



Hartnell, Sir Norman (1901-1979)

by Shaun Cole

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As official dress maker to Queen Elizabeth II, the late Queen Mother, and occasionally, Queen Mary, Sir Norman Hartnell clothed three generations of Britain's aristocracy. It is for the intricately and lavishly decorated gowns created for the royal family that he is best known.

Hartnell never married. During his lifetime rumors and speculation about his sexuality abounded and have continued since his death. He moved in theatrical circles and was friends with out gay men such as photographer Cecil Beaton and dress designer, socialite, and dandy Bunny Roger. However, his sexuality has never been publicly disclosed, and he does not mention the issue in his autobiography, *Silver and Gold*, published in 1955.

Hartnell's silence about his sexuality in his autobiography is unsurprising, for it was difficult, if not impossible, for men in the public eye to come out at that time. During this period homosexuality was not only morally and socially frowned upon, but it was also illegal in Britain and frequently prosecuted.

Norman Hartnell was born in London on June 12, 1901. As a child he spent a great deal of time sketching the actresses of the day and their lavish clothing. This interest was revived while he was studying at Magdalen College, Cambridge when he designed posters, scenery, programs and costumes for the Marlowe Dramatic Society and the Footlights Dramatic Club. He continued to design for the theater (and later for film) throughout his career.

When he left Cambridge Hartnell worked as an assistant at a number of London fashion houses, including the extravagant society couturière Lucille before setting up his own business in 1923.

Hartnell showed his first collection in Paris in 1927 and quickly established a reputation for his luxuriously embroidered ballgowns in satin and tulle and for elegantly tailored suits, coats, and woolen tweed garments.

His first wedding dress, made from silver and gold net was a show-stopping finale at one of his shows. It was described as "the eighth wonder of the world" when worn by the bride of the Lord of Weymouth.

Early commissions included a wedding dress for romantic novelist and socialite Barbara Cartland in 1927 and informal clothes for actress Tallulah Bankhead.

In 1938 Hartnell was officially appointed dressmaker to the British Royal Family and designed gowns for their overseas visits as well as for various royal occasions. He has been credited with creating a stylistic royal image that remains today.

Hartnell was responsible for the wedding dresses of both Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Margaret. In 1953 he created the Queen's historic coronation dress embroidered in pearls and crystal with the emblems of



Sir Norman Hartnell in 1972. Photograph by Allan Warren. Image appears under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported license.

Great Britain and the Commonwealth.

Many of Hartnell's clothes owed much to costume, standing apart from fashion. They were influenced by his experiences designing for theatrical productions at Cambridge University. He also drew much of his influence from paintings. "The Italian Masters are for purest line," he wrote in his autobiography, "and all the French fun of Boucher, Watteau, and Madame Vigée-Lebrun; Fragonard for the *folies de grandeur*; and later Garvani, with Renoir and Tissot for a touch of chi-chi."

Not all of Hartnell's designs were lavish. He produced ready-to-wear collections that were sold through department stores from 1942. During World War II he created uniforms for the British Red Cross, the Women's Royal Army Corps, and the women's division of the British Police Force.

In 1977 Hartnell's work for the royal family was rewarded with a knighthood. He died two years later on June 8, 1979.

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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).