, from which he earned a master's degree in retailing in 1963.

Ellis returned to his native state and accepted a job with the Miller & Rhoads department store in Richmond. He was appointed the buyer for women's sportswear and quickly turned the department into the most successful in the store. He had a flair for both fashion and marketing, a keen sense of what would appeal to customers and how to present it to best advantage.

Ellis developed a good relationship with the John Meyer company, whose sportswear line he promoted at Miller & Rhoads since he found that it sold particularly well. In 1967 Ellis left the department store to become a merchandiser for John Meyer.

During his seven years with Meyer, Ellis became well versed in many aspects of the fashion industry. He was advising rather than designing, but showed a sharp eye for what would sell. He accompanied buyers on trips and helped them select fabrics. He also learned about the production side of the business.

Ellis's experience in retailing stood him in good stead. He understood how to edit a collection, assembling

attractive outfits from its elements and displaying them as ensembles, rather than simply presenting buyers with racks of garments.

Ellis also understood the importance of the press and began cultivating the acquaintance of prominent fashion editors. The relationship was symbiotic: editors were eager to have previews of upcoming lines, and John Meyer collections received increased coverage in magazines.

In New York Ellis began to explore the homosexual side of his nature. He had previously dated a few women but had never developed a serious relationship with any of them. He now also started having affairs with men, including one with Robert MacDonald, a young man then working in the film industry. Their romance faded after about six years, but MacDonald would remain one of Ellis's closest and most trusted friends for the rest of his life.

A turning point in Ellis's career came in 1973, when the John Meyer company was sold to a conglomerate and Ellis moved to The Vera Companies, which sold scarves and blouses featuring the floral and abstract motifs created by Vera Neumann.

Ellis's first post at Vera was vice-president and merchandise manager for the sportswear division, in which capacity he continued to do the sort of work that he had done at John Meyer. After about a year, however, the president of the division approached him about designing a line.

At first Ellis was hesitant since he lacked experience in that phase of the business, but he agreed to try. With the help of assistants who supplied the necessary expertise in such technical areas as pattern-making, Ellis began creating fashions. He was soon given his own line, called Portfolio.

His first spring collection was presented at a small show for fashion editors in November 1976. Ellis's work was well received. His comfortable, casual "slouch" look--with oversized jackets, baggy pants, and mohair sweaters--was a hit, and buyers from prestigious stores like Bonwit Teller sent in their orders for his collection.

Some of the hallmarks of Ellis's work were present from the beginning. He favored a clean-cut but casual look, made with natural fabrics. At the same time he liked a touch of whimsy. "My clothes are friendly--like people you've known for a long time but who continue to surprise you," he commented.

The surprises might include an absence of buttons or a closure that hid them, an interesting cable detail on a hand-knit sweater, or a "dimple" (a forward-oriented pleat) to soften the broad shoulder of a jacket. Because of Ellis's original touches, his clothes were often praised for being fresh, lighthearted, and gently irreverent.

As accolades and award nominations came Ellis's way, he negotiated a complex deal with Manhattan Industries, the parent company of Vera, that gave him his own division within the corporation, Perry Ellis Sportswear, Inc., and also created Ellis's own company, Perry Ellis International. The agreement was signed in August 1978. The arrangement would allow Ellis to branch out, eventually adding lines of men's sportswear, evening clothes, shoes, furs, fragrances, and linens.

In the midst of the negotiations Ellis presented his fall collection in April 1978. The fashion press was highly interested in the up-and-coming designer who had already been nominated for an American Critics Award for Fashion (usually called a Coty, after the sponsor) and who seemed poised for spectacular success.

Ellis demonstrated his flair for showmanship by opening the event with a dance number by the Princeton University cheerleaders, after which the comely captain of the football team raced down the runway. To close the show Ellis playfully skipped down the runway himself, a move that would become his trademark.

In between, Ellis presented a collection that showed creative use of fabric and color and won enthusiastic praise from the critics.

The show was the first to feature Ellis's men's wear designs. The first model to wear them on the runway was Robert "Beau" Tropper, who had recently become Ellis's lover. Although Ellis was not out publicly as a gay or bisexual man, the nature of his relationship with Tropper, some sixteen years his junior, was an open secret in the fashion world.

Under the business arrangement with Manhattan Industries, Ellis's fashion empire burgeoned. Ellis, who had a reputation as a perfectionist, was deeply concerned with the minutiae of all phases of the operation. He was generous, though, in recognizing the contributions of others. At the end of his shows, for example, he typically brought his design assistants to the stage for a bow.

A key player in the expansion of Ellis's enterprises--and in his personal life--was Laughlin Barker. The two met in 1980 and immediately fell in love. Shortly thereafter Ellis retained the law firm for which Barker worked as corporate counsel for Perry Ellis International. In June 1982 Barker began working directly for the company as its president and legal counsel, a position created especially for him by Ellis, who held the title of chairman.

Barker proved to be an astute businessman. When he came on board, Perry Ellis International had wholesale revenues of about sixty million dollars per year from sixteen licensees. By the beginning of 1986 the number of licensees had risen to twenty-three and sales were up to approximately a quarter of a billion dollars.

None of this success would have been possible without a good product, and Ellis's collections pleased consumers and critics alike. Among other honors, Ellis won eight Coty Awards between 1979 and 1984, the last year that they were given.

Not every Ellis collection gained spectacular reviews, however. His women's sportswear line for fall 1982 was among his least successful because it was too trendy and different from his previous looks. Generally, though, Ellis showed a genius for understanding what customers wanted and for updating his collections subtly and incrementally with the times.

Ellis was briefly hospitalized with hepatitis in early 1981 shortly after he and Barker returned from a trip to Africa. Ellis recovered, but following the episode both he and Barker started showing more concern about their health.

Within a few years the two men began to decline visibly, Barker in particular. Although they kept up the demanding task of guiding Ellis's fashion empire, they spent more and more of their time running it from Ellis's luxurious beach house at Water Island, a tiny and isolated community on Fire Island.

Ellis and Barker nevertheless continued to travel frequently. They made several trips to Paris in connection with the development of Ellis's fragrance line, but according to close friends they were also going to the Pasteur Institute, a leader in AIDS research, where patients (including actor Rock Hudson) were able to obtain experimental drug treatments unavailable elsewhere.

Rumors that Ellis had AIDS began circulating in the fashion world. Company spokespeople denied it, and Ellis himself was evasive, commenting, "There will always be rumors. They come and go, and there is nothing you can do about it. But I know how I feel."

Although Barker's decline resulted in increasing absence from the office, Ellis kept a busy schedule. In 1984 he joined with Levi Strauss to produce a sportswear line called Perry Ellis America and brought back the Portfolio line, this time with men's wear as well as women's, to offer fashionable classic looks at moderate

prices. He was also elected president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA).

Ellis had long wanted a child and conceived one with film producer and screenwriter Barbara Gallagher, who had been a friend for about a decade. Their daughter, Tyler Alexandra Gallagher Ellis, was born in November 1984. Ellis bought an elegant house in Brentwood, California for Gallagher and the baby.

Over the next year Ellis juggled work, his duties as CFDA president, and, most importantly, caring for Barker, who was failing rapidly.

Barker was hospitalized in late 1985, but Ellis brought him home at Christmastime. Barker died on January 2, 1986 at the age of thirty-seven. His death was publicly reported as due to lung cancer.

A few weeks later, on January 19, Ellis made one of his last public appearances, at the CFDA's annual awards ceremony. He had to be assisted to the podium by his old friend Robert MacDonald.

Although Ellis was desperately ill, he insisted on attending a benefit for the American Foundation for AIDS Research in late April. A longtime friend later speculated that Ellis may have intended this as a tacit acknowledgment that he had AIDS.

Ellis was also determined to appear at the showing of his fall collection on May 8. Far too weak to close the show with his traditional skip down the runway, he could only walk to the top of it with the support of his two design assistants. The audience rose to give him a standing ovation.

Fashion critics praised the collection. Nina Hyde of the *Washington Post* called it "classic, but special in the hands of this designer." She pointed to characteristic elements--"the familiar cuts" that defined the Ellis silhouette and the typical styles such as wrap coats, this time "brightened . . . with a strong palette of pastels." She highlighted the importance of sweaters and noted that "he introduced the cable-stitched and patterned sweaters that have influenced fashion everywhere."

Before the writers had even written their reviews MacDonald was driving Ellis from the showroom to the hospital. He remained there, eventually lapsing into a coma. Ellis died on May 30, 1986.

His demise was attributed to viral encephalitis, a common immediate cause of death in AIDS patients.

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