

Crown prince of fashion



Ruling Christian Dior's dress empire, is a modest but iron-willed 21-year old -Yves Saint Laurent

by RICHARD GEHMAN

THE TALL, frail-looking youth with wavy blond hair and blue eyes behind thick spectacles stood on the balcony bowing diffidently and waving his hand as the crowd in the avenue below called his name and cheered. When he retreated into the building, the cheers became more insistent.



"Go out again, Yves," a friend urged.

The young man shook his head. "No," he said, "it would not be proper. It is not me they are hailing—but the memory of the great Dior."

In that single modest statement lies the key to the character of a remarkable 21-year-old Frenchman, Yves Mathieu St. Laurent, who is expected to exert a profound influence on the dressing habits and style patterns of women all over the world for years to come. For Yves St. Laurent (his first name is pronounced "Eve") is the successor to Christian Dior, the designer whose New Look revolutionized dress design just after World War II.

When Dior died suddenly last year, St. Laurent went immediately into seclusion. Friends tried to get him on the telephone; he would not answer. For a time it was feared that he would never return to the House of Dior to work.



When he did, a week later, he was pale and seemed even thinner than usual. "I am desolate," he confided to one of the *couturières*. "It is as though part of my life-stream were gone."

But when he was notified that he had been chosen to carry on in Dior's place, he appeared revitalized—as though he felt that he were giving new life to the man who had been his mentor. And his first collection, presented last January, caused almost as big a furor as did Dior's first. For the bony young man gave the world another new catchword, the "Trapeze" line.

Street demonstrations are familiar sights in France; but never before, until the Trapeze line appeared, had people gathered in the streets for the sole purpose of applauding a line of dresses.

St. Laurent seems slightly bewildered by all the attention he has attracted. He was pleased with the response to the Trapeze, which is a somewhat triangularly shaped dress line with a narrow top and a free-swinging skirt, but he dislikes publicity and fuss.

"Yves would have been much happier," one friend says, "if the House of Dior itself, and not he, had received the lion's share of the credit

for his designs.”

Yet behind his modesty there lies considerable strength. “Yves knows exactly what he wants, and gets it,” says Jean-Claude Donati, an executive at the House. And St. Laurent himself says, “I try at all times to do just what I wish to do. Before everything, I do what I please.”

When a made-up dress is brought to him for the first time, he stands back, arms folded, and scrutinizes it carefully. If it does not please him, he has it destroyed, regardless of the cost of making up the model.

“I’ve seen him tear up patterns that other top designers would have given a year’s salary to have produced,” says one Dior official.

Yves is unconcerned with anything but getting the perfection he sees in his mind’s eye. “I try to look at everything as though Dior were still looking over my shoulder,” he says.

Dior was a hard taskmaster. When St. Laurent first showed him his sketches, the great designer threw out hundreds on the grounds that they were “too exaggerated.”

“One must not push things too far,” he said, “for that is one of the first secrets of elegance — genuine simplicity.”

Later St. Laurent said, “I have never been impressed by anyone in my life but Dior.”

He was so impressed, in fact, that he even adopted Dior’s manners. Many French designers leap about, scream, beat seamstresses over the head with yardsticks, and generally behave like maniacs. Dior was exactly the opposite. He was gentle, courteous, considerate and retiring.

Also, he was concerned for the welfare of his workers. The rambling, labyrinthine series of five buildings at 30 Avenue Montaigne which makes up the House contain a hospital, a restaurant and recreation rooms for the employees.

St. Laurent is in the same tradition. He is a nervous young man, and seldom raises his voice. In fact, his speech is frequently inaudible. He answers most questions directly and with sensitivity. When he does not wish to commit himself, he will say politely, “I’ve never asked myself that question.”

Nor will he argue. A designer recalls that, when his first collection was being prepared, one of the women in charge of accessories kept trying to push a certain alligator bag to go with the dress St. Laurent was inspecting.

“I don’t think that one will do, Madame,” he said.

“But Monsieur,” the woman in-

sisted, "it is absolutely perfect—it will be wonderful." And she went on at greater length.

"We will not use the bag, Madame," Yves said, mildly. And that was that.

It may be his calm disposition that enables him to work superhuman hours—he often goes without sleep for more than 48 hours at a stretch. He does not know where he gets his strength, his stamina or, for that matter, his talent. Neither of his parents were especially creative, he says.

ST. LAURENT was born in Oran, Algeria, on August 1, 1936, son of a successful lawyer who was also in the insurance business.

Yves was the eldest child, and his mother's favorite (two younger sisters were born later and are now 12 and 15).

"I have a very strong relationship with my mother," he said recently. "She is very young, a good friend—but how can I explain what I mean when I am talking about someone I love. I am happy with her, that's all. And with my father, as well—he is a gay man, very expansive, and exactly the opposite of me."

Their home life was secure. Yet he liked to withdraw to his own room and remain apart from everyone else for long periods.

"I read sometimes in my room," he says, "but because I had an absolute passion for the theater, I made a stage and created people. (He never showed his creations to anyone.) I have always wanted to remain closed within myself."

When he was 11, a production of *Les Ecoles des Femmes* arrived in Oran. Yves was taken to see it, and it changed his life.

"I was impassioned by the sets' elegance and simplicity, and the same with the costumes," he says.

He went back home and recreated the play in miniature. "I invented the costumes, taking little pieces of paper and bits and scraps of material . . . I did not know how to sew, so I cut them out with scissors and pasted them together. Let us not say that they were dolls. They were personalities made of cardboard which I designed and dressed and which I alone saw."

The family decided that Yves would study law, and he applied himself to it, he says, until he was 17. Then he told his parents that he wanted to go to Paris to test the talents in theatrical and fashion design he had been developing in secret. They agreed to let him.

Before leaving, he made sketches

for a fashion collection—"simply to amuse myself." A friend in Oran gave him a note to Michel de Brunhoff, an executive with French *Vogue*, and he timidly took the sketches in for the expert to see.

Brunhoff was amazed. "I must take you to Dior at once," he said.

Christian Dior, at that time—it was 1953, in the fall—was just about the king of the fashion world. His 28 workrooms employed over 1,000 people; and the Dior empire embraced eight companies and 16 affiliated enterprises, spread over five continents.

From his earliest days Dior had taken a great interest in young people who wanted to learn the crafts of the fashion world. And, when Michel de Brunhoff brought in young St. Laurent, he readily agreed to look at the sketches. After an interview which lasted exactly 15 minutes, St. Laurent went to work as an apprentice at 30 Avenue Montaigne.

The master and the pupil had a strangely silent relationship. Each morning St. Laurent would go into Dior's spacious office, sit down, and silently watch the sketches being created. The two men almost never spoke.

"I learned more than I can ever say," says Laurent, "simply by observing. He seemed to have much confidence in me and I had some ideas that followed along with his. We worked without even discussing or talking. If I had an idea, I would design it, and show it to him—and he would nod, or shake his head, or sometimes point to details with a pencil, or perhaps redraw it on a fresh sheet of paper. Between us there was a silent power."

When Dior died, it was tacitly understood in the House of Dior that the master would have wanted no other successor than Yves. And so Marcel Boussac and his fellow directors met and elected him, placing the fate of a multimillion-dollar business on the shoulders of a 21-year-old.

St. Laurent's salary has never been published, but it has been estimated at approximately 630,000 francs per year (roughly \$15,000). It is expected that, if his success continues, he will be elected a director next year or the year after that. Until then, however, he is still an employee.

St. Laurent has made few changes in the work routine that Dior established. The House presents four collections each year, and although each takes about three months to be prepared, one collection is often in the workrooms while another is be-



ing conceived in the minds of St. Laurent and his associate designers and fashion coordinators.

Before working on a collection, St. Laurent first produces nearly a thousand preliminary sketches. Then he and his four coordinators, all women, select the 200-odd designs that will ultimately be made into dresses. A collection usually requires 10,000 yards of fabrics and takes about 100,000 work-hours to complete.

Professional buyers from the smart stores order a limited number of copies of the originals, in two or three sizes. These dresses usually sell for between \$400 for a street dress, to as high as \$5,000 for an evening gown. Buyers from the mass-production houses lease the designs and sell the dresses, after an interval, for mass prices, sometimes as low as \$6.95. Private customers who can afford the originals pay as high as \$25,000 for a single model.

After the final showing, St. Laurent is in a state of utter exhaustion and goes home. He lives in a single room in a large apartment owned by an old lady on the Boulevard Pierre, and has lived there since he first went to Paris. He falls into bed and sleeps the clock around.

Yves leads a rather strenuous social life, appearing at most of the openings of new plays, at the ballet and the opera. More often than not he is in the company of Suzanne Luling, the sales directress of Dior. Although St. Laurent is a little over six feet in height, Mlle. Luling is even taller. They make a striking couple.

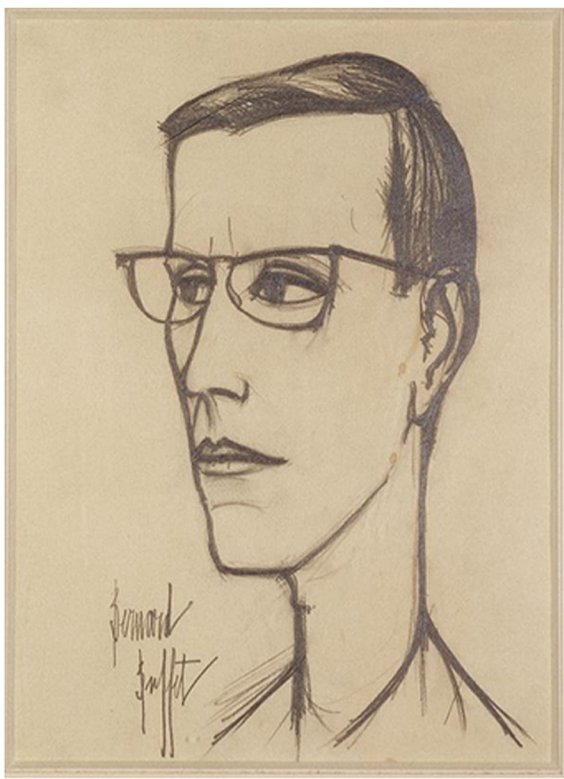
He is also seen frequently with Phillippine de Rothschild, daughter of a baron and a baroness. St. Laurent has said that he is in love with Phillippine, but does not know if they will get married.

"I don't think I could make a good marriage because I am so shut up within myself," he explains.

He believes that he has not changed essentially since he was a child, and those who have known him during his five years at Dior say his new authority has not altered his personality in any way.

"My biggest worry," he said not long ago, "is that I have had too much success too soon."

According to fashion authorities, however, the slender youngster from Algiers need have no worries on this score. His 1958 fall collection, "the curve line"—accenting high bodices and lowering hemlines to 15 inches from the floor—met with the same critical applause that greeted the Trapeze line. Says a French editor: "Yves will be around for a long, long time."



Yves Saint Laurent by Buffet (1958)

Coronet

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p. 96