

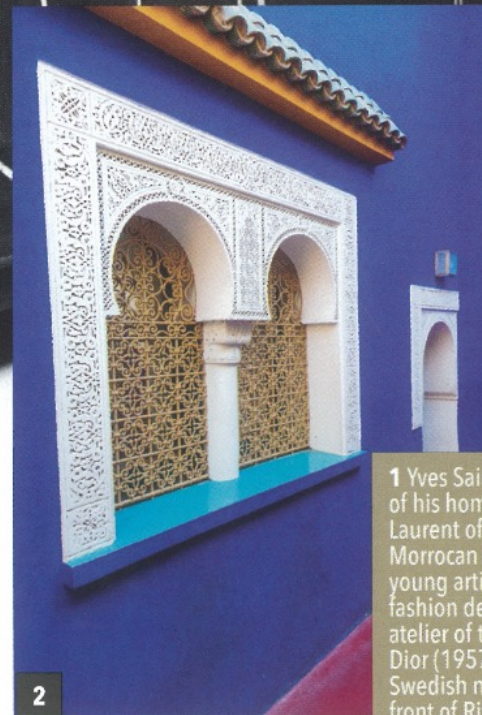
STROKE OF GENIUS

THE YSL LEGACY

WITH ANTHONY VACCARELLO'S FIRST COLLECTION SET TO DEBUT AT PARIS FASHION WEEK, WE PAY HOMAGE TO THE MAN BEHIND THE LEGENDARY LABEL



SAINT LAURENT AW16/17



1 Yves Saint Laurent on the patio of his home in Marrakech. 2 Saint Laurent often retreated to his Moroccan villa for inspiration. 3 The young artist using chalk to sketch fashion designs on a board in the atelier of the House of Christian Dior (1957). 4 Saint Laurent and Swedish model Ulla Andersson in front of Rive Gauche boutique in Paris. 5 Yves Saint Laurent's cape on exhibit at the Bowes Museum, United Kingdom. 6 A dress from the renowned Mondrian Collection housed at the Bowes Museum.



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TEXT: DEIDRE DONNELLY; IMAGES: GALLO IMAGES/GETTY IMAGES; SUPPLIED

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT A MASTER names his 21-year-old apprentice as a worthy successor after only a few years of tutelage. And yet this is what happened in 1957, when Christian Dior told Lucienne Saint Laurent that her son merited taking over his work. Later that year, after Dior (52) died of a heart attack, Yves Saint Laurent became the head designer for the House of Dior.

Dior met Saint Laurent as a teen. After he'd won a competition for young fashion designers, Saint Laurent showed his sketches to Michel De Brunhoff, editor-in-chief of *Vogue Paris*. Noticing an eerie similarity between Saint Laurent's drawings and the most recent he'd seen of Dior's, and sensing a serendipitous synergy, he sent Saint Laurent to see Dior.

The introverted Saint Laurent was so awed by the man, he went mute. But Dior saw the skill in his sketches, and hired him on the spot. And so began Saint Laurent's illustrious, sometimes illicit, career story. Of that time, Saint Laurent said: "[Dior] taught me the basis of my art. Whatever was to happen next, I never forgot the years I spent at his side."

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Born Yves Henri Donat Mathieu-Saint-Laurent on 1 August 1936 in Oran, French Algeria, Saint Laurent first began transforming fabric as a child making intricate paper dolls with his sisters, Michele and Brigitte, and later dresses for them and his mother. Perhaps it was these familial beginnings that nurtured the love he put into his work. "The most beautiful clothes that can dress a woman are the arms of the man she loves. But for those who haven't had the fortune of finding this happiness, I am there," he said.

Saint Laurent set his sights on Paris and at 17 left Algeria to study at the Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture. Paris became his muse. The legacy of the YSL fashion house he started in 1960 is synonymous with the city. In 1971, he named his second fragrance Rive Gauche, after the bohemian southern bank of the Seine. Rive Gauche was also the location of his first prêt-à-porter store, which opened in 1966.

But Paris wasn't the only city to seduce "the master of desire". He was one of the first designers to bring non-European cultural influences into his couture, with collections referencing the Far East, Russia and Africa, the place of his birth. His Spring/Summer 1967 show was devoted to the colours and textures of Africa.

In the same year, Saint Laurent discovered Morocco. "[The] visit to Marrakech was a great shock to me. [The] city taught me colour," he said at the time. He and his partner, Pierre Bergé, bought a villa in Marrakech. When he wasn't working on a collection, Saint Laurent retreated to Morocco to drink from its well of inspiration and colours – from the brick

red of the terracotta tiled roofs and the vivid Majorelle Blue – used and trademarked by botanist-artist Jacques Majorelle in the Majorelle Garden in Marrakech – to pink bougainvillea blossoms. His SS1989 collection featured gazar capes painstakingly decorated with hand-embroidered bougainvillea flowers.

For Saint Laurent, colour accessorised fashion. From those first sketches, one could discern an artistic approach that gained form in his work – from the modernism of his Mondrian Collection (1965) to the definitiveness of the Van Gogh-inspired Iris jacket worn by Naomi Campbell in 2002. Others were softer, yet undeniably bold, the seminal Le Smoking tuxedo suit (1966) being a case in point.

Saint Laurent is remembered for democratising fashion and liberating women in the process. In addition to his tuxedo suit, Saint Laurent made safari jackets and tight pants for women. "It pains me physically to see a woman victimised, rendered pathetic by fashion," he is quoted as saying, by way of explanation. "I have always believed that fashion was not only to make women more beautiful, but also to reassure them, give them confidence."

NOT WITHOUT FLAWS

Saint Laurent was no stranger to courting controversy and challenging conventions – from dismissing the taboo of mixing certain hues (red with pink and black with navy) to his gender-bending couture and the launch of the Opium fragrance with its allusion to the addictive nature of desire. In 1971, when he posed nude for YSL's first male eau de toilette, Pour Homme, he became an icon for gay rights. "I created for my era and I tried to foresee what tomorrow would be," he said, successfully capturing the zeitgeist in that artistic, masterful way that leaves a lasting legacy.

After his death in 2002, Bergé kept Saint Laurent's studio intact, with its desk strewn with sketchbooks and colour palettes. The Fondation Pierre Bergé – Yves Saint Laurent kept meticulous archives of the designer's work, and in 2009, Saint Laurent's art collection

was auctioned at a record-breaking sale. The artist's ashes were scattered in the Majorelle Garden, among the agave and palms that soothed him, and a memorial was later unveiled there.

In tribute, then president of France, Nicolas Sarkozy, said: "Yves Saint Laurent infused his label with his creative genius and elegant and refined personality ... during a half century of work, in both luxury and ready-to-wear, because he was convinced that beauty was a necessary luxury for all men and all women."

That legacy lives on through the house of YSL, and beyond. In 2017, two museums honouring Saint Laurent will open their doors, so that more people can be inspired by his artistic strokes of genius. ▽

TIMELINE

1960

Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Bergé start the house of Yves Saint Laurent (YSL).



1964

The first fragrance, Y, is launched.

1965

YSL introduces the Le Smoking tailored tuxedo suit.

1968

The safari jacket for women is born.



1971

Yves Saint Laurent poses naked for the launch of Pour Homme. Rive Gauche launches in the same year.



1977

Opium is released, to great controversy.



1978

YSL reveals its first make-up collection.

1983

Saint Laurent is the first living fashion designer to be honoured in an exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum, New York.

1986

A Paris retrospective is held at Musée des Arts de la Mode.



2000

Tom Ford's first collection for the house of YSL is shown.

2002

After 40 years at the helm of the couture house, Saint Laurent announces his retirement.