



Saint Laurent, Yves (1936-2008)

by Shaun Cole

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One of the seminal fashion designers of our era, Yves Saint Laurent not only created a venerable fashion empire, but also inspired many other designers.

Born in Oran, Algeria on August 1, 1936, to French parents, Yves Saint Laurent had a difficult childhood. Although taunted at school, he found solace at home in his drawing and painting and occasional designs of dresses for his mother and two sisters.

He first came to the fashion world's attention when he was seventeen and studying in Paris. He won first prize in a dress design competition sponsored by the International Wool Secretariat.

When Christian Dior saw Saint Laurent's designs, he was so impressed that he offered the young man a job as an assistant and was soon referring to Saint Laurent as his "dauphin." When Dior died in 1957, Saint Laurent took over the house. His first collection for Dior in 1958, the Trapeze line, was greeted enthusiastically and increased Dior's sales by 35 per cent.

Also in 1958, Saint Laurent met Pierre Bergé, who was at the time the manager and lover of the Parisian painter Bernard Buffet. At a weekend party Buffet met his future wife, and Saint Laurent and Bergé commenced a romantic relationship that lasted until 1976. After their breakup Bergé continued to serve as Saint Laurent's business manager and remained living in their jointly owned home until 1986.

Although his sexuality was hardly a secret in the fashion world, Saint Laurent did not publicly acknowledge his homosexuality until 1991, in an interview in the French daily newspaper *Le Figaro*.

Saint Laurent's 1960 collection for Dior appropriated the Left Bank style, with black leather jackets, knitted turtlenecks, and crocodile jackets with mink collars. The fashion world watched with fascination as street fashion was redesigned at the hands of a couturier.

In the same year Saint Laurent was called up to fight in the Algerian war. When he was discharged several months later, he discovered that he had been replaced as head designer at Dior. The time was now right for him to set up his own house.

Under his own name, Saint Laurent continued to produce elegant wearable clothes that drew on a huge range of influences, from the Ballets Russes and Russian Cossack costumes (for his 1976 collections) to the works of Marcel Proust (who inspired his taffeta gowns of 1971), to the minimalist works of Mondrian (apparent in the primary colors of Saint Laurent's geometrically blocked wool jersey dresses of 1965).

In 1965, Saint Laurent created the first female tuxedo, which he called "Le Smoking." The design drew upon a history of lesbian cross-dressing for which Paris had been famous in the 1920s and 1930s.

As well as drawing upon lesbian culture, Saint Laurent also tapped into the increasingly popular trend

towards androgynous dressing that was evident among young men and women throughout Europe, Britain, and America in the mid-1960s.

By feminizing the basic shapes of the male wardrobe, Saint Laurent set new standards for world fashion. He not only adapted the male tuxedo for women, but also safari jackets, brass buttoned pea jackets, and flying suits. As a result, he is often given credit for rendering women's pantsuits wearable.

Tom Ford, who became creative director for the YSL Rive Gauche label in 2000, reinvented Saint Laurent's "Le Smoking" for both men and women.

In 1993, the Saint Laurent fashion house was sold to the pharmaceuticals company Sanofi for approximately \$600,000,000. In 1999, Gucci NV group won a battle with LVMH (Louis Vuitton Moët Hennessy) to buy the Yves Saint Laurent label. Ford was appointed designer and creative director for couture and Yves Saint Laurent Perfumes, as well as designer for the YSL Rive Gauche label, positions he held until 2003.

After his retirement, Saint Laurent became increasingly reclusive and spent much of his time at his house in Marrakech, Morocco, which was formerly owned by French painter Jacques Majorelle.

Under Saint Laurent's care, the Jardin Majorelle became a popular tourist attraction and had a significant influence on contemporary garden design, most notably for its key color--the blue of French workmen's overalls.

In 2000 Ian Phillips observed that "Saint Laurent really has nothing left to prove. Almost any other leading designer will cite him as their idol. Marc Jacobs refers to him as god. Tom Ford and Jean-Paul Gaultier call him their mentor. His place in the annals of fashion is well-assured."

Saint Laurent died on June 1, 2008, after a battle with brain cancer.

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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).