

AZZEDINE ALAÏA

revolutionized fashion practically overnight. But he seemed to pass like a comet. What happened? He still makes clothes that make women look great, he simply decided that freedom meant more than money

A customer wears a baffled expression as she enters designer Azzedine Alaïa's boutique on the Rue du Parc Royal. What she expects, on this sunny late April afternoon in the Marais, one can only guess. What she finds is something else entirely.

A dozen of the world's top models—fab Fabienne, yummy Yasmin, lynxish Linda Evangelista—swarm in the square boutique like the loveliest locusts, picking up their payment for walking the runway in Alaïa's fall fashion shows. Most of them fly back to France for Alaïa from all over the world, weeks after most of the Paris collections are shown. Why do they do it? As Cindy Crawford says, "Clothes, clothes, clothes."

Though they are women who dress for a living, the models share the baffled customer's purpose in coming here. So as the shows go on—four of them over two days—more and more of the models dash between the designer's showplace in his under-construction headquarters in an old warehouse on nearby Rue de la Verrerie and the store below his present home and atelier. That's where they get Alaïafied.

Right now, for example, as the customer stands helplessly among them, overwhelmed, Janice Dickinson is climbing the shop's rolling ladder, going through stock cabinets and packaged clothes, moaning "Rien, rien (nothing) for me." Naomi Campbell is exiting a changing booth in beige leggings, a scoop-neck ivory top and black suede desert boots. "That's happening, babe," Dickinson hoots from her perch to the London teenager who often lives upstairs chez Alaïa in a storage room where a single bed—known as the models' bed—rests. "You should be arrested, looking like that."



BY MICHAEL GROSS PHOTOGRAPH BY ROXANNE LOWIT



Guy Marineau



Fall classics: Alaïa's designs are always seductive, exciting, and very French. As devotee Tina Turner says, "His clothes are practical *and* they look good. How could that go out of fashion?"

Meanwhile, across the room, a pregnant Yasmin Parveneh is proving that you don't need a washboard stomach to wear Alaïa. When Evangelista finds her a pretty party dress, she heads into a dressing room, tossing a tomato-red shorts suit she wants to her husband, Simon Le Bon, lead singer of Duran Duran. He transfers it to a table heaped with clothes, asking no one in particular, "Is this Yasmin's pile?" It is almost a foot high.

Though that pile is evidence to the contrary, there are those who say Alaïa passed like a comet, revolutionizing fashion from the moment he launched his first ready-to-wear collection in 1980, but then passing into combative irrelevance a mere six years later. This can seem especially true in America, where Alaïa's profile is low because: a) he's been banned by *Women's Wear Daily* as a result of a feud that began in 1986, when he denied them a preview; b) he's limited his distribution; and c) he's stopped showing dur-

ing the collections, when most of the American fashion press is in Paris.

But the devotion of Azzedine's customers—who are by no means all model-perfect—continues unabated. When they can't get to Paris, they buy Alaïa in shops like Browns in London, Ultimo in Chicago, Maxfield in Los Angeles, and Jacqueline Schnabel's Alaïa boutique and Barneys in New York.

Tina Turner—who dashed into Alaïa's third show en route to a singing engagement in Germany and dashed out with a new dress—has a down-to-earth, but key, appreciation of Alaïa. "His clothes are practical, they don't wrinkle, and they look good," she says. "How could that not be in fashion?"

Certainly the cast of characters at Alaïa's show last April—his "special friends" show—speaks to the breadth of his appeal. There were the wives of the president of France and the mayor of Marseilles, three Duran Durans, the sculptor Cesar, Sydney

and Claude Picasso, the designers Martine Sitbon, Thierry Mugler, Guy Paulin, and François Lesage; Parisian beauties Dauphine de Jerphanion, Bettina Graziani, Dominique Sanda, and Kate de Castelbajac; and the most notable French fashion editors.

That audience reflects Alaïa's diverse background, which informs everything he designs. His most special creations combine the mystery of North Africa, where he was born, with the severe style of his adopted home, Paris, spiced with energy from his friends in entertainment and intellectual circles.

Alaïa speaks French, through an interpreter, seductively, his eyes and hands animated as he tells a life story he's rarely revealed. He was born in Tunis to a wheat farmer and his wife. Though Alaïa summered with his parents on the family farm, he was brought up by his maternal grandmother in the city.

Alaïa hated school, and his days at the movies were his salvation. "I'd run them back in my mind," he says, "thinking about the costumes of *Roman Holiday* and *Sabrina*." He learned to sew thanks to several sisters—his own, and the nuns who taught his sister in school. But since his own sister hated sewing class, he did her stitches for her in a sewing notebook with fabric pages. Fashion also entered his life through aunts who would sit around the house and embroider, and an "uncle" named Darras, a Tunisian traveling salesman who trafficked in soaps and oils and *saharien* clothing. Though Alaïa claims he never thought about fashion, he was that rare thing—a natural.

So he was fascinated when he saw his first fashion magazines at the home of Madame Pineau, the midwife who'd delivered him. "I discovered Balenciaga that way, Dior that way," he says. "I'd ask myself, 'How on earth does that dress hold together?' It seemed like such a mystery. I had to learn."

Madame Pineau helped set a pattern that would repeat in Alaïa's life: Women always seemed to appear to help him out. Pineau arranged for him to study at the local Beaux Arts by swearing he was older than 16. He wasn't. During school he met several grand Tunisian ladies, and through them he found a job at Christian Dior's couture house in Paris. Alaïa lasted only five days, but his world of helpful women kept opening doors. There was the wife of an architect, who introduced him to the *saloniste*. There was the architect's

daughter who introduced him to a marquise. And there was the countess who invited him into her house. Besides giving Alaïa a place to stay, these women gave him odd jobs, but also invited him to social events where he met the artists and writers, architects and politicians of the day, a cast of characters ranging from André Malraux to Aristotle Onassis.

In the late sixties his friends helped him find his first apartment—which he shared with a model—on the Rue Marronniers. Then, in 1970, he opened his first made-to-order home business on Rue Bellechasse on the Left Bank. For the next ten years, he and eighteen sewing hands dressed private clients. “The most important and well-known Parisian, Brazilian, American women of the time came to Bellechasse,” he says. “There were three or four Rollsies in front of the house at a time.”

At a dinner in 1979 with a fashion editor, his fellow designer Thierry Mugler mentioned a suit Alaïa had made for a mutual friend. “Thierry said to do ten like that and present them to the press. I thought he was making fun of me.” But Alaïa agreed to make raincoats for a promotional show the fashion editor was planning. They were an instant success with the French press. Then Bill

Cunningham, the American fashion photographer/commentator, photographed Alaïa’s styles in the Paris streets and published them though he didn’t know the designer’s name. By 1982, executives of Bergdorf Goodman were offering Alaïa a New York show.

“I thought it was a joke,” he says. “I thought it was Thierry Mugler. A month later, a telegram came and I put it aside, too, thinking one day Thierry will confess, but he never did. Then Maud Frizon called and said the Bergdorf Goodman people were astonished that I hadn’t answered their letter, nor their telegram. It was June and the show was set for September. I didn’t even have ten garments. So I said, ‘Twenty models, one passage each, and that’s it.’ I thought of a phrase attributed to Arletty, ‘virgin of all decoration,’ and I thought, ‘Okay, we’ll do a Parisian idea: one high-heel pump, stockings, and no jewelry. We don’t have to look for accessories. We’ll only see the beauty of the girl and the clothes.’” Alaïa giggles. “Each dress was made with leftover mouseline from the private clients.”

Soon enough, Alaïa was past the leftover stage. And when he designed a stretch-cotton dress for Paloma Picasso, he knew he was onto something. “When I did made-to-measure, there were all kinds of underpinnings to the clothes,” he says. “That wasn’t really livable. I wanted dresses that were tight and straight that held you in. So I went shopping for fabrics and started working with bathing suit materials.” His abstractly seamed stretch dresses and pants remade fashion in Alaïa’s image. Soon, designers the world over were imitating him. In 1985, he won both the Designer of the Year award and a special jury prize at the French Fashion Oscars.

He also faced a crossroads, and chose what many consider the more difficult path: A man who to this day still irons his samples himself, Alaïa determined to keep his business small. “I refuse to do things I don’t want to do,” he says. “There are stores I refuse to sell to, like Bergdorf Goodman,” which lost him after a disagreement over a second New York show. “I wouldn’t even do a collection every season, except out of respect for certain people who might lose money if I didn’t. That’s why I chose not to have someone finance me. It’s the only liberty that remains to me.”

Alaïa has taken full advantage of that liberty—moving his shows and deliveries closer to the seasons when women actually wear clothes, for example, and sometimes shipping only half the clothes that stores have ordered.



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Though some have dropped his line as a result, Alaïa professes not to care. He thinks that fashion's system of obligations has created a confusing overload that keeps women from buying clothes.

Insights like that, as much as his vaunted temper, have made Alaïa that rare designer tail who wags the retail dog. Complaining all the way, a carefully hand-picked two hundred stores in seventeen countries return to Paris when Alaïa calls, doing it his way because they know, as Joan Burstein of Browns says, "We scream about late deliveries, but the minute it comes, it walks out. He still has great, great influence."

Alaïa simply isn't interested in success as defined by the fashion world's Calvins and Ralphs. "No, no, no, no!" he says emphatically. "Make that much money? I don't want to. What I make I spend right away, anyway." Alaïa has, for example, frequently refused offers to design for couture houses like He-

lene Rochas. "They would pay me a lot of money," he says, "but I refuse because I have the impression I won't give them my maximum. If I have a good idea, I'm going to keep it for myself. Because of that silly idea in my head, I don't have any money."

Indeed, Alaïa says he is deep in debt thanks to his new, as-yet-uncompleted *maison du prêt-à-porter*, but insists, "The more debts I have, the happier I am. If I don't have debts, it means I'm not working. I assure you I haven't a clue how big the business is. But I pay a lot of tax, so I know it's big enough."

All he has to do is walk down a flight of stairs from his house to his shop if he wants to see how well he's doing. Just as he grew up in a world of women, he's re-created it in his world today. Each time he gets money, he says, he builds another room in his new house on Rue de la Verrerie, so more of his models, the girls he treats like daughters and sisters, can come and stay with him.

"Naomi says I am like her mother," he reports proudly. "I keep an eye on her. All capital cities are dangerous for young girls from the countryside. There is too much temptation. Everything is easy, and at that age they never think anything can happen to them. I arrived myself so young. Today I see how lucky I was, because I could have landed in other circumstances. I saw many people destroyed who had a lot of talent, and for models, it goes very fast." Small wonder that wherever Alaïa is, models swarm nearby.

That April afternoon, for example, after folding his wife's choices in the boutique, Simon Le Bon returns dutifully to a chair while Yasmin finishes her shopping. Don't be fooled. He's not being well behaved.

Before him, all the models are twirling and posing and then peeling off their Alaïas without closing the doors of the dressing-room stalls. "This," Le Bon says, a grin washing his face, "is my favorite seat in Paris." ❧

The advertisement features a black and white photograph of a woman's back and shoulder, with her hand resting on her hip. Overlaid on the image are several pieces of jewelry: a watch with a gold case and black dial, a necklace with a large pendant and matching earrings, and a ring. The jewelry is labeled with their names.

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