



WORN IN THE USA



BEFORE CALVIN KLEIN, BEFORE RALPH LAUREN, THERE WAS A DESIGNER WHO DEFINED AMERICAN STYLE. HIS NAME: **HALSTON.**



Clockwise from top left: Christina Ferrare in a plunging halterneck dress; Halston and all the early Halstonettes wearing his easy separates and dresses, 1972; Candice Bergen in a "giraffe neck" cashmere sweater dress; Halston and close friend Elizabeth Taylor.

The seeds of modern style, sewn over two decades ago by designer Roy Halston, encompassed flat-front pants, hooded sweatshirts, sweaters tied around shoulders, bias cutting, the marriage of fashion and celebrity.

The contribution of Halston (he wisely lost the Roy) to fashion has been at best underestimated. A complex figure, it was hard to separate Halston the man from Halston the designer from Halston the habitué of Studio 54 (and the very best friend of style icons Elizabeth Taylor, Liza Minnelli, Bianca Jagger and Jackie Onassis). He embodied a contradictory mix of glamour, indulgence and intense hard work. The great irony of Halston's legacy is that he is better remembered for who he was with than what he did – an irony newly recognised by authors Fred Rottman and Elaine Gross in *Halston: An American Original* (HarperCollins).

Halston courted fame as much as the famous courted him. An image of the designer disembarking from a boat in Acapulco with his Greek chorus of pre-supermodels, the Halstonettes (in matching black swimsuits and mirrored sunglasses) was a perfect demonstration in image. He appeared on the cover of *People*, arms protectively around Liz and Liza, starred in a special fashion episode of *The Love Boat* and designed Miss Piggy's wedding dress for her marriage to Kermit the Frog (stressing that her eyeshadow not clash with the colour of her husband). At his insistence, whenever Sister Sledge's 'He's the Greatest Dancer' played in the studio, fittings would come to a screeching halt until the line "Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci" was heard. He escorted his famous clients to balls and parties, to premieres and Oscar ceremonies. Compared with fashion/star "friendships" today, what stood out about his relationships with his famous mannequins was that, unlike his shows, they weren't staged. Fred Rottman, who worked for him as a design assistant in the late Seventies remembers, "The first time Elizabeth Taylor called Halston, he got on the phone and said, 'Is this really Elizabeth Taylor?'" She said, "Is this really Halston?"

By Laura Brown



“EVERYONE SHOULD LOOK LIKE A MOVIE STAR,” HALSTON WOULD PRONOUNCE THEATRICALY AT THE HEIGHT OF HIS SUCCESS. DRAMA AND HALSTON WENT HAND IN WELL-MANICURED HAND.

“He was handsome, he could talk about anything, he was extremely intelligent and he was so elegant. A number of people say they’ll never forget his hands,” Elaine Gross recalls. “But although he always appeared so grand, many said that he was the most down-to-earth person they’d ever met. His assistant, Bill Dugan, said it was like watching the Wizard of Oz behind the curtains.”

Halston used Studio 54 as something of a fashion observatory. Although he partied (very) hard there, he also spent a serious amount of time asking complete strangers about their ‘look’. “Part of the reason the club was so attractive to him was because it was a democratic environment. Everybody was there and it fascinated him,” Gross says. Rottman adds, “He spent a lot of time at Studio 54 but he would work until 8, 9, 10 at night and he often wanted us there with him. But there’s no doubt that during those times, he, as well as everyone else, got out of control.”

What the designer did control, almost fanatically, were his clothes. “A ‘Halston’ was immediately identifiable,

not only because it was zipperless, buttonless, unlined or had an elasticised waist, but because this lack of construction was paired with a unique look and fit,” write Gross and Rottman in the book. Often there were no buttons, zippers, darts, seams or trimmings, merely a beautiful fabric cut on the bias. “At night you want to be turned on and there is nothing more of a turn-on than a fabric that hits the body the way the bias does,” was Halston’s sartorial philosophy. It was simple; so simple, in fact, that many women accidentally wore his dresses back to front.

“Everyone should look like a movie star,” Halston would pronounce theatrically at the height of his success. Drama and Halston went hand in well-manicured hand. Rottman has terrifying memories of their first meeting: “I went backstage before a show and he was sitting there, looking at me over the top of his sunglasses. In this slow drawl, he said, ‘Helloooo, I’m Haaalston.’ Dressed head to toe in black, cigarette in hand, he rigorously enforced his fashion philosophy. Staff, like him, were to wear nothing but black (to not “distract” him from the colours of the garments he fitted). His studio contained no decoration apart from walls of mirrors (creating a surreal effect for employees who would see eight reproductions of Jackie Onassis walking down the hallway) and his desk housed nothing but a single white orchid.

Clockwise from above: Lauren Hutton in a one-shoulder gown; Halston on the town with the Halstonettes, 1981; Halston, Liz Taylor and Liza Minnelli from the cover of *People* magazine, 1977.





Clockwise from left: Down in Acapulco - Halston and his model entourage during a 1976 junket for Braniff Airlines, for which he designed the uniforms; Raquel Welch in a black silk jersey cutout dress, 1972; Halston and Liz Taylor; Halston in his studio.

Halston's clients placed their sartorial life in his hands; some, in fact, still do. "When we interviewed Liza Minnelli for the book, she was wearing a black cashmere Halston pullover and trousers with [his frequent collaborator] Elsa Peretti jewellery on. There were Halston things all over her apartment; there were Elsa Peretti objets on the coffee tables; she even had the orchid," Gross recalls. Gross and Rottman are keen, however, to reverse popular perceptions: "We wanted to make sure that history remembered his contribution to the industry, and not just for palling around with Liz and Liza," Gross says.

Before Halston began designing ready-to-wear (he was trained as a milliner and designed Jackie Kennedy's inaugural pillbox hat), American designers looked largely to Europe for inspiration. The young minimalist found his within the American lifestyle: in Des Moines, Iowa, where he was born; on New York's upper east side; in old Thirties issues of *Harper's BAZAAR*. "The American look in fashion is coming to the fore," he said in 1973. "All of a sudden, the American designer, if he has an original point of view and a product, has an opportunity he never had." Not to mention influence he never dreamt of: multiply the Prada bag mania of a few years ago by 10 and you'll almost grasp the covetability of a Halston original.

Today's leading American designers readily acknowledge the road "Mr Clean" (as he was christened by *Women's Wear Daily*) paved for them. "Halston was one of the most influential designers of our time," says Donna Karan. "When I was young, I aspired to be like him. To me, he represented all that was modern and pure." Gucci's all-American Tom Ford, who sparked a renaissance of Halston's simple glamour in 1996, agrees: "The way he dressed people was so modern - sensible, clean, spare, practical, minimal, functional. But luxurious." "He was an American designer who didn't try to design European couture, but he didn't just do blue jeans either," adds Karl Lagerfeld. "He was the first one of the new generation of designers to create a true American style, and the fact that he stopped working made room for people like Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren."

"His celebrity came from his charisma and his personality," Gross continues. "The great difference between Ralph Lauren and Calvin Klein and Halston, besides the era, is that they have producers, stylists, advertising agencies and PR people creating their image for them. Halston created his own." ■



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