

FABULOUS INSANITY: THE LIFE OF ANDRÉ LEON TALLEY

By Stefan Stalker

From being inspired by the fashion of Sunday church to sitting front row at Paris fashion week, André Leon Talley escaped the south and became one of fashion's most talented moguls. In 1948, when Talley was born, the world was an entirely different place, especially for people of color. Talley attended the segregated Hillside High School in Durham, North Carolina, the town



Diane Von Furstenberg

he lived in with his grandmother, where she worked as a maid at Duke University. The violent resistance to the civil rights movement which he saw first hand in addition to early childhood trauma clouded Talley's adolescent mind, and his only escape was through the world of fashion. The magnificent hats worn by the women of the Durham community at church piqued André's interest, allowing him to explore his fascination and providing him with an eye for fashion at a young age. André would walk to the Duke newsstand and endure physical torture by students in order to hold his own thirty-five cent copy of *Vogue* every month, from which he gained inspiration from the Black women found within the pages of the issue. "Fashion magazines are an escape to a better life," Tom Ford, editor and long time friend of Talley says. While his youth was filled with obstacles and a society that prohibited his progress, André yearned for a larger life, and accomplished such through his education.

Kate Novack details aspects of life revealed by Talley in a documentary encapsulating his career titled *'The World According to André'*. The accomplishments of the talented journalist are brought to life through personal anecdotes and his version of activism, such as the source of his university major. Inspired by watching Julia Child's television program, *"The French Chef"*, André attended NCCU with a focus on French language and literature. It was here that his academic achievements accompanied with his work ethic from high school allowed him to earn a scholarship to Brown University in Rhode Island, finally escaping the sheltered south. "There

was a notion that you couldn't just be good," states Talley's former high school teacher and friend Wanda Garret. "You had to be better." At Brown, Talley blossomed and started to experiment with his fashion sense, as encouraged by his new friends and vibrant New York City living. His budding style paired with a masters degree in French Literature could've taken twenty-six year old Talley anywhere, yet, it landed him inside the Metropolitan Museum of Art at a former *Vogue* editor-in-chief's costume exhibit.

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Diana Vreeland and André Leon Talley were extremely similar as the pair had a combined fashion knowledge that was parallel to none, and both wanted to elevate the state of the industry. After Talley fell in love with the issues of *Vogue* during Vreeland's 1963 to 1971 run as editor in chief, he later had the same woman to thank for landing him a job under Andy Warhol at *Interview*. Plunged into the epicenter of style that was 1970's New York City, Talley could converse with personalities from brands such as Chanel in their native language, and was involved first hand with the top designers in the world. "He had something to say," Says Tom Ford on Talley's networking. "And the people that mattered listened." Despite his six-foot-six stature, flamboyant gestures, and his African American heritage, no one could deny André's talent and impact. Talley's work placed him in Paris, the mecca of fashion, alongside Karl Lagerfeld, who pushed him to establish his persona as we know him today, draped in marvelous designer caftans, and pushing the boundaries of what is accepted in fashion. After writing countless editorials and reviews for collections such as the 1978 *Yves Saint Laurent's* "Porgy and Bess" inspired attire, Talley became the fashion news director at *Vogue*, the first black man to achieve this feat, and the right hand man to Anna Wintour. While it may seem as if André had accomplished the dreams of his youth, the road to *Vogue* was not always glamorous.



Behind the picture perfect pages of fashion magazines curated by André Leon Talley, a story of Black persistence is told through his perseverance in an industry that did not celebrate people of color. "None of my contemporaries have seen the world through Black eyes..." Talley states in his 2020 memoir. "Now I realize it is my duty to tell the story of how a Black man survived and thrived in the chiffon trenches." Talley never retaliated to any insults or slurs

thrown at him throughout his extensive career, and instead believed that excelling in an area never touched before by a black queer man was the best form of activism. By simply being himself, Talley broke the glass ceiling for models, editors, and photographers of color to be included within the fashion industry. Talley's legacy lives on through all people of color currently within the industry as well as his work of deconstructing the stereotype of Black masculinity in America.



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