



Charles James The Couture Secrets of Shape

The exhibition **Charles James - The Couture Secrets of Shape**, edited, produced and originally presented by Rick Owens, offers a selection of rare vintage prints, patterns, prototypes, dresses, tools and original drawings by Charles James, from the 1930s to the early 1970s.

Charles James is now seen as one of the most important *American fashion designers* of the 20th century. His work has resulted in a radical shift in the conventions of fashion.

British-American designer Charles James (1906–1978), “America’s First Couturier,” is famed for the extraordinarily elegant evening gowns he created on both sides of the Atlantic in the 1930s through the 1950s for the chic and sophisticated. Notables such as Marlene Dietrich, Austine McDonnell Hearst, Gypsy Rose Lee, and Millicent Rogers among others wore his creations.

From the beginning of his career, James also designed revolutionary unisex styles.

The Eiderdown Jacket, now at the V&A in London, and James’ other unisex designs share with his ball gowns a sculptural, architectural presence and a rigorously cerebral design process grounded in mathematic proportions. James is still regarded as a visionary thinker in the world of fashion, introducing lasting innovations in both technique and methodology.

Homer Layne, James’ legendary assistant and **Dorothea Mink**, professor of fashion design at the University of the Arts Bremen wrote the eponymous volume, published by Spector Books, that inspired this exhibition. They analyzed Charles James’ remarkable innovations, revealing what made his designs so special, and suggested how designers today can apply James’s principles to their work.

This unique exhibition reveals for the first time his largely invisible work in the construction of his designs. Here, the secrets of a design’s early development, with images presenting both concept and composition, testify to an extraordinary creative method.

Charles James: The Couture Secrets of Shape goes beyond the evening gowns, focusing on some of James’ unisex designs, and his life in the legendary bohemian community of the Chelsea Hotel, where he lived from 1964 until his death in 1978. James retained his restless creativity throughout his life where his rooms at the Chelsea served as a studio, workshop, archive and magnet for the creatives who would pass through. In 1973 he started to write the book “The Charles James Approach to Structural Design,” which allowed a glimpse into his thinking at that time, from the slopers to his draping tools.

As a tribute to Charles James, **Rick Owens**, one of his greatest admirers, wrote about his relationship with James. “*When I started my label in the mid-Nineties, my ultimate goal was to be Charles James. Complete devotion to craft, scorn for conventional prosaic comforts, but attention and respect reserved exclusively for the mega-refined and extravagant.*”

10 Corso Como

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On view at 10 Corso Como, one of the archetypal gown by Charles James: sculpted and elegantly shaped, as the epitome of timeless elegance, now reinterpreted by Rick Owens.

Charles Wilson Brega James (18 July 1906 Camberley, England – 23 September 1978, New York), was an English-American fashion designer. James' father, Ralph Ernest Haweis James, was a British army officer at Sandhurst. His mother, Louise Enders Brega, came from a wealthy Chicago family.

In 1919, he attended the Harrow School where he met Evelyn Waugh and Cecil Beaton with whom he formed a longstanding friendship. James studied music at the University of Bordeaux in France before going to Chicago to work. A friend of the family, Samuel Insull, found him a position in his architectural design department, where he acquired the mathematical skills that later would become the foundation of his creations.

At the age of nineteen, James opened his first shop in Chicago, with the name of "Charles Boucheron," as his father forbade him to use the family name. In 1928, James left Chicago for Long Island to open a millinery shop where he presented himself as a "sartorial structural architect."

By 1933 he had designed the Taxi Dress, the Spiral Zipped Dress, and the wedding dress for Baba Beaton, Cecil Beaton's sister. He presented his first collection in Paris in 1937 with great success. That same year, he created a one-of-a-kind white satin quilted jacket described by Salvador Dalí as "the first soft sculpture" now at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

Charles James was twice honored with the Coty American Fashion Critics Award, in 1950 for mystery of color and artistry of draping, and 1954 for his memorable collection of sculptural coats.

In 1954, James married Nancy Lee Gregory, and they had a son and a daughter. The marriage dissolved in 1961. In 1964, he moved to the Chelsea Hotel in New York, where he had three sixth-floor rooms for his workspace, office, and apartment.

During his 15-year tenancy at the Chelsea Hotel, he entertained Salvador Dalí, Andy Warhol, Lou Reed, Antonio Lopez, Juan Ramos, and the photographer Bill Cunningham among the many artists who both lived and frequented the Hotel.

James died in New York in 1978. Charles James' designs have been showcased in numerous one-man exhibits including: Decade of Design at the Brooklyn Museum (1948); Homer Layne's Collection of Charles James Designs at the Museum of Modern Art-PS1 (1981); Charles James from the Collections of Homer Layne, Lisa Kirk and FIT at the Fashion Institute of Technology (1993); and Charles James: Beyond Fashion at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2014).

Charles James

The Couture Secrets of Shape

June 1st – July 28th, 2019

Every day, 10.30 am - 7.30 pm

Wednesdays and Thursdays, 10.30 am - 9.00 pm

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