



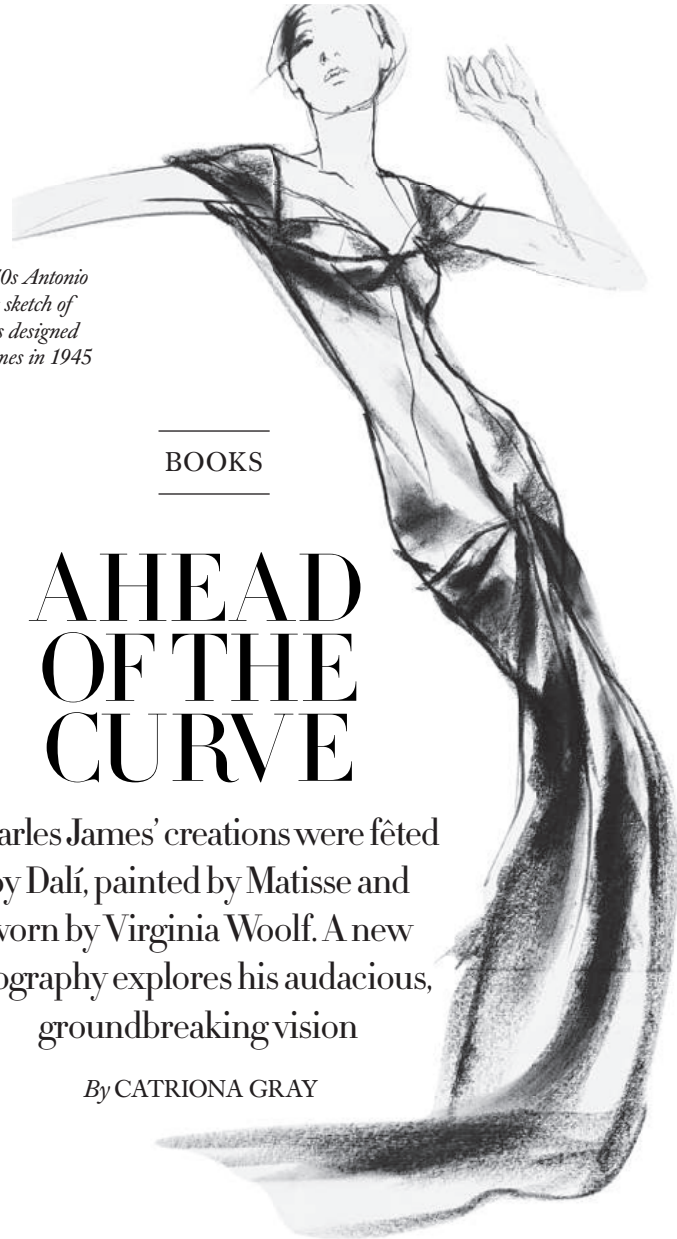
Charles James photographed by Cecil Beaton with his wife Nancy Gregory at his New York showroom in 1954. Bottom: 'Model Betty Threat in a Charles James evening dress' shot by Louise Dahl-Wolfe for Bazaar's April 1947 issue

'My seams are sentences. They all have meaning,' said Charles James, one of the 20th century's most innovative designers, who constantly experimented with silhouettes and textures. Dubbed 'America's first couturier', he created avant-garde shapes that challenged and captivated in equal measure. Michèle Gerber Klein, who has written the first biography of James, originally encountered the designer's work when she was a junior employee at Bendel's department store. Asked for her opinion on a transparent, peculiarly shaped blouse, she admitted that she 'wouldn't wear it'. Years later, she realised that the garment was the iconic Butterfly blouse, an iteration of which had been immortalised by Henri Matisse in a famous drawing.

James' clothes demanded to be worn by the daring – they were conceptual and clever, prompting Salvador Dalí to describe them as 'soft sculpture'. Born in Surrey and educated alongside Cecil Beaton and Evelyn Waugh at Harrow, he was a transatlantic talent who knew virtually everyone. His influence spans from the 1920s to the 1970s – from making hats for Virginia Woolf (who declared him 'a genius', after he cut them while they were on her head), to employing Lou Reed as an errand boy at his New York studio, long before the singer found fame with the Velvet Underground.

One of his favourite muses was Austine Hearst, a glamorous journalist who married into the famous American publishing dynasty (which has owned *Harper's Bazaar* since 1913). She was a constant supporter of James for years, regularly wearing his creations, helping him financially and buying him exquisite 18th-century dresses to study when he started experimenting with the then-unpopular empire line.

Today, 40 years after his death, James remains an enigmatic, pioneering figure, said to be an inspiration for the recent film *Phantom Thread*. The Bloomsbury Group writer Mary Hutchinson perhaps put it best. 'I think he has a romantic gift,' she wrote in a letter to Woolf. 'He makes women look exciting and strange.' It is somewhat ironic that the piece that so captured her imagination was a wrap dress, which was first dreamt up by James in 1929. As ubiquitous as it is now, back then it was bold and radical – 'symmetrical, diabolical and geometrically perfect' – a promise of liberation and freedom, expressed in cloth. □ *'Charles James: Portrait of an Unreasonable Man'* by Michèle Gerber Klein (£28.95, Rizzoli Ex Libris) is out now.



A 1970s Antonio Lopez sketch of a dress designed by James in 1945

BOOKS

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Charles James' creations were fêted by Dalí, painted by Matisse and worn by Virginia Woolf. A new biography explores his audacious, groundbreaking vision

By CATRIONA GRAY



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