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29 NOVEMBER 2015

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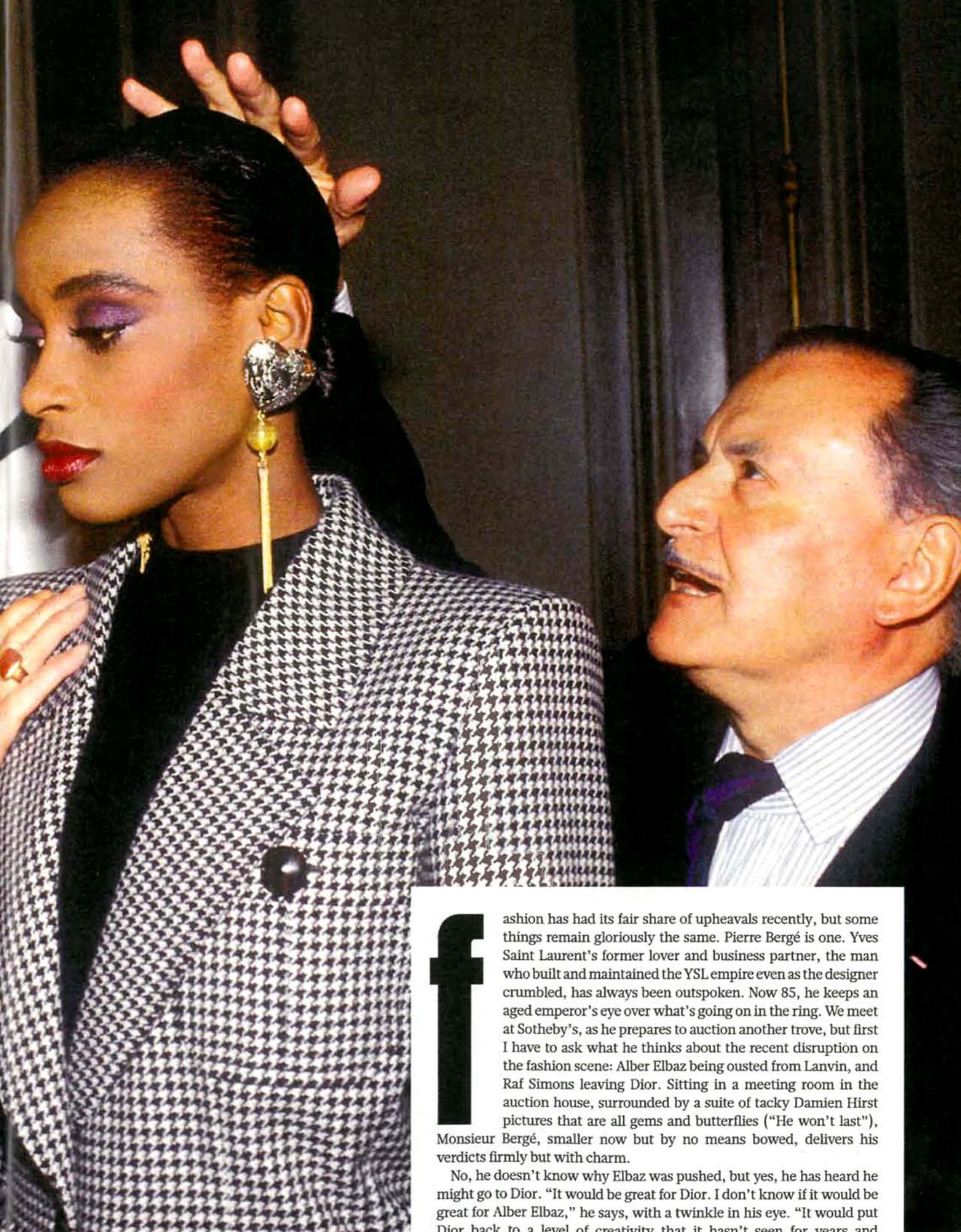
The
strange
genius of
Björk





'I like people who
are mysterious,
fragile and
creative. Yves
was all three'

Tom Ford at YSL was a 'catastrophe',
and Raf Simons's designs for Dior
were for women 'in his dreams'.
At 85, Pierre Bergé, the millionaire
publisher and Yves Saint Laurent's
lifelong partner, is as outspoken as
ever, reports *Louis Wise*



fashion has had its fair share of upheavals recently, but some things remain gloriously the same. Pierre Bergé is one. Yves Saint Laurent's former lover and business partner, the man who built and maintained the YSL empire even as the designer crumbled, has always been outspoken. Now 85, he keeps an aged emperor's eye over what's going on in the ring. We meet at Sotheby's, as he prepares to auction another trove, but first I have to ask what he thinks about the recent disruption on the fashion scene: Alber Elbaz being ousted from Lanvin, and Raf Simons leaving Dior. Sitting in a meeting room in the auction house, surrounded by a suite of tacky Damien Hirst pictures that are all gems and butterflies ("He won't last"), Monsieur Bergé, smaller now but by no means bowed, delivers his verdicts firmly but with charm.

No, he doesn't know why Elbaz was pushed, but yes, he has heard he might go to Dior. "It would be great for Dior. I don't know if it would be great for Alber Elbaz," he says, with a twinkle in his eye. "It would put Dior back to a level of creativity that it hasn't seen for years and

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years." Naturally, Bergé is a fan of Elbaz's — he hired him to take over the YSL Rive Gauche line from Saint Laurent himself. But hold on, what about darling Raf?

"Raf Simons? I didn't really understand what he was doing," he says, shrugging. "Maybe he dresses women as he sees them in his dreams, but they won't wear that. Another one who had that fault was Galliano. *Alors là!*" For the uninitiated, "*Alors là!*" means "Don't get me started", but with a lot more panache.

And then there was McQueen, he says. "If you think fashion is there to be used by women, rather than to use them, if you think that it's important to have a dialogue between fashion and women, which was, of course, Saint Laurent's legacy — *alors là! Alors là!*" Eventually he concedes that if you think fashion is an art, then of course McQueen is fine — but no prizes for guessing which side he's on.

Bergé is much more than Saint Laurent's other half: he is a multimillionaire who co-owns *Le Monde*; an influential fundraiser and confidante of the former French president François Mitterrand; an old friend of the writer Jean Cocteau, and now the exclusive holder of all his copyright; a former director of the Paris Opera; and so the list goes on. I had read somewhere that on the day he moved to Paris, Bergé was walking down the Champs-Élysées when the famous poet Jacques Prévert fell out of a window and onto him. This is a bit like moving to London, walking down Carnaby Street and having David Hockney fall in your lap. "It's true," Bergé confirms. "I always considered it a sign from destiny, that the first day I moved to Paris, a poet fell on my head."

Today, he spends his time nurturing the Saint Laurent legacy: he is revamping his centre in Paris and also building a YSL museum in Marrakesh, one of their favourite haunts. Both are due to open in 2017. Then again, he has little to do with the brand itself, which is now owned by Kering and was renamed Saint Laurent Paris by the creative director, Hedi Slimane. Under Slimane, business has boomed, but it has not been without grumbles: it's hard to decipher any classic YSL in Slimane's Courtney Love-lite stylings. Yet Bergé remains a fan and a friend of Slimane's (he points out he was also the first to hire him, to do YSL menswear), and he has even dubbed him Saint Laurent's heir. Well, yes, but how exactly?

Well, in one sense, Bergé explains, Saint Laurent can't have any heirs, because haute

couture is dead now. Sure, there are houses that still do haute couture — "or who *claim* to do haute couture" — but its glorious era, dating to the middle of the last century, is far away. The *art de vivre* that haute couture once complemented has gone, he says, though he refuses to be nostalgic ("I hate that"). "Today, there are Russians, wives of oligarchs, but that doesn't mean anything. It's not because they buy haute couture that they understand it, or live the lifestyle — they don't." Previous attempts to keep the spirit of Saint Laurent alive were a disaster, says Bergé — Tom Ford's tenure a "catastrophe", Stefano Pilati's "worse still" — but Slimane has at least one thing in common with Yves, and it's a vital thing, he says: "A dialogue between the designer and the street, the here and now."

The reason we are here is to discuss Bergé's latest sale. An avid reader, he is selling a collection of first editions — Kafka, Cocteau, Flaubert, Shakespeare, Montaigne, Cervantes, Baudelaire, often with original inscriptions. This comes on the heels of his selling a hoard of Islamic art last month; and, of course, there was the famous Bergé-Saint Laurent sale in 2009, when he sold 50 years' worth of joint collecting. Bergé says he is selling it all now as he has no heirs and would rather control the process, and anyway, he is tickled to see how much it will raise: "It's fun!" But this sale is an individual venture. He could never get Saint Laurent interested in his rare books. "Yes, he read Proust, but in paperback."

Bergé was 28 when he got together with Saint Laurent, who, at 21, was already the star designer at Dior. When it sacked him, it was Bergé who helped him set up his own fashion

house. Bergé had lived with the painter Bernard Buffet for eight years, but Saint Laurent was just too irresistible. "I don't like bodybuilders, I like people who are mysterious, fragile and creative." He was all three. You couldn't ask for more." The couple lived and worked together for nearly 20 years, but the domestic arrangement fell to bits when Saint Laurent began to drink and take drugs in the mid-1970s. Bergé eventually moved out, but only down the road, and in a loose sense they remained partners; before Saint Laurent's death in 2008, they entered into a civil partnership.

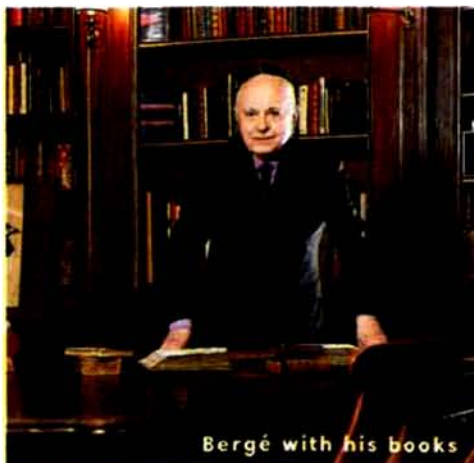
I ask Bergé about the notorious pressure on fashion designers, which is much lamented today. "Oh, let's not exaggerate," he tuts. "I lived with a fashion designer for 50 years, you know. Yes, there's a pressure, but there was pressure on Yves, I'd say, because it was him. I always said he was born with a nervous breakdown. It's not the job, really — if he'd been a banker, it would have been the same."

Saint Laurent finally got clean in 1990, but he was "never the same", says Bergé, sighing. "After that, he had a kind of ennui, he seemed disgusted with life. He said to me so many times, 'I would rather be dead.' He didn't have the knack for happiness, clearly. I do. Or I try."

Despite the sadness, there were a lot of beautiful things to their story. I tell Bergé it is striking how open they were as a couple, especially considering homosexuality in France was only decriminalised in 1968. "Never complain, never explain," he says, shrugging. But he doesn't think they would have got married: they weren't much into marriage, he says, and even if he has been a vocal champion of gay marriage and rights, it always seemed a little strange to him that gays should want to copy heterosexuals. Yet he is deeply heartened that their life together influenced people.

One day, he recalls, Jean-Paul Gaultier invited him to lunch. "I thought he wanted to talk to me about fashion, but straightaway he said, 'I wanted to know you because I wanted to say that I owe you a lot. Your life with Yves set an example for me, and it helped me when I was 15 years old.' That touches me a lot."

He sighs lightly. "At least you can say, 'Oh well, I was good for something.'" ●



The Pierre Bergé Library goes on sale on December 11 at Drouot-Richelieu, Paris. labibliothequedepierreberge.com