



The de Menil Residence

Top: Dominique de Menil's dressing room

Bottom: Dining room



Above: Exterior (from the northeast corner)

Right: Hallway with mirrored door



All residence photos: Balthazar Korab, 1964



Living room

In Dominique de Menil's words, with the advent of international modernism in the 1920s and '30s "the rectangle reigned supreme." Though the de Menils' Philip Johnson-designed home is a paragon of this architectural style, for the interior the couple wanted "something more voluptuous," and thought of Charles James. A daring combination with Johnson's architecture, James's dramatic yet subtle interior manages to harmonize with the modern building. And so the daily life of John and Dominique de Menil, filled with meetings of artists and thinkers and with a constant eye to beauty, came to be set against the backdrop of James's visionary and sensuous approach to color, fabric, and shape.

*A Thin Wall of Air: Charles James* is organized by the Menil Collection and curated by Susan Sutton.

This exhibition is generously supported by The Brown Foundation, Inc./Allison Sarofim; David and Anne Kirkland; Anne and Bill Stewart; Nina and Michael Zilkha; Accenture; Lazard Frères & Co. LLC; Diane and Mike Cannon; Sara Paschall Dodd; Peter J. Fluor and K.C. Weiner; Gensler; Tootsies; Lynn Wyatt; Jerry Jeanmard and Cliff Helmcamp; Carol and Dan Price; the City of Houston; and an anonymous donor.

**PUBLIC PROGRAM**

**Dangerous Ideas: Charles James and the de Menils**  
Saturday, May 31, 7:00 p.m.  
Harold Koda, curator in charge of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and other special guests join Susan Sutton in a discussion of James's work.

All photographs, other than the Man Ray work and the one of the evening jacket, Menil Archives, The Menil Collection, Houston. Charles James designs courtesy of Charles B.H. James and Louise D.B. James.

**THE MENIL COLLECTION**

1533 Sul Ross Street Houston, Texas 77006 713-525-9400  
**menil.org**

Printed with low VOC (Volatile Organic Compound) inks on recycled paper containing at least 40% post-consumer waste.

The Menil Collection

**A Thin Wall of Air**  
**Charles James**

May 31–September 7, 2014





Inscribed photograph of Charles James holding a dress lining, n.d.

Charles James (1906–1978) is considered by many to be America’s first couturier. Largely self-taught, by the 1940s he had established himself as a premier fashion designer with an elite clientele that included Millicent Rogers and Gloria Swanson. John and Dominique de Menil were introduced to James during that decade, and Dominique de Menil began to buy pieces from him soon thereafter. As the relationship deepened, the couple became great champions of James, commissioning both furniture and couture, collecting his sketches, donating examples of his work to museums, and hiring him to dress the interior of their home, his only residential commission. *A Thin Wall of Air: Charles James* explores the work of the designer in relation to two of his most committed patrons and clients.

Born to a British military officer and a member of a prominent Chicago family, James’s childhood was split between England and the United States. When he was thirteen or fourteen, James began attending an elite boarding school in northwest London, where he met future fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, who became a long-time friend and collaborator. The semester before his final year, James appeared to lose interest in school and ultimately left (or possibly was expelled) after what he described as a “minor escapade.” A few months later, his parents used their social connections to get him a job at the electric company Commonwealth Edison and sent him to Chicago. After disrupting the clerical office by showing off the batik-dyed silks he’d been making, he was transferred to the architectural department.

Though he didn’t stay long, the assignment seems to have proved informative for James’s future design ventures. In 1926, he opened his own millinery shop in Chicago, and the sculptural influence of architecture and engineering was apparent in his earliest designs. James’s method of directly molding on the human form and dramatically manipulating materials began to develop there as well. After the closing of his store, which had three locations in two years, and a stint in New York City, James went to Europe and spent much of the 1930s in Paris, where he forged friendships with Surrealists such as Jean Cocteau and Salvador Dalí, and London, where he briefly opened a salon. It was during this decade that James caught the attention of some of the most important couturiers of the era, including Cristóbal Balenciaga, Christian Dior, and Paul Poiret, and began to make a name for himself.

James was known for his virtuosic design and construction. His clothes fuse a Victorian aesthetic with forms derived from nature and are defined by dramatic curves and an exaggeration of the human form. The silhouettes are further accentuated by unusual color choices that heighten their sculptural dimension and give them a surreal undertone. He had a clearly defined ideal female

body for which he designed as exemplified in his custom dress forms, which display the attributes James esteemed: squared shoulders, a long torso, and highly accentuated hips with a curved waistline. Interested in how posture effects the way clothes fit, drape, and move, he also devised a flexible



Above: Dominique de Menil, wearing a Charles James jacket, and Philip Johnson at the River Oaks Theatre, 1949. © *Houston Chronicle*. Used with permission

Right: Saffron damask silk evening jacket, 1948. The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Adam Baker



Dominique de Menil, dressed in a Charles James suit, and Max Ernst in the atrium garden of the de Menils’ home, 1952. Photo: Larry Gilbert



mannequin. Above all, James believed that there was transformative design power in the space between the body and fabric, which fashion photographer and close friend Bill Cunningham described as “a thin wall of air.” He saw his garments as carapaces that surround the body and permit a metamorphic extension of it. Such a design theory connects James’s fashions to sculpture and architecture, where the body is transformed by the engineered structures surrounding it.

In the 1940s, the designer returned to the United States, where he spent the majority of his remaining career, and in 1943 he was invited by beauty maven Elizabeth Arden to become the designer for her fashion showroom opening on 5th Avenue. Due to James’s turbulent behavior—the drama that infuses his designs was often echoed in his personal and professional interactions—and Arden’s ruthless business practices, the relationship did not last long. However, it was through this association that James and Dominique de Menil were introduced. Though the de Menils had permanently settled in Houston by that time, they continued to maintain residences in New York and Paris, and the socialite and art scenes in New York in particular were a source of many influential connections.

James was best known for his ball gowns, and one of Dominique de Menil’s first purchases was the aptly named Bustle Dress, first created in 1947 for Millicent Rogers, which directly references the bustles common in the Victorian era. In Dominique de Menil’s version, a brown silk-wool is used as the overskirt,

an unusual color for evening wear that reveals the designer’s unorthodox eye and a rejection of traditional standards of taste. He often built the exuberant forms of his gowns by layering contrasting fabrics, creating the illusion of depth and heightening the sculptural nature of the designs, and he paired plain or rough fabrics like cotton organdy or wool with the refined, lavish materials more typical of evening wear.

James placed immense value on the innovations he developed in coat design. A saffron damask silk evening jacket he made for de Menil in 1948 has sculptural sleeves that balloon out and then taper in, the volume and shape achieved by his inventive use of darts, and an origami-like collar that folds in on itself in another Jamesian inversion. The coat’s lining is a contrasting pale celadon; such linings were often a place for the designer to exercise his eye for unusual color combinations and enrich the space between the wearer’s body and the garment. Another coat, a black theater jacket with a bright red satin lining, appears to take its cue from a riding jacket: the hips are sculpted out and then descend into dramatic knife pleats, falling from precise points at the hip line.

In 1950, John de Menil proposed that they hire James to dress the interior of the couple’s Philip Johnson-designed house in the River Oaks neighborhood of Houston. It was a bold choice, given that James’s style was the very inverse of Johnson’s minimalism, but James’s mischievous personality was well suited to such subversion. His intervention in the de Menil home resulted in a multitude of rich tensions as the structures of international modernism interacted with the voluptuous fluidity of the interior design. He introduced rich, warm colors such as bubblegum pink into small, dark spaces, and he covered hallways, niches, and doors in butterscotch or fuchsia felts. Other doors were wrapped in antique velvet. In Dominique de Menil’s dressing room, James used a checkerboard of hand-mixed aqua, gray, and blue paints with a dirty patina to produce an airy and cool atmosphere. Like the lining of a coat or suit jacket, James painted the interiors of the drawers and cabinets in contrasting colors of butter yellow and olive green.

James’s selection of Belter chairs and other Rococo antiques both revealed his love of historical references and added curves to the otherwise rectilinear home. He designed several pieces of imaginative, complex—and often difficult to execute—furniture as well, causing one Houston socialite to comment that “his ball gowns look like furniture and his furniture looks like ball gowns.” Indeed, when James designed the chaise longue, he seemed to be thinking about the dressed female form, as evidenced by the curvaceous figure that emerges in a side-view sketch, and the combination of the contrasting fabrics of his gowns. The designer’s propensity for the surreal also emerges in the taupe wool two-piece sofa.



Man Ray, Hattie Carnegie in front of his 1934 painting *A l’heure de l’observatoire—les amoureux* (*Observatory Time—The Lovers*), 1936. © 2014 Man Ray Trust/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Photo © 2014 Telimage

The couch was inspired by Man Ray’s 1934 painting *A l’heure de l’observatoire—les amoureux* (*Observatory Time—The Lovers*), which depicts lips floating in the sky over a landscape. When paired, the chaise longue and sofa seem to refer to Man Ray’s photograph of a woman reclining beneath the painting.

James was frequently volatile and never known for his business acumen—even selling personal belongings when he needed extra money, including the wood sculpture of a saint in the exhibition—and over the years his behavior became more erratic and his financial situation increasingly dire. He all but stopped designing by the early 1960s, though he continued to invest time and energy in the preservation of his intellectual and artistic legacies. The de Menil’s patronage naturally slowed during this period, but their respect for him and his work was undiminished and they maintained an intermittent correspondence.

Years later, Dominique de Menil recalled that James “really taught me how to turn my back from easy things and look for more elaborate ones instead,” and his influence can be seen in the seven-sided ottoman she designed for her home in 1958. Upholstered in gold velvet, its luxurious fabric and unusual shape has an undeniably Jamesian feel, though the linear edges seem to echo the modernism of the Johnson’s designs. The ottoman is the template for the one that resides in the museum’s lobby today, a subtle memorial to the influential relationship between Charles James and John and Dominique de Menil.

—Susan Sutton, Assistant Curator