FASHION, they say, is ephemeral. But in the case of Yves Saint Laurent, that adage holds little weight. During much of his 45-year career, Saint Laurent, who died in Paris on Sunday at the age of 71, held the style world in his thrall, wielding an influence that dominated the runways and exerts a fascination to this day.

A stylistic rebel with a paradoxically conservative streak, Saint Laurent arguably did more to advance fashion than any designer of his generation. His signal contribution to the world of style was to elevate the lowly and the outré, conferring an aristocratic insouciance on modes of dress — military peacoats, peasant blouses and raffia-bordered tribal skirts — once considered too gritty or exotic for conventional wear.

“He altered the consciousness of the way we dress,” said Lisa Koenigsberg, a culture historian.

But his legacy is not purely abstract. Marc Jacobs, Tom Ford, Miuccia Prada and Alber Elbaz of Lanvin are but a handful of the designers to have borrowed liberally, and sometimes literally, from Saint Laurent’s seemingly inexhaustible repertory.

“Designers have been copying Yves Saint Laurent for more than 20 years,” said Keni Valenti, a vintage fashion dealer in New York. As recently as this spring, he said, his downtown loft was a magnet for designers rifling his racks of vintage YSL. Many of them, absorbing the designer’s ideas down to the subtlest details, openly look to him for validation.

“I and a couple of friends would always say, ‘How would Saint Laurent do it,’ ” Mr. Jacobs told Women’s Wear Daily. “It’s a little, funny gauge of a thing being right, a kind of standard for chic, for youth, for sex appeal without vulgarity and with overall beauty.”

Citing Saint Laurent is a long-held tradition. “When Yves was alive, all the huge names in fashion — Bill Blass, Oscar de la Renta, Calvin Klein, Claude Montana — could not help but be affected,” recalled Marian McEvoy, who befriended the designer in the mid-’70s, when she worked in Paris as an editor of Women’s Wear Daily.
“His was a very profound influence,” she said, noting that there was no shame or hesitation in knocking off his most compelling ideas. “If you were a designer at the time, you gave in to that influence kind of joyfully. It was: ‘Hey, that’s a great piece. Let’s copy it.’ ”

TODAY Saint Laurent is a touchstone for designers hoping to demonstrate a mastery of tailoring and draping. In the mid-‘90s, Mr. Ford was alternately criticized and lauded for his fidelity to the designer. In his collections for Gucci, his curvaceous blazers and dinner jackets recalled the gender-bending sexuality of a Saint Laurent piece memorably captured in the ‘70s by Helmut Newton.

In his fall 2007 couture collection, Jean Paul Gaultier also paid homage, resurrecting the fluid trouser suits that Saint Laurent had perfected decades earlier, down to their flaring lapels, extended shoulders and the slouchy drape of the pants. Last winter, Mr. de la Renta introduced his interpretation of the classic Saint Laurent trouser suit, a black and white spectator look.

Never mind their vintage provenance. The nods to the master still look up-to-date. The originals “were always appropriate without a kind of blue-haired-lady appropriateness,” Ms. Koenigsberg said.

That perverse balance between sobriety and seductiveness partly explains why Saint Laurent’s ideas still race through fashion’s bloodstream. There are the decorously bowed blouses resurrected by Proenza Schouler for resort 2008.

There are the cascading ruffles on dresses by Mr. Elbaz, who briefly designed for the Saint Laurent label, a not-so-subtle homage to Saint Laurent’s gypsy looks of the mid-‘70s. And, of course, Le Smoking, a women’s tuxedo revived over the years in the collections of Mr. Elbaz, Giorgio Armani, Viktor & Rolf, Ralph Lauren and others.

Even in his sportier styles, Saint Laurent championed a sexy androgyny. Successors to the safari jacket introduced in 1968 resurface on designer catwalks almost every season. On its debut, it caused a furor, sending devotees to Abercrombie & Fitch to improvise interpretations of their own. Echoes can be seen in the spring and resort collections of Proenza Schouler and Michael Kors.

There is no telling where the next impulse may come

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Yves Saint Laurent, Giant of Couture, Dies at 71 (June 2, 2008)
from: the Mondrian mood of the mid-’60s? The extravagant Cossacks of 1976. Designers continue to raid the archives, scour vintage shows and dealers’ ateliers for plunder.

“Of course the stuff will be more valuable, especially the couture,” Mr. Valenti said.

On learning that one of his idols had died, Mr. Valenti was stricken. But he entertained another mood as well: “As a dealer, I thought, ‘Oh, my goodness, ka-ching!’ ”