Though Yves Saint Laurent consistently produced iconic collections over the course of five decades—from the fifties through the nineties—his seventies looks really represent the distillation of his aesthetic. In the summer of 1971, Saint Laurent arrived at a place that feminists wouldn't reach until decades later: empowering women through sophistication. He presented a collection that made risky visual references to the I Second World War as an antidote to an excess of flower power. Real, ladylike outfits—high heels, seductive daytime dresses—looked more revolutionary than the denim bell-bottoms the revolutionaries wore. In the 1940s, women were strong because they had to be. Saint Laurent didn't shy away from ambiguity—he ran toward it. It wasn't enough just to pose the question; he also tried to provide the answer. "My dream is to give women the basis for a classic wardrobe, which, while escaping the fashion of the moment, will give them greater confidence in themselves," he said. Saint Laurent combined the sophistication and craftsmanship of haute couture with the innovation of street style and the richness of exotic cultures, forever changing the way fashionable women dressed.

And unlike the other great couturiers who came before him, Saint Laurent was not interested in playing the role of Pygmalion. If one tries to impose ones own interests one's own fantasies, ahead of those of women, one ends up with disguises, he once said. Instead of using women as canvases, he translated his interests and inspirations into pieces that were at once modern and timeless, and that always aimed to put a woman s beauty and personality into focus. Whether he was crafting an ode to the color palette of Marrakech or the androgyny of Weimar Berlin, Saint Laurent brought effortless wearability to the most outlandish of inspirations. The Ballets Russes collection that Saint Laurent presented in 1976 was revolutionary but not in a proletarian way. Inspired by the same eclectic dance company as Paul Poiret had been in the 1910s , not only did he take the looks themselves over the top—with luxurious embroidery decadent fur, voluminous sleeves, and layers and layers of silk—but he also turned the showcasing of these looks into a true spectacle. From then on, a "fashion show" was no longer a staid presentation of couture to potential buyers, but an extravaganza, a production, a full bells-and-whistles Show. It brought proud glamour back to an industry that had loosened up significantly—perhaps too much—since the sixties. He brought age-old trademarks of the aristocracy to the cutting edge of fashion, and dared women to be brave—and rich—enough to wear them.