

A Thin Wall of Air: Charles James

An intimate look at the celebrated couturier's creations for a singular patron's wardrobe and home

Fabric as a sculptural medium...sensuous settees...colors rivaling those of a tropical garden... a rococo interior that softened the hard lines of a Modernist house

On view exclusively at the Menil, May 31st through September 7th, 2014

Celebrate the exhibition's opening day with special guest Harold Koda, curator in charge of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Costume Institute, in a panel discussion in the Menil foyer:

"Dangerous Ideas: Charles James and the de Menils"

Saturday, May 31st at 7:00 p.m.

HOUSTON, TX, May 22, 2014 — The first Menil exhibition to focus on the work of a fashion designer, *A Thin Wall of Air: Charles James* will pay tribute to the relationship between America's first couturier and two of his most devoted patrons, Dominique and John de Menil. The title of the exhibition comes from an observation by the photographer Bill Cunningham, a close friend of James's and a fashion legend in his own right. For James, Cunningham once said, the possibilities of design were found neither in the human form itself nor in the material, but in the space between the body and the fabric—"a thin wall of air."

Organized by Assistant Curator Susan Sutton, the exhibition's tightly focused selection of works will include examples of revolutionary eveningwear, coats, capes, and daywear – all custom-made for Dominique de Menil – as well as furnishings for the family's residence (a veritable intervention that stands today as James's only interior-design commission). Wall colors and works of art from the Menil's permanent collection will evoke not only the rooms of Menil House but the designer and client's mutual affinity for such artists as Yves Klein and Max Ernst.

The man who came to be known as the American Balenciaga, Charles James was born in London in 1906 to a British father and American mother. After a stint at the University of Bordeaux and a brush with architectural design for a company in his mother's hometown of Chicago, he began his career as a milliner. His architectural approach to fashion could be seen early in his habit of forming clients' hats directly on their heads. James opened two more hat shops in Chicago before moving to New York and later London to pursue dress design. Despite no formal training, he had by 1940 become a sensation. At the peak of his career, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, women could wait years to receive one of his extravagantly engineered ball gowns. With their singular, sculptural reinventions of bustles and draping of historical dress, James's creations – realized in silk and silk chiffon, satin, taffeta, and velvet – were supported by armatures of boning, buckram, millinery wire, and a multitude of petticoats.

James's skills as a dressmaker were unsurpassed. He cut waists on the curve and made patterns of as many pieces as required to eliminate bust darts. He draped and cut fabric while clients wore it, and fitted the dresses himself. The finished product was often hand sewn. James designs remade his clients' figures in his own vision. Christian Dior himself admitted to being inspired by James to create the fashion-world-changing designs dubbed the New Look, which was marked by nipped-in waists from which flowed full skirts.

By 1947 Dominique de Menil had begun to appear in James's daywear and evening wear, joining the roster of such leading ladies of society, stage, and screen as Millicent Rogers, Marlene Dietrich, Babe Paley, Gloria Swanson, and Gypsy Rose Lee (for whom James created breakaway strip-tease costumes). The de Menils counted James as a friend as well, a friend who considered himself not a fashion designer but an artist.

In 1950, the de Menil family was preparing to move into the flat-roofed rectilinear box of brick and glass that they had commissioned from architect Philip Johnson. The architect recommended that the interiors be furnished by Mies Van der Rohe. But the de Menils wanted something "more voluptuous," in Dominique's words; they asked James to dress the interior. James's style was the very inverse of Johnson's pure modernism. The introduction of butterscotch velvet and fuchsia felt walls framing lip-shaped love seats and

other curvaceous furniture did not sit well with Johnson (the architect did concede, decades later, that the commission was brilliant).

Said Menil Director Josef Helfenstein: “Thirty years before the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation honored Charles James with its first fellowship awarded to a fashion designer, Dominique and John de Menil had recognized and encouraged him as an artist and as a visionary innovator. Sharing their belief in James, we are honored to present this exhibition exploring the role of the de Menils in expanding the range of his work.”

In what might be called the long-awaited Year of James, the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s recently opened *Charles James: Beyond Fashion* is on view through August 10, 2014.

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; Russell Reynolds; Tootsies; Lynn Wyatt; Jerry Jeanmard and Cliff Helmcamp; Carol and Dan Price; the City of Houston; and an anonymous donor.

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