



HALSTON

An American Original

E L A I N E G R O S S & F R E D R O T T M A N



INTRODUCTION:

The Halston Mystique

If fashion's Seventh Avenue had a Hollywood-style walk of fame, the biggest and shiniest star would belong to Halston, America's first true fashion celebrity. Nine years after his death, his name still conjures up images of luxury and fashion excellence commonly associated only with the toniest of European couturiers.

Before him, Claire McCardell's casual sportswear and Norman Norell's European-inspired glamour wardrobes made major contributions to the American fashion scene. But it wasn't until Halston, with his special blend of luxurious, comfortable and gimmick-free fashions, that America truly found an original, and a role model for its fashion future.

Behind the grandiose image lived a man with an innate talent for foretelling the fashion needs of a changing generation of women. He mixed couture-level garment construction with the reality of modern lifestyles. Both in spirit and in detail, he led fashion's redefinition from the pie-in-the-sky dictates of a handful of designers to apparel driven by women's needs. With a unique interpretation of sensuality, movement, proportion and simplicity that caused *Women's Wear Daily* (WWD) to nickname him "Mr. Clean," he invented a way of dressing that revolutionized his, and our, fashion times.

Although some may remember him most as the designer of Jackie Kennedy's inaugural pillbox hat, in fact all of 1970s contemporary fashion was defined by Halston. Every woman, from royalty and celebrities to middle-American housewives, wore his designs or was scented with his fragrance. A simple black, block-lettered name and logo became an adjective for fashion elegance, much as Rolls-Royce was for luxury cars.

It is impossible to clearly separate Halston, the man, from the designer or the business. There was a synergy to his life and work that zigzagged in and out of all his activities. Any more than you can isolate a single ingredient from a master chef's recipe, these facets cannot be extracted and examined individually. The whole was more than the sum of its parts.

Timing is everything, and Halston's life and career can be summed up as the timely convergence of a number of unique personal and social elements. Had they

Halston in his New York town house, 1978. © Harry Benson

occurred either separately or during another era, he would probably not have had the far-reaching impact he did.

The 1950s, when Halston began his fashion career as a milliner, was a time when a woman would sooner dare utter profanities in public than walk out of the house without wearing a chapeau. The places where he learned and perfected his design and personal skills as a milliner during the early to mid-1960s—the Ambassador Hotel in Chicago, Lilly Daché and Bergdorf Goodman in New York—were repositories for the wealthy and celebrated hoi polloi. There he learned the genteel art of catering to the carriage trade who demanded European-style, custom-made attire and a level of service to match. At the same time, he intuited the slow disappearance of this kind of conspicuous consumption and the beginnings of a pro-American fashion attitude that would lead to the growth of more democratic fashion in the form of ready-to-wear.

When Halston opened his apparel business in 1968, he astutely tapped into the antiestablishment, freethinking, open-minded, more casual approach to life that was emerging. Vietnam War protests and the Watergate political scandal, the rise of discos, Beatlemania and the London fashion scene, widespread recreational drug use and the burgeoning women's and sexual liberation movements all helped change the scope of most women's expectations, lifestyles and, therefore, fashion needs.

Halston's movie-star good looks and charismatic star qualities ushered in a newfound celebrity status for fashion designers. Almost daily, his name appeared in the fashion and society columns alongside those of his equally famous clients. They were naturally attracted to each other and their celebrity transferred both ways.

Halston was interviewed on every subject from his daily grooming habits ("wash hair every day, shave twice a day, and wash face with own signature soap") and his favorite recipes (cottage cheese dressing for crudités, caviar on a baked

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"I dreamt I was sitting in on a National Security Council meeting, and guess what. Liza Minnelli and Halston were there, too!"

potato, cold salmon mousse) to how he stays fit (eats an early breakfast, follows rigid exercise program) and his working habits (likes to work late into the evening so he can concentrate without being disturbed, books appointments for himself “rather like a doctor”).

Halston was featured in two *New Yorker* cartoons and appeared on every talk show from Merv Griffin, and Phil Donahue, to Dinah Shore, and *Good Morning America*, and capped it all off with a featured role in a special fashion episode of *The Love Boat*. Halston was spoofed on the April 11, 1987, edition of *Saturday Night Live*, with the late Phil Hartman impersonating the designer in a mock interview on the fictitious *Pat Stevens Show*. Halston’s name was mentioned in two popular songs—Billy Joel’s “Big Shot” (1978) and Sister Sledge’s disco favorite “He’s the Greatest Dancer” (1978). Upon Halston’s insistence, whenever Sister Sledge’s song played over the speakers in his office, fittings would come to a halt until after the line “Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci” was heard.

Through a conscious effort, he attained one-name celebrity status and palled around with such luminaries as artist Andy Warhol. “Andy was the ultimate voyeur and Halston was the ultimate host. So whenever you were around them, you knew there was going to be some fun, mischief and hijinx,” says film director Joel Schumacher, a longtime friend and short-time coworker of Halston’s. “I think they both loved celebrities and the spotlight.”

Like an actor who rehearses for weeks on end to make it seem as though he is not acting at all, Halston liked to make his fashions seem effortless and easy, and exhibited a contradictory mix of grandeur and bare-knuckled hard work. His reputation as a social butterfly was blown so out of proportion that it somewhat tarnished and overshadowed his legacy as a brilliant fashion designer.

More than any other designer before him, Halston’s celebrity and style put American fashion on the map and helped make New York City the internationally recognized fashion capital it is today—on equal footing with the long-standing meccas of Paris, London and Milan.

When corporate America began to take over the fashion industry, Halston was caught in its early machinations. He was on the cutting edge of the business world’s conglomerate fever of the 1970s and 1980s, and became a small cog in the big wheel of huge corporations. But without any precedent to guide him, he unwittingly shared his name and valuable trademark with a corporation that both allowed him to build a dynamic business and later forced him out of active design duty. It was a world that he could never fully adapt to, a world where the concept of supporting the integrity and creativity of the fashion arts was secondary to dollars-and-cents accountability. But through his triumphs and errors, he laid the foundation for today’s fashion superstars to market themselves into global empires and worldwide recognition without losing control of the products that carry their names.



On the set of The Love Boat with designer Gloria Vanderbilt, 1981.

BELOW:

*Halston and Liza Minnelli,
slow dancing.*

OPPOSITE:

*Left to right: Halston, Loulou de
La Falaise, Yves St. Laurent,
Nan Kempner and Steve Rubell
at Studio 54 party celebrating the
launch of St. Laurent's Opium
perfume.*

OVERLEAF:

*Pearlized sequins on silk halter dress,
January 1974. © Neal Barr*



Halston's fashion genius was at its best when he had total control of the creative process. When his business grew to colossal proportions, some think that it was his inability to delegate responsibility that precipitated his decline. But before that happened, Halston took the fragrance and cosmetics industry by storm, creating a perfume that for more than ten years was listed as one of the top ten sellers. The Halston fragrance was sold in a unique bean-shaped, Elsa Peretti-designed bottle that is still one of the most famous perfume bottles in history.

Halston rang all the bells on the meter that measures success. And in recognition, his peers awarded him five Coty Fashion Critics Awards, the Oscars of the fashion industry, for his groundbreaking millinery and fashion designs.

Halston was a man with many faces who selectively revealed different aspects of himself depending upon whom he was with. "It was a little bit like watching the Wizard of Oz in operation behind the curtains," says his former assistant Bill Dugan.

The uptown and regal Halston easily conversed and played with true royalty such as the Duchess of Windsor and the Baroness Marie Hélène de Rothschild, and Hollywood royalty like Gloria Swanson and Elizabeth Taylor. The downtown and down-to-earth Halston treated Viola, his longtime, in-office cook as though she were a queen, and could "get real" with eccentric and bohemian friends such as rock singer Monty Rock III and artist Andy Warhol.

The glamorous Halston could stage the most dramatic entrance at Studio 54 or design a breathtaking environment for his Olympic Tower offices. Yet the practical Halston never forgot he was designing clothes for real people of all types and shapes.

First and foremost, however, he was the focused and serious fashion designer who put his work and ambition before all else, demanding perfection in all things, from himself and from those who worked for him. But through it all he interjected a playful, cutting wit, dry sense of humor and a steady stream of practical jokes.

But he was something of an enigma, even to his closest friends.

"I think I got as close to him as anybody," said Liza Minnelli at the dedication of the Halston Archive at the Fashion Institute of Technology. "But he was still such a gentleman that there was a certain line that one never crossed with him. And yet he knew everything about me. He was always there if I needed him—as a friend, as a designer, as a brother. He was wonderful. But you know, he had this wonderful kind of style where you really didn't intrude on his life."

Because of his simple and focused fashion view, during the 1970s many fashion critics called Halston the antidesigner. In contrast, he always thought of himself as just a dressmaker who thoroughly enjoyed but was somewhat bemused by the level of his success. Today we know that he was actually the predesigner whose mystique and design concepts changed the scenery and the rules of fashion's future.

FASHIONABLE PEOPLE

Fashion is a living art requiring people to acknowledge, validate and breathe life into it. That is the single hypothesis around which Halston's fashion philosophy was formed.

Many designers create a look and then find customers that appreciate their point of view. One of the keys to Halston's success is that he took an opposite approach. First he studied and analyzed fashionable and modern women—how they live, their daily activities, the variety of body types, then he designed fashions that fulfilled, rather than dictated, their fashion needs.

While he was designing hats for the rarefied, carriage trade clients at Bergdorf Goodman, women's lives were changing, becoming more active and varied. Halston deduced that a different type of clothing was needed to accommodate newly liberated and working women. His often repeated mottoes, "Fashion is made by fashionable people, designers only suggest," and "You are only as good as the people you dress," were already formulated.

"Fashion is not made by designer and pencil in the seclusion of an atelier," Halston told *WWD* in 1964. "Fashion is made by people. It has to be on somebody's back to come alive. Even the most beautiful Balenciaga is not fashion until it's selected and worn by a woman. Actually, different social groups have made and will continue to make fashion though we single out their leaders."

From the start, Halston was perched at the perfect vantage point to observe the rituals of the rich and famous who were society's fashion leaders. As a young milliner in Chicago, he interfaced with the movie stars and socialites who were coiffed at André Basil's Ambassador Hotel hair salon. Working under the tutelage of Lilly Daché, the reigning queen of millinery, Halston met and worked with many of his future clients. At Bergdorf Goodman, the crossroads for all fashionable ladies visiting or living in New York, he perfected and refined his selling and networking skills. When he opened his own business, those years of informal study were put to the test.

OPPOSITE:

Joe Eula's illustration of Halston fitting Lauren Bacall in long cashmere dress with Peretti's rattlesnake belt, 1973.

BELOW:

People magazine cover, June 20, 1977. Photograph by Harry Benson.





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MASTER MILLINER

Halston's childhood fascination with hats was not an unusual one considering the era in which he grew up. During his formative fashion years, the 1930s to the 1950s, millinery was the focal point of every woman's wardrobe. From housewives to society matrons, in big cities and small towns, for formal and everyday activities, no self-respecting woman, or man, for that matter, would venture out in public without something covering her or his head. Women often owned more hats than dresses, and choosing the most perfect, most fashionable hat was so important, they were often purchased first, worrying later about finding something to wear them with.

There were few name apparel designers in those days, but millinery was a relatively easy way for fashion hopefuls to become local celebrities. Many notable designers—Coco Chanel, Claire McCardell, Charles James, Adolfo—took their first steps into fashion as milliners.

As early as age seven, Halston was intrigued by hats. Roy was so enamored of his grandmother's hat wardrobe that he would climb into her lap and tug at the veils and the brims, "as if he were trying to figure out what made the hat tick," his mother, Hallie May, said. It was such an obsession that she started hiding her hats from him.

Flowers picked from neighbors' gardens were transformed into hats for his mother, which she would obligingly model. On Easter Sunday, 1945, his family was quite surprised when thirteen-year-old Roy presented his mother with a homemade red hat and veil decorated with a gold metal pot-scrubbing sponge. "We all wondered how and why he did it," recalled his brother Robert. "But it was a smash and really flattered my mother."

It was not until Halston moved to Chicago that millinery became anything more than a hobby. In his spare time, in between night classes in illustration and days dressing windows at a department store, Fro made hats on a used sewing machine in his small apartment.

His mentor and lover, André Basil, the preeminent hairdresser at the ritzy Ambassador Hotel, encouraged Fro's talents. The move into Basil's luxurious Astor Street apartment gave him his first workroom, the spare bedroom.

Sophia Loren about to be crowned with a Halston hat by the designer, September 1961.

FASHION'S FIRST MINIMALIST

Before ever once putting scissors to fabric to make a garment, Halston had a mental image of what he knew women's fashions should be.

"If I were to design clothes, and yes, I'd love to, and maybe someday I will, they'd have to be snappy, all function and ease," he told *WWD* in 1964, two years before he designed his first apparel collection for Bergdorf Goodman. "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 jewelry, never clothes. We'll go on simplifying, everything uncluttered. This is a tailor's world, not a dressmaker's world."

From the first of his designing days to the last, he never swerved from that uncomplicated formula—simple by day, simply extravagant by night. But he offered more than just a talent for designing attractive clothes. Halston proselytized a theory about how people should live and dress that was vastly different from the mode of the day.

"Evolution, that's what keeps fashion in flux today. Revolution is out," Halston's theory went. "Life's too active to be pinned down by one revolution or another. Too often, revolution means going back to things past."

Halston believed that all clothes should be as comfortable and easy to wear as sportswear, but elegant at the same time. Almost more important than the way they looked was how they felt on the body. That theory set the precedent from which modern, minimalist fashion was derived.

Looking back, the first two apparel collections Halston designed for Bergdorf Goodman in 1966 proved he had the right stuff to move beyond hats into clothing, but they were mainly experimental. Contained within the Bergdorf collections were few hints of the look for which he would become famous. The fashions were clean and neat in a somewhat futuristic, space-age way and very different from the haughty refinement that Bergdorf Goodman was known for.

"I remember one dress that stuck with me forever," says Audrey Schiltz. "It was navy and white A-line with white cuffs and collar. Very French schoolgirl. It was really new looking. Nobody had done it at that time. At Bergdorf Goodman I was

Karen Bjornson wearing hammered silk satin spiral cut strapless gown, 1976. Photograph Francesco Scavullo

Did Halston make Ultrasuede or did Ultrasuede make Halston? That is the question many fashion historians have asked. In the 1970s, the two were synonymous.

Halston was not the first designer to work with the imitation suede fabric, but he was the first who fully understood its potential. Halston first saw the fabric at a dinner party six months before it was distributed in the United States. Japanese designer Issey Miyake had been given a piece of Ecsaine, as it was originally called, by the Japanese mill that created it, Toray Industries, and was wearing a shirt jacket he made from it. Once the fabric arrived in the United States under the name Aquasuede, shoe designer Beth Levine had also been asked to do some early trials with the fabric. Reportedly both Calvin Klein and Bill Blass were offered the fabric before Halston.

"I flipped," Halston told the *New York Times* in 1973. "The material was so soft, so luxurious yet so utilitarian. I immediately started visualizing all the things I could design."

Although the fabric was completely machine washable, Halston incorrectly thought that it was also waterproof and so the first Aquasuede garment that appeared in a Halston collection was a raincoat, shown in January 1971 for the Spring 1971 season. It was so successful that the following season he followed it up with a classically casual shirtdress, style #704, in the fabric now called Ultrasuede by its U.S. distributor, the Skinner division of Springs Mills.

BELOW LEFT TO RIGHT:
Ultrasuede skirt suit, April 1977;
three-quarter-length Ultrasuede
jacket with self belt and Ultrasuede
beret, June 1973; hooded Ultrasuede
windbreaker jacket and pants,
June 1973.

OPPOSITE LEFT:
Ultrasuede ensemble—A-line coat,
skirt and hat, September 1973.

OPPOSITE RIGHT:
Ultrasuede shirtdress style #704
with cashmere cardigan tied around
shoulders, August 1972.



Halston was eminently qualified to dress Jacqueline Bisset in her role as the wife of *The Greek Tycoon*, loosely based on the life of Jacqueline Onassis. This being his first major film assignment, he was charged with designing the wardrobe but, according to Bill Dugan, also volunteered to instruct Bisset on what Jackie would or would not do. Set in the year it was filmed, Halston told *WWD*, “Ely Landau, the producer of the film, contacted me and I was thrilled. I only stated I couldn’t have anything to do with nostalgia. This is all 1977. The clothes are of this period and an extension of my designs.”

For four days, Halston and Bisset were locked away in his Sixty-eighth Street showroom discussing the thirty costumes needed for the film. “I will make a point to dress emotionally,” she said at the time. “I think people make drastic mistakes in movies when they contradict the plot by wearing the wrong color.”

“Everything for the film was made to order because nothing he had previously made worked,” says Jacqueline Bisset. “He had to rethink his whole concept for me, which surprised him a lot.” As for their personal chemistry, she says, “There was some give and take. He was very grand in some ways and very charming in others.”

BELOW:

Halston and Jacqueline Bisset selecting fabrics for her costumes for the film The Greek Tycoon.

OPPOSITE:

Halston’s original sketch for costume for The Greek Tycoon, and Jacqueline Bisset (inset) wearing the same outfit.



"Halston was one of my closest and dearest friends. At a time when I was at my lowest ebb, he stood by me. If it were not for his belief in me, and his support of my school and dance company, they would not exist today."

—MARTHA GRAHAM

OPPOSITE:

Martha Graham wearing Halston's teiki sequin caftan, with her dance company in 1984.

OVERLEAF:

Halston's costumes for the Martha Graham Dance Company ballet Frescoes. Photograph Francesco Scavullo

Halston's affiliation as costume designer for the Martha Graham Dance Company was truly a labor of love. There was a bond between the two artists that went well beyond their love of the arts, more along the lines of a mother-son relationship. They both shared an appetite and curiosity for life, and as a dancer, Graham revered the body and its coverings as much as Halston. Their fifteen-year collaboration began with costumes but concluded with Halston becoming the financial savior of the Graham dance troupe.

In her autobiography, *Blood Memory*, which Graham partly dedicated to Halston, she recounted how the two first met, when Graham was already a septuagenarian. They were introduced when she needed something to wear to present the Capezio Dance Award: "Halston suggested a wonderful earth-colored cashmere caftan and a darker natural poncho over it. I loved it. I felt as if I had always worn it. Halston understood the drape of fabric and the body's movement beneath it; he understood elegance."

Rather than return the dress to Halston, which was just a loan, she asked Halston if she could buy it, but pay it off monthly. Halston said, "Martha, if I cannot give you that dress, there is nothing in the world I can give you."

Their mutual love for fabrics helped continue their friendship. For most of her career, Graham had designed all the costumes her dancers wore. Now she was crippled with arthritis and could no longer shop the fabric stores the way she used to. Halston invited her to his workroom to look at fabrics, but because of the condition of her hands she always wore gloves and commented that she could not feel the fabrics, or use her hands. Halston replied, "Martha, let me be your hands."

From that point on, Halston made almost all of the costumes for her dance troupe, remaking and restyling the old ones, many of which were so threadbare and poorly made that dancers were going on stage with safety pins holding them together.

Halston and Graham would confer about the look she wanted. The dancers would run through their numbers for the designer in his showroom, stretching and bending in their larger-than-life movements, so he could see what the costumes needed to do in order to accommodate them. Then he or Joe Eula would sketch the ideas, or Halston might drape fabrics on the models themselves. All the garments were made in Halston's workrooms, completely free of charge. The first sample of each costume was usually draped by the designer himself.

"Martha Graham and Halston were alike, they were both perfectionists, both demanding, but they didn't just demand and not do it themselves. I saw him sew hats for her ballets until his hands were bleeding. That's how strongly he cared for her," says his personal secretary, Faye Robeson.

"When Martha was here, Halston was like a little child, asking millions of questions," remembers Akira Maki. "She talked so softly to him and he used to listen to every word."



HALSTON REVISITED

It took a few years for the rest of the fashion world to catch up with Halston. The minimalism that Halston conceived and uniquely offered in the late 1960s and 1970s was applauded in the mid and late 1980s and 1990s as the very definition of modern fashion. Credit was given where credit was due.

HALSTON HAUNTS SEVENTH AVENUE, said the front page of *WWD* on April 21, 1989. "Halston may be out of the Seventh Avenue scene, but his spirit is everywhere." The photo spread showed pieces from Halston's collections from ten to fifteen years before. They were astoundingly similar to those from the recent collections of such design notables as Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, Donna Karan, Michael Kors, Louis dell'Olio for Anne Klein, Ralph Lauren, Carolyne Roehm, Marc Jacobs and Isaac Mizrahi.

IT'S STILL WORKING, declared the headline in *W* magazine in July 1996. "Halston's groundbreaking style of 20 years ago is as valid now as it was then."

Gucci's Tom Ford, one of the leaders of the Halston renaissance, looked back to the future of fashion, noting, "The way people dressed then was so modern—sensible, clean, simple, spare, practical, minimal, functional. But luxurious." A different era, but the message still rings true.

Within his own lifetime, Halston saw his own designs newly appreciated and revived. "I think it's great that people consider me interesting enough to copy. That mood still exists in fashion. If I were to do something now, I would continue my style," he said, while in the midst of legal struggles to recapture the company that bore his name.

A few years later, he acknowledged as a matter of fact that "the experiment was mine. It was revolutionary in its day. I made the change from very structured clothes to a more casual look and fashionable women picked up on it. I still think my look was the most attractive and sensible. Whether it was cashmeres, jersey, the strapless, chiffon, it was about a total look. Clothes should be practical, glamorous, functional and spare. . . . I'm proud. I'm happy," he said of those who copied his designs. "It proves it still works. I think it will work forever. Certain people have formed whole businesses on my look. They might have the effect, but not the cause. They haven't had to experiment."

OPPOSITE:

Halston, December 1978.

BELOW:

Front page of WWD, April 21, 1989.

OVERLEAF:

From Halston retrospective exhibit, "Absolute Modernism," held at the Museum at FIT, October 1991.





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