



## Klein, Calvin (b. 1942)

by Shaun Cole

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2002, glbtq, Inc.

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

American designer Calvin Klein has created an extraordinarily successful fashion empire through the simple and elegant design of his clothes and through his skilful employment of provocative advertising campaigns that are saturated with homoeroticism.

Born in the Bronx, New York, on November 19, 1942, the son of a Jewish grocer, Klein taught himself to sketch and sew as a boy. His mother was an elegant and sophisticated woman who played an important role in shaping her son's fashion sense by taking him on trips to her dressmakers. His grandmother had the greatest influence on his budding career by teaching him to use a sewing machine.

Klein attended New York's Fashion Institute of Technology. After graduating in 1962, he worked for a Seventh Avenue coat and suit house. In 1968, with his childhood friend Barry Schwartz, he opened his own business, designing and selling women's coats.

Klein's designs were noticed by the vice president of the New York store Bonwit Teller, who invited him to show his clothes to the store president. In order to ensure that the clothes did not get creased or soiled, the designer pushed his collection up Seventh Avenue on a clothes rail. The president was impressed with Klein's minimalist style and placed an order for clothes worth \$50,000.

Klein's emphasis in designing clothes has always been on modernity and simplicity, creating wearable outfits for both men and women. "I've always had a clear design philosophy and point of view about being modern, sophisticated, sexy, clean and minimal. They all apply to my design esthetic," he told fashion magazine *Women's Wear Daily*.

In 1964, Klein married Jayne Centre, with whom he had a daughter, Marci. Klein and Centre were divorced in 1974.

During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Klein was a familiar face on the New York club scene. He was regularly seen at celebrity night spots, such as the now legendary Studio 54, accompanied by a loosely knit circle of friends, who included designers Halston and Giorgio di Sant'Angelo, artist Andy Warhol and his acolytes, and Bianca Jagger, among others.

Rumors of drug consumption and sexual excesses abounded, as did rumors that Klein had contracted AIDS. In fact, an Italian radio station announced his death from the disease. In May 1988, Klein revealed his drug addiction and checked into a drug rehabilitation clinic.

Rumors have circulated widely about Klein's sexuality. In their 1994 unauthorized biography, *Obsession*, Steven Gaines and Sharon Churcher alleged that he is bisexual. They said that he has a preference for "straight boys" and that he is a member of a so-called "Velvet Mafia" of millionaires who swap lovers.

In 1986, Klein wed a thirty-two-year-old worker from his design studio, Kelly Rector. The fact that the

couple continued to live in separate apartments only added fuel to the rumors.

Klein developed his fashion empire by branching out from women's coats to sportswear, then developing a line of designer jeans, and launching successful fragrances in the 1970s and 1980s.

In 1982 Klein altered the way men viewed and bought underwear with the introduction of Calvin Klein underwear. This may be his biggest contribution to gay culture. To announce the launch of his men's white briefs, he erected an enormous billboard in New York's Times Square, featuring an overtly sexual image of a perfectly formed muscular man wearing nothing but white underwear.

The homoerotic imagery was overt. Questioned about the homoerotic appeal of their advertising by Karen Stabiner for *The New York Times Magazine* in May 1982, a spokesperson for Calvin Klein stated, somewhat disingenuously, "We did not *try* to appeal to gays. We try to appeal, period. If there's an awareness in that community of health and grooming, then they'll respond to the ads."

Klein's billboard has been credited with heralding a new era in imagery of men in advertising and in precipitating a new fashion in men's underwear. This campaign ran just a few years before the revolution in men's magazine advertising that sexualized the male form as a hairless muscular object of desire.

The homoerotic appeal was enhanced by the use of photographs by Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts. By the beginning of the 1990s, Calvin Klein white cotton briefs were the most popular item of underwear for gay men, enhanced by the use of increasingly sexual images, such as the 1992 campaign featuring rap star Marky Mark.

In 1993 Klein created a breakthrough new concept in designer fragrance with the launch of cK One, a unisex fragrance designed to be worn by both men and women.

Klein's importance as a designer is evident through the awards he has received. In 1973 he became the youngest designer to win the prestigious American Coty Award (the first of three) and in 1982, 1983, and 1986 he won the Council of Fashion Designers of America Award for outstanding design in both womenswear and menswear.

Advertising has played a major role in the success of Calvin Klein's many fashion enterprises. From the Richard Avedon advertisement for Calvin Klein jeans featuring a young Brooke Shields asking, "You know what comes between me and my Calvin's? Nothing," through the homoeroticism of the jeans insert in *Vanity Fair* shot by Bruce Weber, and the stylish black and white advertisements for the perfumes Obsession and Eternity, to the controversial 1995 campaign for cK Calvin Klein jeans that was quickly withdrawn after accusations of child pornography, Klein's advertising campaigns have been both provocative and enormously successful.

Commenting on the importance of advertising Klein himself stated that "I think it starts with the product. Then you need to communicate what the product's about. We've done that efficiently."

More than efficient, the advertising campaigns for Klein's products have made homoeroticism a staple of consumer culture in North America and Western Europe.

## **Bibliography**

Coleridge, Nicholas. *The Fashion Conspiracy*. London: Heinemann, 1988.

Gaines, Steven, and Sharon Churcher. *Obsession: The Lives and Times of Calvin Klein*. New York: Carol Publishing Group, 1994.

Howell, Georgina. "Mr. Klein Comes Clean." *Sunday Times* (London) (September 10, 1989).

McDowell, Colin. *The Designer Scam*. London: Hutchison, 1994.

Milbank, Caroline Rennolds. *New York Fashion: The Evolution of American Style*. New York: Harry A. Abrams, 1989.

Stabiner, Karen. "Tapping the Homosexual Market." *The New York Times Magazine* (May 2, 1982): 34.

### **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).