

# How American Designer James Galanos' Archives Reflect a New Narrative for Post-Couture Fashion

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## Abstract:

Once in a century there comes a clothing designer who serves to narrate a particular journey in the tale of American fashion. Such a designer is James Galanos – the only twentieth century designer to apprentice in the immediate post-war house of Robert Piguet; the only American designer to sustain couture standards for four decades without “selling out”; and as of 2017, the only American designer with a dedicated Research Center in an exemplary American university museum at Drexel University in Philadelphia, the town of Galanos' Greek immigrant parents. Galanos settled in California in 1951 and created to couture standards, humbly calling it “Custom Ready-To-Wear”. When he retired in 1998, he felt that women no longer appreciated quality design, construction nor fabrics. The design aesthetic for today's women is very different. Although the story of fashion in the twenty-first century is changing unbelievably fast, there are new possibilities for understanding Galanos' uniqueness.

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## Introduction

Costume historians are certainly “au fait” with the narrative commentaries that clothing illustrates. We are fascinated with adornment, for it echoes our human trials and trails. Once in a century there comes a clothing designer who serves to narrate a journey in the tale of American fashion, while describing a legacy of Haute Couture, and a social history of womankind. Such a designer was James Galanos (1924-2016).

As of 2017, Galanos is the only designer to have a dedicated Research Center in an exemplary American university museum: Construction began in 2017 to accommodate the comprehensive donation from The James G. Galanos Foundation, at The Robert and Penny Fox Historic Costume Collection, Drexel University, Philadelphia, the town of Galanos' birth to Greek immigrants. All his siblings grew up helping in their parents' Greek restaurant, but Galanos, from a very young age, knew he was destined to be a designer of elegant women's clothing.

My research endeavors to uncover Galanos' singular placement in American couture and women's changing attitudes towards high fashion in the second half of the twentieth century and beyond. Beginning in December 2015, I had the great pleasure of cataloguing the James G. Galanos Foundation Collection, much of which is already at Drexel University, and more will follow upon the completion of the Research Center. The collection comprises hundreds of garments, sketches, photographs and other ephemera. All the photographs in this article were taken by me, apart from fig. 5, which was taken by James Galanos. To my knowledge, none of these images have been published before, and for this rare opportunity, I thank The James G. Galanos Foundation. Images of celebrities wearing Galanos are easily sourced on the Internet, and the gowns described in detail herein now reside at The Robert and Penny Fox Costume Collection, where I am sure images will be digitally available in future.



Fig. 1:  
Galanos Drawing at Age 15, 1941.

What does his story tell us? For one thing, no designer today can survive without backing of some kind, and no designer can exist in the twenty-first century, without a commercial or intimate relationship with social media, but these were anathema to Galanos. No other designer could have succeeded for so long in the twentieth century without Galanos' dedication, talent, training and pure artistry. He did not license his designs (apart from a fur line with Pologeorgis) nor was he part of a luxury conglomerate. However he is an example of the manifestation of "Haute Couture diffusion" in the last fifty years, as well as the changing influence of the 1% (i.e. those fortunate few who could afford his wardrobe.) We can study the evolution of high-end fashion by studying this one man. We can witness his clientele changing and the role of garments changing within a woman's wardrobe.

Galanos was drawing very maturely by age fifteen (in 1941), and already had a grasp of colour-palette, line and accessories (fig. 1). He also won high school drawing awards from department stores and local newspapers. Luckily, Galanos' father was an amateur painter himself, and fully supported his son's plans.

## Robert Piguet

After a brief tenure at the Traphagen School of Fashion, New York, in the early 1940s, he felt he had learned all he could there and needed further challenges. He was determined to study in Paris. With the help of a Russian immigrant entrepreneur named Lesavoy, he arrived in Paris ostensibly to attend *L'Ecole des Beaux Arts*, but that isn't quite what happened. Although his favorite designer in the mid 1940s was Balenciaga, he was not taking on any apprentices. However, Galanos managed to persuade haute couturier Robert Piguet to let him intern. There he mostly sketched, and observed. Marc Bohan and Givenchy also worked there and became his friends. Galanos is the only American designer to apprentice at a true House of Couture in Paris, i.e. member of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*.



Fig. 2:  
Galanos Illustration for Piguet, 1947.

Galanos' sketch for Piguet (the "Piguet" is actually written in Galanos' hand) is from 1947 (fig. 2). Amongst the Foundation's ephemera was a letter penned by Robert Piguet from 1948. It is essentially a letter of reference and states (in French) that "he has proven certain qualities that would permit the prediction of an interested and true talent for designing." Not bad praise from an haute couturier! After his term with Piguet, Galanos returned to New York and worked for *Davidow*, a well-known company specializing in copying *Chanel*. Again, Galanos soon felt that he needed more freedom to be creative. At the behest of Jean Louis, a successful film costume designer, Galanos moved to Los Angeles, California.

Having always been a film maven, he worked with Jean-Louis until it was time to create his own line. Los Angeles was a booming and creative city after the war, and where the idea of truly American design blossomed with the help of the movie industry and its separation from Paris. Interestingly, the year Galanos set up his own business was the same year Piguet closed his house in Paris: 1951.

### Mid-Century Fashion

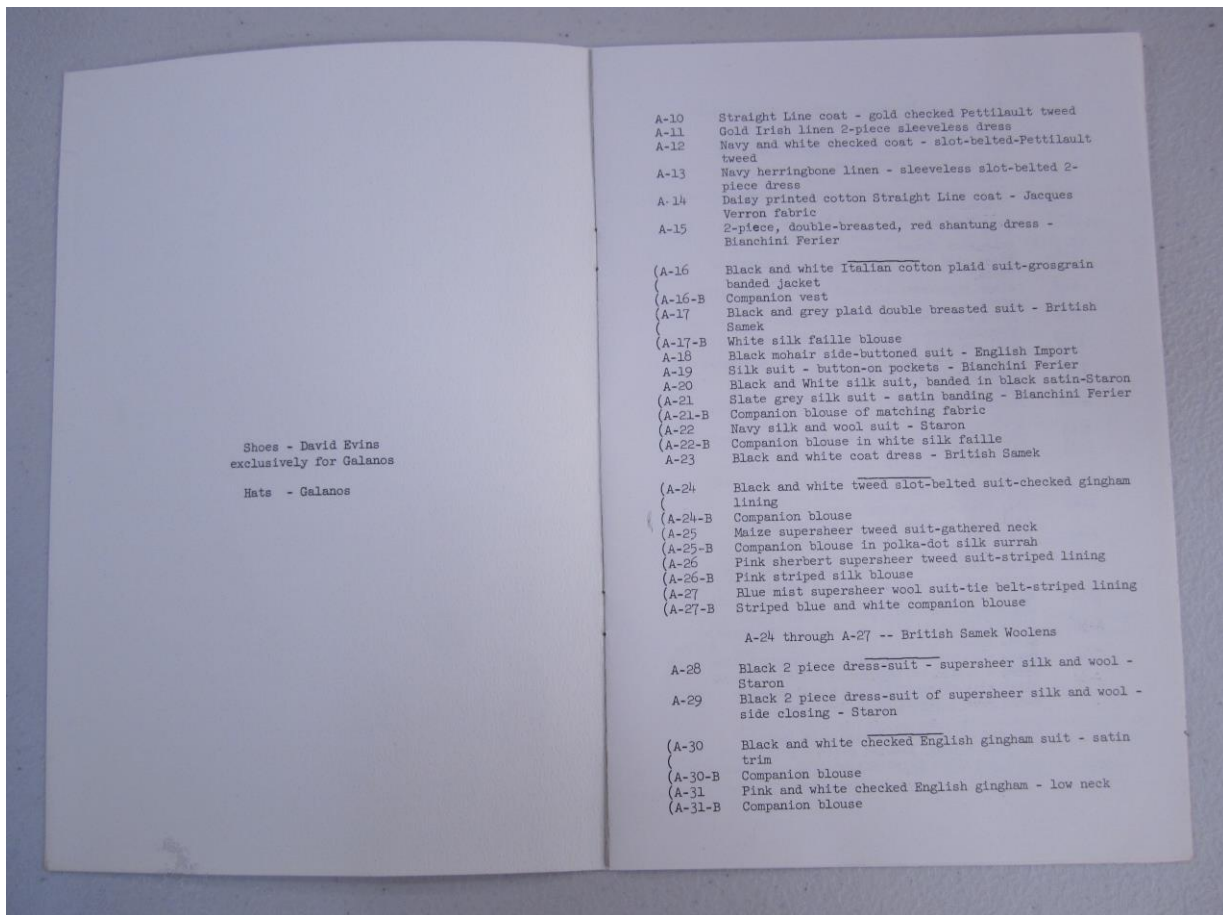


Fig. 3:  
Galanos Fashion Show Programme, New York, 1958.

I was very excited to find a number of programmes from his New York fashion shows in the late 1950s. Fig. 3 shows one from 1958, where the descriptions state the fabric origins. Later in the programme many of the outfits had names: *Bed of Roses*, *Persian Ice*, *Wood Nymph*, *Polka Dot Fantasy*, as was typical at that time. The show shoes were designed especially for Galanos by David Evins.



A New York press release described his Fall 1959 collection thus: *“The Galanos collection is highly individual, often uniquely expressed but always representative of the apex of elegance.”* That year he introduced his “half and half” designs as they called it, or parti-coloured dresses, an idea he continued through the end of the century, using bold contrasting colours.



Fig. 4:  
Galanos Sketch with Swatch, c. 1960.

Fig. 4 presents an original Galanos sketch for a coat with matching hat. He designed all the coordinated hats for his collections through the 1980s. The swatch is original and we can see from a notation that the price was \$259.75 – quite a sum for circa 1960. How did he command such prices? In Paris he learned to construct to couture standards. His clothes are beautifully finished inside and out, with hidden zippers, linings and interlinings, covered snaps and hooks, and, something we never see today, very generous seam allowances so that alterations could be made and clothes worn for many seasons.

## The King of Chiffon

Galanos became known as the King of Chiffon, and was also noted for his combination of surprising fabrics, such as tweeds alongside chiffon. His skirts often featured not only yards and yards of silk chiffon, but also as many as six different layers of chiffon. Galanos had always been an avid photographer, and he photographed his own models in and around his house above Sunset Boulevard in the Hollywood Hills (fig. 5). In the 1950s and 60s many of Galanos' designs would be considered day dresses, whereas today even our business attire is more casual than those day dresses. In the 1970s and 80s he created trousered outfits and jumpsuits (he called them "jump-pants") that could be worn in the evening. He was often ahead of the curve, while managing to reflect the needs of the modern woman.



Fig. 5:  
Galanos Model in Chiffon, c.1960.

## Custom Textiles

Galanos maintained his standards and his prices throughout the decades and became more sought after as time went by. He worked with East Coast based textile designer, Tzaims Luksus, also of Greek descent, who created a line of Greek-inspired prints circa 1970, as well as designs with Galanos' name in Greek-style script. The textile in fig. 6 is a wool knit, boxes of which were found in his Palm Springs house, but I don't remember seeing any garments or sketches using that jersey. His fabrics were sourced twice a year from the best companies in France, Switzerland and Italy, such as Bianchini-Férier in Lyon, France; Abraham et Cie in Zurich, Switzerland; and Staron in Milan, Italy. Galanos not only sourced his own fabrics, but hand-picked buttons from Paris and custom-designed costume jewellery from New York. Belts were customized to each outfit, often with dyed-to-match leathers, custom-designed buckles and other novelty features.

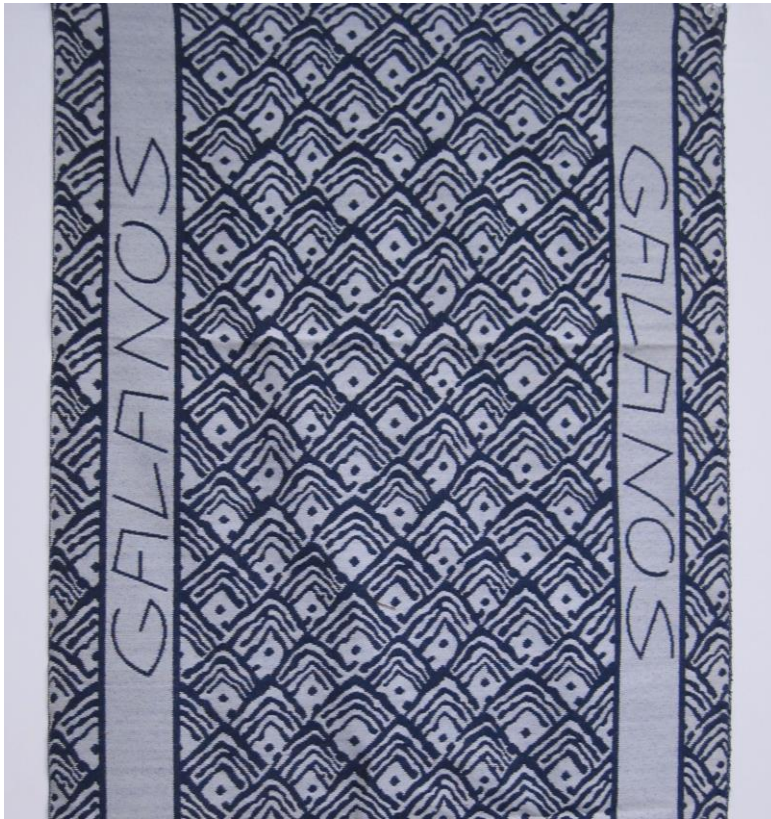


Fig. 6:  
Galanos Wool Jersey Designed by Tzaims Luksus, c. 1970.

## Nancy Reagan and Beading

The 1980s were probably Galanos' zenith, a time when the rich were flaunting and fabrics were flamboyant. Beading was another craft Galanos designs excelled in. Not unlike Lesage, the favourite of haute couturiers in Paris, he perfected the art of creative bead embroidery, using extraordinary dimensional techniques along with the most unusual shapes, sizes and hues. He engaged a company called D. Getson Embroideries in Los Angeles, that began life embroidering for the Hollywood designers such as Adrian, for example in the MGM classic *Marie Antoinette* (which, incidentally, was a favourite film of Galanos'.) Although in Los Angeles, the Getson beaders were trained in Europe, and Devlet Getson originally hailed from Turkey. Sadly, I believe the company went out of business in the early twenty-first century.



Although the late First Lady Nancy Reagan had enjoyed Galanos' designs since the 1950s, she and he came to prominence in the 1980s at The White House. He designed a number of formal and inaugural gowns which she wore not only in Washington but internationally. They may have been formal, but they were unusually stylish, especially when seen alongside other international female dignitaries. Nancy Reagan was one of Galanos' best clients, not only for beaded evening wear, but also for day wear. She even wore a fourteen year old Galanos gown to her first state dinner at the White House, attesting to the timelessness and durability not only of his workmanship, but also his design, and she continued to wear Galanos until her death in 2006.

### **Juxtaposition of Contrasting Fabrics**

Besides the previously noted juxtaposition of tweed and chiffon, there were many other striking examples. In 1991 Galanos designed a stunning chiné or warp-printed taffeta tunic with train, and sleeves of dress lace and green lamé, enhanced with green chenille swirls and bugle beading. Coordinated leggings match the sleeves, but instead of bugle beading, flowers have been outlined in swirls of pewter-coloured ribbon. A Fall 1995 outfit consisted of a front-opening plaid silk taffeta maxi-skirt, revealing matching hot-pants that were edged in bright yellow silk piping. The attached bodice consisted of a yellow velour camisole, over-laid with metallic lace.



Fig. 7:  
Galanos Customized Fabric, Fall 1990.

Not all his extraordinary fabrics were sourced as he frequently enhanced them himself with added applications, such as adding pendant dangles of sequins to an already glittering gown (fig. 7.) Another specialty of Galanos, was his creative use of silk satin ribbon which he worked as a textile. For example, where ribbons were sewn to a chiffon underlay, then self-fringed at the hem for texture (1990), or as in the bodice of a dress where the ribbons were inter-woven across dress lace (1988). And then there was the minute hand-tucking and hand-smocking that he perfected.

Galanos was "old school": he sketched, he draped, and he oversaw every process in production. He personally fitted his best customers. He was every bit a couturier, but in his usual humble manner, insisted on calling himself "Custom ready-to-wear" out of respect to the true Haute Couture industry based in Paris.



## Celebrities and the Red Carpet

In the 1950s, 60s and 70s Galanos designed for stars such as Marilyn Monroe, Grace Kelly and Barbara Streisand. He was a favorite designer of Loretta Young and Rosalind Russell. He designed for the big and little screens, notably for Judy Garland in a TV Special and Rosalind Russell in *Never Wave at a WAC* amongst others. I want to make the point that he designed for truly talented women in the twentieth century, not as we seem to have today, people just famous for being famous while paying for their own PR.

Galanos' long-term special clients were able to buy quality, luxury and sublime elegance, in a classic style or sometimes with outrageous exuberance. They also wore his clothes far longer than one season. Iris Apfel, the famous and rather eccentrically-dressed New York interior designer is still wearing her vintage Galanos in her nineties!

But that was all before the red-carpet charade of the twenty-first century, where it has become big business for big fashion conglomerates – even H&M is in on it now. Galanos had been well aware of red-carpet demands, however it is interesting to me how subtle and elegant his red-carpet designs were compared with much of what we see lately. He always covered the breasts, for example, even on an otherwise nude fabric, by skillfully centering a lace rose over the nipple.

Galanos never sold-out, he never licensed (except for fur coats for Pologeorgis in the 1980s) and he never bought pages in fashion magazines.

Suffice it to say that he was a master, and continued to supply red-carpet gowns. Not so much to film stars, but now with the rise of famous chefs, to both wives of Wolfgang Puck, or to Vanity Fair editor Amy Fine Collins, for example.

## Into the Twenty-First Century

Galanos closed his business in 1998. He was 74 – a perfectly fitting time to retire. However, he seriously felt that women no longer appreciated quality and elegance. As we know, the portion of our income today that we spend on clothing has dropped enormously in comparison to other commodities. We have been seduced by cheaper fashion beyond reason. The fashion industry has seriously changed.

However, all is not lost as according to Alix Browne in *The New York Times*, Aug. 21, 2009: *“while he officially retired in in 1998, he shows no signs of falling out of fashion.”* Galanos' vintage gowns remain chic, sought-after and popular among Hollywood stars and supermodels, and have been seen on such notables as Celine Dion, Renée Zellweger, Nicole Kidman, Heidi Klum, Amber Valletta, and Christina Ricci, among many others.

The design aesthetic for today's women has certainly changed, but some of us feel the story of fashion in this century is morphing so fast that there are now new possibilities for understanding Galanos' unique tale. Today we can look at his creations and wonder at the prestidigitation that rendered the most exotic and complex European silks a palette for an artist – for Galanos' approach to fashion design was that of an artist: he skillfully combined strikingly contrasting fabrics in complete harmony, and exercised a sophisticated though experimental attitude towards colour, line and silhouette.

As women today are more aware than ever about ethically sourcing fabrics and labour, and as we try to stem the throw-away society we have become, we look on vintage quality apparel with

renewed admiration for its durability and timeless design, as well as its recycling properties. We may not be the 1%, but we can acquire a Galanos garment at auction, adjust the fit, and look a million dollars without employing child labour. Those of us who cannot afford to hire a dress-maker or shop at a high-end boutique, can enjoy the benefits of a garment that moves with us as we sit, stand and dance, while enhancing our figure and feeling like silk satin next to our skin (because it is). Now the former 1% creations have found a new life as collectible vintage gowns for the twenty-first century red carpet. Finally, younger generations can learn to appreciate quality once more and, by buying second-hand, can afford the kinds of fabrics and exotic designs no longer found in boutiques today.

Galanos created for half a century, through great changes in women's roles in society, and I do not believe he could have achieved this without remaining autonomous, or without his training, talent, dedication and pure artistry. Will we ever see his like again?

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