

SPECIAL EDITION

VOGUE

MET GALA 2014

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 A CONDÉ NAST SPECIAL EDITION



THE APPRENTICE

Fresh to New York in his 20s, William Ivey Long installed himself alongside Charles James at the Chelsea Hotel and waited for the master to answer his call.

While I was at the Yale School of Drama studying stage design in the mid-1970s, sometimes, to avoid work, I would go to the library and read the newspapers; in particular, *Women's Wear Daily*. I was a farm boy from North Carolina: Fashion was an exciting new arena for me.

I quickly discovered that Charles James was a high watermark in American fashion. I gathered interviews and articles about him, and memorized Cecil Beaton's photographs of his dresses, especially the famous portrait of the group of ladies in ball

gowns—as if at Versailles—in their wonderful duchesse-satin creations. I found out all I could, and in those days before the Internet you had to make a bit of an effort to learn about people.

As the moment of my graduation drew closer, I started to panic about what was next for me. Before attending Yale, I'd completed a degree in history at the College of William & Mary and studied Renaissance and Baroque Architecture at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'd always had very strong mentors, and my parents were both educators. I was afraid to leave the academic nest.

I had read that Charles James lived at the Chelsea Hotel in New York City. So, with all the pomposity of a three-degree graduate, I went there to meet the manager, Stanley Bard, and rented an



INVERTED ELEGANCE
AN AFFECTIONATE CHRISTMAS NOTE FROM THE COUTURIER TO LONG, 1975.



Dear William, I've missed you so much over these last lonely days during which it is easy to be haunted by the past, of "what might have been" rather than by "what could happen."

A DESIGN BY

CHARLES JAMES

New York 1950

Your affectionate care & loyalty has meant so much to me

drawing by ANTONIO

more than you have probably known. With love & all my wishes for your happiness May every joy be yours at Christmas and throughout the New Year. In the years - which you wish make happier for many others - to come.

Charles James

the doll. From then on, I worked with him until his death in 1978.

He used a lot of imagery when he spoke and always referred to me as the Lost Boy—because I had lost my way, and why else would I be at the Chelsea Hotel being rocked by the sea? Insulting as I found this, I supposed that to be called anything at all by Charles James was a good thing. In my job with him (unpaid, of course), I don't think I ever sat down. Mr. James took having an acolyte as his due.

I found out later that there had previously been a lot of people around him, but now it was just his trusty assistant, Homer Layne, and me. I started out cleaning the bathrooms; walking the dog, Sputnik; painting the walls—mustard yellow, robin's-egg blue—swatching. We'd go to the fabric stores, Paron, Poli, and Jerry Brown. I would feed him—cooking for him in my apartment—and he would come down. He would talk about the present a little and all about the future, but he categorically did not want to talk about the past.

Hanging in his room was the papier-mâché original of the famous Charles James dress form—I'd grown up at the drama school working on the Charles James forms—and he did a lot of drawings as he worked. After a while I moved on to helping thread-mark the gowns. When Mr. James created a garment and it needed adjusting, the proportional realities remained the same, which meant that if someone needed more room or less room, he didn't just take it in at the side: Every single seam of his construction was taken in, a quarter of an inch, an eighth of an inch. . . .

The reverence for the sculptural nature of the dresses was the temple, the church. Every single detail was done by hand, and we didn't dare iron, using water or steam; we took the dress apart very carefully. It had all been flat lined, and my job was to help smooth it out. I would thread-mark it so that Homer could come in and take it in or out the quarter of an inch. And woe be the day you had to let it out, because of course there was the possibility that through the fitting process the holes would have pulled. We worked from ten at night until the early hours. Mr. James wouldn't even start being interested in working during the day.

Only every now and then was I allowed at a fitting. By this time they were few and far between and didn't actually happen on a schedule. Elsa Peretti would drop by—this was when she was in her heyday at Tiffany—Paloma Picasso, and some of the de Menils: fancy ladies coming in with dark glasses. He didn't like many people. And except for my Yale contemporaries Paul Rudnick and Candida Piel, he didn't want to see my friends. I would say, "I'm having some design students from Yale to dinner, who'd love to meet you." He'd say, "Oh yes, I'll come." They all arrive. Three hours later he's a no-show. They finally wander off and, as if he knew, fifteen minutes later, he would arrive. His

apartment. I became committed to the idea of working for Mr. James, and immediately started politely stalking him.

Needless to say, it took six months before I got even the slightest response. Meanwhile, I took odd jobs and interviewed for theater work. To amuse myself, I started making historical dolls and creating costumes for them. One day I was working on Marie de' Medici—rather large and overly puffy, like the Rubens portrait. I dressed her for her coronation in a wonderful vintage opera capelet with real ermine tails. But I was stuck on the bodice; I couldn't figure it out. So I thought, Well, I'll write this imaginary colleague of mine, Mr. Charles James, and ask him if he would help me with the bodice. I shoved the note under his door, two floors above my apartment.

By the time I got downstairs, the phone was ringing. It was Charles James. "Oh, I would love to come and see what you're doing." All my previous cards and letters and requests to meet him had gone unanswered, but this one punched some quirky button. He came right down, and he was totally enchanted with

world had shrunk but he was still the king of it, and the adulation had to be on his terms.

Stanley Bard was very supportive of artists, and he allowed Mr. James to have two rooms—a work studio and his own room—rent-free. He lived in squalor. I would try to clean every now and then because there'd be a lot of roaches at the Chelsea Hotel even on a good day. Mr. James discouraged me from doing that because he knew where everything was.

I ran errands and gathered research and covered a lip-shaped pillow—to go with the lip-shaped sofa he designed for Dominique and John de Menil—in gardenias for a fashion exhibition. It wasn't exactly the glamorous whirlwind kids would think was exciting today, if *Project Runway* is their standard. But for me, it was the absolutism that was exhilarating. There was no give-and-take. "It has to be this way"; "we have to do it that way." Everything else

hate mail. I would type letters for him on my typewriter, continuing his feuds with stores. He whined about Wanamaker's and Halston having stolen his patterns. I found out years later he had been paid for them. He was known for borrowing back clothes and selling them to somebody else. I just assumed he was telling the truth, that Halston had stolen his patterns and that people had refused to pay him for things he had done. How would I know otherwise? There were no articles on him. So I was his big defender. Within a month or two of listening to all this, I thought, Oh, my goodness, he's a British citizen, wouldn't it be nice if the queen put him on one of her honors lists?

So of course I wrote a note to elicit support from Sir Cecil himself, and almost within a week, by return mail, I received a response. "Dear William Ivey Long, Thank you for the information. I'm not as close to it all as I used to be, I'm afraid I'm not

able to do anything. Please give Charlie my very best, and I hope you will understand."

Mr. James was a shortish man who loved wearing trendy clothes, which at that time were silk shirts, hip-hugger pants, and Cuban heels. He dressed like he was ready to go to a disco. I would pin the hems of his pants and adjust his cuffs and collars. He had white skin and black eyebrows, and he looked as though he dyed his hair with shoe polish. I later realized that he used the type you were meant to wash out, but he would leave it in, so it would drip and drool down his neck, like Gustav von Aschenbach in *Death in Venice*.

He didn't take care of himself at all—didn't eat well, never saw a doctor. I felt he was daring his body, as well as the world, to appreciate him.

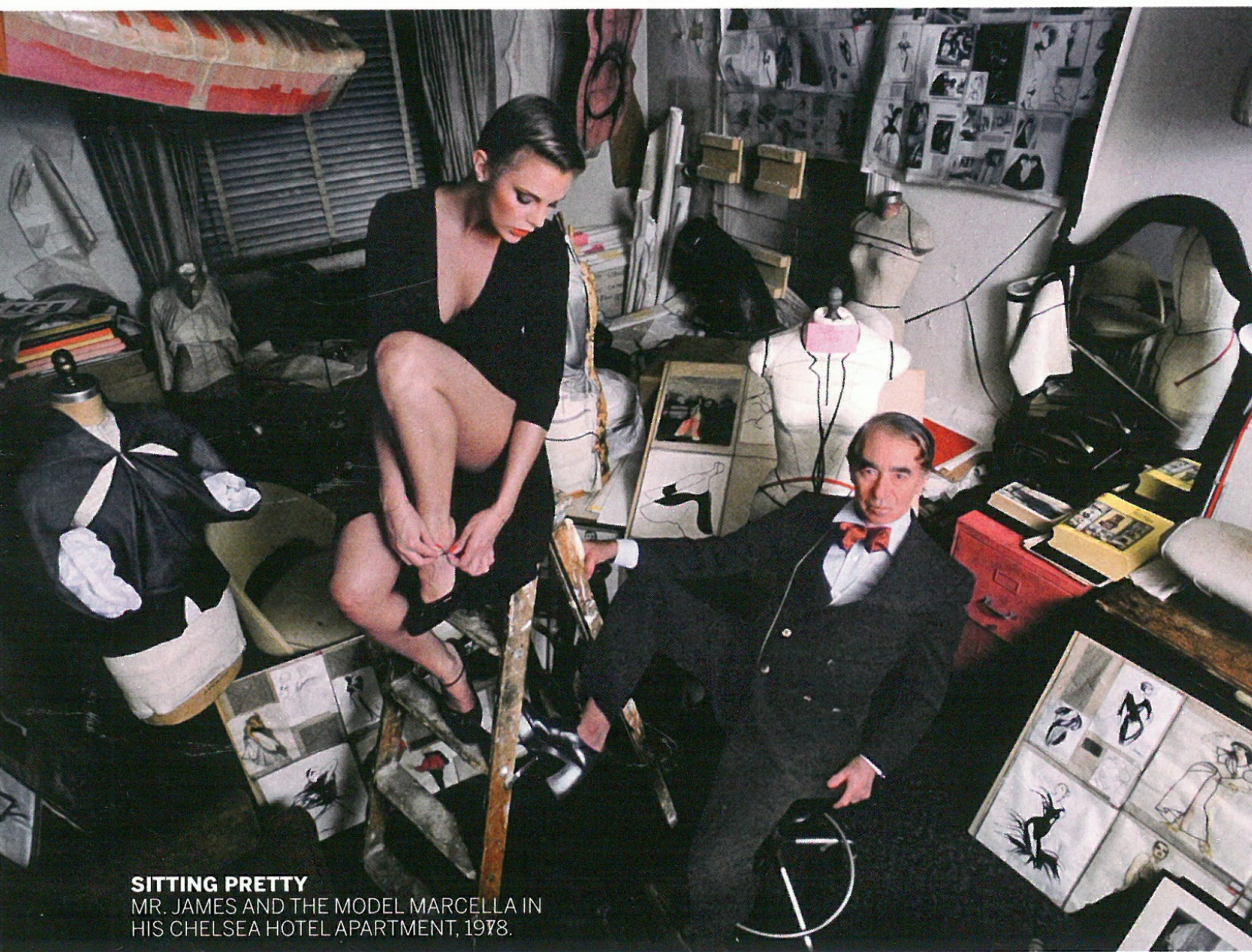
There was a self-destructive impulse at play. I couldn't help but get it into my brain that he was trying to pick fights to keep himself interested. I was too

young to figure out that these were calls for help.

After he died, I left the Chelsea Hotel and there was a big void in my life. He was magical. He had that spark. As for the complaining, you got used to it, and you missed the curmudgeonly nature. I learned so many things from him, but mostly about his commitment to his art. It was life or death for him. He was sacrificing all for it, including his health.

Mr. James had an innovative overview of form and function and fabric. He was totally inspired. He was touched by the angels. And he fought valiantly against the world. He didn't want to play ball. He didn't want to be the perfect Wanamaker pattern-maker, scaling his designs to fit all sizes. He challenged people to treat him like a god. He knew he was a god, and he remains one.

—AS TOLD TO EVE MACSWEENEY



SITTING PRETTY
MR. JAMES AND THE MODEL MARCELLA IN HIS CHELSEA HOTEL APARTMENT, 1978.

falls away, and it's all about the structure he's created. That's what I took away from it, the utter focus and reverence for his process, and his complete belief in himself.

And also, his complaining, complaining, complaining. No one was his friend. No one liked him. And boy, oh boy, did he remember hook, line, and sinker every slight. He had a particular running vendetta against Eleanor Lambert. I would hear him on the phone, yelling and using the F-word, his British accent growing stronger the more forceful his fighting became. It was all about how people had betrayed him and didn't appreciate him; everything he had done for the world and this is how he was treated! He would actually speak like that.

If a third of my time was spent on maintenance and a third on privileged work on the dresses, the other third was writing