

In Her Footsteps

OLIVIA SHARPE speaks to Said Ismael about continuing the legacy of Catherine Walker and Co, the atelier he founded with his wife 35 years ago. The designer's death two and a half years ago came as a tragic blow to the fashion world which had come to see her designs as the archetype of both French couture and English tailoring



DURING HER LIFETIME, Catherine Walker's aim was simple: to create an old-fashioned Parisian couture atelier with a workshop for the essential tailoring work. Catherine did not want to create mass, ready-to-wear collections which lose out on the one-on-one relationship between designer and client. Instead, she wanted to return to the old French mode of business (at large in the mid-70s) whereby the couturier worked directly and closely with the client. At the premises on Sydney Street, Catherine and husband Said Ismael provided a 'safe-house' where the two could meet privately and discuss all manner of intimacies with the assurance that

"what is said in the workshop, stays in the workshop". It is no wonder, then, that Catherine fast became the go-to woman for celebrities and members of the royal family, most famously Princess Diana. A relationship based on complete loyalty, trust and discretion, Diana's sentiment was reported to have been: "If Catherine says it's okay, it's okay". Catherine's name is now forever associated with the Princess, having designed more than 1,000 of her outfits, including the one in which she was buried.

Three decades later, Catherine's vision remains intact. Despite the Sydney Street store being headed up solely by Said Ismael, its entrance still proudly bears the name Catherine Walker and Co. Similarly, its appearance hasn't changed. From the outside, there is little to distinguish it from the terraced houses situated next to it. Once you locate the entrance, however, the transformation when you walk inside is extraordinary. The small and inviting showroom has clothes hanging along the walls as though you have entered someone's walk-in wardrobe at home (albeit a very large and expensive one). However, there are no changing rooms but just one fitting room partitioned off with a curtain which is usually drawn because, once you enter, you receive one-on-one assistance. Everything, therefore, speaks of a personal service that you do not find in your average high street store today.

When I meet Creative Director Said, he tells me about the Catherine Walker experience. When a client enters the store, they are taken on "a journey, from design and inspiration through the sketch to seeing



the design made up in calico form and, finally, taking the outfit home". Rather than simply walking in, picking something and stepping out with a shopping bag, customers go through a step-by-step process. After they choose their preferred design, their measurements are taken and conveyed to the pattern transfer and then to a mannequin before the fabric is cut and sewn together.

This is followed by another fitting to ensure the client is happy (it is here that any last minute alternations are made). Once Said and his team are content that it fits properly, they arrive at the finishing stage of making up the garment ready to be worn.

The whole enterprise is still very much run along French lines; there are seven large studios in neighbouring Bury Walk and each room is devoted to a different craft including tailoring, dressmaking and embroidery, run by a team of 30 highly-skilled men and women. Unlike fast-paced ready-to-wear fashion, Said describes the whole process as "slow fashion". This evokes memories of an interview given by Catherine where she talked about fashion being, on the whole, "fast-moving" but she instead sought to design clothes "which give poise to women without being too rigid and which are poetic without being overworked". Trends do not come and go in the world of Catherine Walker but rather key pieces and design ideas constantly evolve and develop into new collections.

Thus there appears to be a sense of timelessness and continuity within every aspect of the brand. In an interview with *Vogue*, Said commented how "Catherine Walker and Co. is investment dressing in its truest sense. The clients regularly return to add to their wardrobes, which began decades ago, while those who have newly-discovered the label are impressed by the defining heritage of English Savile Row tailoring and French luxury sensuality." This was highlighted recently in *Hello!*; a young woman was pictured wearing her mother's Catherine Walker coat which had last been worn, by her mother, at her own christening. Clients see the garments as an investment; rather than buying a ready-to-wear, on-trend outfit which will inevitably go out of style within a season, these pieces will remain a permanent fixture

in your wardrobe and of those of future generations because the clothes live up to the ethos of quality and design which, Said states, "will always be there".

And like the garments, many clients have remained constant. As well as its devoted fan base consisting of loyal English, American and French clients who reside in Kensington and Chelsea, the label continues to enjoy celebrity and royal commissions from those who look to

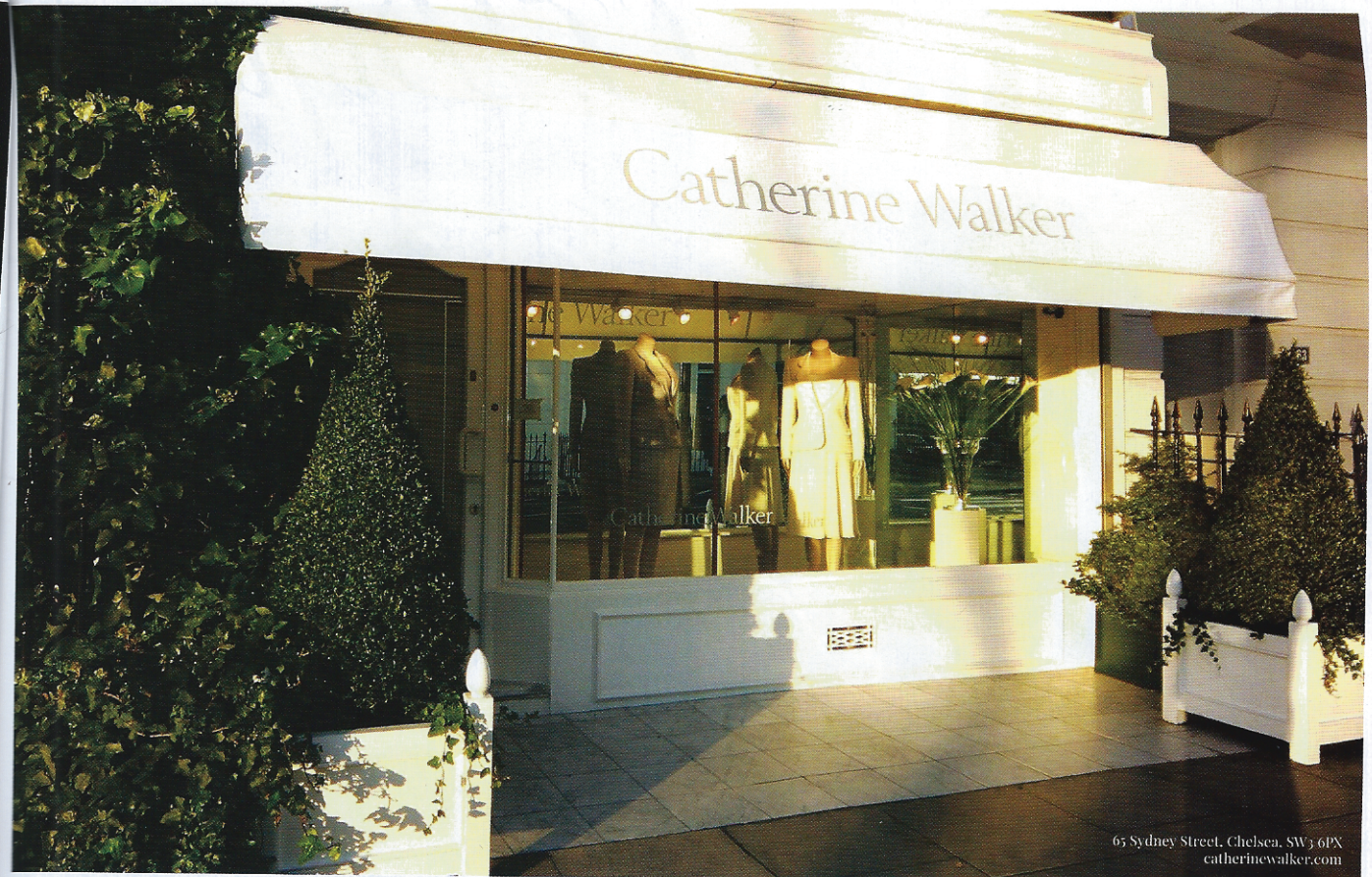
the couturier for their most important social engagements. For her daughter's wedding, Carole Middleton commissioned Said to design her a soft blue

Carole Middleton commissioned a soft blue shift dress and fitted coat for Catherine's wedding

shift dress with a fitted coat which became one of the most talked-about ensembles of the event. Following in her mother (and mother-in-law's) footsteps, the Duchess of Cambridge called on Catherine Walker and Co. to design two of her outfits for her recent tour of North America with her husband. At this point, I probe Said to give me an inside scoop about what it was like working with Kate but there is no budging him. Like his wife (who famously hired a PR advisor to make sure her name was kept out of the press during the Princess Diana media frenzy), he understands the immense importance of discretion; if this goes, then the whole business, along with everything that it stands for, goes too.

What makes Catherine Walker truly unique is that "it is the client who is the star of the show, and not the frock." Often, when looking for that perfect evening





65 Sydney Street, Chelsea, SW3 6PX
catherinewalker.com

► dress for a special occasion, the vision in your head can be completely different from what you end up wearing. However, because of the collaborative nature of the process, the customer has her say during every stage so the final product is just as much her own vision as it is the designer's. For Said, the real pleasure does not come from having designed a beautiful outfit with his own name and stamp on it but from the final moment when he gets to "see the client, the very beautiful woman who is the star and not the dress." During the recent series of *Strictly Come Dancing*, it has become known that long-standing client Darcey Bussell wore ten Catherine Walker outfits, none of which were reported by the press at the time. Matching his late wife's Gallic reserve, Said has never attempted to push himself or the label into the limelight following her death.

Although evidently happy with his current clientele, I ask Said whether he has considered branching out with another store, to which the simple answer is no. In fact, I had the distinct impression that Said would rather the whole thing fell apart. "We don't have any plans to turn into some massive label; we are very happy producing the quality that we do and having a work group right on our doorstep. If we start to tinker about with size, I think we will lose



some of the control we have and at the moment we have a very good balance on what we are asked to produce and what we can produce." As Creative Director, growth as a company does not involve physical expansion; for Said, Catherine Walker's progress comes from constantly looking to change the "quality and beauty" of the clothes produced. Said has focused on creating bespoke, quality designs which will be treasured by his clients for a long time and he stresses the importance of designers "designing with our hearts"; if you do this, "there will always be someone who will want what you are doing."

Catherine Walker may no longer be with us but her legacy lives on through her couture house and the work of her husband. In an interview given soon after her death, Said explained that they had discussed in detail the collections that would follow Catherine's death (when it was discovered that she was not going to live) just as they had done over the past 30 years. Her last will and testimony, so to speak, Said has since carried out to the letter, running the company through his wife's vision. As much a commemorative plaque as a business, Catherine Walker and Co. continues to uphold the same core values and design ethos, creating long-lasting pieces which clients can enjoy for a lifetime. In this way, it is as though Catherine never left us. ■