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Almond, Kevin

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Yves Saint Laurent – Dazzling Colourist

A Review of the Yves Saint Laurent Retrospective at the Petit Palais, Paris – March 11th – August 29th 2010

Much has been written and speculated about the life and career of the French fashion designer, Yves Saint Laurent. To many he is the archetypical tortured genius of fashion, fulfilling the romantic ideal of the sensitive artist suffering for his craft. He is also recognised as one of the defining architects of fashionable clothing in the twentieth century, a designer with a clear vision of how the modern women should be dressed. A shy teenager employed as assistant to Christian Dior, he was catapulted into a global spotlight when appointed chief designer on Dior's death in 1957. He was fired by Dior for designing an all black, beat-nick styled collection, considered too avant-garde for an established label. The defining outfit from this collection is displayed in the exhibition. In shiny black patent crocodile, edged in black mink it retains a look of lavish modernity. Saint Laurent founded his own couture house with partner Pierre Berge in 1961. Throughout the 1960's and 1970's he was a unique creative force within the industry, beginning with the championing of ready to wear: with his boutiques 'Rive Gauche', to his hugely influential fashion innovations such as 'Le Smoking' in 1966, the 'Safari Collection' of 1969, the 'Forties' collection of 1971 and the 'Ballet Russes' collection of 1976. These collections are purported by chroniclers of fashion to have had a profound impact on the sartorial lives of everyday women and on the work of other fashion designers. As his biographer Alice Rawthorne said:

'In terms of stylistic innovations he unleashed a storm. His influence was so strong that the innovations of thirty years ago now look like everyday designs.' (Kelso, (2002), p-3)

By the 1980's Saint Laurent's fashion influence had begun to wane. The name remained synonymous as a brand associated with Parisian luxury however the collections became a series of sumptuous refinements that were no longer considered cutting edge. Reports also began to circulate about Saint Laurent's emotional and physical well being; he was portrayed in press reports as a man burnt out through ceaseless creation, tortured by the continuous wheel of fashion and the demands of producing four collections a year. Saint Laurent eventually retired in 2002 and died in 2008.

I queued for three hours in blazing sunlight, before finally being admitted to the exhibition. The museum assistant's explained the lengthy queues had been an everyday occurrence since the opening in March 2010 and justifies in some way, the immense popularity and continued significance of Yves Saint Laurent. Situated within the suitably magnificent interior of the Petit Palais, over four hundred outfits were exhibited in fifteen themed rooms. These displayed chronological signature styles and also included filmed interviews with the designer, fashion shows, sketches and fabrics. It was an overwhelming shrine to beauty, spectacle and high style, yet the chronological presentation also highlighted the designer's specific handwriting. This was in the great simplicity of cut and line and in the amazing sense of geometry: as evidenced in his nautical pea coats from the 1960's, through to his lavishly embroidered and embellished suits from the 1980's. Occasional forays into asymmetric designs and draping still retained this sense of geometrical precision. There is also a great contradiction within his work. His earlier and later creations appear extremely edgy and relevant, yet work produced during his mid career, in the late 1970's and 1980's, has a 'Mother of the Bride' appeal, perhaps more suited to a provincial wedding than Paris Haute Couture. For instance the astounding African Art collection from 1967 and the 1940's collection from 1971, are funky, fabulous and dateless, compared with the over worked, matronly and costume orientated looks in room eleven's 'Imaginary Journeys'.

Saint Laurent has been described as a:

'A dazzling and uncontested colourist.' (Berge, (1997), p-9)

Although one room in the exhibition is devoted entirely to colour, there is a consistency of palette in every other room. It is bold, radiant and passionate and ranges from the monochromatic and sober palette of the first collections, to the intensity of colours inspired by Marrakech where Saint Laurent owned a house. It was here that he declared;

'You can encounter groups that are impressive in their intensity, their relief. Men and women, where pink, blue, green and violet caftans mingle.' (Yves Saint Laurent, Benaim, (1993), p-261)

Through his brave and often violent use of colour, Saint Laurent invented his own vocabulary. He used colour in a similar to the way a great writer uses words, mixing them up and using unexpected combinations to create a unique harmony and eloquence.

The final room in the exhibition is called 'The Collision of Colours' and the walls are festooned with pages from his folders, filled with fabric samples that exemplify his colourists quest: a red folder, blue folder, pink folder etc. These are complimented by six stark, chiffon dresses from his final collection in 2002. Grecian in inspiration, they are masterful columns of pure line, in salmon pink, shocking pink, powder blue, black and yellow ochre. The colour, in these dresses are their defining assertion.

Another room that emphasised the radiant and dazzling Saint Laurent palette was 'Through the Looking Glass of Art'. It highlight's his dialogue with the work of Van Gogh, Picasso, Matisse, Cocteau, Leger and Braque amongst others. Conspiring with the couture embroiderer Lesage, he lavishly evokes painterly brush strokes in imaginative and abstract placements of sequins and beads, arranged to resemble the luxurious generosity of thickly applied oil paint, or the matt geometry of gouache. One evening jacket in particular stands out. A tribute to Van Gogh's 'Irises' in shades of blue, green and yellow, it glistens with an edible immediacy.

In her enlightening article 'A Museum of Fashion Is More than a Clothes Bag', Valerie Steele justifies her rationale for fashion museums and exhibitions devoted to fashionable clothing. She deplores the intellectual stance of living by the word and ignoring the role of the object in the creation of knowledge. She makes a case for the fashion scholar spending time examining actual garments. The Yves Saint Laurent exhibition provides just such an opportunity. The clothes however are presented more as spectacle, than emphasising their fashion or indeed their social and cultural significance. This could be compared to the criticism levelled at a 1987 exhibition of Saint Laurent clothes At 'The Costume Institute' in New York,

The Yves Saint Laurent show was the equivalent in turning gallery space over to General Motors for a display of Cadillac's (Store, 1987, p17, 19 – quoted in Steele, 1998, p-334)

Presenting his work as 'spectacle' does however showcase the designer's incredible sense of high style. This was perhaps best exemplified in 'The Last Ball Room' of the exhibition. It is mounted on red carpeted steps, leading to an imaginary Opera House. The stupendous and melodramatic voice of Maria Callas provides the soundtrack to a display of somewhat predictable and opulent evening wear. It is grandiose and in many ways beyond fashion, through its presentation of a sumptuous world most people could only dream of. The back wall of the room, however is a revelation. It is mounted with three tiers of black lacquered mannequins and is a spectacularly chic display of Yves Saint Laurent's greatest innovation, 'Le Smoking'. First presented in 1966 as an alternative to the 'Little Black Dress', thirty eight variations of this look, from five decades, explore different stylistic interpretations of the tuxedo. Each are illuminated by a small light that highlights a glossary of black fabrics, velvets, chiffons, sequins, wool crepes, venetian wools, tulles, satins and grosgrains. These fully display the geometric simplicity in Saint Laurent's lines, surfaces and angles. Each black fabric catches the light in a different way and reflects different shades, both gloss and matte. As it is almost the end of the exhibition it also suggests a hidden meaning, hinting at a funereal statement in order to commemorate the end of the designers life.

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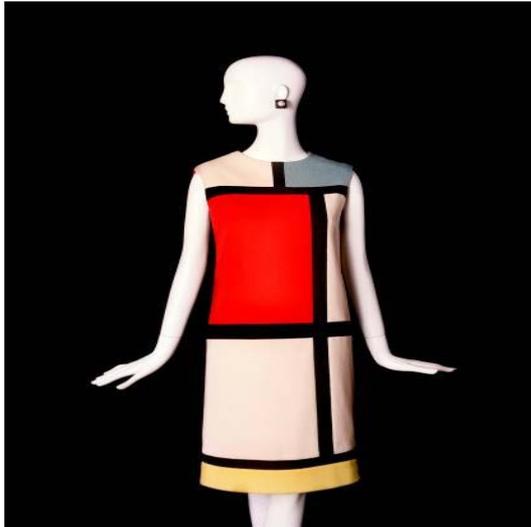
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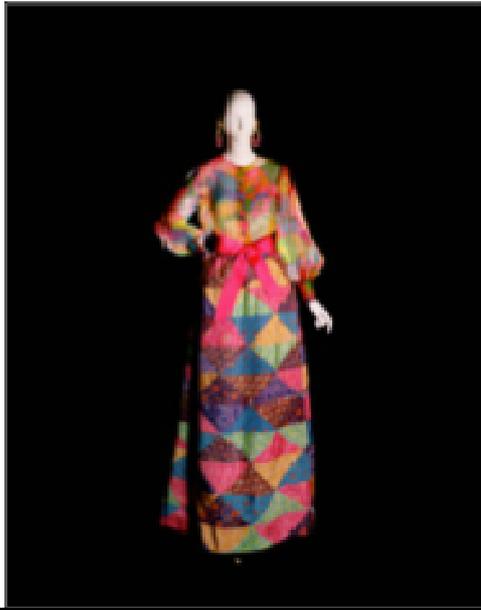
Yves Saint Laurent Forty Years of Creation (1998) New York, International Festival of Fashion Photography



Haute Couture Collection autumn-winter 1965 © Alexandre Guirkinger



Haute Couture Collection spring-summer 2002 © Alexandre Guirkinger



Haute Couture Collection spring-summer 1969 © Alexandre Guirkinger