



Hail Halston

A new book celebrates the American designer who dressed Jackie O and Grace Kelly and revolutionised fashion in the '70s. **By Jacqueline Lunn**

● Before Calvin Klein, Donna Karan and Ralph Lauren, there was Halston. In the 1970s, the fashion designer with matinee idol good looks dressed Jackie Onassis, Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor and Jacqueline Bisset in between nights at Studio 54 with the likes of Andy Warhol and Liza Minnelli, and guest roles on the early '80s TV smash *The Love Boat*.

There was Halston haute couture, ready-to-wear, a diffusion label and perfume (with bottle designed by Elsa Peretti). His empire was built on an uncanny ability to read the times. As the '60s moved into the '70s and feminism dug in its heels, Halston gave women a

less structured, cleaner, simpler, yet still luxurious wardrobe. A modern wardrobe. She could look good all day at work in bias-cut pants and an ultrasuede top and still be comfortable as she strode down Madison Avenue towards home.

As he told *Womenswear Daily* in 1964, two years before he became a fashion designer (his first foray into fashion was as a milliner): "If I were to design clothes, and yes, I'd love to, and maybe some day I will, they'd have to be snappy, all function and ease. For day, simple action clothes that women can breathe in, work in, play in. Nights, that's different. Time to splurge, live the dream that's fashion. And, let's face it, dresses are not going to have feathers and fuss in the future. No tricks for me, though fashion is tricky. I can understand them in things like jewellery, never clothes.

"We'll go on simplifying, everything uncluttered. This is a tailor's world, not a dressmaker's world."

It seems fitting that, at a time when minimalism is being hailed as the major fashion highway of the future, a new book



never have happened without Halston."

Rottman says Halston's influence can be charted through Jacqueline Kennedy's wardrobe. At her husband's inauguration in Washington in 1961, Jackie wore a structured suit, A-line wool coat and the famous pillbox hat designed by Halston. During the '70s Jackie O's wardrobe featured elegant Halston pant suits for day and relaxed yet luxurious strapless chiffon gowns for evening.

"Women were going to work, asserting themselves and freeing themselves from the confines of patriarchy," Rottman reminisces, "and he offered a more relaxed work uniform that was important, original and still special."

Elaine Gross believes the exploration of Halston has been a long time coming. "For too long people focused on his celebrity. But I couldn't pinpoint one single American designer who revolutionised fashion like Halston. The relaxation of fashion was started by Chanel, Halston continued it and now there is Armani."

It was not just his designs, Gross says, but his business acumen that influenced the next generation. While every contemporary international designer worth his or her weight in cashmere has big-name star devotees (think Madonna and Gucci, Courtney and Versace, Gwyneth and Klein, just about everyone and Armani), he was the first American designer to court celebrity and become it.

"The key distinction between Halston and today's designers is that Halston did



not acquire celebrities the way they do now through press agents and strategic marketing," Gross says. "They were truly attracted to him. They viewed him as important and glamorous."

But fashion is a business and Halston also showed the next generation what not to do. At the height of his influence, he sold his name and trademark and lost control of his empire. "Halston is still imitated today," Gross says. "His fashion legacy was lost among the hoopla surrounding his celebrity friends and his partying. But he wouldn't have had any of that if it wasn't for his immense talent." © *Halston: An American Original*, by Elaine Gross and Fred Rottman, HarperCollins, \$90.

This page, clockwise from top left: Halston and Jacqueline Bisset select costume fabrics for the 1977 film *The Greek Tycoon*; hooded doublefaced wool pullover tunic and body suit, 1967; layers of chiffon in graphic print-over effect; contrast jersey dress, 1967. Opposite page: Halston and models (including a young Anjelica Huston, bottom right) wearing his easy separates and dresses, 1972; harlequin evening gown, 1967.

explores how Halston redefined American, and consequently global, fashion. *Halston - An American Original*, by Elaine Gross and Fred Rottman, is a definitive account of the man (who died in 1990 from AIDS, aged 57) and his design achievements. Don't go looking for any salacious tidbits - the book pours praise on Halston and skims over his private life. What it does offer is masses of fashion information, fabulous pictures and an insight into the beginnings of the culture of American sportswear.

"Halston changed fashion. In the '50s and '60s people really dressed up and wanted important, structured clothing. There was a lot of following Paris - the undisputed fashion capital back then - but Halston relaxed and simplified fashion, he combined sportswear with the idea of ready-to-wear suits," says co-author Fred Rottman, who worked with Halston in the late '70s and early '80s.

"Now we have American designers [Tom Ford, Marc Jacobs, Narciso Rodriguez, et al] heading European houses - and that would