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Azzedine Alaïa: The Greatest Couturier Who Never Bore the Name



Benedicte Kurzen for the International Herald Tribune

The Art of Alaïa: An exhibition of the acclaimed designer's work will be the first show in the City of Paris's newly refurbished fashion museum.

By SUZY MENKES

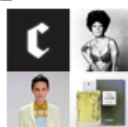
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PARIS — “It is all those years of work — and when I look at it, I see the continuity; there is no season that pushes another out of date,” said Azzedine Alaïa, standing beside one of a handful of dresses displayed in all their graphic, body-conscious glory in front of Matisse’s “Nymph” murals.

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But this display at the Musée de l’Art Moderne is only a taster of the 74 dresses on show across a verdant private park at the Palais Galliera, Paris’s fashion museum, newly refurbished with oxblood walls and a restored mosaic floor, the better to show the wonders of the greatest modern couturier who never bore that name.

“Alaïa,” which is to open Saturday and end Jan. 26, is an exhibition as noble as it is joyous, with its elegant, impeccably cut dresses, the striking intervention of zippers snaking around the body curves and with the funky Africa outfits, as seen on a young Naomi Campbell. They are an echo of memory from the designer’s childhood in Tunisia.

“Sometimes, when I am making a wedding dress, I think of those nuns, in their white habits with those wimple hats,” says Mr. Alaïa, 73, explaining the purity of tiny stitched eyelets on white cotton.

Olivier Saillard, the museum’s director and curator of the exhibition, working in clusters and vistas, eschewed the idea of putting up images — say of Grace Jones wearing a bias-cut, hooded, nude-colored dress that rippled over the diva’s body. There also are no digital screens displaying the fashion shows that the so-called “king of cling” started in the 1980s, after his private couture business evolved.

Instead, there is the whammy of color: not just the 1997 scarlet dress, recently worn by Rihanna, standing majestically on its own in an alcove. There are also shades that the curator recognizes as “Alaïa colors”: a deep, faded purple, a dusty bronze or black, lighted in fluffy wool or gleaming as leather, perforated with silver eyelets.

As Mr. Saillard says, everything is so much earlier than seems credible — like that metal and leather outfit made first in the late 1970s, rejected as too aggressive by the company that had commissioned it, then remade for one of Alaïa’s own collections in the early 1980s, well before Versace and so many others decided that skin was in.

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The most dramatic of Mr. Alaïa's works is the tailcoat from 2003, with its back turned to show an appliqué of crocodile skin in its entirety.

Mr. Saillard has been intelligent in his choices for this renovated but still relatively small museum. Flanking the large entry room are two side areas, still rich with 19th-century ceiling frescoes. The clothing in one area heaves with sensuality, including a wool dress with the white lacy effect of a French maid's uniform and strategically placed markers at erogenous spots.

The other room's display is the opposite of sharp and sexy: tailored dresses and coats, showing the designer's realistic side, with the clothes so beautifully made.

The exhibition then closes with the iconic pieces: the bandage-without-bondage stretch dresses, inspired by ancient Greece; Mr. Saillard's favorite, a nude dress, so apparently simple in its complex bias cut; and the outfit of Ms. Jones, whose photograph wearing the creation became a fashion icon of its own.

But Mr. Alaïa has done little to show himself over his 30 years as fashion's secret star. The exhibition, so graceful, harmonious and generous, captures the essence of the designer: his modesty in the face of such exceptional talent.







"He has been waiting all his life for this moment," said Carla Sozzani, his friend and fashion supporter through her 10 Corso Como Milan store and beyond.

In fact, a new [Azzedine Alaïa](#) store is to open Saturday on Rue de Marignan, just off Avenue Montaigne and at the heart of the Paris luxury "golden triangle."

It is the fruits of his collaboration with the Richemont luxury group and will give the designer a very different showcase than his discreet store (no window displays, of course) in the Marais district of Paris.

But the greatest accolade is the collection of clothes on display at Galliera: nothing dusty in concept or outdated in style. It is a tribute to a fashion that is forever relevant.

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