



# THE FANTASIST

*How John Galliano reimagined fashion.*

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

Last July, three hours before the first model—wearing a flamenco skirt flecked with purple polka dots and cut from more than a hundred and fifty metres of crinoline, organza, and georgette crêpe—stepped onto the runway at the Christian Dior haute-couture show, held in the Hippodrome d'Auteuil, John Galliano, the House of Dior's forty-two-year-old design director, settled anxiously into a tiny, makeshift dressing room directly behind the stage. Show days are tense for any fashion designer—a season's worth of sales can ride on the result—but Galliano had more on his mind than clothing. He was keeping a secret from hundreds of his employees at Dior, from scores of fashion writers who had just arrived in Paris, even from many of his closest friends: three days earlier, Galliano's father had died, and, at exactly the moment that his presence in the Dior atelier, on the Avenue Montaigne, was considered essential, Galliano had flown to Gibraltar to bury him.

Galliano is often described as a blatant exhibitionist; he also happens to be shy. He didn't want people to know about his father's death, because he didn't want them to be distracted from the preparations for the show. Fewer than a dozen people knew where he had gone. He disappeared and returned to Paris two days later, on a jet lent to him by Bernard Arnault, his boss, who is the chairman of L.V.M.H., France's largest luxury-goods company. Galliano then worked through the night, fitting models and making final adjustments to their clothes. By the time he reached his dressing room, he looked numb. Still, Galliano is a man who believes deeply that appearances matter, and he

had refused to alter his normal routine: just after dawn on the day of the show, he jogged three miles to his gym, where his exercise program includes hundreds of sit-ups and frequent boxing matches. Even he acknowledges that he has an almost demonic desire to perfect his body. "I am a completely obsessive man, and that comes out more clearly in times of stress," Galliano told me before the show. "Whatever I do, I like to do it until it can't be done anymore. It doesn't matter if it's work or the gym or some things I might not even want to mention."

Galliano arrived in Paris in 1990, a nearly destitute punk with unmistakable talent and an unrivalled reputation for personal excess. At the time, many designers were operating under the influence of Japanese-inspired minimalism. The eighties were over and the era of the pouffe was out of vogue. The models, often wearing subtly tailored black clothing, would walk quietly down the runway under dim lights. They would twirl and walk back to the stage, and that would be the show. Galliano was appalled. He thinks about fashion shows the way Steven Spielberg thinks about movies; he believes in spectacle, complication, suspense. "I met John in 1984 at the show he put on to graduate from art school in London," Jeremy Healy, a well-known d.j. who is among Galliano's closest friends, told me. "My girlfriend was modelling, and when she walked down the runway she had a tree branch coming out of her head and she was waving a dead mackerel. An actual dead fish. The whole show was like that. It takes a lot to shock me. But I just thought, What the hell is this bloke up to?" The graduation show was a suc-

PHOTOGRAPH BY RICHARD AVEDON

*Galliano in New York. "I just think every woman deserves to be desired," he says. "Is that really asking too much?"*



cess, and it convinced Galliano that the bizarre—and even the infamous—sells. Since then, he has never wavered; in the past decade, he has sent trapeze artists, sailor boys, and naughty schoolgirls down the runway, not to mention nuns in bondage and even a version of homeless tramps.

Galliano has staged fashion shows at the Paris Opéra and at the Gare d'Austerlitz, where he hired an antique steam train to ferry the models about the platform, which he turned into a North African souk, with more than a score of half-naked men serving mint tea and a floor covered with imported rust-colored sand. Last fall, inspired by a trip to China, Galliano flew a dozen Shaolin monks to Paris, and sent them thundering down the catwalk twirling swords and swinging numchucks. He also imported a troupe of Chinese acrobats who, positioned at the stage entrance, spun plates on foot-long sticks. There was even a girl in a pink tutu riding a bicycle on top of a parasol carried by a Chinese elder. In the *International Herald Tribune*, Suzy Menkes called it “the most staggering example of self-indulgent luxury since Louis XIV held court at Versailles”—where, by the way, Galliano had presented Dior’s previous winter collection.

Galliano alters his look for each show, and he cares at least as much about his own appearance as he does about those of Nicole Kidman and Gwen Stefani, both of whom he often dresses. The morning of this summer’s haute-couture show, Galliano put on a pair of carefully distressed bluejeans with perfectly frayed cuffs—which covered his sandals but not the toenails he had recently painted a glossy shade that he calls “cosmic blue.” Galliano’s personal hair-and-makeup team had been briefed in advance on the look he wanted to achieve, which was inspired by the evolution of dance. “I am feeling very Spanish tango dirty creepy with oily black hair,” he said. His stylist got the message: he glued a stringy goatee onto Galliano’s chin and trimmed it to a neat triangle; after that, he spent half an hour curling Galliano’s hair and then applied a thick coat of mascara to the lashes beneath his dark-brown eyes. Galliano wore hoop earrings. His muscles were oiled, then covered by a layer of grime—

## NORTH OF MANHATTAN

You can take the Dyre Avenue bus to where the subway terminates  
just inside the Bronx  
and be downtown before you realize  
how quickly your body has escaped your mind,  
stretching down the tracks on a beam  
until the band snaps and the body slips free and is gone,  
out the crashing doors, through the stiles,  
and up the long chutes,  
to burn both ways at once down the avenues,  
ecstatic in its finitude,  
with all the other bodies,  
the bundles of molecules  
fusing and dispersing on the sidewalks.  
Ten to the hundredth power,  
bundles of molecules are looking at paintings,  
bundles of molecules are eating corn muffins,  
crab cakes, shad roe, spring lamb, rice pudding.  
Bundles of molecules are talking to each other,  
sotto voce or in a commanding voice—  
“I agree with you one hundred per cent, Dog”;  
“I looked for you today, but you’d already gone”;  
“I’ve left the Amended Restated Sublease Agreement on your desk”;  
“I’m going home now,  
and you think about what you did.”  
The ear grows accustomed to wider and wider intervals.  
The eye senses shapes in the periphery  
toward which it dares not turn to look.  
One bundle is selling another a playback machine,  
a six-square-inch wax-paper reticule  
of powdered white rhinoceros horn,  
an off-season-discounted ticket to Machu Picchu,  
a gas-powered generator  
for when the lights go out,  
a dime bag of Mexican brown.  
It is four o’clock in the afternoon.  
The sunlight is stealing inch by inch  
down the newly repointed red brick wall.  
She comes into the kitchen wrapped in the quilt

so that he would look like a toreador when he took his victory lap. (Most designers simply dart onto the runway at the end of a show; a few take a quick stroll in the company of the models. Galliano struts the catwalk all by himself, and he does it with the hauteur of Naomi Campbell.)

By the time guests started filing into the tent, however, Galliano looked weary and depressed. His father was a plumber, a quiet, stern man who labored for years in one of South London’s dingiest precincts before retiring and moving, with Galliano’s mother, to Spain.

Many things had been left unsaid between the two men—among them that Galliano is gay. (“It was all very Latin and complicated between me and my father,” he told me.) Galliano paced on a zebra-skin rug that had been sent from his atelier. Two six-by-eight-foot blowups of the model Angela Lindvall, glistening and full of desire, dominated the little room.

“This day is going to be hard,” Galliano said. “But I can deal with that later. Right now, I need to focus on the show. I want people to forget about their electricity bills, their jobs, everything. It’s

and watches as he fries eggs.  
“After what just happened, you want to eat?” she says in disgust.  
Will she or will she not, back in the bedroom,  
lift the gun from the holster  
and put it in her purse? The mind, meanwhile,  
is still somewhere around Tremont Avenue,  
panting down the tracks, straining  
from the past to the vanishing present.  
It will never catch up  
and touch the moment. It will always be  
in this tunnel of its forever,  
where aquamarine crusted bulbs feed on a darkness  
that looks all around without seeing,  
and fungus, earlike, starved for light, sprouts  
from walls where drops of rusted water  
condense and drip.

Don't say I didn't warn you about this.  
Don't say my concern for your welfare  
never extended to my sharing the terrible and addictive secrets  
that only death can undo.  
Because I'm telling you now  
that you can also take the same bus north,  
crossing over against the traffic spilling out of the mall  
and waiting twenty minutes in the kiosk with the Drambuie ad.  
There. Isn't that better?  
More passengers are getting off than on.  
The girl with the skates going home from practice  
will soon get off, as will  
the old woman whose license to drive has been taken from her.  
They will enter houses with little gazebos tucked in their gardens.  
And then, for just a while, the mind will disembark from the body,  
relaxed on its contoured plastic seat,  
and go out to make fresh tracks in the snow  
and stand and breathe under the imaginary trees—  
the horsehair pine, the ambergris tree,  
the tree that the bulbul loves,  
the nebula tree . . .

—*Vijay Seshadri*

fantasy time. My goal is really very simple: when a man looks at a woman wearing one of my dresses, I would like him basically to be saying to himself, ‘I have to fuck her.’” He shrugged his shoulders. “I just think every woman deserves to be desired. Is that really asking too much?”

When John Galliano began showing collections in Paris, at the age of thirty, he was already considered to possess one of Britain's most original, if outrageous, fashion minds. Three years earlier, he had been named De-

signer of the Year in England. (He has since won the award three more times—the only person ever to do so.) Critics often dismissed Galliano as a sort of dressmaking Barnum: his clothes were exquisite, but he was too much the showman—and his outfits often seemed more suited to the pageantry of public relations than to profits. Yet his effect on the way women dress is almost impossible to overstate, and it became apparent as soon as he graduated from St. Martin's School of Art, in 1984. More than any other designer working today, Galliano is responsible for the sheer and sexually

frank clothing so many women wear. “You cannot name many people who completely change fashion, and John is one of them,” André Leon Talley, *Vogue's* editor-at-large, told me. Talley is the person who Galliano says is most responsible for bringing his work to a larger public. “The sexy slip dress, the spaghetti straps, everything inspired by lingerie and by the curves of a woman's body—that is all John,” Talley said. Others agree. “John is really the reference point for the rest of us,” one of his competitors, the designer Diane von Furstenberg, told me. “Because we are making clothes, and he is making magic.”

In the mid-nineties, Bernard Arnault, who oversees the L.V.M.H. conglomerate's luxury holdings—Louis Vuitton, Moët, and Hennessy—along with Christian Dior and other companies, decided that the group needed to attract younger shoppers who were more adventurous than their mothers. Among Arnault's properties was the couture house founded by Hubert de Givenchy in 1952. Givenchy had a talent for creating clothes that made a woman look innocent and sexy at the same time, but in recent years the look had come to be viewed as prissy and dated. Arnault wanted somebody to pull the house into the modern era, and Galliano was everything that the understated and deliberate Marquis de Givenchy was not.

When Arnault actually gave Galliano Givenchy's job, late in 1995, many people were shocked (including the sixty-eight-year-old Givenchy himself, who learned about the appointment when he read it in a news release issued by his own press office). Galliano became the first British designer to take over a major French fashion house in nearly a century and a half—since Charles Frederick Worth was appointed by Napoleon III to dress the Empress Eugénie. It would have been difficult under any circumstances for the staid French fashion establishment to accept the appointment of a foreigner to run a firm whose refined image was represented most famously by Audrey Hepburn. But John Galliano? A flamboyant South London night-club habitué who looked like a buccaneer, with his bandannas, pencil mustache, and shoulder-length hair? “When John went to Givenchy, he cre-



*"I'm through with apparel. From now on, it's just accessories."*

ated more 'wow' than any other designer in Paris at that time," Joseph Boitano, a senior vice-president at Saks, told me. "He still does. But people were not ready for him yet. There was a lot of surprise."

In Europe, fashion is a blood sport, and the Parisian lunching class couldn't get enough of the Givenchy saga. French critics used the word "capitulation," and implied that Arnault's choice was a sure sign of the nation's cultural decline. The comments of the couturier Valentino were typical: "He has a wonderful imagination, but I am not sure that technically he knows everything about how to make a dress." Within a month of arriving at Givenchy, however, Galliano astonished seamstresses by returning several sample dresses along with written instructions on how to improve them so that they fit in a less dowdy way: "Tighter, smaller, tighter, smaller, tighter, smaller," his note said in its entirety. "The place was a bit of a dowager when I arrived," he told me, "and I felt that you didn't really need to get trussed up to look great anymore. I wanted to free women from wearing corsets and big taffeta skirts."

Throughout the next year, Galliano was covered in the press as if he were a

war. Reporters would appear constantly at his parents' home in Streatham. They followed his slightly mystified father to work and asked his mother countless questions that she had no desire to answer. ("I got so sick of seeing my father called a plumber in every article," Galliano recalled not long before his father died. "People are always talking about how I am a plumber's son. I am my father's son primarily. What he chose to do as a career was his choice and he did it very, very well.") The French papers reported regularly, and somewhat gleefully, that Galliano's departure was imminent. Arnault was forced regularly to announce that it was not. Eventually, though, Galliano's technical skill became apparent even to those who did not like the results. He had, by the time he arrived in Paris, mastered the art of cutting dresses along the bias—against the grain rather than on seams—so that a garment would move more easily and that a woman's curves would be revealed and not concealed. It is a difficult technique, because, as Galliano puts it, the dress must become "like oily water running through your fingers."

The beleaguered French fashion elite had only begun to recover from the shock

of Galliano's ascent, when, in 1996, Arnault moved him to the House of Dior—which, along with Chanel, is the best-known and most highly regarded fashion brand. Galliano had never held a regular job for any length of time before he went to Givenchy; now he would have to supervise nearly a thousand employees and oversee multimillion-dollar marketing campaigns, and do it all, dauntingly, in the atelier created by one of his heroes, Christian Dior.

Certainly, no single event had more impact on the way women dressed in the twentieth century than the introduction, by Dior in 1947, of the New Look, which featured opulent, romantic clothes whose rounded shoulders and tightly cinched waists seemed risqué and ebullient to a country just emerging from the devastation of the Second World War. "Dior has done for Paris couture what the taxi drivers did for France at the Battle of the Marne," one fashion writer said at the time. Instantly, the firm became a touchstone of French quality and finesse. By 1949, Dior accounted for seventy-five per cent of the Parisian clothes worn by foreigners and five per cent of France's over-all exports. Arnault, in selecting Galliano, had handed a national treasure to an outsider. "You cannot imagine how shocking it was to appoint him—this was *Dior*, for heaven's sake, *Dior*," André Leon Talley said to me one day, his voice rising sharply each time he uttered the word "Dior." "Can you imagine? A young radical British punk at the firm that represented the arch-tradition of French luxury."

For a while, Galliano struggled with his legacy, but within a year the company was making money again and his transformation was complete: in less than a decade, Galliano had gone from sleeping on the floors of his friends' apartments to a life as the emperor of the most successful fashion house in the world. Although neither Dior nor he will reveal his salary, he earns millions of dollars a year, more in a month than his father earned in his life. It has been a perilous time for the fashion industry; sales have fallen, many companies have cut back, and some have closed. But at Christian Dior Couture, which includes the ready-to-wear accessories business, sales rose forty-one per cent last year, to \$535.6 million. The company reported

profits of thirty-six million dollars, up sharply from 2001, and projects sales of as much as a billion dollars by 2006. “John Galliano will certainly figure as one of the greatest designers of his time,” Arnault has said. “Through his work at Dior, he has been able to bring modernity to the ultimate luxury house and to envision the fashion of the third millennium.”

Galliano actually has two jobs. In addition to Dior, he produces his own line of clothing, and this year he opened his first boutique—a nearly two-thousand-square-foot space, on the Rue Saint-Honoré, which cost millions of dollars to renovate—and he has plans for boutiques in London, New York, and Tokyo. Galliano’s first dress for Dior was a lingerie-inspired slip created for the Princess of Wales, who wore it as the guest of honor at a dinner given at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in December, 1996. Since then, his clothes have been coveted and hoarded both by celebrities and by women who have never even met a famous person. The delicately embroidered gold-and-green shift that Galliano made for Nicole Kidman for the 1997 Academy Awards assured her a role among Hollywood’s most stylish women. Galliano’s Dior saddlebag, now sold in shops from Hong Kong to Houston, has helped the company earn millions. Two years ago, he was called to Buckingham Palace, where the Queen awarded him the C.B.E. for his service to Great Britain.

Galliano doesn’t delegate easily, but neither did Dior. “A Frenchman we’d never heard about till seven years ago is worshiped as a dictator of fashion by every Eve whose fig leaf proved inadequate,” an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* declared in 1953. Dior would laugh about his role but said of the women he dressed, without irony, “My dream is to save them from nature.” Galliano shares the view. “I am a hopeless romantic, and I want to make women feel sexy and beautiful.” He runs the company almost as single-mindedly as Dior himself did: he oversees not only the clothes and the advertising campaigns but

the many licenses—bags, shoes, Baby Dior, underwear, eyewear, perfumes, and swimwear. Galliano even designed the hangers in his boutique, and decided how many layers of paint should be applied to the industrial-steel beams that hold the building together. Visiting the boutique one day, I watched as Galliano checked nearly every dress to make certain it was hanging in the right way and in the right place. He even ducked into the bathroom (which has quilted, embroidered walls) and the dressing room (whose floors are covered in calfskin) to make certain that his newest product, the Galliano Diptyque candle, was burning properly.

Galliano has developed a predatory eye for the bottom line. His own label, which had no more than a dozen retail outlets in the world when he was appointed to Dior, now has hundreds, and Valérie Hermann, the president of Galliano, projects that sales will grow by as much as twenty-five per cent this year. Galliano has also just introduced a line of men’s clothing—a typical blend of the bizarre and the conservative, with suit sleeves that close not with buttons but with the type of hooks and eyes found on bras. And his ambition is anything but sated. I once asked if he could see himself designing furniture or cars, or even houses. “Yes,” he replied instantly. “Yes to all of it. I would never put a limit on my goals. I would love

to see what a John Galliano airplane would look like, or a hotel. I don’t want ever to say there is something that John Galliano won’t do.”

One overcast morning in late June, I walked to the eighteenth-century building where Galliano lives with his boyfriend and their Jack Russell terrier. It is just a few blocks from the Picasso Museum, in the Marais, one of the oldest parts of Paris. Most Parisians were still in bed, but Galliano’s driver was stationed out front and so was Frédéric Vaché, one of Galliano’s two physical trainers. (Whether he is travelling in India, China, Russia, or the South of France, he is never without one of them. He also consults a sports doctor nearly every week: “He keeps a chart that shows my most stressful periods. At that point, my cardiovascular work increases and my intake of protein decreases at nighttime.”)

Galliano emerged from the courtyard looking carefully dishevelled but wide awake. His hair was tied back in a bun, and he wore a Russell Athletic T-shirt over shorts and sneakers. We jogged for about five kilometres through the Marais, then along the banks of the Seine, where Galliano pointed out various women whose stylish attire caught his eye.

We ran past La Samaritaine, which Arnault recently bought. Galliano pointed



“You are going to wish you had cancelled this appointment.”

at a woman strolling along the Left Bank. "Look," he noted, approvingly. "She is wearing cycling clothes with a vintage Chanel top. That's *major*." ("Major" is a word Galliano uses often, always with zeal. As in "Did you see Nicole in 'The Hours'? She was major," or "Have you ever tried the steak at La-pérouse? It's major.") A bit farther along, we ran past a stunning woman, and as we did he turned his head to me and shouted, "She is so very John Galliano!" The woman, who was in her twenties, had short, spiky blond hair, and was wearing silver stiletto sandals and a brown beaded dress under what looked like a ripped black sweatshirt. Her right fist was wrapped around a two-thousand-dollar handbag. It was unclear to me whether she was on her way to the office or coming home from a very long night on the town.

Galliano often refers to things he sees on the street or at work as "very John Galliano." I asked him what that meant. "It is something incredibly refined mixed with something savage," he explained. "Savage" is another of his favorite compliments. Tribes of all kinds interest him, and he collects the Native American photographs of Edward S. Curtis. "Refined is boring and savage can be too obvious," he said. John Galliano is all about trying to strike the perfect balance between the two.

It was on a run like this that Galliano became fascinated with the people who live on the stoops near the Seine—what he calls the "wet world" and what almost everyone else on earth calls the homeless. He built his 2000 fall couture show around a concept of how they dressed. "There is this whole world of fantastic characters who live there, I believe through choice," he told me. The clothes—ripped and reconstructed—were remarkable displays of fashion technique and history, and they were supposed to reflect the inventiveness of street people. Galliano was picketed and reviled, though, for what was considered a callous attitude toward the homeless. Riot police surrounded the Dior offices, on the Avenue Montaigne, and Galliano had to apologize. "I saw just the romantic side of it, the poetic side of it," he told me. "The criticism was that I was taking the piss out of homeless people, but the point was that they are creating beauty

out of necessity. I loved that collection."

We ran past Notre-Dame and up the Rue Poissonnière, where, according to Galliano, the best French knock-offs of designer goods are produced. Frédéric, the trainer, ran beside us, and every few minutes would offer annoying tips ("Your arms are too tense," "Your posture is poor," and so on). After half an hour, we arrived at our destination: Galliano's gym.

Galliano never worked out before he moved to Paris. How, I wondered, did a guy who was famous for staying out all night—and for disappearing, sometimes for days, after each of his collections was shown—become such a fitness fanatic? "I got a grownup job," he replied. "I was drinking coffee and diet sodas to give me the buzz to get through the day. At night, to come down I would open a bottle of red wine to relax. Do you know what I mean? Also my change of diet. I ate purely crap before I came to Paris. I literally didn't know what a carbohydrate or a protein was.

"But then I went to Givenchy," he continued. "And I was responsible for two lines and a lot of work and many employees. I needed to find some kind of balance in my life." Balance is a difficult concept for Galliano. Even now, Frédéric told me, he has simply shifted his obsession with night life to an obsession with his physique. "John doesn't just want to have good pecs," Frédéric said, as Galliano lowered himself onto a bench to lift weights. "John wants to have the best pecs in Paris." Galliano's entire day is built around making sure that he gets his time in at the gym. "Everyone says it's the same high as with drugs," he told me. "It's that little burst of light you are always looking for."

Frédéric had us stretch a bit to unwind from our "warmup" run. "Ready for the abs?" he asked. It was a rhetorical question. He put us next to each other on mats and started on a long, slow series of sit-ups. Then crunches. Then more sit-ups. We did scores of them. It seemed to last for hours; Galliano is impish, and, while he is blindingly single-minded and ambitious, he has not lost his sense of how odd it has been to move from a life as a dissolute party boy to that of an international businessman. There are times when he clearly

misses his debauched past. "You know," he said, as we raised ourselves from the mats, "if you had been with me at this hour fifteen years ago we might have been doing an entirely different kind of sit-up by now."

Galliano was a vigorous participant in the wild life of London in the nineteen-eighties. For students at St. Martin's, as for others, that life revolved heavily around the clubs, and Taboo, which was held on Thursday nights at Maximus, in Leicester Square, was at the center of it. The club had an outrageous reputation (in fact, its history will be recounted this fall in a Broadway musical starring one of its best-known customers, Boy George). "It ended up seedier than the bottom of a birdcage," one regular has said. "You had bodies lying on the dance floor. You didn't know if they'd O.D.'d or were just messing about. It was very extreme and very dangerous." No chemical or carnal pursuit was off-limits there. "It was '84, '85 that it was really happening," Galliano told me one day over lunch. "All these creative energies from the film world, the music world—it would all come together on Thursday night. I would spend the entire week putting my outfit together. It would be a full-time job, and I took it seriously. Taboo became quite notorious. There was a lot of drug use. It was *the* place to be. It became harder and harder to get in, and the harder it was the more people would try, and that made it even more exclusive."

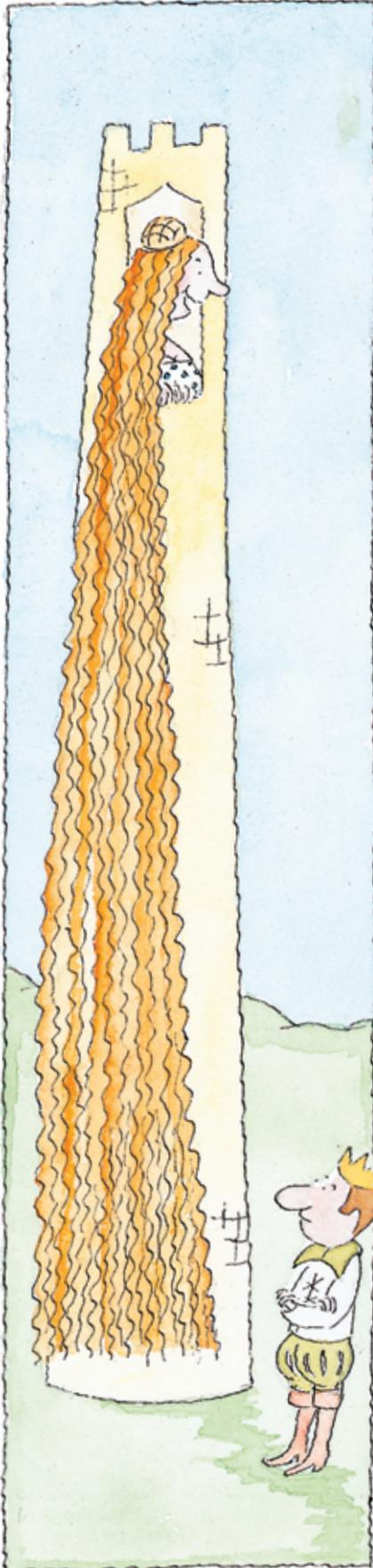
And his drug use? "Any kid in the eighties used drugs. I went to St. Martin's"—he said it as if that alone answered the question. "It was a new romantic movement, and one did experiment. I am glad I did. And I am glad that, somehow, I got through it. It helped me evolve. And I have changed, thank God. I would not want to be stuck in the Taboo days for the rest of my life. You have no idea what went on there."

Galliano was raised in the ethnic stew of South London. His father was from Gibraltar, where Galliano, whose full name is Juan Carlos Antonio Galliano-Guillen, was born. His mother is Spanish. "To get to Spain, you had to take the boat, because the frontiers were closed," he said. "We had



DEMONT

**THOROUGHLY MOD** *Peggy Moffitt first modelled Rudi Gernreich's famous topless bathing suit in 1964. Now Rei Kawakubo has reinterpreted it, in a new line called Peggy Moffitt/Comme des Garçons. Photograph by William Claxton.*



*"When I'm not having a good hair day, you'll know."*

to go through Tangier. I remember the market, the smells, the colors, the people. It was all very exciting. Romance. Latin. When we moved to London, my mother brought it all with us. Even the music. My mother taught me to flamenco-dance on tabletops—it makes more noise. She had a big influence on the way I look at the world and the way I dress people."

Galliano has two sisters, both of whom live in London. "We were dressed as well as my mother could dress us for any event, even if it was just to go to the corner shop. We were always bathed, talced, perfumed, hair slicked back. I was groomed to a T. That is very Spanish." Galliano went to a boys' school in London, and he intended to study languages. It turned out, however, that he had a gift for illustration. "At the end of that course, they suggested I apply to a fashion school like St. Martin's. I had never been in that kind of milieu before. It was totally liberating.

"I didn't have a grant, and I was living at home. There wasn't much money. And so I got a job as a dresser, at the National Theatre. That changed my life. I was a good dresser. It helped shape my view of drama, of clothing, of costume—the way people dress." I asked him what a "good" dresser was. "I was always on time. The clothes were always clean. If it was a period piece, the Eton collars were chalk-white, things had been pressed, moleskin top hats would be smoothed with the oil of my own hands, I would be in the right place at the right time even if it meant lying under a fucking stage for two hours until the actor made his entrance. I worked with Judi Dench, Sir Ralph Richardson, and they were people who taught me very much about bodies and clothes. And how they commanded their space."

It still had never occurred to him that he might design clothes for a living. "I tend to become whatever it is I am working on, and I was drawing pictures of the French Revolution," he went on. "I was inspired by Robespierre, *'les incroyables.'* And I was looking like this down-and-out French tramp. Living it, breathing it. Drawing by candlelight. Producing parchment paper soaked with bits of bread that are then stained with tea. Drawing with a calligraphy pen and

sepia ink in this very kind of curious light. I could just imagine these fantastic creatures marching, running across the wet shiny cobblestones of Paris."

Galliano's tutor at St. Martin's suggested that he turn the drawings into outfits for his graduation presentation. "I cut clothes that could be worn inside out, upside down, and by both boys and girls," he said. "Very androgynous, but huge romantic blouses with tricolors and hems that rolled up and were split. You have to make three presentations. The first went really well. By the second, I was suddenly put on as the last act. I thought, Something has gone down here." And by the third people were struggling just to find seats. The owners of Browns, for many years London's most adventurous fashion store, attended one of the shows and bought Galliano's entire student collection for their South Moulton Street store. "I had to literally wheel my collection up the street to their shop," he told me. "I couldn't even afford to put the clothes in a cab. And they put one of the coats in the window and it was bought by Diana Ross."

After graduating from St. Martin's, Galliano set up a studio in London. He had trouble earning a living, though. His talent seemed outweighed by a lack of business skill and by a considerable desire to enjoy life, particularly at night. "I had less than no money," he said. "Zero. I was living above the garage where the studio was. Dodging the rent man. Professionally speaking, it was not the greatest moment for me."

Increasingly, he sought refuge in the London club scene. "When times were hard, John really couldn't do anything else," Jeremy Healy said. "We were at clubs till dawn day after day. It was insane, but what was he going to do? He couldn't get the work. I encouraged him to be more commercial. He always refused." For all its raw energy, London could never compete with Paris for attention within the fashion world. British designers like Vivienne Westwood and Ossie Clark have often been seen as daring or eccentric, sometimes brilliant, but they almost never earned the respect given to French, Italian, or even American designers. It is also the case that France has a collection of skilled needleworkers and a tradition of caring

about clothing, which have helped Paris retain its position as the center of the fashion world.

"I had to go to Paris to continue in my career," Galliano said. "There really wasn't a choice. I was not progressing and I was not getting better." Galliano's chief lieutenant, Steven Robinson, went with him. "I was at an art school near London and I did an internship sewing buttons for John," Robinson, a quiet, heavysset man who moves with the grace of a dancer, told me. "I was too shy to come alone; I had to bring a friend. I stayed a week and then I stayed some more. And I went to college and worked one day a week. Then two days, then four days." Galliano and Robinson were not exactly welcomed with open arms in Paris. "We were producing the most beautiful things, but for dinner we were eating a can of beans on a Bunsen burner," Galliano said. One day, André Leon Talley went to visit Galliano and Robinson at Galliano's atelier, near the Bastille. "He was horrified, and he immediately started buying us McDonald's and basically fed us to keep us going," Galliano said. Talley brought his boss, Anna Wintour, the editor of *Vogue*, to see Galliano's work. She loved what she saw, and she quickly became his most influential supporter. "Before I knew it, Anna had called the collection to New York for a picture shoot," Galliano said. "Then she invited me to come, too." He attended a series of dinner parties filled with "socialites, all these fantastic people, and I was suddenly meeting bankers from Paine Webber—me meeting bankers and them wanting to talk to me. Can you imagine that?"

He still needed to convince the bankers and buyers that he was serious and stable. To do that, Galliano had to produce something for the fall, 1994, Paris collections. They were only three weeks away, and he had no cash, no venue, no clothes. Talley persuaded a socialite named Sao Schlumberger to lend Galliano her large, unused, and slightly decrepit house near Saint-Sulpice.

With the help of Robinson and Amanda Harlech, who now acts as the creative consultant at Chanel but for years was the muse who helped Galliano define his style, Galliano filled the house with dried leaves. "And love letters that

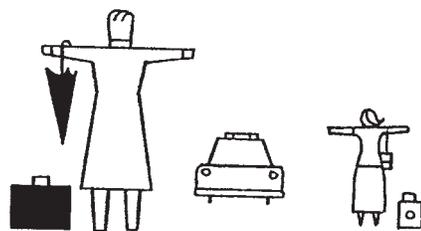
we had written ourselves. I went and got about five hundred rusty keys and sent them as invitations." He flooded the place with dry ice, so that you could see the texture of the air. A broken chandelier was placed on the living-room floor. It was decadent and romantic. Stephen Jones, the London milliner, created a series of hats that looked like Möbius strips and worked as a perfect complement to Galliano's austere dresses. None of the participants charged for their work, not even the world's most famous models—Kate Moss, Linda Evangelista, Naomi Campbell, and Christy Turlington.

Galliano had no time to order fancy fabric; he cut every dress from the same bolt of cloth. "I made the dresses from black satin-backed crêpe, because it was cheap and I could use the matte and the shiny sides to make it look like there was more to it than there was," he recalls. "There were, I think, two touches of pink. Kate and Christy had pink outfits. Those were the only colors in the entire show. We just didn't have time for anything else."

The show became perhaps the most celebrated fashion event since Dior introduced his New Look. "It was really a watershed moment in modern fashion history," Diane von Furstenberg told me. "We all knew we were seeing something that had not been seen before. The clothes were sublime, simple and feminine. You wanted to wear every single dress."

Orders started to pour in, and Galliano barely had the means to fill them. "This was it," he recalls. "I could not fuck up or make a mistake. It had to be a very professional business or I was never getting another chance to make a dress."

At about eight o'clock on the night before Galliano's most recent show, his two main collaborators were lying on their stomachs on the floor of the ballroom-size fitting space in the Dior headquarters. Bill Gaytten, who has directed the cutting of Galliano's clothes for twenty years, and Robinson, whom



many now see as Galliano's alter ego, were matching stockings with shoes, gloves, jewelry, hair clips, and underwear. When they assembled items they thought worked well together—say, lime-green leggings, black gloves, and a mesh pushup bra—they put them in a giant Ziploc bag, pasted a label on the pack, and set it aside to go with one of the outfits.

It was an early-summer evening, before this year's record heat started to settle too heavily on the city, and the room was filled with peonies, Galliano's favorite flowers. "They are the last peonies of the season," he said, as I stared at dozens of purple and pink buds. "And that makes them the sweetest." Flamenco music was wailing so loudly that it was hard to think. "Flamenco music is always about somebody's pain," Galliano said. "It never comes out O.K. in the end. It's the perfect music to make dresses by."

Galliano sat alone at a table in the middle of the room, a pack of Marlboros in front of him at all times. He had just returned from his father's funeral, and he wasn't talking much. Every twenty minutes or so, a beautiful young woman would wander in, take off her clothes, and sit in a corner. Only after she was strapped into a corset by five assistants, or dressed in a fringed silk aubergine gown made with, among other things, fifteen pounds of glass tubes, would any of the men pay attention to her. (At one point in the evening, I watched as Gaytten and Robinson adjusted the waist and crotch of a dress worn by Natalia Vodianova, one of the world's more alluring models. They might as well have been measuring the height of a kitchen cabinet.)

Every once in a while, Galliano would stand up, take a pair of scissors, and show the seamstresses in the room that he wanted something cut tighter or in a different way. "It has to be raw and sophisticated at the same time," Galliano explained to Raffaele Ilardo, the head of the atelier. "You need to slash it more." By 3 A.M., all the models had appeared and Galliano had studied the clothes carefully—usually looking at them in the mirror rather than directly. There was more to do: several of the dresses were not completed, and there was embroidery and detail work to worry about, not to mention the complicated mix of Healy's music, which

would have to synchronize exactly with the light show and with the models' entrances.

Galliano's collections are mapped out like a military campaign. They start with a conversation among Galliano, Robinson, and Gayten. "We produce these books, and they become the bible from which we work," Galliano told me. "Then we talk about the concept of the show. We have to have a new way of cutting or a new way of seeing things. And that dialogue turns into a sketch, and then the work begins."

Galliano's shows are always built around a theme: one focussed on escaping from Russia at the fall of the Romanovs; another was inspired by Napoleon. The dresses in the recent collection were intended to portray different aspects of dance—from the tribal rhythms of India to hip-hop. But Galliano did not want simply to make the clothes of, say, the flapper era or the tango. That would have bored him. "I want the models to look as though they had been dancing for eight days and eight nights," he said. "I want to see the sweat and the grime and the exhaustion and the fear and the pain. I want agony in the expression and in the clothes. I want to feel it. I want to rip and tear it and cut it until the pain is in the dresses. And then we will create a new dance from that. It

could be a very John Galliano moment."

Steven Robinson shook his head and said, "This is so much work for twenty minutes you can hardly believe we keep doing it."

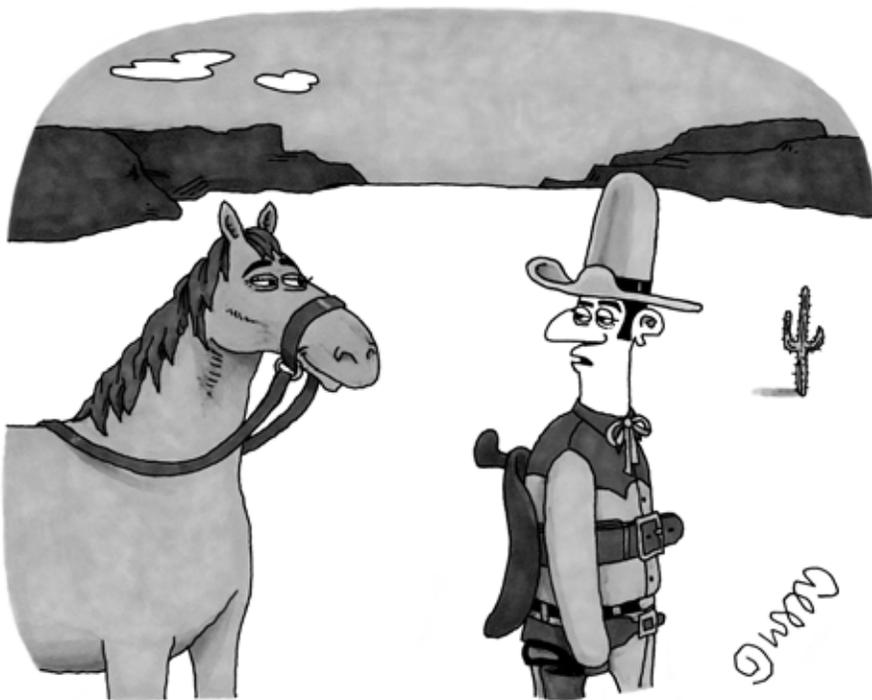
Galliano's place in two related but distinct fashion worlds makes for some odd contrasts. In mood and temperament, the Dior and Galliano lines could not be more different. Dior appeals to a flashy young crowd. The word "Eurotrash" comes to mind. Galliano's own line is simpler and more feminine. When Christian Dior opened his atelier, just after the end of the Second World War, he bought an old mansion on the Avenue Montaigne. It looked exactly like the salon in "Funny Face"—full of curving bannisters and stately parlors where women of leisure could sip tea while contemplating the purchase of a ball gown. Today, the corridors are lined with stark, black-and-white pictures from Dior's time of glory: a 1950 Cartier-Bresson photograph of him in his studio examining the clothing on a model; another, from 1954, of the designer with Jane Russell. There are also pictures of Marlene Dietrich and the Duchess of Windsor. All the photographs are framed in black. Turn the corner and you can see another kind of shot entirely: the model Gisele Bündchen, in superrealistic color

and in a size far bigger than any life. Sweat clings to her skin so clearly that you almost feel obligated to examine every pore.

On the fifth floor, Dior seamstresses work quietly in white butcher smocks, tape measures dangling from their necks. One can sense the effort and concentration as they spend hundreds of hours preparing the beaded, sequined, and jewelled concoctions that Galliano will put on the runway. His own atelier, in the more ethnically mixed and funky Twentieth Arrondissement, has a Middle Eastern feel to it. There are Turks and Moroccans, and the smell of espresso mingles with the sounds of reggae. The garden there is like a jungle, and Galliano told me that it's the one place in Paris where he feels completely "safe."

I had long wondered how on earth one can make money on haute couture. Even in the nineteen-fifties, there were just a few women eager to spend what might be a bus conductor's annual salary on an ornately designed piece of fabric. Who, for instance, is likely to buy the most complex dress that Galliano produced for this show? It was a silk wine-colored gown with three hundred and ten pleated insertions, which were used to create the skirt and the sleeves. The dress was edged with a two-hundred-and-twenty-metre strip of black lace, and it had been embroidered with a technique made up of three different forms of stitching. There were sequins, pearl drops, and pearl tubes, not to mention hundreds of jet beads. The dress took nineteen people four hundred and twenty hours to make.

"Who are you going to sell that to?" I asked. Galliano seemed surprised at my question. "We are turning away orders," he replied. "But the couture is a laboratory, and from it I decline my collection"—meaning that he turns the exotic clothing of the runway into many types of outfits that people might actually wear. Indeed, a close examination of the clothes in any Dior boutique will reveal pieces adapted from the couture collection. Today, haute couture functions as Dior's most powerful marketing tool—it is the basis for everything from dresses to eyewear and shoes. "John uses the couture to work out his most advanced ideas," Joseph Boitano, of Saks, told me. "But he has a real focus on the business and how to drive it and what the cus-



*"Just remember, we switch back before we get to town."*

tomers wants. No matter how wild the shows seem, he never lets go of the customer." Galliano gets annoyed by questions about the utility of his dresses. "It's like going into a museum, looking at a Rothko, and saying, 'My kid could paint that,'" he replied when I asked. "It's abstract and it's art. Frankly, that ought to be enough."

"In case you have the feeling that I am flying too far from the earth, though, you should remember that while I make these dresses I have girls sitting and sketching every step, and at some point I will say, 'You know, that dress is really beautiful. That dress we could just cut now.' It's the difference between fashion and clothes." One of his sketch artists stepped over and showed me what he meant. She was carrying a very detailed series of drawings that followed the evolution of one dress from plain to interesting and then to intensely weird. "Of course, I am passionate about the collection and I want to see all the passion and the pain," Galliano said. "But then I am also thinking, Fuck, this is a wicked Oscar dress. Let's just sketch it."

It was getting late. I asked if Galliano cut his cloth to suit the clients or if they had to do what Galliano thought was best. "We are gentle, yet there are some clients that have a fixed idea," he replied. "There was a charming girl—an Arabian client—who wanted to look like Cinderella for her wedding. So I did my interpretation of Cinderella. But no. She wanted to look literally like the cartoon Cinderella. The customer is always right, I know, and we tried, we really did try, but this one wanted to look like the Walt Disney Cinderella. So we proposed ideas and sent drawings, and they would come back. 'I want Cinderella.' And we would alter it a bit and they would come back. She just wanted to look like Cinderella, for God's sake. It was impossible." Huffing, then laughing a bit, he said, "But that was her dream, and in the end we did it. What other choice was there?"

It is easy to see fashion, particularly the haute couture, as irrelevant and frivolous. A couture dress is by definition something exceptional, something that cannot be made in a factory or in large quantities. It is also based essentially on whim, often strange whims; you are unlikely ever to see a woman walking down



the street in Galliano's corset of duchess satin, which is embroidered with nearly a thousand micro-crystals made by Lesage.

Yet haute couture remains a serious business in Paris. In an age when the red carpet at the Oscars has become a sort of Super Bowl of fashion—and the designers of the dresses worn by actresses are mentioned on television everywhere—couture clothing may even have gained new relevance. During Fashion Week in Paris, ask nearly any taxi-driver what time Dior is showing, and you will get the answer; you won't need to give him the address.

Galliano stood silently through his show, watching on a monitor backstage until it was time to march down the runway. As he emerged, he was met with a roar, and he looked like a bullfighter,

drenched with sweat, packed into his costume: gray-and-blue embroidered track pants, a mesh corset over a gray T-shirt which was cut deep enough to expose his muscles, and suede boots. When he was done, I joined him backstage as he made his way, escorted by security men with necks the size of refrigerators, toward his tiny dressing space. The fashion editors of the world—joined by celebrities like Jack Nicholson and Elizabeth Hurley—were waiting to congratulate him.

"Are you all right?" Galliano asked me. Sweat was streaming down his face, and he looked stunned. I was a little taken aback by the question. "Sure," I replied. "Are you?"

He burst into tears. "I don't know," he said. "That was for my father today. I hope I would have made him proud." ♦