

Hubert de Givenchy: Parisian Chic

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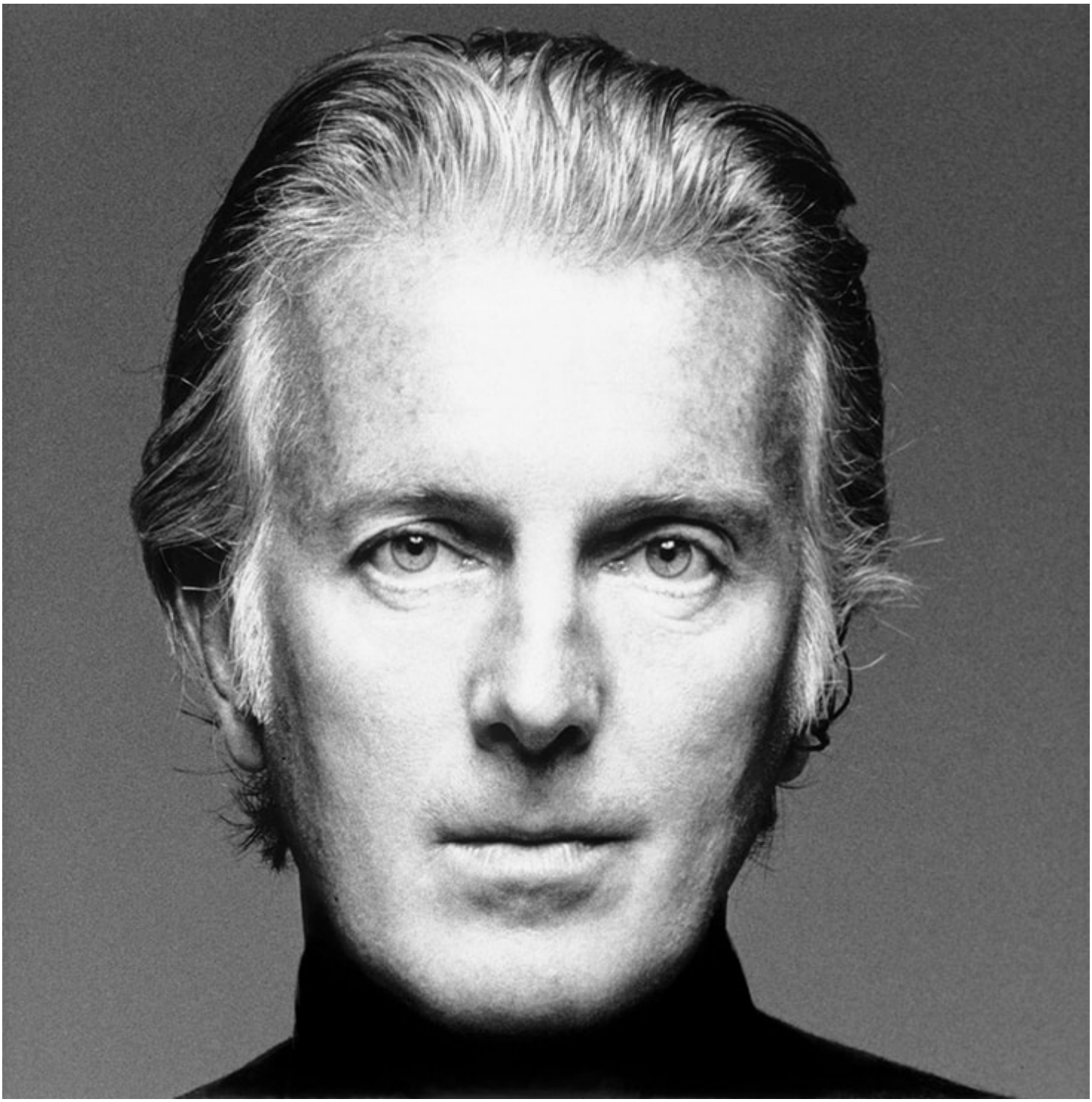


Hubert de Givenchy

“To have style is to … remain true to oneself.”

One of the most celebrated designers of all time, Hubert de Givenchy brought elegant, Parisian chic to Hollywood, adorning the stars with his

inimitable, immaculate style, thereby cementing his place in history. As a counterpoint to Christian Dior's "New Look" of the 1950s, with its' wasp waists and full skirts, Givenchy's innovative lantern forms, tent shapes and shorter hemlines came to define the 1960s. Couturier to the stars, Audrey Hepburn was his first, and most long-lasting muse, for whom he created that iconic, streamlined little black dress in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* in 1961, but in the years that followed he also proved popular with Grace Kelly, Elizabeth Taylor, Jackie Kennedy, Wallis Simpson and many more. Launching his own men's line in the late 1960s, his designs were as popular with men as with women, while his revolutionary fashion house is still going strong today. "His are the only clothes in which I am myself," Hepburn remarked, "he is far more than a couturier; he is a creator of personality."



Hubert de Givenchy

The youngest son of French aristocrats, Givenchy was born Hubert James Taffin de Givenchy in 1927, in the Northern French town of Beauvais. His father, the Marquis de Givenchy, died when he was just three years old,

leaving Givenchy’s mother, Beatrice Badin and his maternal grandmother, Margaret Badin, to raise him. Givenchy’s grandmother was widow to the director of Beauvais’ tapestry workshop, and had in her possession swathes of luxurious fabric in cupboards and trunks, which she would allow the young Givenchy to play with as a child, investing in him a curious and enduring fascination. “I dreamed of fashion as a little boy,” he remembered.



Hubert de Givenchy in his studio

Givenchy’s mother supported his decision to be a designer, allowing her son to leave home at 17 and study at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in 1944. While still a teenager, Givenchy studied at apprenticeship with Jacques Fath, leading him to work with Robert Piguet, Lucien Lelong and legendary

designer Elsa Schiaparelli. With Schiaparelli he developed a particular sensitivity to fabric; when she asked him to use up 900 metres of her pre-war Surrealist-print silks, he hung the cloth up to understand its' innate properties, before cutting into it, a pioneering technique that taught him about weight and drape, and one which he would adopt for the rest of his career. "Never work against the fabric," he commented, "it has a life of its' own."



Audrey Hepburn and Hubert de Givenchy

At the tender age of 24 Givenchy opened his own fashion house, La Maison Givenchy, in Plaine Monceau, Paris, 1952, with financial support from his brother-in-law. Money was still tight, forcing Givenchy to forgo models for plastic mannequins and to use cotton toile shirting instead of the luxury silks favoured by his competitors. But when he released his first collection later that same year, revealing to all of Paris a series of floor length skirts and stunning ruffled blouses, including the Bettina Blouse (named after model Bettina Graziani), the fresh lightness and meticulous tailoring of his designs quickly became popular.

Influences on Givenchy's early designs came from various designers, including Dior, who's "New Look" he initially imitated with 1950s neat waists and full skirts, although Givenchy's style was sleeker and less ostentatious. Dressmaker Madame Gres was another one of his heroes, as well as Cristobal Balenciaga, from whom he learned the essence and elegance of simplicity, commenting, "Balenciaga was my religion … There's Balenciaga, and the good Lord."



Audrey Hepburn in a Givenchy “Sack Dress”

In 1953, an appointment was made at Givenchy’s fashion house with a Ms. Hepburn. Expecting the then more famous Hollywood star Katharine Hepburn, Givenchy was taken aback when a fresh-faced, gamine Audrey Hepburn walked in, recalling, “Paramount Studios called. I was told that “Miss Hepburn” was coming to look for clothes for her new movie, Sabrina. Since I loved Katharine Hepburn’s style and look, I thought this was fantastic. But when the door of my studio opened, there stood a young woman, very slim, very tall, with doe eyes and short hair and wearing a pair of narrow pants, a little t-shirt, slippers and a gondolier’s hat with a red ribbon.”



Audrey Hepburn with Hubert de Givenchy in his workshop in Paris.

More accustomed to catering for the grown-up, sophisticated lady, Givenchy was initially reticent about dressing the youthful, tomboyish Hepburn, but it was through the breath-taking aura of his clothing that he was able to transform Hepburn’s character in Sabrina from a naïve, girl-next-door teen to a grown up, Parisian beauty, thus exploring the transformative power of fashion. Hepburn’s character became a showcase for Givenchy’s stunning dresses, in bold colours, striking patterns and daring shapes. In the months and years that followed Hepburn won Givenchy over with her French charm, and the pair would develop a close, mutually beneficial relationship that allowed both their careers to open out towards the international spotlight.



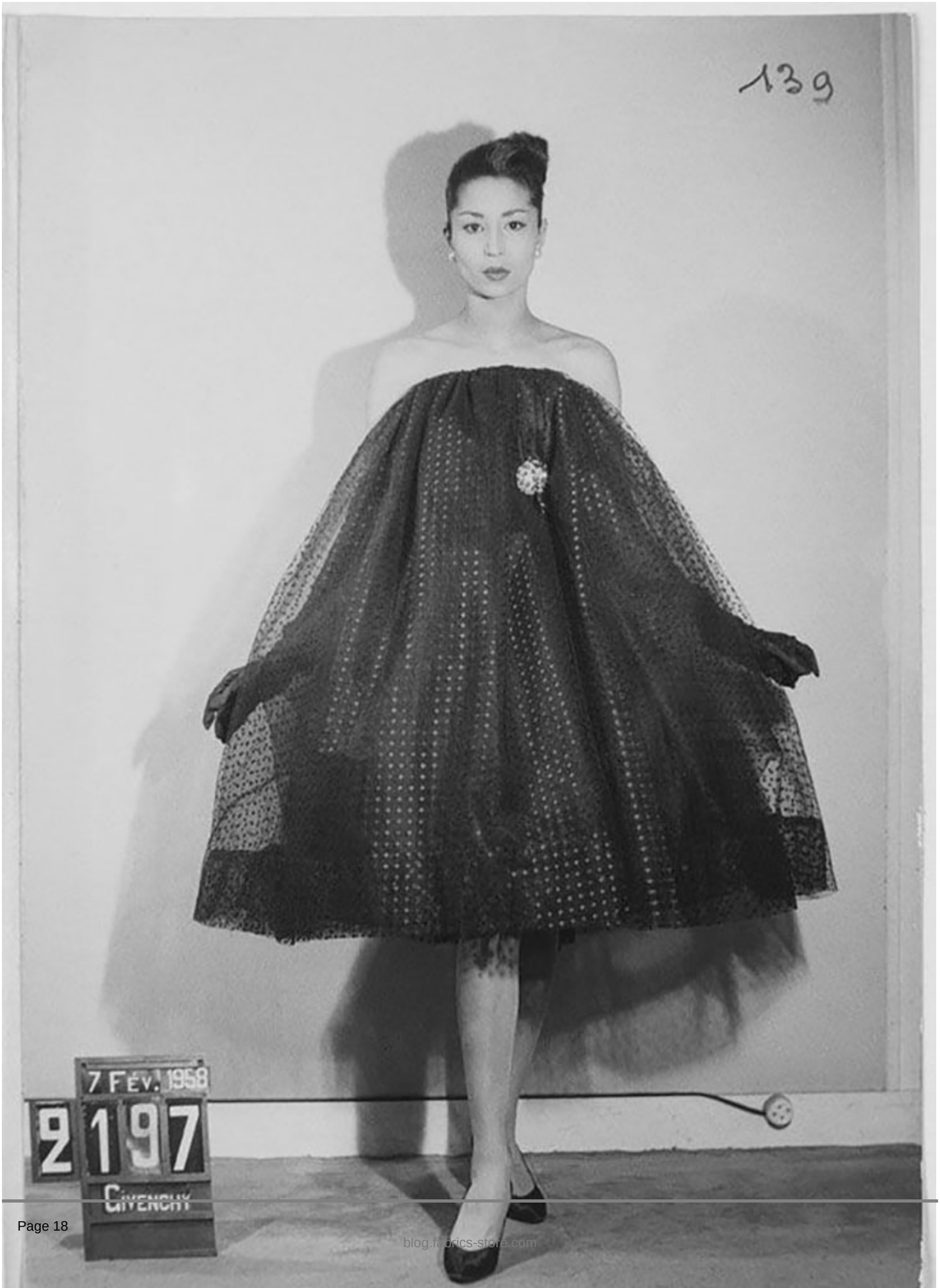
Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany’s in her Givenchy Black Dress / 1961

Hepburn became the face of Givenchy’s signature perfume line in 1957, the first actress to front a signature scent, while he would go on to design clothing for Hepburn in a string of hit movies, most famously for *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* in 1961, featuring Holly Golightly’s iconic little black dress. “The little black dress is the hardest thing to realise, because you must keep it simple,” he observed.



Jackie Kennedy in a classic Givenchy coat

Throughout the late 1950s, Givenchy truly found his signature voice, pioneering a series of bold new fashion silhouettes that broke away from Dior’s classic femininity. One of the first to introduce the now timeless shirtdress, Givenchy went on to create his “Sack” dress in 1957, with a wide, loose fitting shape, a style which was copied by fashion manufacturers across Europe and the United States. Continuing to abandon form and waistline, other fashion firsts were his “Balloon Coat” and “Baby Doll” dress, designs which skimmed over the torso but finished at a higher hemline, a vital precursor to the prevalent 1960s swing shapes and miniskirts, along with his “separates”, couture tops and bottoms that could be interchanged with one another, including a two-piece ballgown. Quickly catching on, Hollywood stars and royalty flocked to him for eveningwear and special events. Jackie Kennedy, in particular, wore Givenchy throughout her position as the First Lady of America.


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“Babydoll Dress” by Givenchy / 1957

In 1969, Givenchy launched Givenchy Gentlemen, a ready-to-wear collection for men which carefully balanced streamlined, architectural lines with wearable comfort. Reflecting on his battle to remain both innovative and approachable, he wrote, “I intend to stay classic. My personal taste leans toward structured clothing: I like that rigour. But (structured) often slips into rigidity; I think it should be tempered by casualness – which can also tip into excess. You have to take the best from each style.”



Audrey Hepburn and Hubert de Givenchy

By the 1980s, Givenchy was gradually winding down his business in preparation for retirement. In 1981, he divided his house into two wings – the first, the perfume brand, was taken on by Veuve Clicquot, while Givenchy sold his fashion house to the large conglomerate Louis Vuitton Moet

Hennessy, who continue to oversee its' management today. Givenchy gracefully retired in 1995, but his company has continued to expand in new and unprecedented directions. When John Galliano and later Alexander McQueen took residence as head designers, the company earned a reputation as a seedbed for rebellious young designers. Since then, Julien McDonald and Ricardo Tisci have had a stint at the helm, while today the brand is fronted by Clare Waight Keller, who famously produced the minimal, refined gown for the Duchess of Sussex when she married Prince Harry in 2018; emulating Givenchy's approach she designed "from the shoulder down." It was in this same year that Givenchy passed away, but his brand is, as he would have hoped, as synonymous with innovation and luxury as it was in his heyday.

CATEGORY

1. SUCCESS HACKS

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