



Charles James with Model, 1948. Photograph by Cecil Beaton, Beaton/Vogue/Condé Nast Archive. Copyright © Condé Nast. All photos courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

‘Lost’ Fashion’s COUTURIER

*Revered by Dior and Balenciaga, 20th-century couturier
Charles James died penniless and forgotten. Now, 36 years later, he’s back in vogue*

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Charles who?” Even the most dedicated fashionista was left mystified when the 20th-century couturier was announced as this year’s Met Gala muse. Yet back in his heyday of the 1940s and ‘50s, Charles James was revered by the fashion elite, from Beaton

to Balenciaga, before spending his final decade broke and bitter in New York’s legendary Chelsea Hotel. But with Anna Wintour leading a revival of the designer’s legacy and label, Charles James is set to become high fashion’s next big thing once more.

The couturier is the subject of the inaugural exhibition at the new Anna Wintour Costume Center at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. Charles James: Beyond Fashion features 65 of James’s most significant designs from the 1920s until his death in 1978. Shortly after the launch in May, Weinstein announced a deal to license the defunct label from the late couturier’s estate, with Marchesa designer Georgina Chapman to serve as creative consultant. “Charles James was one of the most incredible couturiers in the history of fashion

and this label deserves to be a household name in same ranks as Chanel, Dior and Oscar de la Renta,” he said in a statement.

So why is he largely unknown outside of fashion circles? “Part of it is that James had a very small body of work. He probably only had about 1,000 designs in his whole career and he was active for decades,” says Patricia Mears, deputy director of The Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. “Other couturiers who were active for many decades, especially Balenciaga and Saint Laurent, generated designs in the tens of thousands.” James approached fashion with a sculptor’s eye and

a scientist’s logic; while best known for his majestic evening dresses, his tailored suits, coats, and more understated daywear are equally admired by fashion experts. “He really did understand balance and proportion and how to hang the weight of a garment on someone’s body,” says Mears. A contemporary of Elsa Schiaparelli,

Christian Dior and Cristobal Balenciaga,

Dior declared him “the greatest talent of my generation”, while Balenciaga said James was “not only the greatest American couturier, but the world’s best.”

Born in England in 1906, the privileged but wayward son of a British military officer and a Chicago socialite, James later attended Harrow, an elite public school for boys, where he met

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Cecil Beaton, who went on to play an important role in developing and promoting James's career. In 1924, his parents sent him to Chicago to work for a large utility company founded by a family friend. After disrupting the office by showing off the batik beach wraps he had designed, the flamboyant teenager was reassigned to the architecture department, where he absorbed some of the technical concepts that he would later apply to great effect in his designs.

After quitting his desk job, James set up shop as a milliner and was embraced by the doyennes of Chicago society. In 1928, he moved to New York, and then to London the following year, selling his hats to American department stores.

By the early '30s, he had moved on to designing clothes in London, and then Paris, developing a lifelong fascination with complex cuts and seaming, and creating key design elements that he would use throughout his career. "James took hat-making methodology, such as the use of heavy structural

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materials like buckram and the hand-shaping of them, and translated them into clothing. I think that's why his clothes have such a dramatic look to them," says Mears.

During this decade, James established a wealthy client base, thanks largely to introductions from Beaton, Stephen Tennant, a British aristocrat known for his decadent lifestyle, and writer and politician Harold Nicholson. Yet he also filed for bankruptcy, the first of numerous business collapses.

In 1940, he moved permanently to New York, and by 1945, had gained sufficient recognition to open his own atelier and salon on Madison Avenue. Here he worked in the pure couture tradition, custom-designing, fitting, and creating new garments for America's most stylish women, including heiress Millicent Rogers, journalist and socialite Austine McDonnell Hearst, philanthropist Dominique de Menil, and entertainer Gypsy Rose Lee.

Over the next seven years, he produced his most admired gowns, culminating in 1953 in what he regarded as the pinnacle of his dressmaking career: a ball gown with an undulating four-lobed skirt known as the "Clover Leaf". He went on to create several equally memorable designs – the "Butterfly," "Tree," and "Swan" gowns – along with sculptural coats. Feted by his clients and peers, he won two prestigious Coty Awards in 1950 and 1954, which cited his masterful skills as a colourist, draper, and sculptor, and the Neiman Marcus Award in 1953, America's fashion Oscar.

Nancy James in Charles James Swan Gown, 1955. Photograph by Cecil Beaton, The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's.



Charles James Butterfly Gown, 1954. Photograph by Cecil Beaton, The Cecil Beaton Studio Archive at Sotheby's.



James's prodigious talent was matched by maddening perfectionism and a difficult artistic temperament. "He was really very meditative in the process of creating design. He would take something and work on it and work on it and that's very antithetical to the way the fashion industry operates," says Mears. He seemed to care little for the financial implications – reputedly once spending three years and \$20,000 perfecting a sleeve – and his exacting standards routinely jeopardised commissions and contracts. "James was notorious for not delivering dresses on time and even taking back dresses he had sold to clients, so I think his relationships with not just business partners but even clients was very complicated," says Mears.

Eventually, financial improvidence destroyed his business; in 1958, the contents of his Madison Avenue atelier were seized to pay creditors. At the same time, his four-year marriage to wealthy divorcee Nancy Lee Gregory faltered. The somewhat surprising union was widely considered to be a financial move, although James insisted it was not; the couple had two children but eventually separated in 1961.

In 1964, he moved into the Chelsea Hotel, a haven for down-on-their-luck creative types. During his last years, he became more petulant and prone to accusing others of stealing his ideas, but also held court with a coterie of devoted clients and admirers, perfecting old designs and nurturing young talent until his death, aged 72.