

AND THE OSCAR GOES TO...

As the Museum of Fine Arts pays tribute to prolific fashion designer Oscar de la Renta, local style icons look back on his impact on both their lives and the world.

By Michele Meyer

The first major fashion exhibit at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston began with one phone call, when philanthropist Lynn Wyatt rang up Museum Director Gary Tinterow.

Having seen a tribute to the late, great Oscar de la Renta at San Francisco's de Young museum, Wyatt believed Houston should stage its own showcase of the dapper designer. After all, he'd often visited our city and had clad not only Audrey Hepburn, Taylor Swift, Oprah Winfrey and every first lady of the United States—from Nancy Reagan to Michelle Obama—but also many local fashionistas, Wyatt among them.

Needless to say, Tinterow agreed.

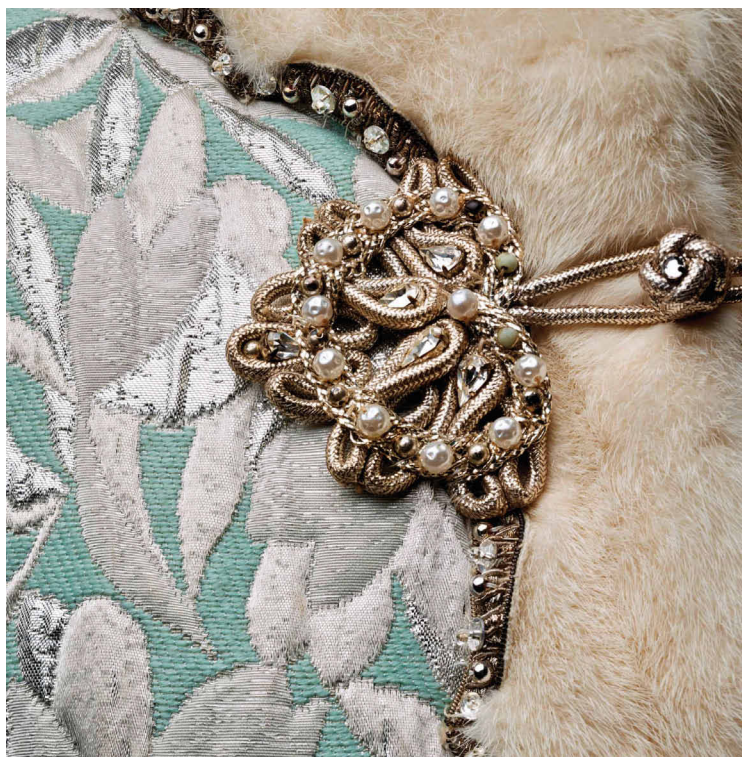
Rest assured that the resulting exhibit, *The Glamour and Romance of Oscar de la Renta*—on view through Jan. 28—is no knock-off. Not only did de la Renta's heirs and French label Pierre Balmain share corporate and personal archives, but some of Houston's best-dressed denizens opened their own closets to the MFA. Each section features gorgeous garb loaned by Wyatt; former Mayor Bob Lanier's wife, Elyse Lanier; fine arts patron Rosanette Cullen; anesthesiologist Yvonne Cormier; and former first lady Laura Bush.

"He told me he had a special affection for the women of Houston because they had style and wore their clothes beautifully," Cormier says. And in return, Houstonians were besotted with the designer.

Wyatt, who first met him as a teen, recalls many a gala at de la Renta's side. "He was just so, so charming. And he was a fabulous dancer. Oh, my goodness, he was a Latin dancer. I CONTINUED...



From left: Detail of embroidery, fur and beading on a gown from the designer's 1968 fall collection; a custom evening ensemble done in 2001 shows the Spanish aesthetic that greatly influenced the designer's life and career.



...CONTINUED loved to dance with him.”

The last time Wyatt saw him was in his final days at the hospital, dying of cancer. “There [was] Oscar de la Renta, in a chair that was sort of reclining, in the most elegant pajamas, in the most elegant silk robe,” she says. “I mean, he could’ve had a dinner party there for a king and queen, and he wouldn’t [have been] out of place. I mean, even in the hospital, he was an elegantly dressed man.”

Three years after de la Renta’s death, the new show captures the always impeccably attired clothier’s wit and charisma, as well as his broad range, and supreme tailoring and craftsmanship. On view are 50 years of his work, not only for his eponymous brand, but also as head designer of ultraexclusive fashion house Balmain—which dressed the likes of Sophia Loren, Ava Gardner, Katharine Hepburn and Brigitte Bardot back in its heyday.

De la Renta’s affinity for women was born in the Dominican Republic, where he was the sixth of seven children and the sole boy. His flamenco flourishes and hot-blooded Latino palette can be credited to his years studying art and his apprenticeship with couturier Cristóbal Balenciaga in Madrid. His lush furs and embroidered leathers arose from visits to Russia; his intricate beading, from forays to China, Japan and the Far East. The exhibition chronicles all of these global influences and then ties them together showing the local legends he dressed. In essence, the exhibit shows that the designer’s eclectic taste absorbed traits from corners across the globe, making him a great parallel for Houston’s own multiculturalism.

Beyond Wyatt’s phone call, credit also goes to André Leon Talley, de la Renta’s longtime friend—and former *Vogue* editor-at-large—and Cindi Strauss, the MFA’s curator of decorative arts, craft and design.

Talley set the stage with furnishings from the museum’s permanent collection, including gilded 18th century mirrors, Asian-inspired lacquer

screens and French impressionist artist Berthe Morisot’s “The Basket Chair” oil garden painting.

“André’s the creative visionary,” Strauss says. “He chose the individual pieces, the jewelry and placed all the mannequins. He’s also talked about how incredibly warm and generous Oscar was, and how it always was a pleasure to be in his company.”

Like Talley, de la Renta conceived on a grand scale. Even back in 1967, he described his clientele to the retail trade’s *WWD* thus: “When she jumps off a yacht, it’s the biggest one in the French Riviera.” Wyatt, Cormier and dozens of Houston’s top style set agree and had custom gowns created for the exhibition’s opening. “When I wear it, I feel tall and regal—and it’s surprisingly comfortable,” Cormier notes of one of her favorite gowns by the designer.

Perhaps the most spectacular piece in the exhibition, however, is the handencrusted, off-the-shoulder wedding gown featuring pearls and diamanté that he designed for activist Amal Alamuddin’s Venice nuptials to actor George Clooney. It was one of the last custom works he did, and it’s the culmination of one of the most prolific fashion designers in history. Some may wonder why clothing and ballgowns are currently on display in a space usually reserved for million-dollar paintings and 2,000-year-old Greek sculptures. One look at Alamuddin’s gown, however, should silence any debate. Oscar de la Renta’s gowns are not only glamorous and romantic—they are truly masterpieces. ■