

SPIRITUAL SNOBS of SILICON VALLEY

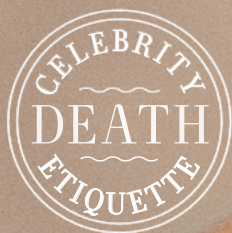
TOWN & COUNTRY

SEPTEMBER 2019

102
PEOPLE
YOU REALLY
MUST MEET*

THE
HAUNTING
OF
PARIS
ONE FAMILY'S
SAGA

HOUSE PARTY AT
WILL & KATE'S!



Bourgeois?
MOI?

FASHION'S
RICH GIRL
REVENGE

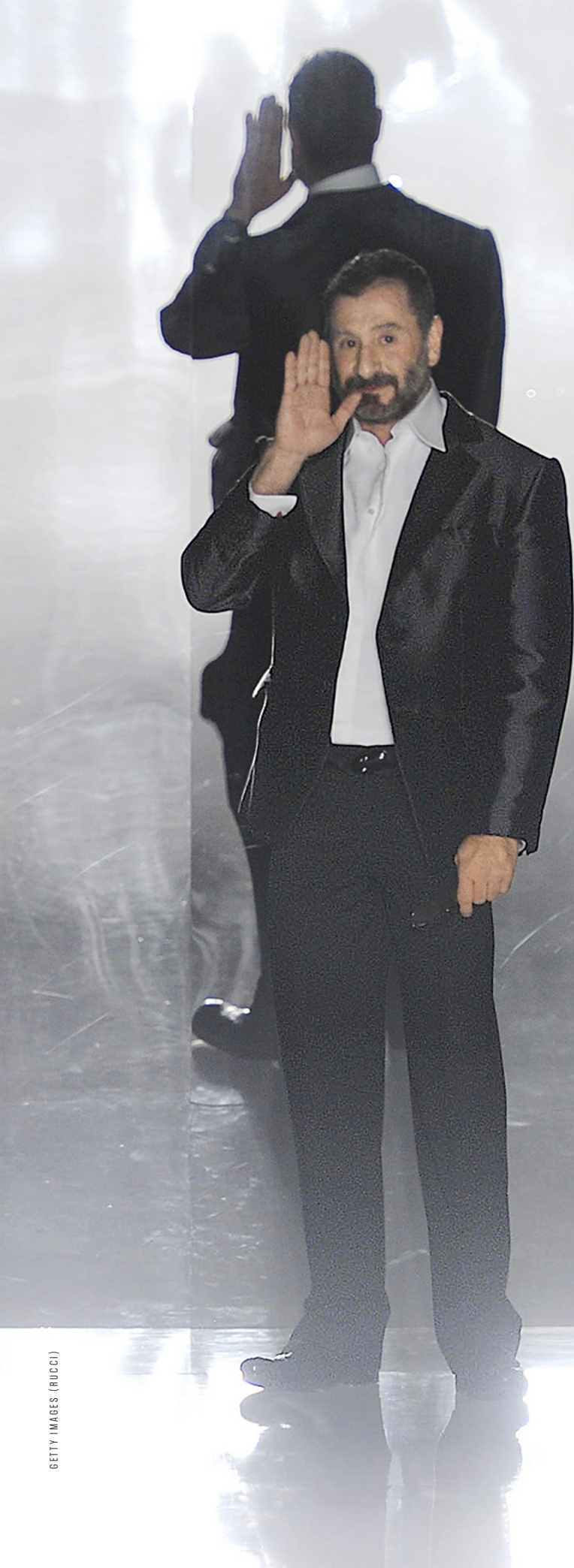
*STARRING LADY KITTY SPENCER



FRIENDS WITH Money.

How Ralph Rucci, the only living American haute couturier, became a cautionary tale for art and fashion.

BY JESSICA IREDALE



“**W**here is Ralph Rucci, exactly?” bellows André Leon Talley from the dais at Judson Memorial Church in New York, where he is seated on an actual throne, swathed in yards of crimson duchesse satin that Rucci has whipped into a caftan. It’s a fair question.

In 2014, Rucci, the second American ever invited to join the French *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, exited the label he had founded 33 years earlier amid a seemingly bitter rupture with his patron, the philanthropist Nancy Marks. Rucci had been keeping a low profile ever since, becoming the subject of speculation among his peers and former clients, the elite cohort of women who once made him a darling of New York society. On this particular evening in May, when he is staging a runway show for an LGBTQ fundraiser, he has yet to be seen. The venue is low budget but high energy, the crowd a motley mix of young activists and performers, and personalities like Marc Jacobs, Naomi Campbell, and Bethann Hardison.

Next to Talley, Sandra Bernhard, a pal of Rucci’s who has come out to cheer him on, drolly responds, “He’s backstage dressing everyone.” The designer is, in fact, fitting his models, who are not his usual doyennes but performers from the gay ballroom community. Aghast at the socialites and movie stars he recently saw on the pink carpet at the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s camp-themed Costume Institute gala, Rucci imagines his new muses in subtle black crepe-back satin and Elsa Peretti jewelry.

“Maybe I’m spoiled, but I was lucky enough in my past to have standards,” he says. It’s not the first time he has looked back at his heyday, when his front row was bursting with grande dames of every stripe, from Lee Radziwill to Martha Stewart.

All Ralph Rucci has ever wanted to do is make beautiful clothes—he feels he has been anointed to do so—but, as the Bible says, the ➤➤➤

There are few second acts in fashion, but Ralph Rucci, seen here at one of his runway shows, is staging his on the toughest stage of all: Paris haute couture.

path of the righteous man is beset on all sides. Fashion has changed dramatically since his arrival in the early 1980s, yet he clings to that heady time. The world he inhabited, “a kind of club of women who stood both inside and above fashion,” as his former client Amy Fine Collins puts it, has vanished, devoured by an industrial complex that demands more sales, more collections, more compromise. It’s a system with no room for the designer-as-artist, which is how Rucci sees himself. His is a cautionary tale. Succumbing to commercial imperatives was always a risk, but so was ignoring them and relying instead on wealthy benefactors, who can be as mercurial as the designers themselves.

“His work is unlike anything anywhere in the world,” says Linda Fargo, senior vice president of fashion at Bergdorf Goodman, where Rucci’s collections were mainstays. “In an oversaturated life, it’s remarkable that so many of his designs remain imprinted in my mind’s eye.”

“Ralph is the only designer who is creating instant classics, because, honestly, God speaks to him in a certain way,” says Tatiana Sorokko, couture customer and former model.

The production at Judson Memorial is a mere dress rehearsal for the reception that awaits him in late June, as this issue goes to press, when he steps out again onto fashion’s toughest stage, Paris haute couture. Showing his new label, RR331, there, is a career Hail Mary, perhaps his last salvo. But Rucci believes he is answering the call of a higher power.

“I was sitting right there,” he says, a week earlier, pointing to a chair reserved for his daily prayers in his East 72nd Street living room, regarding the moment a year ago when God delivered a message. “Go back to Paris,” he recalls being told. “I said, ‘God, that’s a big expenditure. I don’t have partners. I’m not seeking partners.’” Still, he reapplied to the Chambre Syndicale, and, to his surprise, he was accepted.

“I’m a very spiritual man,” Rucci says in the prewar apartment his friend and client Susan Gutfreund decorated for him 18 years ago. It’s lived in, beginning to show wear. The brown sofa matches the brown walls, one of them hung with a treasured Cy Twombly. Piles of books cover every surface that’s not occupied by Asian knickknacks. “When you hear me say the word *God*, I say it for a very specific, life-lived reason.” Wearing a white shirt, black jeans, and a small gold earring to match his gold watch, Rucci, 61, has the gentle, engaged demeanor of a man who has done a lot of reflecting and is eager to tell his story.

He makes clear that he is a man of faith. Faith in God. Faith in himself. And perhaps above all, faith in his talent, a conviction informed by his devout Catholic upbringing in South Philadelphia and by his father, who taught Rucci “that the standard by which you live should only be a level of perfection and work.” This credo has led him to pursue the highest ideal of design. From time to time, it has also made life difficult.

While a student at the Fashion Institute of Technology in the ’70s, Rucci schemed his way into an internship at Halston and launched his own label in 1981. By 1999, when he was showing at



THE INNER CIRCLE

Present and former pals of a designer who fancied himself couturier and confidant.



TATIANA SOROKKO

The Russian former model (Dior, Yves Saint Laurent) turned San Francisco socialite is married to art dealer Serge Sorokko. She considers Rucci her “gay husband.”

LEE RADZIWILL

The late grande dame became close with Rucci in 2000, and even appeared in a documentary about the designer, *A Quiet American*.

New York Fashion Week, Chado Ralph Rucci was an independent luxury business, microscopic compared with its neighbors on the sales floor, like Armani and Chanel (“It’s not necessary for me to charge \$100,000 for a wool suit,” Rucci says), but cherished by Bergdorf Goodman and Neiman Marcus, not to mention critics and discerning women like Peretti, Deeda Blair, Iris Apfel, and Patti Smith.

“I turned to him after Geoffrey Beene died, because there was a similar sensibility,” Fine Collins says. “I do like wearing what no one else is wearing.” Still, even as he cultivated personal relationships, Rucci bucked the rules that governed the fashion ecosystem. He rarely offered previews of his collections to important editors, and he refused to lend clothes to celebrities or work with a stylist, something he still considers anathema to his process. *Vogue* never included him in a single editorial, a snub that still smarts. “I want to know, what do people in the press think of me?” he asks me.

At this point it’s a question not of what but whether. Rucci had been the only American designer since Mainbocher granted the status of couturier at the Paris level, but he never captured the cool crowd; his customers were

Chado Ralph Rucci, as the label was known in the early aughts, was a modest business that was prized for architectural cuts and exquisite details.



MARTHA STEWART

The domestic doyenne was a regular at Rucci's fashion shows, and he once shared his recipe for coconut pudding on her eponymous cooking show.



AMY FINE COLLINS

The muse to Geoffrey Beene swore by Rucci after Beene's death but later moved on to designers like Thom Browne.



SUSAN GUTFREUND

First a client and later Rucci's interior designer, she draped his penthouse rental in masculine shades of brown.



NANCY MARKS

She went from top client to backer, but the investment ended within two years. Later Marks hired Sander Lak to create a new label, Sies Marjan.

mature women. The tabloids, meanwhile, smelled a story of hubris and privilege when, in 2012, he abruptly canceled his show at fashion week amid reports that he owed suppliers and lenders millions and couldn't make payroll for his staff. It has also been said, although Rucci denies it, that he spent lavishly on extravagant gifts: a pair of Mish pearl earrings for an employee, items from the Diana Vreeland estate auction. "Everyone wondered where the money came from," says a former ally. The financial state of the business seemed precarious.

It was later in 2012 that a white knight arrived in the form of Nancy Marks, a top client and a big spender from Beverly Hills and New York (along with her billionaire investor husband Howard, co-founder of Oaktree Capital Management). "I remember thinking it was one of those classic examples of a customer buying a business without knowing anything about the business," says Ron Frasch, then president and chief merchandising officer at Saks Fifth Avenue. "I think I was right about that."

From personal experience, Frasch, who left Saks in 2013 and is now a partner at the private equity firm Castanea Partners, knew that Rucci could be prickly to deal with. While the label brought to Saks the kind of clients who

didn't look at price tags, Rucci was "exacting" about how the collection was bought and sorted.

"It was almost like an insult" if Rucci was asked for a different fabric or a more accessible price, Frasch recalls. "If he didn't think you were doing it the right way, he just wouldn't sell to you."

For the luxury of staying in business, and the resources to potentially go international, Rucci sold a majority stake and, more crucially, his name to the Markses' holding company, Deia LLC, in 2013. "When great possibilities present themselves to you, you are overjoyed and can't see the future," Rucci says now.

Less than two years later the partnership soured. Neither the designer nor his former champion have discussed the breakup. Through a spokeswoman, Nancy Marks would say only that the initial investment in Chado Ralph Rucci was made "in good faith by both parties." (Later Marks would go on to bankroll the acclaimed upstart label Sies Marjan, by designer Sander Lak.) When the subject comes up, Rucci becomes visibly upset. He offers that he "greatly respects" Howard Marks and admits that he was angry at one point. "I had to leave, because my soul was so disturbed," he says. But, he adds, "I received a greater gift in having this experience, because it [CONTINUED ON PAGE 150]



By 2012, his business struggling, Rucci entered into a deal that would eventually cost him his name and his archive.



FRIENDS WITH MONEY

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 125] allowed me to say, 'I bless you, the best of luck, and I forgive you,' so I could move on, which I have."

Whispers of falling-outs have a way of following Rucci, who is said to have relied on the largesse of clients and seemed to expect members of his staff to be "self-sacrificing wives," in the words of one former devotee. But it's more likely that the split with his patrons was a matter of incompatible personalities, between a designer with an imperial expectation of couture-level quality and backers with an eye on the bottom line.

When the Marksés took their stake, they installed as interim CEO Jeffrey Aronsson, former CEO of Marc Jacobs, Oscar de la Renta, and Donna Karan. Aronsson had been warned away by merchant friends with tales of chronically late deliveries, "merchandise [that] would arrive when it arrived," he says. But together he and Rucci addressed the issue, and he characterizes their working relationship as "excellent."

"It's kind of like when you see a couple getting divorced and ask, 'What happened?' It's never any one thing. It's complex," says Aronsson, who now runs his own retail consulting firm. "It has to do with a warning I gave both [Rucci and the Marksés]. There were signs before they even got involved with it. We all did it anyway."

Still, for every friend or business associate lost, there is a host of supporters willing to testify to Rucci's character. "He's a really loyal friend," says Gutfreund, who met Rucci back in the 1980s as a client and became a confidante. "That's something you find out only when you're close to someone. When my husband died, all of a sudden a present would come. When I was feeling down, he was there for me. It's what counts on a day-to-day basis."

One wound remains open. Rucci says he is no longer in possession of his archive and has little hope that it will be returned. "The answer was no," he says. While the Marksés own Rucci's trademark, they are not actively using it, nor have they sold it back to him. It's an ironic turn of events for a designer who began his rise under Roy Halston Frowick,

who also disastrously sold his iconic trademark.

Rucci has a lot riding on this couture comeback. Yet in many ways it's the perfect milieu for someone with his inflexible standards. It is for purists. It is direct-to-consumer—the toniest, most niche consumers—in the most romantic, exalted setting, which is exactly the way he likes to operate. If there's hope for him, it's in Paris. The show for RR331, which he opened in 2016 mostly as a private client business, will be at the Ritz, as was his first Paris couture show, in 2002. This time around he has the benefit of showing early in the schedule, when clients and press are still fresh, moods high.

While he no longer has a studio or staff, he has been developing the collection with Nicolas Caito, one of the few name brand patternmakers working. All of Rucci's silks are from Taroni in Como, and everything is produced in New York, as it has always been. Much of the collection will be bias cut, and there will be as much for day as for evening. "It's subtle," Rucci says. "And I'm doing less embroidery, because I find spark unnecessary. That's the new mantra." For all his craft and subtlety, he'll have a hard time competing with the grandeur of, say, the Qatari-funded Valentino. But there's an upside to the lack of investors: total independence. With RR331, he is completely free and focused, and just as passionate as ever before. His surprisingly active Instagram account, which has the tone of an endearing oldster fumbling with a new gadget, features his many opinions, some of them adulatory, some bitchy. For example, he described a Chanel show as "a display of wealth on steroids."

"I would like to bring back a rigor of cut and *frou* and complicated simplicity that doesn't look messy," he says. "The clothes should be a shadow to you. They should have rigor and impact, and they should be bedazzling, with subtle details."

He knows his admirers will follow him wherever he goes, but he hopes to lure new, younger clients. Will they appreciate his throwback charm? "I would say he is the Charles James of our time," Sorokko says. "He will be understood later more than he is now."

Here's hoping for now. James, an undisputed master who notoriously refused to bow to the system, died penniless in squalor at the Chelsea Hotel. Rucci still resides in his Gutfreund-decorated apartment. It's a rental, but it's the penthouse. **T&C**



TURNIP TOFFS

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 139] has sometimes evolved into a studied scruffiness. "By and large tweed is considered to be improved by the addition of holes, and binder twine is contentedly used for smart, as a belt, if your coat is bust," he says. "But the quality of eccentricity here is such that people are rather gentle and slightly unselfconscious and, oddly enough, quite unsnobby." He adds, "There is an urge to think of 'normal for Norfolk' as the dribbling imbecile, but there's an odd intelligence to it."

Scandal has only rarely visited the marshes in the past few centuries. The last big one centered on Jane Digby, who was born at Holkham in 1807 (her mother was a Coke) and ran off in pursuit of a series of lovers, including a Bavarian king, a Greek count, a Thessalian general, and a Syrian sheikh 20 years her junior.

More recently Lady Anne Glenconner (née Coke) has spoken out about the discrimination against women that comes with primogeniture, the feudal rule that says only oldest sons can inherit estates. She would own Holkham, but she was the eldest of three daughters, so the estate passed from her father, the 5th Earl, to his cousin, the current Lord Leicester's grandfather. It is a custom that the current Lady Leicester was aware of when she had two daughters before a son arrived 15 years ago. "I remember being in hospital with Tom and rushing back, and there was champagne and all the trustees came around," she recalls, laughing as Basil the parrot squawks in his cage. "I felt like Anne Boleyn."

But scandal here usually dies quickly, as discretion and stiff upper lips prevail. The rumors that have fluttered about the marshes most recently will, one suspects, disappear out to sea before they have any impact on these shores, not least as duty calls the Cambridges and they spend more time at Kensington Palace. An eccentric but evolving way of life will return to normal (for Norfolk). But as grouse season approaches, and until the next state visit, all eyes in Norfolk will be on the shooting calendar, where titles are no guarantee of an invitation. **T&C**