



## **Famous French People**

### **Yves Saint Laurent©**

*by Robert Shepherd*

Hello, you're listening to Robert Shepherd on EnglishWaves and it's time for Famous French.

This time we revisit the life of an influential fashion designer who impacted fashion in the 1960s right up to the present day. He is Yves Saint Laurent.

Yves Henri Donat Matthieu Saint Laurent was born on 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1936, in Oran, Algeria, to parents Charles and Lucienne Andrée Mathieu-Saint-Laurent. The young Yves and his two sisters, Michelle and Brigitte, grew up in a villa by the Mediterranean, courtesy of their well-off father, who was a lawyer and insurance broker. He also owned a chain of cinemas.

While Saint Laurent was able to live a comfortable home life, his school life wasn't so easy. He was often bullied by schoolmates for appearing to be homosexual. It turned him into a nervous and rather sick child.

Still, he managed to find solace in the world of fashion. In his early years, Saint Laurent liked to create intricate paper dolls and by his early teens he was designing dresses for his mother and sisters. Saint Laurent's mother could see her son's potential and when he was just 17, she took him to Paris for a meeting with Michael de Brunhoff, the editor of *French Vogue*.

Saint Laurent moved to the capital a year later where de Brunhoff introduced him to designer Christian Dior, who by then was a giant in the fashion world. Under Dior's tutelage, Saint Laurent's style continued to mature and gain more notice.

In 1960 Saint Laurent was called back to his home country of Algeria to fight for its independence, but he managed to secure an exemption based on health grounds.

However, he was shocked when he returned to Paris. He found that his job with Dior had ceased. At first, it was an incredibly traumatic experience for the young, fragile designer. Then it became very ugly. Saint Laurent successfully sued his former mentor for breach of contract and received £48,000.

The combination of money and freedom was a boon for Saint Laurent. In cooperation with his partner and lover, Pierre Berge, the designer opened his own fashion house. Furthermore, the rise of pop culture and a general yearning for original, fresh designs, meant Saint Laurent's timing couldn't have been better.

For the next 20 years, he ranked as one of the world's greatest designers. Models and actresses loved his creations. He dressed women in blazers and smoking jackets and introduced attire like the pea coat to the catwalk. Other signature pieces included the sheer blouse and the jumpsuit. By the 1980s, Yves Saint Laurent was a household name – and he became the first designer to have a retrospective on his work at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City.

Away from his public persona, Saint Laurent began to experience personal problems. He became reclusive, fighting addictions to alcohol and cocaine. It was also seen in his work - some complained that his style had grown stale. Saint Laurent tried to pull himself together as best he could and in the early 1990s, his designs were rediscovered by a fashion elite that had grown tired of the grunge movement that dominated the catwalks.

The designer's personal life continued to show signs of improvement, which was helped by him slowing down his work pace. Eventually, he and Berge sold the company they'd started, netting them both a tidy fortune. In January 2002, Saint Laurent appeared in his final show and then retired for good in Marrakech. Five years later, his imprint and importance on French culture was cemented when he was appointed Grand Officer of the Légion d'honneur by the French President, Nicolas Sarkozy.

Yves Saint Laurent died in Paris on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2008 after a brief illness. Even after his death, he remains one of the most respected designers the world has ever seen.

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