



Galliano, John (b. 1960)

by Shaun Cole

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John Galliano has been dubbed the "Wild Child of British Fashion." The epithet is due in part to the fact that Galliano's highly theatrical personal style is as much a part of his work as the clothes he designs. His personal look, which varies from "Dickensian Street Urchin" through "albino Rasta" to "Monsieur Suave," is a product of his creative mind but also reflects his personal life as a gay man, especially his love of costume and dressing up.

Galliano was born in Gibraltar in 1960, the son of a Spanish mother and English father. He was brought up in a lavish Spanish Roman Catholic style, which--along with his mother's immaculately turned out appearance--instilled in him a love of finery and a sense of the Baroque.

At the age of six Galliano moved with his family to London, where, after studying art and design at various schools, he attended the prestigious London design college, Central St. Martin's School of Art. While at St. Martin's Galliano lived with another young and talented designer John Flett, but the relationship, said to be tempestuous, did not last.

Galliano's final year show at St. Martin's in 1984, inspired by the French Revolution, was hailed by journalists as a masterpiece. He was dubbed by many as "a true fashion genius." One week after the show his entire collection was bought up by the influential London boutique Browns.

As a result of this success Galliano launched his own label in 1984. He continued to receive critical acclaim, winning the British designer of the year award in 1987. However, financial success eluded him.

In 1991, after a particularly bad year financially, Galliano moved to Paris, where he found new backers. By the mid 1990s, he had become the most sought after designer in the city.

In July 1995, Bernard Arnault, president of the luxury goods group LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy), shocked the fashion world by announcing that Galliano was to be the new designer for the House of Givenchy. The French fashion press was enraged that a British designer (and one so outrageous as Galliano) had been chosen head designer at a house considered part of their national heritage.

However, Galliano's first collection for Givenchy, his spring-summer 1996 collection entitled "Le Papillon et la Fleur," took Paris by storm. Not only were the designs acclaimed, but so was the extravagantly themed show itself.

After two collections for Givenchy, Galliano moved to Christian Dior, where his debut couture collection coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of Dior's legendary "New Look." (Following the new trend of British designers heading Paris houses, the young, gay, talented, and outrageous new *enfant terrible* of British fashion, Alexander McQueen, succeeded Galliano at Givenchy).

At Dior, Galliano has continued to stage extravagant shows, in which the clothes reflect the influence of a

wide range of anthropological and historical subjects, ranging from Hopi Indians to 1930s Berlin cabaret. However, as his shows became more extravagant, so the criticism grew that he could produce only outrageously theatrical shows and that his clothes were unwearable.

In response to this criticism, Galliano has recently toned down his shows, while retaining his signature theatricality. Perhaps most importantly, his recent collections feature carefully tailored and eminently wearable outfits.

The darling of the rich and famous, Galliano has designed clothes for Madonna and Nicole Kidman, who have worn them at such high-profile occasions as the Cannes film festival and the Academy Award presentations.

[On February 25, 2011, following two separate incidents in which Galliano allegedly engaged in anti-Semitic rants, the Christian Dior fashion house announced that he had been suspended and would be fired.

The brilliant designer has been urged by friends to seek help for a drinking problem. He may face charges for "verbal assault" and for violating French laws intended to curb anti-Semitism.]

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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).