

Center Stage, From the Creative Fringe

By MICHAEL GROSS special to The New York Times

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LONDON, Oct. 13 — Just two years ago, John Galliano's show of his spring collection was the sort of insular affair well known to those on the avant-garde fashion fringe. Though his designs were eerily beautiful, they were also twisted and artfully torn, like something a cat had clawed. Though Mr. Galliano was highly regarded, few important buyers or fashion editors paid heed.

The night after that show, the designer went to a party in a downtrodden section of London, where he drank red jug wine with young friends.

Times have changed. Sunday night, the editors and buyers were there when he presented his spring collection at Olympia, the vast exhibition hall here. The next night, Lord Young of Graffham presented Mr. Galliano with an award as Britain's Designer of the Year for 1987. The ceremony took place in the Banqueting House at Whitehall, part of the 17th-century palace built for James I. Mr. Galliano's peers, London's top designers, were in attendance. Afterward, trailed by a pack of paparazzi, Mr. Galliano went to the Groucho Club, a trendy private dining establishment, for a champagne celebration.

At the age of 26, Mr. Galliano has already outgrown the insular and has become international. His clothes are sold around the world, in stores that include Saks Fifth Avenue and If in New York, and are hailed by some of fashion's toughest critics. "He is a most creative talent," said Joan Kaner, a vice president and fashion director at Macy's. "He is wonderfully fey and original." Kalman Rutenstein, the senior vice president for fashion direction at Bloomingdale's, said, "It's an evolution that is polished and sophisticated."

There is little sophisticated about the designer's background. He was born in 1960 in Gibraltar to a Spanish mother and a British father, who, Mr. Galliano said, "is still a plumber." Though his parents refused to let him study art until college ("I had to do physics — boy's things," he said), he finally followed his inclinations and studied textiles at London's renowned St. Martin's

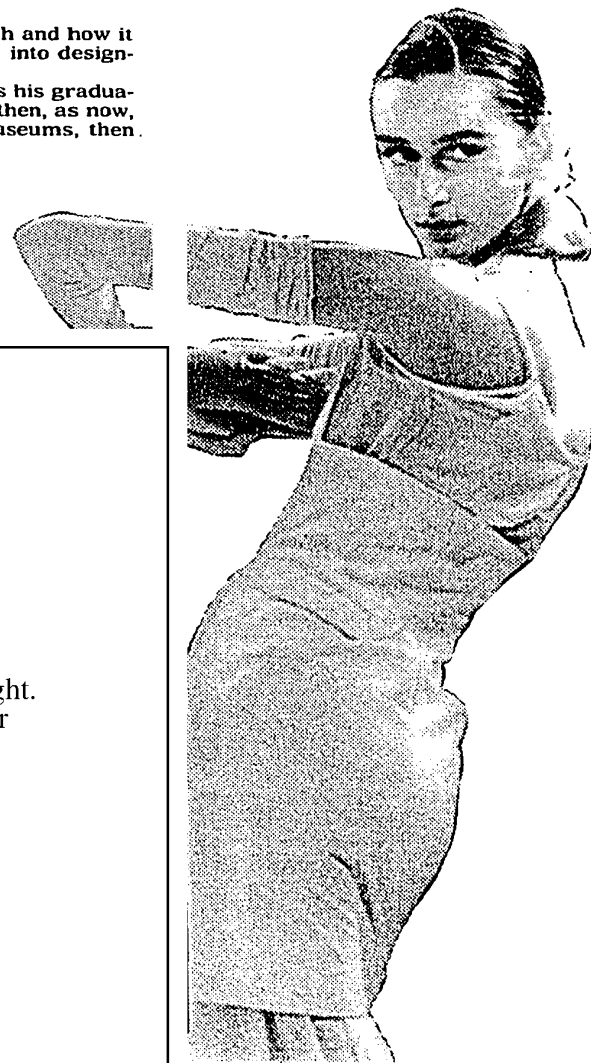
School of Art. "I learned fabric, color, cloth and how it drapes," he said. "I finally decided I was into designing."

Mr. Galliano's first public success was his graduation collection at St. Martin's. He worked then, as now, researching a period and its styles in museums, then

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John Galliano, below. A model, right, shows his halter-neck wool jacket over two layered chiffon slips.

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creating designs on a model's body. His method, cutting fabric in circles that take body movement into consideration, gives his designs a particular identity.

The graduation collection, called "Les Incroyables," was based on French revolutionaries. "They were the equivalent of today's tramps," Mr. Galliano explained. "They were punks, ripping down curtains from the homes of aristocrats and turning them into waistcoats."

How did he choose them as inspirations? "It was instinctive but also a reaction," he said. "In the real world, Armani was putting women into men's clothes."

His floral brocade and striped waistcoats and tea-stained dresses made of see-through fabric with buttoned-up hems won Mr. Galliano his first powerful patron: Joan Burstein, a co-owner of Browns, a leading London fashion shop.

"I saw great talent immediately going his own way with great humor," she said. In an unprecedented move, she showed the clothes in the front windows of Browns.

One step ahead of his creditors, Mr. Galliano went into business. More London stores bought his styles. One competing shopkeeper bought 30 waistcoats at Browns at retail prices to have Galliano designs in his store. A young Danish businessman, whom Mr. Galliano refused to identify, was impressed with the Browns windows. With his backing, in the fall of 1984, Mr. Galliano showed his first full collection.

From the first, his designs have had humor and historical resonance. The first collection was based on a 1930's cartoon that showed an Afghan in native garb about to stomp on a classic British bowler. It was a comment on an Afghan king named Amanullah, who, inspired by a visit to Savile Row, "went home and tried to force Western clothing on Afghanistan," Mr. Galliano said.

Mr. Galliano combined Middle Eastern-style robes, dyed saffron and a shade he called "dried blood" with traditional British pinstripe cloth to create half-tailored, half-draped designs, all in one garment.

His next collection was dubbed "The Ludic Game." (Ludic, from the same Latin root as ludicrous, means "having to do with playful behavior.") It featured jackets worn upside down or as skirts, twisted and tied tweeds, falconry prints, twigs and stuffed birds in the models' hair and trompe l'oeil suspenders. "Imagine a roomful of kids and a box of clothes," Mr. Galliano said. "Put a shoe on your head. It's a wonderful, naive approach to dressing." He admitted, however, that "if I'd been a buyer, I wouldn't have bought it."

A collection called "Fallen Angels" followed. It introduced the Empire line, which Mr. Galliano still uses, as well as models with mud and talcum powder in their hair, wearing clothes that been washed and baked. The finale, inspired by women who bathed in their undergarments during an 1803 influenza epidemic in Europe, was a series of sheer draped muslin evening dresses that were soaked before being sent onstage.

"People thought it was meant to be attention-grabbing," Mr. Galliano said. "I thought it was very beautiful." People thought his next collection, "Forgotten Innocents," was attention-grabbing, too, and beautiful as well. Mr. Galliano dressed 14-year-old models in wispy clothes cut so the fabric created a soft swaddling effect, with unexpected gives and pulls.

"It was very erotic," Mr. Galliano said. "But there was a point." He had defined a new chaste eroticism.

That same season, he made a business move that led to his current success. "I wanted to succeed and still do what I wanted," Mr. Galliano said. "I had to wiser up." When he and his



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The New York Times/Chris Parker

Blouse with lapel detailing, left, worn with skirt that buttons seven ways. Lycra jacket with rosette and chiffon-covered beekeeper's hat, above. Cotton top with oversize bow and summer wool skirt, below.

original backer parted, Mr. Galliano approached Peder Bertelsen, a Danish entrepreneur whose company, Aguecheek, owns fashion shops here and also backs the designer Alistair Blair. "I didn't like what he showed me," Mr. Bertelsen said, "but I could see he had talent."

Mr. Galliano said he thought Mr. Bertelsen "had no faith in me, but he probably thought, 'Give it a try.'"

Asked to produce new drawings in a week, Mr. Galliano did. He also cut his shoulder-length hair and started wearing suits. Most important, he produced a series of collections, leading up to this season's, that refined his look and what he calls his "tailoring with a twist" technique. His volume subsequently doubled each season.

For next spring, Mr. Galliano has produced his best collection ever. No longer a split personality — sometimes commercial, sometimes bizarre — he has produced a refined synthesis. He still wraps the body and warps his fabrics, but he does so elegantly. He still deconstructs standard modes of dress, but now he turns jacket lapels into halter straps instead of turning pants into shirts. And he still believes in spontaneity; his skirts can be buttoned any of seven ways.

"I'm just doing what I believe in," he said. "You can see it as romantic or classic. To me, it's both."



Cotton and Lycra bodysuit and viscose culottes, above.

