

## Paris exhibition explores link between Azzedine Alaïa and Madame Grès, two fashion greats

Fondation Azzedine Alaïa hosts 'Alaïa / Grès. Beyond Fashion', a conversation between the two couturiers' sculptural works. The foundation's Olivier Saillard and Carla Sozzani tell Wallpaper\* more

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'Alaïa / Grès. Beyond Fashion' at Fondation Azzedine Alaïa, Paris  
(Image credit: Photography by Stéphane Ait Ouarab)

BY JEAN GROGAN  
PUBLISHED 2 DAYS AGO

Azzedine Alaïa was one of the most gifted designers of his generation, the last of the greats to completely master each stage of designing and producing a garment; a virtuoso in cutting a garment to a woman's body. The Franco-Tunisian arrived in Paris in 1956 aged 21, designing for a private clientele that included Greta Garbo, Louise de Vilmorin, Arletty, and Cécile de Rothschild.

He would show his first ready-to-wear collection in 1980, rising to prominence in the 1990s as the so-called 'king of cling'. He went on to dress Tina Turner and Grace Jones and propelled models Naomi Campbell, Tatjana Patitz, Stephanie Seymour, Farida Khelfa, and Cindy Crawford to superstardom.

What is lesser known is that Alaïa was also a prolific collector of haute couture, a fact that only came to light after his death in November 2017.

## **Inside 'Alaïa / Grès. Beyond Fashion' in Paris**



(Image credit: Photography by Stephane Ait Ouarab)

'Alaïa's archive of 19th and 20th-century couture is the third largest in France, after the Palais Galliera and the Musée des Arts Décoratifs,' says prolific fashion curator and director of Fondation Azzedine Alaïa, Olivier Saillard.

‘It was an obsession for him,’ said Carla Sozzani, Alaïa’s close friend of 40 years (the pair were interviewed together by Wallpaper\* in 2012), founder and president of Fondation Azzedine Alaïa and of the 10 Corso Como concept store in Milan. ‘He was always buying, buying, buying. It began when he bought Balenciaga’s entire archive in 1968.’

He bequeathed a legacy of more than 15,000 haute-couture pieces to the foundation. This includes 700 creations of French couturier Madame Grés, who worked from the 1930s to her retirement in the late 1980s.



(Image credit: Photography by Stephane Aït Ouarab)

'Alaïa / Grès. Beyond Fashion' juxtaposes two couture master talents in the skylit gallery of Alaïa's Rue de la Verrerie maison, which also houses the Azzedine Alaïa workroom, archives, bookshop, café and just-opened restaurant. Sixty of Madame Grès' gowns are exhibited here for the first time.

The similarities between the two are astounding. Both were self-taught, honing their craft in real time. Both disregarded the fashion calendar, presenting their collections only when they were ready. Both favoured a monochrome palette of black, white and bone, occasionally integrating crimson, bordeaux, midnight, ultramarine, celadon and nude. They shared a love of simplicity, of pureness of line.

'I love clothes that are beautiful and timeless, without useless details or decorations, or in colours that date them too fast,' said Alaïa. 'The simplest clothes are the hardest to create.'



(Image credit: Photography by Stephane Ait Ouarab)

Both completely mastered the selection and potential of fabrics, velvet, silk and jersey in particular.

'You can tell the soul and character of a fabric by touching it,' said Madame Grès. 'When I drape a mannequin in silk, for example, the fabric responds in my hands and I try to understand and judge its reactions. That's how I give the dress the outline and shape that the fabric itself would like to have.'

Most tellingly, both started out studying sculpture. 'I wanted to be a sculptor. Working with fabric or stone is exactly the same thing for me,' said Madame Grès, whose real name was Germaine Émilie Krebs chose the 'Grès' pseudonym for its 'sandstone' meaning.





(Image credit: Photography by Stephane Ait Ouarab)

Both used pleating, draping and sensual fabrics to accentuate the female body, the hourglass proportions (or 'bombshell', as Alaïa's incumbent designer, Pieter Mulier, names it) between the breasts, waist and hips.

Alaïa emulated Madame Grès' Grecian pleating and draping, adding a more contemporary edge with leather straps, chainmail, and his signature metal eyelets. He was not alone; Issey Miyake and Yohji Yamamoto also drew inspiration from the couturier's couturier, Yamamoto naming his S/S 2005 ready-to-wear collection after her.



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Page 1/11

The legends identifying side-by-side pieces seem interchangeable, which lends the exhibition to a fascinating game of 'guess the designer.'

'Madame Grès is perfection in eveningwear,' says Carla Sozzani. 'Alaïa is perfection in everything.'

*'Alaïa / Grès. Beyond Fashion' runs until 11 February 2024 at Fondation Azzedine Alaïa, 18 Rue de la Verrerie, Paris.*

*[fondationazzedinealaia.org](http://fondationazzedinealaia.org) \**



## Olivier Saillard Curates the Forthcoming Galerie Azzedine Alaïa Exhibition, Showing 11th September 2023 until the 11th of February 2024

In an unprecedented and captivating display, the works of Madame Grès and Alaïa are brought together for the first time. These two visionary designers, united by their commitment to formal principles, cutting techniques, and harmonious fabric and color choices, take visitors on a journey transcending mere fashion. With 60 stunning creations on display, the exhibition unveils the timeless elegance of one and the captivating artistry of the other, showcasing the dialogue between these two remarkable dress sculptors.

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Madame Grès, Haute Couture Spring-Summer 1975 © Colin Gray



Madame Grès, c. 1963 © Colin Gray

Madame Grès, also known as Germaine Krebs, began her illustrious career in the 1930s, crafting designs that melded the beauty of ancient statuary with modern sensibilities through her innovative draping technique. Her journey led her to establish the iconic Maison Grès, where her signature timeless collections graced the white salons at 1 rue de la Paix in Paris until 1987. Throughout the decades, she dressed luminaries such as Greta Garbo, Marlene Dietrich, and Grace Kelly.

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Similarly, Azzedine Alaïa's genius shone brightly, quietly, and determinedly. With a background in sculpture from the School of Fine Arts in Tunis, Alaïa channeled his artistic vision into fashion, creating long, fluid, and pleated dresses reminiscent of Grès' drapery mastery. His designs embraced the softness of jersey fabrics and knitwear, revealing a pursuit of proportion and precision in cutting that transcended both evening and daytime models.

While there is no evidence of a direct encounter between the two couturiers, their creations undoubtedly exchanged whispers of mutual inspiration. Both Grès and Alaïa were apostles of simplicity, infusing seemingly effortless designs with inherent complexity. Their meticulous selection of monochromatic colors, especially intense black and plaster white, further united their creative spirits.



*Azzedine Alaïa, Paris, 1989 © Peter Lindbergh*

Through this groundbreaking exhibition, visitors can witness the artistry of two exceptional creators, whose dedication to their craft elevated draping and cutting to guiding principles in the history of fashion. Madame Grès and Alaïa, two remarkable individuals, now stand together in this extraordinary showcase of sculpted dresses, offering a timeless lesson in style and design that reaches far beyond the bounds of fashion.

Galerie Azzedine Alaïa  
18 rue de la Verrerie  
75004 Paris

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Page 4/4

