

Judith Clark Costume 15 March - 26 April 2001

Vionnet

VIONNET & CLASSICISM

By REBECCA ARNOLD



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Print
CLIFFORD PRESS

Exhibition
MADELEINE VIONNET
15 DRESSES FROM THE COLLECTION
OF MARTIN KAMER
16 MARCH – 14 APRIL 2001

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CLASSICISM PRESENTS a façade of effortless-ness. It demands a return to the essential elements of fashion design: body and textile. It is revered within western culture as an emblem of simple, natural truths, the beauty of geometric forms draped upon supple flesh, yet it takes considerable skill to create and wear. Beneath the smooth lines of classically inspired clothing is a complex web of elaborate construction techniques and contradictory meanings. To try to understand the values and beliefs with which we invest classically inspired designs, the work of early twentieth century couturier Madeleine Vionnet will be considered as a cipher, linking mythologies of classicism and modernism within a specific historical context. Her designs encapsulate the significance of classicism's influence on fashionable dress during the inter-war period, yet they also offer more subversive readings, which undermine stable interpretations of classicised design as timeless, democratic and 'pure'.

Madeleine Vionnet's training at a number of couture houses in both London and Paris taught her to favour the natural body as the guiding motif in any design and led her to develop her well-documented technique of draping specially woven double width fabric onto an 80cm high mannikin. This process emphasised her radical view of dress-making, which focused on the body as a 3 dimensional whole, not a fractured vision of back, front, top, bottom. She had been taught to foreground the body while premiere at Callot Soeurs in the early 1900s. There, she watched one of the couture house's maitresses Mme Gerber, whose ability to perfect her designs and adapt them to the needs and tastes of each client was to influence Vionnet's later creations. At Doucet, where she moved in 1907 she was to display her avant garde view of fashion, becoming part of the triumvirate of couturiers, along with Chanel and Poiret, who were to construct a new form of fashion and beauty that heralded the concerns of the modern era. By discarding the corset and quite literally stripping away the superfluties of fashion and contemporary

notions of respectability, Vionnet became part of the revolution in fashion, evoking a new form of femininity that spoke of freedom, independence and experimentation. For Vionnet, this new spirit was linked to a search for purity of form and artistic expression that sprang, at least in part, from a thorough exploration of classical design.

A silk crêpe dress of 1918-19 from the collection of the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris's encapsulates many of Vionnet's main preoccupations. Betty Kirke, in her book *Madeleine Vionnet* of 1998, describes how its form is created by drapes and folds of fabric that in turn cling to and pull out from the figure, thus enhancing some features while masking others. The diagonal jabot points at the hemline of the dress echo those at the hem of the Greek chlamys or cloak which will be discussed later. The swathed cowl neckline falls like the chiton in deep folds that curve around the neckline providing a light-reflecting frame for the face. The dress is fluid and mobile, comprising a tube of crêpe hung diagonally so that it hovers around the body, touching but not moulding it. It wraps around the frame, a third armhole doubled over one side of the body helping to hold the garment in place and adding to its swathed effect. The dress is a bold statement of Vionnet's skills - her commitment to experimental construction techniques which challenged both the acceptance of western tailoring and the need for applied decoration to add interest to a design. It also reflected Vionnet's desire for an alternative vision of femininity that gave women the confidence to go without corsetry and the restrictive idea of woman as culturally constructed artefact that it evoked. For Vionnet the pre-eminence of a sensual form of femininity was crucial to her work. While other designers, like Chanel and Patou, looked to masculine dress as a means to visualise a stronger, more independent and, importantly, more modern version of feminine dress, Vionnet always focussed on the curves of women's bodies as the basis of any design. Even her daywear and tailleurs owe less to men's tailoring techniques than those of

other designers. For her, modern femininity meant just that: feminine, not androgynous dress, which relied upon radical construction techniques to reassess gender roles rather than appropriating the symbolism of status and power inherent in masculine tailoring.

Vionnet had established her own house in 1912 and during the teens she focussed her attention on geometric forms, in particular the rectangle, as a basis of exploring her belief in paring designs down to their most essential forms. As Caroline Milbank Rennolds noted, 'Vionnet was called the Euclid of Fashion, and geometric shapes predominate in all her collections as decorative and functional devices.'¹ While such an approach may seem coolly aloof, the response to her garments had, from early on proved how revelatory this focus on fabric draped to the body was after centuries of seeing women only through the moulded mask of layers of restraining underwear.

While Vionnet was at the house of Doucet many of the vendeuses refused to show clients her designs, deeming them too risqué and immodest with their revealing drapes and use of lingerie techniques such as rolltucked hems and fagoting decoration to disguise seams. It is no surprise that many of her clients were actresses and demimondaines, women who were already made dubious by their public lives and who favoured the inherent eroticism of dress that focussed on the body. Vionnet's work expressed the problems of femininity in a period of such rapid change and upheaval. As gender roles altered under the impact of the First World, women needed to renegotiate their relationship to public spaces; no longer closeted, literally within the domestic sphere, or metaphorically by restrictive clothing or rigid moral codes, younger women sought means to signal this change. Vionnet had been brought to the house of Doucet to add a youthful charge to its designs and began her career there by eliminating the heavy satinised black cotton dresses which all house models wore under the couture designs that they showed to customers. She was gradually peel-

¹ Millbank Rennolds, C., *Couture*, London: Thames and Hudson, p.163

ing away the layers of stifling 19th century morality that had deemed no woman respectable who was not closed off from the world in corset and petticoat, her body a mysterious object encased in whalebone.

In this period of transition femininity was marked by ambiguity, likely to flip between seemingly contradictory ideas of public and private, moral and immoral. Classicism, the prism through which many designers were re-conceptualising the female form within a modernist context, was equally on the cusp. On the one hand it could be used by Mussolini as a right-wing vision of imperial dominance and military might through his appropriation of the imagery of Augustan Rome, yet on the other it provided a site for avant-garde experimentation, for example by Picasso. The mythologies circulating around classical source material, regarding its allegiance to transcendent ideals of pure mathematical form and eternal truths, ironically enabled it to be interpreted in radically different ways. In Vionnet's hands classicism provided a means to challenge and critique her own discipline, pushing at the boundaries of fashion by testing the limits of the classical ideal.

Other designers were also revealing the body through the lens of classical nudity. Mme Grès produced a series of finely pleated columns that were tucked and draped around the figure. But unlike Vionnet's work, her designs contained more structured underpinnings to sculpt and hold the figure within the fluid line of the light fabrics. They were images of classicism without the problematic display, albeit under a layer of crêpe, of naked flesh. While Grès's work was undoubtedly creative in its complex use of fabric, it did not represent the proto-feminist ideals that Vionnet's clothing explored. Both in her experimentation with the relationship between fabric and female body and with her advocacy of the rights of her (largely female) workforce, for whom she provided good working conditions and various benefits like paid holidays and medical care, Vionnet foregrounded feminine concerns.

Meanwhile Fortuny had followed a reformist line in his Greek inspired designs at the start of the century. They were symptomatic of a strand of dress that had run through the second half of the 19th century that sought an alternative to high fashion. Based on a healthier more natural form of dress, he built on ancient Greek ideals of beauty rather than the seasonal vagaries of haute couture. His Delphos gowns were worn by bohemians who recognised in his creations the ancient Greek peplos – a tube of fabric folded over at the neckline to produce a tunic effect at the top of the dress. His dresses were rendered in various soft jewel tones, their slim-line forms slipping easily over the wearer's head - a far cry from the complex layers of most early 20th century clothing which required a maid's assistance to get into.

Fortuny's crinkled pleats paid homage to the effects produced in Greek costume where linen, wool, cotton and later silk were draped in folds against the body or finely pleated to cling to the skin. The basic garment for women's dress was the chiton, a simple tube of rectangular fabric fixed at the shoulders and then caught with bands at the

waist and sometimes also the bustline. The peplos that Fortuny was so inspired by was a variation on the chiton, which added depth to the garment in its folded over top section. The various ways in which such drapery could be worn added nobility to the figure and emphasised the fabric's feeling of movement as it shifted around the body, constantly falling into new formations

Anne Hollander in her book *Seeing Through Clothes* stresses the importance of imagery like this and the works of art it has inspired over the centuries, in creating a mythology surrounding the draping of the nude body. They have trained the viewer's eye to see the body as most harmonious when draped in cloth. Hollander writes:

*'The nude body and draped cloth became essential elements of idealised vision; they came to seem correct for conveying the most valid truths of life, entirely through the persuasive force of their appearance in works of art rather than through the original significance attached to them in real life. The "natural" beauty of cloth and the "natural" beauty of bodies have been taught to the eye by art, and the same has been the case with the natural beauty of clothes.'*²

It is this mythologising of Greek dress as "natural" that plays an important part in its appeal to Madeleine Vionnet and other designers, who like her saw classical dress as the most appropriate form to adopt and adapt in the first half of the 20th century. It represents an already legitimised reverence for the human body which was newly revealed in the fashions of the period and this indisputable heritage helped to deflect criticism from those who found the revealing nature of such fashions immodest. Vionnet's work seeks to weave new mythologies around the body, adding to the meanings that art has attached to the classical body, by linking her designs firmly into the contemporary modernist, rather than seeking to replicate classical dress precisely.

The other garment that was particularly influential on Madeleine Vionnet was the chlamys or cloak which consisted of a rectangle draped over the shoulders and allowed to flow vertically down the body creating dips and points at the hem. The importance of being able to wear such free form garments was significant in demonstrating the status of the wearer, since as Hollander points out:

*'Sophistication, sexual allure, power and austerity could all be expressed by the style in which simple rectangles woven of different stuffs were disposed around the body.'*³

The complex drapes made by this most minimal of garments and the need to move while keeping the chlamys in place heightened the dynamic tension between body and fabric. It also acts as a metaphor for the complex meanings that western culture attaches to the deceptively simple lines of classical dress.

It was not just fashion designers who were looking to ancient Greece for new modes of expression. The American dancer Isadora Duncan used the highly recognisable forms of Greek art and dress to create performances of revolutionary freedom and experimentation. In Paris in 1907 she appeared in classical tunic, bare legs and sandals, a lithe form that symbolised both the stripped down

dynamism of modernity and the authenticity of ancient cultures. Her style represented both past and future. Her improvisational dance and draped body were emblematic of a period on the cusp of change – the classical reference point once again a means of imagining and authenticating the toned and revealed body that was to gradually emerge from the constricting fashions of the early 1900s and which was to come to dominate western fashion for the century to come.

For Madeleine Vionnet classicism was a starting point from which to create dramatically pared down forms that exploited the natural elasticity of the fabric to the full. Her designs were mobile, hanging free from the body anticipating each movement in their daringly simple shapes. One example from 1919-20 is notable for its use of rectangles of springy silk crêpe which drop on the diagonal from the shoulders, thus working on the bias of the fabric to produce a dress of geometric forms that appears sculptural and fluid as it pulls towards the curves of the wearer's body. Vionnet was known for her use of bias-cutting to increase the drape and movement of the fabric. While bias-cutting had existed before, in the 19th century its use had been restricted to trimmings, or the drapes of material had been fixed to an immobile lining. Vionnet used this technique to release the potential of the fabric and explore its relationship to the 3 dimensional forms of the body further. She said:

*'My efforts have been directed towards freeing material from the restrictions imposed on it, in just the same way that I have sought to liberate the female form. I see both as injured victims...and I've proved that there is nothing more graceful than the sight material hanging freely from the body. I've attempted to create an element of balance in my material so that the lines of a dress are not marred by any movement, but emphasised.'*⁴

In Vionnet's eyes, fabric had been limited by traditional cutting techniques, which literally restricted the female form, but were also symptomatic of woman's restricted role in western culture. By freeing the fabric she was also freeing the woman, enabling her body to be revealed and celebrated, unhampered by bourgeois notions of modesty and decorum. Like Isadora Duncan, expressive movement was the guiding motif and classicism the heroic prototype for a starkly modern image of femininity.

Bruce Chatwin, who interviewed Vionnet in 1973, three years before she died, spoke of the seriousness of Vionnet's commitment to her work. During her career fashion was still deemed a frivolous profession,

*'But for Madame Vionnet, who was once penniless, couture is not a minor art. Like the dance it is an evanescent art, but a great one. She sees herself as an artist on the level of say, Pavlova. She was single-minded in the pursuit of perfection, and even her exemplary common sense is tinged with a streak of fanaticism.'*⁵

He went on to recall the sparse modernist interior of her Paris apartment, saying,

*'On [the fireplace] stands a photo of the Parthenon: a talismanic photo, for Madame Vionnet has always turned to classical Greece for inspiration.'*⁶

This theme was continued in the new culture establishment in avenue Montaigne which she moved to in 1923. Frescoes by Georges de Feuve

depicted mythical scenes alongside classicised renditions of women wearing her best selling garments, enabling her clients to measure themselves against heroic templates of perfected beauty. Models presented her designs in this brightly-lit salon, whose creation was overseen by M. Chanut, who found that

*'What she wanted for the décor of her new salon was the same as what she wanted for her clothes: the space should be harmonious and classically inspired, but modern.'*⁷

Even the logo of her house expressed these themes in a simplified form – with a figure holding up a curving drape of fabric atop a classical column.

While the Vionnet dresses already discussed used classicism in an abstract way as a means to re-evaluate the space fabric creates around the body, some designs used Greek motifs in a more decorative manner. Genevieve Dufy, who worked for her after the first World War, recalled how Vionnet would make trips to the Louvre to study Greek vases and the couturiere discussed the influence these had on her work,

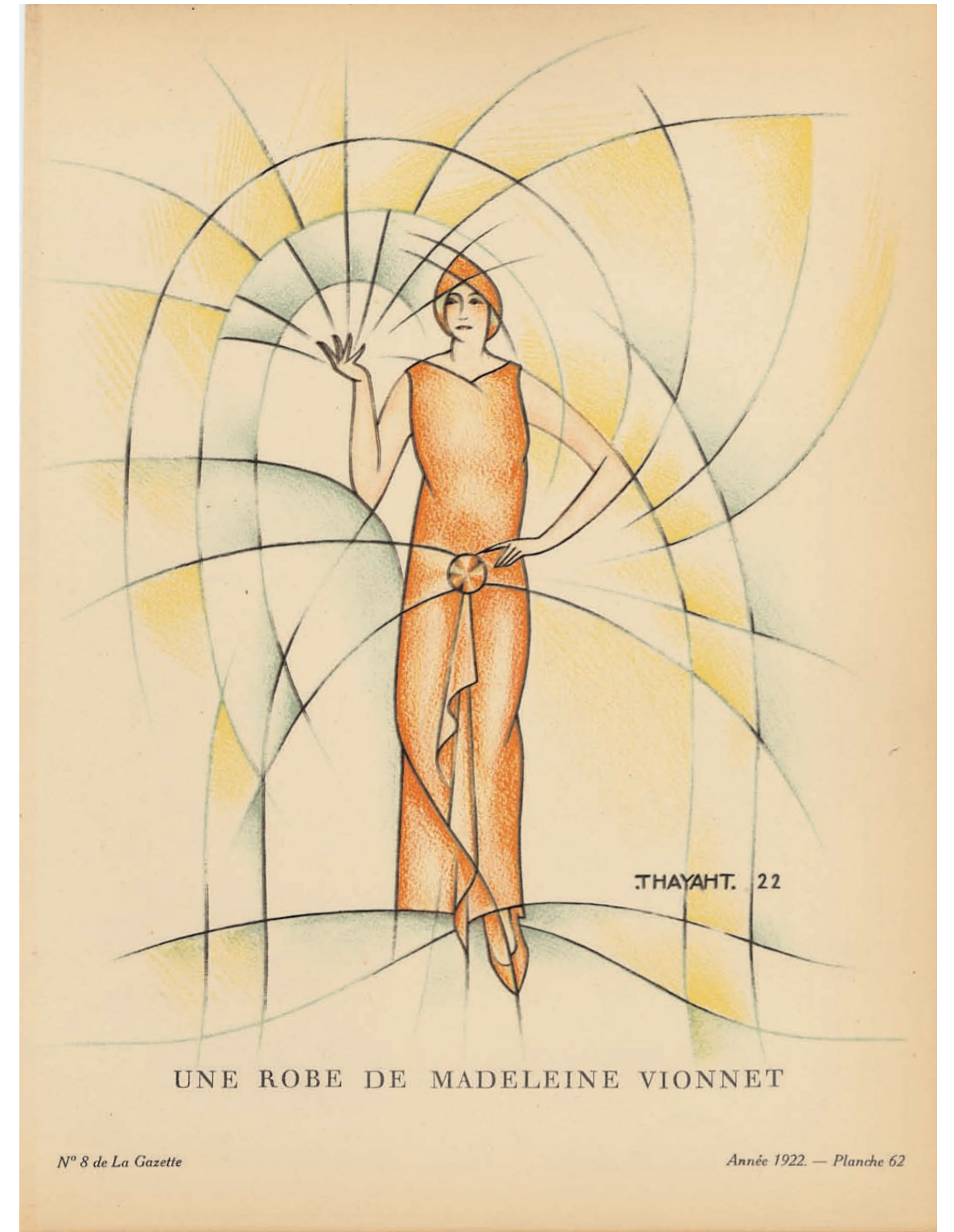
*'I like to look at old costumes and fashions of times gone by, because of what they say about their times. They tell so much about their era and the people in it. My inspiration comes from Greek vases, from the beautifully clothed women depicted on them, or even the noble lines of the vase itself.'*⁸

It is notable though that this interest in historical costume is never interpreted as nostalgic – partly because Vionnet's radical approach to construction methods continually broke new ground. But also because of our attitudes towards classicism – which is seen as a pure form, an eternal measure of excellence that transcends the period of its creation. Yet, surely there is a longing in this evocation of the past, a yearning for the ideals of balance, proportion, harmony and symmetry, which have themselves become mythologised in western culture. This cultural mythology reflects a desire to believe in stable 'golden ages' of the past as a means to find hope in the present. It is telling that classical reference points often resurface in periods of political and economic turmoil, for example in late eighteenth century France, and inter-war Europe in the twentieth century. While European artists and designers in the 1920s and 1930s sought to break with the past and find expression in the here and now, historicism played a role in reformulating contemporary representation, with classicism, as a signifier of the eternal, a key site for inventing a vision of newness.

An article from the *Werkbund* journal *Die Form* of 1930 emphasises the role of white, a key element of both classical and modern design in adding to a sense of the present, by stating that the white walls so favoured by modern architects,

*'Expose any error and control any space. Furthermore, everything is being painted white because white establishes the sense of the present. White is the modern state of mind. It is both a colour and an organising principle of modern life. Something to be seen and a way of seeing.'*⁹

The sweep of clear white fabric that dominates so many of Vionnet's designs may certainly be read in terms of control of both fabric and flesh, since, despite having freed the body from the



restraint of the corset, there is still a sense of control of the self through exercise and diet to produce the requisite toned modernist body. Control is also implicit in the desire for pure geometrical rationality in Vionnet's work and that of modernist architects like Le Corbusier, who could be seen as searching for a controlled and contained representation of the body/home/workplace to mitigate against the impending crisis of the contemporary period. Classical whiteness therefore states allegiance to an all conquering eternal set of truths, yet inevitably reflects the present, fixing designer and designed object in their own cultural and historical context, as products of their time as well as creators of the way that period is viewed and interpreted.

Meanwhile Vionnet did not just use whiteness to refer to classical sources. Her 'Little Horses' dress of 1924, which was shown in the *Musee des Tissus* Madeleine Vionnet exhibition in Lyons in 1995, saw her integrate decorative embroidery – so popular in the twenties – with her usual rigorous

exploration of new techniques. The dress is cut on the bias to add fluidity and lightness to the silhouette and normally applied embroidery would have weighed down the design, working against the diagonal cut of the fabric. Albert Lesage therefore developed a new technique to follow the bias grain and enable the dress to maintain the elasticity that Vionnet's construction methods required, covering the dress in tiny blue bugle beads that filled in the negative spaces of the design like a Red Figure vase. Cecil Beaton spoke of Vionnet's modernist view of classical source material during the twenties in his book *The Glass of Fashion*:

*'When the fashionable silhouette was flat, Vionnet worked in the round, evolving a harmony between the supple curves of the feminine body and the hang of drapery that was to be fluted as a Hellenic column. She made a Greek dress in a way the Greeks could never have imagined; there was nothing archaic about her lines. Everything Vionnet created had a cling or a flow, and women dressed by her were like moving sculptures.'*¹⁰

2 Hollander, A, *Seeing through Clothes*, California: Yale, 1993, p.xiii

3 Hollander, *ibid.*, p.5

4 Quoted in Marie Claire, May 1937, in Demornex, J, Vionnet, London: Thames & Hudson, 1991, p.137

5,6 Chatwin, B., *What am I doing Here*, London: Picador, 1990, p.86-8

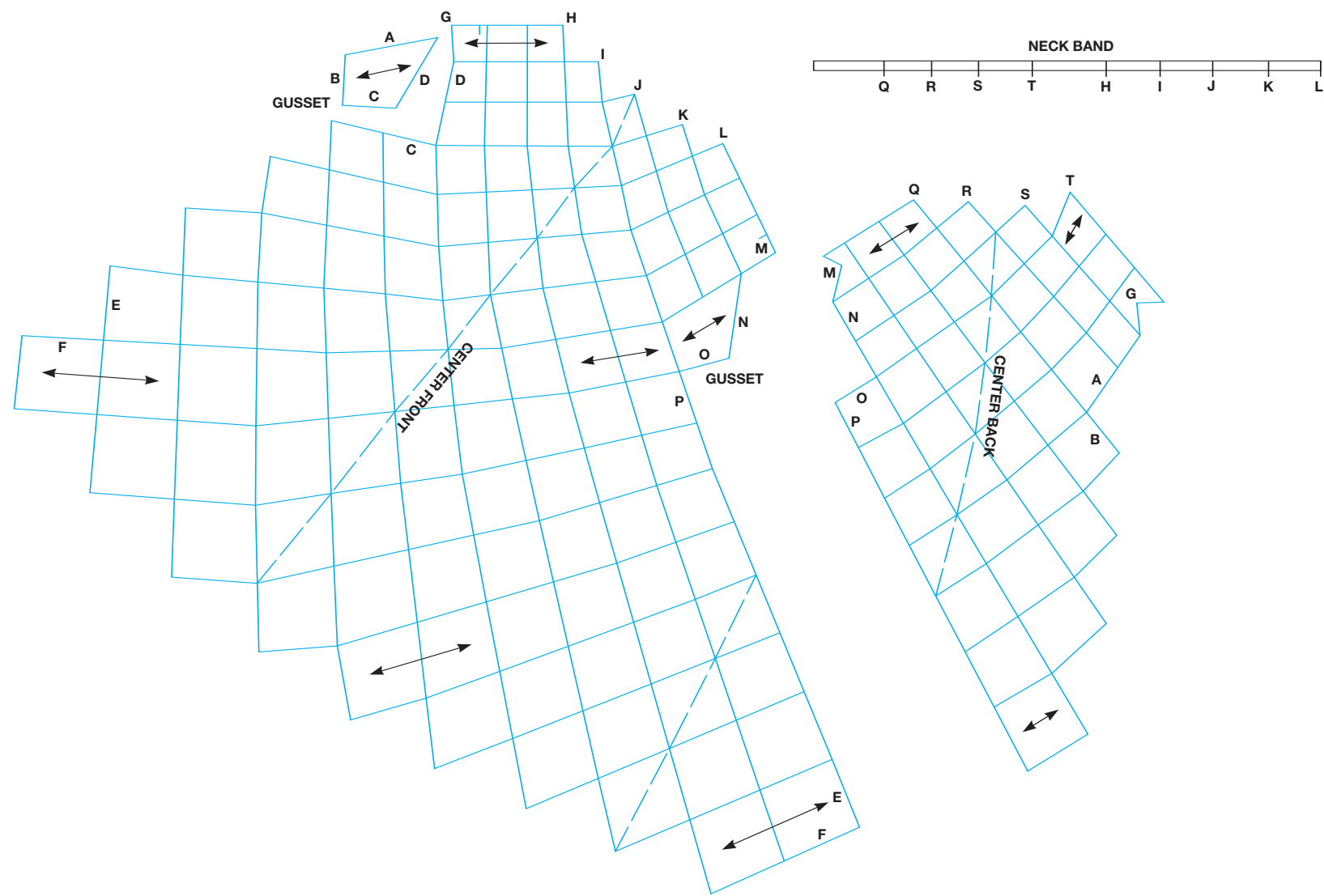
7 Kirke, B, *Madeleine Vionnet*, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998, p.119

8 *ibid.*, p.41

9 Hamman, J.E., 'Weiss alles Weiss', *Die Form*, 1930, quoted in Wigley, M., *White Walls and Designer Dresses*, *The Fashioning of Modern Architecture*, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995, p.208

10 Beaton, C., *The Glass of Fashion*, London: Cassell, 1989, p.183

11 Hollander, *op.cit.*, p.153



While modernism spoke of standardisation in most areas of design, with mass-production sowing the seeds of a standardised body, Vionnet's couture was set firmly within the old world of individually fitted fashion. However, it also hinted at the standardised fashionable body that was to dominate the twentieth century with the designer's adoration of the lithe, toned figure that became the iconic, model ideal.

The bias cut was the foundation upon which Vionnet's design philosophy was built. It enabled her to smooth the link between structure and decoration, body and fabric to create a contained and unified image. The wearer's body was revealed and yet concealed by the smooth layer of spiralling fabric. As the thirties began, French couture began to feel the impact of the Depression - 1927 had been the peak year for couture sales but now the economic climate had radically changed and Vionnet predicted a shift towards the simpler styles that she had always favoured. From the early to mid 1930s she focussed more and more on white fabric. Her colour palette had always been fairly limited - indeed it was left to her assistant Marcelle Chaumont to add colours to her designs - but now white seemed strangely appropriate. White is associated in the west with purity, it speaks of cool statuary - a protective layer of classical imagery to idealise and mythologise the female figure.

The images which best encapsulate the importance and meaning of classicism within Vionnet's work are Hoyningen-Huene's 1931 photographs of her favourite model - Sonia dancing in silk crêpe romaine pyjamas, replicating the grace-

ful moves of dancers depicted on Greek vases. Sonia was filmed dancing in this manner - her image preserved by 20th century technology as she recreated the spirit of classical antiquity. Anne Hollander has suggested that the advent of moving pictures irrevocably altered the way that clothing was perceived,

*'Women, once thought to glide, were seen to walk...The various dance crazes of the first quarter of the century undoubtedly were an expression of this restless spirit, but its most important vehicle was the movies.'*¹¹

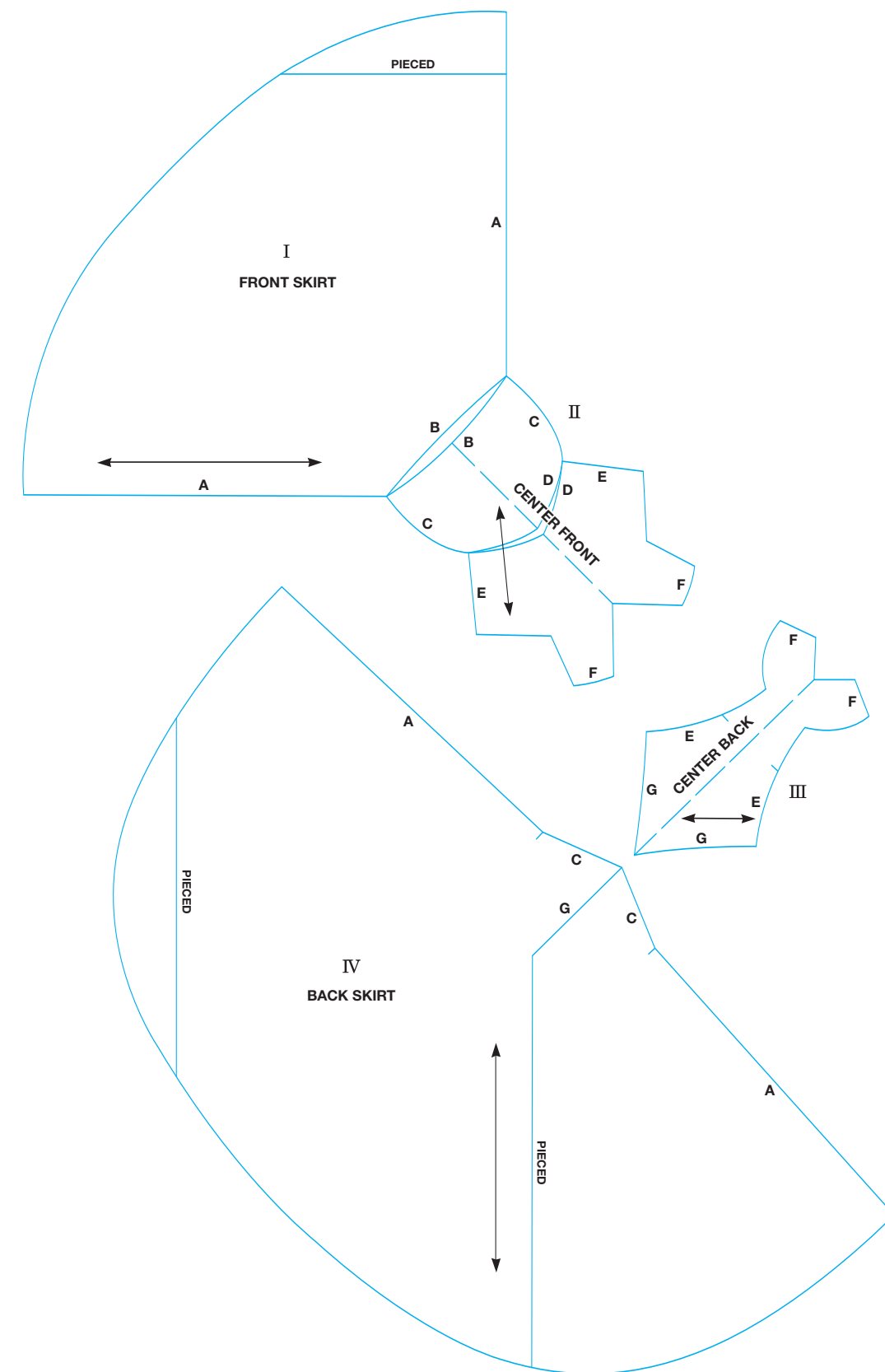
Film emphasised and enhanced the impact of movement on the relationship between fabric and body. In the footage of Vionnet's model Sonia, it is the fluidity of the material floating around her limbs that is most striking. What is also noteworthy is the way that Sonia seems to glow. The pale colour of her garments, the white of her skin and blonde hair transforms her into a glowing streak of light that inhabits the dark backdrop. Her form at times seems to have turned into an electrical current signalling movement and flux, as the fabric of her evening pyjamas settles and reforms constantly as she dances. The impact of such bright, white fashions and hairstyles was not lost on Hollywood, where screen stars like Jean Harlow were lit to maximise the glitter of their shiny white gowns, their pale skin and hair as shorthand for feminine allure and sexuality. The relationship between such filmic images and fashion in the thirties also tends to 'fix' such imagery in a particular period. While the dresses worn nod towards a timeless ideal of beauty and dressing, they capture the period's fas-

ination with whiteness, at the aesthetic level of cinematography, reflecting what Hamman wrote above concerning white as a way of 'seeing', but also as a product of cultural unease about race, when whiteness was still an unproblematic marker of superiority and dominance.

Like the so-called 'goddess' dresses that Vionnet was making during the same period, the model becomes an ideal. Her smoothly made-up face and carefully curled blonde hair make her into a vision of sculptural perfection. Vionnet sought for 'true beauty' in her designs - an eternal or at least classical ideal that relied upon Platonic notions of proportion and wholeness. Each feature must be carefully balanced with the other - the harmony of facial and physical features extended and merged with the proportions of the dress. The model becomes the embodiment of an idea - an ideal of impossible perfection a dream of completeness - an invulnerable body with flaws smoothed away to construct an untouchable goddess of aloof physical unity.

There is a Roman myth that tells of Tuccia, a vestal virgin whose chastity is called into question. To prove herself she prays to the goddess Vesta and then goes to the river Tiber and dips her sieve in the water, filling it to the brim and then miraculously carrying the water back to the temple of Vesta as proof of her continence. As Marina Warner points out in her discussion of the iconography surrounding Tuccia in her book *Monuments and Maidens*,

'Tuccia's sieve, miraculously made whole by the power of her own wholeness, provides us with a symbol



*of ideal integrity, that puns on the semantics of virtue, and constitutes in itself a kenning on the inherent properties of goodness.'*¹²

Warner goes on to show how this allegory has echoed down the centuries, with feminine virtue being repeatedly associated with notions of completeness. Women's bodies are seen as ambiguous, and made culturally and morally acceptable, only when they appear to be clean, smooth and impenetrable. Warner continues:

*'Tuccia's sieve is an unsound vessel that becomes sound by a miracle, like the body of a woman, which, with its open orifices, dangerous emissions and distressing aptitude for change, can yet become preternaturally sound when representing the good.'*¹³

During the 19th century this soundness was provided by the cuirass of the corset, which held in women's dangerous flesh, shielding the

problematic natural body beneath a whale-boned layer that culturally defined the body with its unambiguous firm lines. The figure was therefore quite literally contained and made whole in order to denote the virtuousness of the wearer and assuage collective fears of the female body.

In Vionnet's designs the corset is discarded and the natural body revealed yet smoothed out and contained by a film of bias-cut fabric, a perfected second skin that makes the wearer's body once again miraculously complete. The reflective pale tones of the silk crêpe merges with her milky skin. She is a sculpture, an impenetrable whole. Yet Vionnet has added a warm sensuality to her figure, which although 'protected' by the completeness of her image speaks more of a celebration of femininity than fear of the realities of the female body. Vionnet's goddess dresses rephrase the allegory of

Tuccia's sieve, by enabling the whole body to be free and to move - at once evoking ideals of the 'soundness', while at the same time making the figure a mobile plastic creation of flesh and fabric.

The heroic, monumental image of the 'goddess dress' was evoked by other designers like Paquin, and imposing classical features provided backdrops for numerous fashion photographs of the thirties. Women were encouraged to use the classical proportions of the sculptures's faces as a measure of their own beauty. Mary G. Winkler commented, 'these images [in fashion magazines] are secularised remnants of a very ancient practice: the use of images as the foundation for self-reformation through empathy and emulation.'¹⁴

The face itself became a focus for the classicising trend. Fashion photographs and importantly, Hollywood, encouraged women to use make-up to perfect their features, to make them photogenic, ready for the spectator with cosmetics that could achieve far more natural effects than ever before. The mask-like decoratively made-up face of the previous decade was replaced by a coolly chic vision of 'natural' i.e. classical beauty that like the well-proportioned classical body was worn as an emblem of goodness.

Kate de Castelbajac sees this form of make-up as symptomatic of women's desire to present an image of control and calm to escape both the desperation of the Depression and also as a glamorous mask for the sense of confusion surrounding women's role in a period of economic and political crisis. De Castelbajac writes,

*'This emotional need could be approached only by an idealised femininity, which planted the seeds of an obsession that would affect the appearance of women of the rest of the century. The ideas of 'looking good' and 'feeling good' became inextricably connected for the first time, and the identification of goodness with beauty is crucial to the understanding of thirties woman.'*¹⁵

The bias cut required a slim toned body, which has become familiar as the standard model figure. As Madge Garland recalled,

*'In fact, what the new fashion required was nothing less than a perfectly proportioned body with a naturally indented waist, small rounded breasts which needed no support, perfect shoulders, an absolutely flat back, and exceptionally slender thighs ending in extra long legs.'*¹⁶

With underwear kept to the minimum, dresses like the one worn by Meredith Frampton's sitter in her 1935 painting in the Tate Gallery revealed the body to an unprecedented degree. The young woman shown wears a bias-cut dress of palest pink, the fabric hovering on the surface of her skin, revealing prominent hipbones and slim legs beneath its folds. Madeleine Vionnet stated that the bias cut was elastic enough to accommodate various body sizes, but as she noted in an interview for Marie Claire in 1937,

*'I feel that my profession must enable me to bring out the best in the most varied types of women. Throughout my life I've always tried to be a 'doctor' of the female form. As such my aim has been to teach my clients to respect their bodies, to exercise and to have a disciplined approach to their health, discarding any items which might constrict and deform them.'*¹⁷

During the 1930s numerous exercise pro-

12 Warner, M., *Monuments & Maidens, The Allegory of the Female Form*, London: Vintage, 1996, p.242
13 *ibid.*, p.254

14 Winkler, M.G., 'Model Women', Winkler, M.G., & Cole, L. B., (eds), *The Good Body, Asceticism in Contemporary Culture*, London: Yale, 1994, p.222

15 de Castelbajac, K., *The Face of the Century, 100 Hundred Years of Makeup & Style*, NY:Rizzoli, 1995, p.62

16 Garland, M., *The Indecisive Decade, The World of Fashion & Entertainment in the Thirties*, London: MacDonald, 1968, p.185
17 Quoted in Marie Claire, May 1937, in Demornex, op.cit., p.137

18 Bordo, S., *Unbearable Weight, Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, University of California Press, 1995, p.185
19 Foucault, M., *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*,

Penguin, 1990, p.43-44
20 Hollander, A., *Sex & Suits, The Evolution of Modern Dress*, NY: Kodansha, 1994, p.134-5

MADELEINE VIONNET

15 DRESSES FROM THE COLLECTION OF MARTIN KAMER



MADELEINE VIONNET was one of the most significant couturiers of the 20th century. She opened her first couture house in 1912, having already worked for a number of notable designers in London and Paris, and continued to design until she closed her salon on the outbreak of the Second World War. During this time her radical approach to draping and cutting fabric to encircle the figure challenged the way fashion is designed and suggested new ways to define and enhance the female body. Her clothing emphasised adult femininity rather than androgynous youth, and enabled women to negotiate the transition from private to public sphere in ensembles that were technically complex, while aesthetically streamlined. Thus she proposed a modern ideal of femininity that was confident and independent, with discreet daywear that hovered close to the skin and allowed the

wearer to move with ease and fluidity, and evening-wear that was often daringly provocative and used lingerie as its main source of inspiration.

Vionnet's technical prowess, both in understanding fabric's potential and in cutting garments to work with the whole of the body, is unquestioned, but she is not well known today outside the fashion world. When Madeleine Chapsal interviewed Vionnet, she commented, 'C'est fragile, une robe,' to which the designer replied,

*'Pas les miennes. Vu le matériau que j'utilisais, et par leur valeur artistique, elles étaient faites pour traverser le temps. Tout ce que j'ai fait, je l'ai fait dans cet esprit-là: pour que ça dure toujours.'*¹

The longevity of her designs is indubitable; stylistically many look as fresh and modern today as they did eighty years ago and the quality of her fabric and construction has indeed led many to sur-

vey. This exhibition brings together fifteen examples of her work from Martin Kamer's private collection. They cover the period from 1917 to the mid-1930s when she was one of the most sought-after couturiers in Paris. They demonstrate her technical and aesthetic skills, her delicacy of touch, her love of lingerie techniques like fagoting to create integral decoration, and her famous abilities with the bias cut.

These dresses enable us to celebrate her importance within early 20th century fashion and as a source inspiration to later designers like John Galiano, Azzedine Alaïa, and Issey Miyake and to ensure that the name of one of the most revolutionary designers of the last century will not be forgotten.

¹ Millbank Rennolds, C., *Couture*, London: Thames and Hudson, p.163

Catalogue Images

Black bias cut evening dress, c.1933

This inky black, bias cut dress epitomises Vionnet's lightness of touch. While its construction is complex enabling the fabric to sculpt around the stomach, shoulder blades and the small of the back through a series of diagonals and rectangles, the overall effect is of effortless simplicity. It is sleeveless, with a high neckline at the front and back straps framing the shoulder blades like a swimming costume, a line that was known as the 'Vionnet décolleté'.¹

It is designed to enhance the body without being revealing, turning it into a sculptural column of black silk. The dress comprises a bold configuration of fabric, a network of diagonals shapes the dress, adding slight fullness to the diamond shape piece over the stomach and pulling in at the sides to define the figure. Twin seams run down the back of the dress to the hem to sculpt and emphasise the legs.

Although the dress is absolutely plain, Vionnet has achieved a sophisticated decorative effect through her skilful manipulation of the fabric to produce a startling effect as the light falls across the material. Some sections appear smooth and glossy, others more matte and textured. This painterly use of black would have been enhanced as the wearer moved, allowing the light to flow down the larger pattern pieces in the skirt, while presenting a complex range of tones and textures over the top of the body. The dress represents both Vionnet's virtuoso skills at employing the bias cut to manoeuvre fabric around the figure and her desire to focus on less obvious areas of the body, like the small of the back and shoulder blades, to emphasise the wearer's femininity.

Black bias cut dress, c.1932-3

Vionnet used bias cutting to 'load' fabric with movement, each shift of the wearer's body was anticipated by the elasticity that she built into her designs. The diagonal flow of the material's grain accentuated and amplified the relationship between skin and garment. In this example, she has released the crêpe's potential elastic properties by cutting on the cross to produce a slender dress, its pared-down form and in-built movement speak of dynamism and modernity.

The silhouette is kept as spare as possible, the front of the dress a sheath of deepest matte black, sleeveless, with a shallow 'V' neckline, which ends in two broad straps at the back. The front and back of the dress are connected by two long, low triangular seams that start under the shoulder straps at the back, then point inwards at either side of the torso before they curve down, to edge towards the back of the dress and end in straight seams to the hem. The wearer's figure is thus given shape and definition as the fabric hovers and ripples around her.

The dress's impact is enhanced by its stark black fabric, a colour that had long been popular for eveningwear, but which, along with white took on new connotations during the twenties and thirties. As Claudia Gould noted in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, *In Black & White: Dress from the 1920s to Today*,

'These colours, or non-colours, have played a central part in the evolution of modern – and modernist – art and design, regardless of the specific object involved. In fashion in particular, their use and significance have been well noted, as the black of mourning

became the black of classical and later cynical stylishness and the white of infancy, virginity and sport took on new connotations.'²

Slip, c. 1933

This bias-cut slip demonstrates Vionnet's desire for consistency of line and for the perfection of a smooth silhouette for every ensemble. Although the outer-dress that this slip was made to be worn with does not survive, it is possible to surmise that its seams would have matched those of the slip. This would ensure that both hung evenly from the shoulders, with the fabric then hovering around the figure in an unbroken, fluid line. The Victoria and Albert Museum has a number of examples of such slips by Vionnet from the mid-1930s (for example, one of pale blue slip, c.1932, T.197A-1973), which are accompanied by evening dresses of the same colour and cut as the slips.

For Vionnet, who began as an apprentice to a lingerie firm at the age of 11, underwear was a crucial component of couture. She had eliminated restrictive foundation garments early in her career, but lingerie remained an abiding influence, both in construction details, with fagoting and roll-tucked hems for example, and the deshabillé of so many of her evening dresses.

This semi-transparent lime-yellow rosalba chiffon slip provides a ghostly trace of the dress that was worn over it. The sinuous silhouette it creates hints at the mid-1930s. This was a period when Vionnet's visually simple, yet technically complex eveningwear was a dominant influence in fashion and film costume. Such dresses

grammes were devised to discipline and control the body, sculpting the muscles into the desired lean form. Nutritionists also produced diet regimes that were popular at health and beauty spas. Increasingly there was a need to produce a culturally acceptable idealised form that spoke of a healthy, that is to say carefully controlled intake of food, and exercised figure. Once again, there was a classical precedent to be followed. As Susan Bordo discusses in her book, *Unbearable Weight*,

*'Aristocratic Greek culture made a science of the regulation of food intake, as a road to self-mastery and the practice of moderation in all things.'*¹⁸

This creation of a public self that intimated a rational, perfected inner self spoke of status, spirituality and virtue. Once again we see the natural body being mastered to make it 'sound' and impenetrable, with firm muscles and toned skin. In the thirties slim bodies were equally symbolic of social and cultural value.

The body created rejected the continually changing silhouettes of the previous century and the corsetry that had artificially sculpted women's figures. The classical toned body was viewed as timeless, superior to transient fashion fads and, since control was invisible, with exercise and diet shaping the body from within, as a return to the 'natural'. Foucault linked the strengthening and controlling of the body through diet regimens and exercise to the development and care of the 'self'. Such practises, he argues, were developing during the Classical period and were grounded in moral ideas relating to power and control, of both the individual and the culture as a whole. In *Care of Self* he writes,

*"This "cultivation of the self" can be briefly characterised by the fact that in this case the art of existence...is dominated by the principle that says one must "take care of oneself". It is this principle of the care of the self that establishes its necessity, presides over its development, and organises its practice.'*¹⁹

Thus the need to attend to the body and produce a culturally acceptable exterior self is explicitly linked to the implied 'goodness' of the interior self. This again belies the suggested effortlessness and naturalness of the classically body, since it is set within a complex set of moral and cultural processes.

By extension, there is a temptation to read the Vionnet clothes that we have been looking at as 'nude', since fabric and body appear as one. As Anne Hollander says, Vionnet and Mme Grès,

*'Used fabric in a sculptural way, as if it were an extension of the mobile flesh, modelling it directly on the body to make a complete plastic and tangible composition.'*²⁰

Caroline Evans and Minna Thornton clarify this idea in *Women & Fashion* by saying,

*'[Vionnet's] dresses represent not so much a return to nature as an attempt to re-confront the raw material out of which women are (culturally) constructed, actively to mediate between nature and culture via the body and clothing. They are a brave attempt to underdetermine the female body.'*²¹

Vionnet's work was certainly a radical departure from the complex layers that had comprised fashionable dress at the turn of the twentieth century and Vionnet herself asserted that her

dresses were, 'not for fashion...I only like that which lasts forever.'²²

This desire for an immortal form of clothing was clearly expressed in her 'goddess' dresses, photographed against classical pillars, a visual emblem of their timeless status. Dress/body/sculpture/architecture – become a cohesive whole.

It is significant that Vionnet's last collections before she closed her couture house on the outbreak of World War 2, drew upon early 19th century neo-classicism as a source. The high bustlines she showed evoked the austere rationality of that period's application of classical principles. Nikolaus Pevsner described neo-classical art and design of the first years of the 1800s as modernism's 'first chapter' and in this collection classicism becomes an expression of modernist intent once more. Modernist architecture had also seen a link to the purity of ancient forms. Le Corbusier praised such an influence as a means to strip down architecture, cleanse it of unnecessary decorative elements and construct timeless, perfect buildings, controlled and 'naked' with their stark white walls and geometric forms. Once again we return to this idea of nudity in relation to whiteness and clear lines. Mark Wigley, in his discussion of the use of white in modernist architecture comments on the contradictory reading of white walls as 'naked', saying,

*'While everyone seems to be everywhere concerned with the beauty and purity of the naked body, modern architecture itself is not naked. From the beginning, it is painted white and this white layer that proclaims that the architecture it covers is naked clearly has an extraordinarily ambiguous role.'*²³

This recognition of the layer of meaning that supposedly 'pure' whiteness represents, whether created by paint or fabric is important in deciphering the complex meaning attached to Vionnet's work, in particular, as has already been shown, during the thirties when classical references and images of white could contain such extreme and opposite meanings. It must be remembered that as Wigley notes,

*'The white wall is an item of clothing, authorised at once by modernity and the classical tradition, a recovery of the spartan puritan dress that befits the controlled nobility required in the face of mechanised life.'*²⁴

Both the modernist architect's buildings and Madeleine Vionnet's dress strive for nudity, for stripping away the transient elements of fashion and the search for a timeless form of design. However, both the classical sources that they explored and abstracted, and the whiteness with which they coloured their creations are themselves imbued with multiple layers of complex cultural meaning. They are linked to persistent western notions of whiteness in general as 'neutral', the 'norm', but as Richard Dyer discusses in his book, *White*,

*'This way of conceptualising white as a hue, apparently the most objective aspect of colour, provides a habit of perception that informs how we think and feel about its other aspects. The slippage between white as a colour and white as colourlessness forms part of a system of thought and affect whereby white people are both particular and nothing in particular, are both something and non-existent.'*²⁵



²¹ Evans, C., & Thornton, M., *Women & Fashion*, A New Look, London: Quartet, 1989, p.118

²² Kirke, op. cit., p.41

²³ Wigley, M., 'White Out: Fashioning Modern Architecture', Fausch, D., Singley, P., El-Khoury, R., Efrat, Z., *Architecture in Fashion*, NY: Princeton Architectural Press, 1994, p.172

²⁴ *ibid.*, p.238

²⁵ Dyer, R., *White*, London: Routledge, 1997, p.47

²⁶ Kirke, op. cit., p.14

¹ Kirke, B., *Madeleine Vionnet*, Chronicle Books, 1998, p.89

² Gould, C., Introduction, *In Black & White: Dress from the 1920's to Today*, Wexler Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, 1992



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turned women into modern sculptures, they looked to the future in their revolutionary simplicity, while legitimising their daring by recalling goddesses of the classical past.

4

Black chiffon dress, c.1928

The delicacy of this ensemble encapsulates Vionnet's lightness of touch. The pale, flesh-toned slip hangs from narrow spaghetti straps. It is bias-cut to shape to the wearer's figure, which would appear nude beneath the dress's fine black silk chiffon frame. The fragile chiffon consists of two inverted 'T' shape pieces of fabric sewn at the shoulders to produce a slash neckline. The dress is sewn down each side to the top of the thigh, to leave deep slits that reveal the slippery silk slip underneath. The waistline is slightly dropped in line with contemporary fashion and tied with a long gauze belt, which rests on the hips. At this point the rolled edges of the chiffon stand out slightly from the body, leaving a tiny ripple of fabric to slip down the side of each leg.

During a decade when simple shift dresses proliferated, frequently decorated with heavy embroidery and beadwork to enliven their basic form, Vionnet has used a more inventive form of ornamentation. As was usual in her work, decoration has been refined to take part in the shaping of the garment as a whole. The narrow tucks that swirl into abstract representations of Vionnet's signature rose motif are subtly graduated to gently shape the dress in towards the wearer's figure. For Vionnet such exact craftsmanship was the means to test the boundaries of construction techniques. This enabled her to incorporate elements of fashionable style into garments that fundamentally challenged the basis of fashion itself: fabric's relationship to the body. The wearer's body would be smoothed by the milky pink crêpe silk slip and then accentuated by shadowy black chiffon: apparently naked, yet completely covered in fluid fabric.

5

Black dress with decorative fagoting, s/s 1933

(No label, but photographed as Model 3560 in *Archives de Paris, March 1933*)

Madeleine Chapsal writes that early in her career Vionnet used the bias cut 'pour mettre à vu ce que le début du siècle ne voulait pas voir, le corps des femmes, la différence sexuelle.'³ It is difficult now, when we are so used to seeing the female form exposed in fashion imagery, to imagine just how revolutionary and startling Vionnet's designs were. It is unsurprising that actresses, used to displaying their bodies to the best advantage, were some of her most loyal clients. While the bias cut provided an idealised second skin for the wearer, Vionnet's use of lingerie techniques and flesh coloured fabrics set against smoky black transparent chiffons, created a sexual subtext that spoke of greater intimacy and the act of undressing, without actually showing much flesh.

This ensemble clearly conveys these qualities. The flesh-toned slip, with a transparent section over the bust is cut to encircle the body, and to match the tone of the opaque silk stockings worn at this period. The slip is shorter than the dress to further blur the distinction between fabric and flesh as it would appear to merge with the stockings. Over this a sheer black silk chiffon dress slips easily over the head. Cut on the bias to hover around the apparently nude body beneath, the fabric is left completely plain, except for a decorative section at the top of the dress. Diagonal lines of fagoting, a favourite Vionnet lingerie device, run from the shoulders of the kimono sleeves to meet in a point at the centre front of the bodice. They provide a delicate 'sketched' decoration that, at the back of the dress meets in the middle back in a series of vertical diamonds

of opaque fabric that look like vertebrae running down between the shoulder blades.

6

Black resist dye dress with white spots, s/s 1935

(No label but UFAC vol.63, photo 63)

A distinctive dress that fits to the upper body through a complex series of sewn and unsewn tucks and folds. The fabric is a thick, crisp silk that has been resist-dyed to produce a black ground with irregular ivory spots. The top section of the dress sculpts to the figure, with tucks extending from centre front, up over the sleeve, to produce an effect that is architectural, defining the breast, and supporting the stand-up collar, while giving structure the top of the sleeves. The tucks decrease in size as they reach up the body, reducing to a small inverted 'V' at the shoulder. At the back the tucks form a series of sewn down pleats across the shoulder blades. The 'skirt' of the dress hangs straight from the bustline, providing a simple surface in contrast to the intricate structure above.

The sewn-down tucks from bust to sleeve stiffen the collar, which is further supported by folds that are left unsewn as they approach the throat, allowing the fabric to curve around the neckline. The material is folded over double at the top to add to its crispness and enable the wearer to turn it over to form the collar.

7

Ivory velvet dress with Lesage embroidery, a/w 1921/22

Model 1391 UFAC vol. 2, green embroidered label

Vionnet's understanding of fabric is unsurpassed. Her ability to optimise the way a textile would hang and move with the body combined an instinctive feeling for fabric with a keen eye made increasingly acute by years of studying fabrics' capabilities. This closeness to the basic ingredients of fashion – fabric and body – extended to her ability to create decoration by exploring the properties of a particular material, in this case ivory velvet.

The dress consists of diamond shaped pieces of velvet, which are uniform in size, except at the sides, where they enlarge to accommodate the hips and give shape to the dress as a whole. The decorative effect is created through the pile of the fabric, which runs in opposite directions in each row of diamonds. This means that when the light hits the dress some rows appear shiny, densely opaque and of the palest coffee colour. Other rows reflect a more matte ivory sheen. This effect changes according to the lighting of the room, when held up to a lamp the dress suddenly turns into a transparent glowing flame of off-white light, with the lines of gold Lesage embroidery that trace each panel of the dress gleaming against the velvet's pile. A golden cord is looped through the points of the diamonds at the top to form a neckline and skinny straps. The hem of the dress echoes these points. Such dramatic, integrated ornamentation on a simple silhouette represents another example of Vionnet's innovative approach to integral decoration.

Picolée roses dress, 1922

The bateau neckline of this dress enables the wearer to slip it on smoothly over her head and allow the thick black crêpe to slip gently around her figure.

As with most of Vionnet's clothes, this takes the minimum of effort to put on, yet is nonetheless complex in its conceptualisation of the body as a three-dimensional whole. This emphasis on ease is part of Vionnet's modernising spirit, and mediates against couture's tradition for emphasising the wearer's status through the difficulty in actually wearing its creations and the need for a maid to

assist in dressing.

The dress consists of two broad bands of fabric, one at the front, one at the back, which produce a tubular silhouette, shaped to the figure by a tuck either side of the torso at waist level. This adds fullness to the top half of the dress, and this is increased by an interior belt at the back, which pulls the fabric into the waist to produce a subtle bloused effect while never diminishing the streamlined silhouette. An orange version of the same dress appears in the July 1922 issue of *Art, Gout et Beauté*. Worn with a wide-brimmed hat it demonstrates Vionnet's ability to chime with the fashionable silhouette while simultaneously testing the ways in which such a line can be created.

The dress reaches to just above the ankles and is decorated down whole length of each side by a broad band of same colour gauze applied with row upon row of tiny handmade roses. The rose was Vionnet's signature flower and here it is used to add a romantic edging that breaks up the severity of the dress's line. In her book, *La Chair de la Robe*, Vionnet's goddaughter Madeleine Chapsal recalls her saying,

'Ah! Mes robes souples, dans ces étoffes magnifiques qui ne sont plus! Ces beaux tissus que me fournissaient les soyeux lyonnais, Bianchini me fabriquant des taffetas, mélangés, chatoyants...Làdedans, je faisais des robes qui se tenaient, mais taillées avec de l'ampleur, et je mettais dessus mes petits roses. Elles étaient devenues grosses comme des soucoupes, mes petites roses, et faites dans un biais tournant, pour enlever la platitude du tissu.'⁴

9

Black dress with tassels, before 1920

Vionnet opened her first couture salon on the rue de Rivoli in 1912 but closed it for most of the First World War, during which time she travelled to Rome. However, a few dresses survive from c.1917, the black wrapped dress in this collection is one of them, and it is possible that this may be another.

It is made of heavy black silk satin, trimmed around the 'V' neckline with four rows of tiny black bugle beads. As with the other wrapped and tied dresses in the exhibition there is a hint of flesh where the ties that hold the dress together slip through slits at the side to wrap around the body.

While the dress' bodice is quite simple, the skirt is a complex geometrical exercise, which demonstrates Vionnet's mathematical approach to design. It is formed by a series of deep diamond shapes, sewn together at the waistline and down each side, so that the hemline comprises a narrow opening composed of a series of points. The centre point of the diamond shaped pieces is trimmed with a black silk tassel that would have hung down the skirt when the wearer stood still, but which would have swung out from the skirt as she danced.

Navy blue dress with ivory and red dots, 1933

A light, supple dress of navy blue silk printed with ivory and red spots, which is cut on the bias to hover around the figure and ensure maximum fluidity of the fabric. This dress is an example of Vionnet's sophisticatedly simple daywear that emphasises the line of the body without restricting it in any way.

It slips over the head and drapes softly around the three dimensions of the body. The neckline is cut straight at the back then curves at the edges to fold and fall into a wide drape at the front. This drape is echoed by the gentle fall of fabric across the stomach between the small bow ties just above each hip. This style cleverly incorporates decorative detail in the strategically placed



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bows that simultaneously hold the dress in place at waist level, thus enhancing the movement of the skirt and the bloused effect of the bodice.

The sleeves are cut in two pieces and seamed to curve around the arm with tiny triangles of fabric shaping into the wrist.

11

Black wrapover dress, c.1917

Comprised of ebony black satin this dress is sleek and sensual, a daring evocation of Vionnet's revolutionary exposure of the female form. It wraps around the body and is secured by an integral sash that encircles the waistline, which is cut low at the back to reveal the optimum amount of the wearer's flesh. The dress slips around the figure to create a halter neck with a deep 'V' of décolleté that echoes the bareness of the shoulders. Slits at waist level enable the sashes to slip through and twist around the body like a Japanese obi, and these can be tied in a bow at either the front or side. The waistline is lowered at the back to produce a smooth curve of fabric over the small of the back, two broad lined strips of fabric are then doubled over, left open either side and then attached to the waist. These create full 'streamers' of material that would have filled with air and deflated as the wearer danced. The back section of the dress increases this effect still further as it has two deep slits in it that would reveal glimpses of the wearer's legs. It is the perfect dress for the shocking new dances that were so popular at the time, its sophisticated style heightening the eroticism of the body as it moved to the rhythm of the tango.

The bodice of the dress is left plain, emphasising the torso and allowing for a minimum of underwear. A gathered band of fabric runs across the front of the dress at waist level and, combined with the fullness of the streamers at the back, these hint at the historical revival in contemporary fashion at the time. Romanticised versions of 18th century dress were popular among various couturiers like Mme Chéruit and Lanvin and featured references to panniers and robes à la polonaise. In Vionnet's dress though, such influences have been streamlined to produce a defiantly modern statement of contemporary style.

Deep red moss crêpe evening dress, c.1933

Somewhere between lingerie and eveningwear, this dress creates a sinuous column of softly textured fabric that sculpts around the figure. Vionnet's intimacy with both textile and anatomy are brought to the fore, as she cuts the moss crêpe to define the musculature. Tiny diagonal interior tucks from either side of the waist gently pull the fabric into the waist, then smooth round to the small of the back to subtly enhance the wearer's body.

The dress demonstrates Vionnet's interest in wrapping, its 'V' neckline is constructed by pulling the fabric across the body and fixing it in place by tying the attached sashes around the waist. The inverted 'V' that is produced by symmetrical lines of fagoting running down the front shape and define the bust. The deep slit where the dress wraps around the legs and the train at the back use the weight and stretchiness of the material to increase to the vertical line of the silhouette and add softly flowing drapery to the ensemble.

The deep décolleté at the back of the dress is kept in place by a tiny interior weight hung at the centre point of the 'V' neckline. A tiny cape in matching fabric is weighted in the same way. The cape has a circular neckline and front notch that produces an interesting keyhole effect at the front. This adds to the series of geometrical forms that make up the dress and contributes to the design's harmonious proportions.

Apricot day dress, a/w 1932/33

(No label, UFAC 3495, vol 45, no. 24, *Archives Seine, Sept 1932, no.349*)

The fabric's rich, warm apricot hue and Vionnet's clever use of its self-coloured stripe to emphasise the bias cut of the pattern pieces contribute to the 'graphisme' of this day dress. As ever, the dress slides simply over the wearer's head and falls from the shoulders with a full, flared skirt. It is 'discreet without being self-effacing,'⁵ a stylish yet comfortable item of daywear that demonstrates Vionnet's use of confidently feminine clothing that enabled women of the twenties and thirties to enter the public sphere.

The back view of the dress is very plain. A central panel runs from shoulder to hem, its seams adding definition to the wearer's figure. The sleeves are long, cut in one piece and tucked around the arm, with tiny elongated triangles of fabric sculpting them into the wrist.

The dress' focal point is its softly draped cowl neckline, a favourite Vionnet device, that gently falls around the wearer's throat to provide a flattering frame for her face. The triangular front fall of the cowl is fastened across the neck and held in place by an interior hook and eye and, on the outside, a clear glass button that reflects the light and shines against the fabric's apricot glow.

14

Black, Ivory & Coral evening dress, s/s 1933

(No label, *Archives de Paris Feb 1933, Vogue Jun 1933*)

The bold colour contrast of ivory bodice, black skirt and coral sash, combined with the shifting transparent and opaque effect of draped silk chiffon, enhance the dramatic impact of this elegant evening gown.

The bodice is sleeveless and the nakedness of the wearer's skin beneath is emphasised by the soft fluid folds of the cowl neckline, and by the accompanying slip's chiffon inset over the bust. The rest of the slip is pale silk, adding a shadowy underpinning to the full smoky black folds of the skirt. The back of the bodice is plain, with a seam running horizontally across the figure just below the shoulder blades. This serves to narrow the panel of fabric to the waist, presenting a smooth silhouette that is further defined by the theatrical sweep of the sash's bright red/pink coral folds.

The sash is double thickness fabric, attached to the waistline at the front by a triangular panel that extends into long streamers to wrap around the body, and tie in a bow, its ends cascading down the skirt. Vionnet's intricate use of geometry is displayed at the waist, with the coral triangle echoed in a ghostly shadow image on the skirt's folds beneath.

Hoyningen-Huene photographed a similar tricolour dress in 1933 worn with a rich black cape, possibly lined with coral, that sits across the model's shoulders and falls to the dress' hem. Long black evening gloves and a clutch of diamond bracelets on each wrist further enrich this glamorous image.

15

Leaf print and gold lamé evening dress, c.1933

The print of this dress is a subtle play of soft peachy colours designed to complement the wearer's skin. The fabric's ground is palest apricot adorned with prints of wispy fern fronds in a deeper shade apricot and black. A thread of gold lamé runs through the material and forms into leaves that glimmer in the light. The dress comes with a full-length slip that is cut on the bias like the dress and as so many of Vionnet's slips, the section over the bust is transparent chiffon.

The dress has a low 'V' back comprised of two broad strips of

Roberto Menichetti

talks about Vionnet

GUBBIO, MARCH 2001



“MADELEINE VIONNET had a great vision of the future, coupled with great energy ...she really harnessed the energy that was around at the turn of the last century. Vionnet was very much a woman of her time, she must have speculated what the future might promise for woman, what would they do or what they might become, what would it be like to clothe the future and how to translate this into dress-making methods... these questions must have always informed her technique, the shapes she generated.

....She really revolutionised sartorial technique, couture standards at the time, she simplified them, but not in an industrial way, that was a trend of course running parallel to hers with the possibility of increased mass production, hers was simplicity of line, meticulously crafted, everything in fact that is not mechanically reproducible. Taking inspiration from a more streamlined, mechanised environment. There is an incredible interactivity between her and her environment, in a way similar to the futurists' dream, where clothes are somehow projected into the urban space around them.

....She really trod the creative line between minimal, or rather, I think, essential, and incredibly sophisticated – both extreme simplicity, harmonious and evolved rupture with the past, or tradition.

....By reducing the number of components she transformed the individual pattern shapes dynamically – and of course she made the fabric work for her. The sophistication belongs to an art which is by definition applied, not conceptually free, based on her love of fabric – I know, it has always been so important to my work – there is a practicality about it, *material* reality separate from pure concept which you can get away with as an artist which as a designer you can't, it is important to remember this - we have to take into consideration, the protective aspect of fabric for example. The balance between each dress as an individual garment and a larger project, Vionnet maintained this throughout her work.

....Decoration, it was a huge project, deco-

ration, essential shapes, spirals, interlocking circles, meticulously and executed in minute detail., she had amazing taste in colours, really subtle, yes, she really understood the power of colour, structural planes provide play with the light, luminosity emphasising subtlety.

....I love her famous wrapped gowns, that come from the centre and fold outwards, as though from her soul, a spiritual centre, the whirls, her roses, intimate unfolding, or the outside coming in. She had the confidence to let her project evolve to its logical consequence.

....She had a strange and tough life, but remained an incredibly strong and determined woman, I think, dreaming of the whole, her project was always about wholes, her dreams must have been of new worlds, ones that were in part dawning around her creative environment. She fused body and dress, perhaps soul, seams reduced to the essential, themselves sometimes providing the decoration, as you have in the show.

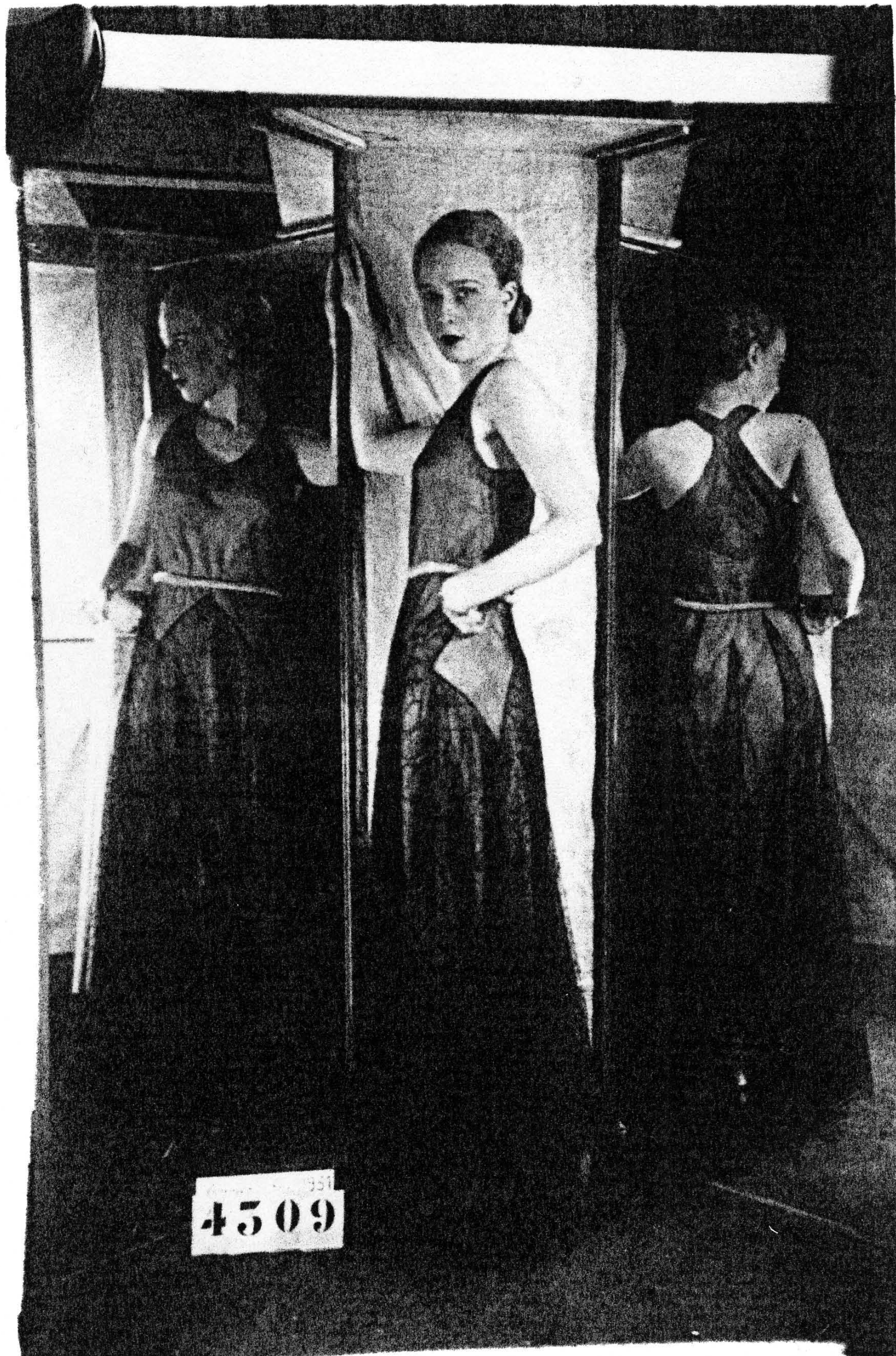
....Research, conversations about the future, the future of her environment, informed by her inspiring environment – you just have to see Thayaht – she incorporated the zeitgeist into her clothes. Her clothes were her manifesto. Her questions are still relevant, lessons we are still learning from her not only about cut but about interpreting our environment, she is truly contemporary.

....I love looking at the photograph of Vionnet taken by Louise Dahl-Wolfe in 1952 – look how strong she is, what a life... When we look back to the last century in hundreds of years her importance is always going to have such potency, she is really one of the 20th Century's great Couturiers. I am glad to have been inspired to look and think about her work again today...”

Roberto Menichetti, Creative Director Burberry's was speaking to Judith Clark from his studio in Gubbio, Italy.



Burberry Autumn/ Winter 2001



The Spectator

MONDAY SEPTEMBER 8, 1712



Mr SPECTATOR,
It happened lately, that a Friend of mine, who had many things to buy for his Family, wou'd oblige me to walk with him to the Shops. He was very nice in his Way, and fond of having every thing Shewn, which at first made me very uneasy; but as his Humour still continu'd, the things which I had been staring at along with him began to fill my Head, and led me into a Set of amusing Thoughts concerning them.

I fancy'd it must be very Surprising for anyone who enters into a Detail of Fashions, to consider how far the Vanity of Mankind has laid it self out in Dress, what a prodigious Number of People it maintains, and what a Circulation of Money it occasions. Providence in this Case makes use of the Folly which we will not give up, and it becomes instrumental to the Support of those who are willing to labour. Hence it is, that Fringe-Makers, Lace-Men, Tire-Women, and a Number of other Trades, which would be useless in a simple State of Nature, draw their subsistence; tho' it is seldom seen that such as these subsistence; tho' it is seldom seen that such as these are extremely rich, because their original Fault of being founded upon Vanity, keeps them poor by the light Incostancy of its Nature. The Variableness of Fashion turns the Stream of Business which flows from it now into one channel and anon into another; so that different Sets of People sink or flourish in their Turns by it.

From the shops we retir'd to the Tavern, where I found my friend express so much Satisfaction for the Bargains he had made, that my moral Reflections (if I had told them,) might have pass'd for a Reproof; so I Chose rather to fall in with him, and let the Discourse run upon the use of fashions.

Here we rembered how much Man is goven'd by his Senes, how livelily he is struck by the Objects which appear to him in an agreeable Manner, how much Cloaths contribute to make us agreeable Objects, and how much we owe it to our selves that we should appear so.

We considered Man as belonging to

Societies; Societies as form'd of different Ranks, and different Ranks distinguished by Habits, that all proper Duty or Respect might attend their Appearance.

We took notice of Several Advantages which are met with in the Occurrences of Conversation. How the bashful Man has been sometimes so rais'd, as to express himself with an Air of Freedom, when he imagines that his Habit introduces him to Company with a becoming manner: And again, how a Fool in fine Cloaths shall be suddenly heard with Attention, till he has betrayed himself; where as a Man of Sense appearing with a Dress of Negligence, shall be but coldly received, till he be prov'd by Time, and established in a Character. Such Things as These we cou'd recollect to have happen'd to our own Knowledge so very often, that we concluded the Author had his reasons, who advises his Son to go in Dress rather above his Fortune than under it.

At last the subject seem'd so considerable, that it was propos'd to have a Repository builded for Fashions, as there are Chambers for Medals and other Rarities. The building may be shap'd as that which stands among the Pyramids, in the Form of a Woman's Head. This may be rais'd upon PillarsWhose Ornaments shall bear a just Relation to the Design, Thus there may be an Imitation of Fringe carv'd in the Base, a Sort of Apperance of Lace in the Frize; and a Representation of curling Locks, with Bows of Riban floping over them, may fill up the Work of the Cornish. The Inside may be divided into two Apartments, appropriated to each Sex. The Apartments may be fill'd with Shelves, on which Boxes are to Stand as regularly as Books in a Library. These are to have Folding-Doors, which being open'd you are to behold a Baby dress'd out in some Fashion which has flourish'd, and standing upon a Pedestal, where the Time of its Reign is mark'd down. For its further Regulation let it be order'd, that every one who invents a Fashion shall bring in his Box, whose Front he may at Pleasure have either work'd or painted with some amorous or gay Device,

that, like Books with gilded Leaves and Covers, it may the sooner draw the Eyes of the Beholders. And to the End that these may be perserv'd with all due Care, let there be a keeper appointed, who shall be a Gentleman qualify'd with a competent Knowledge in Cloaths; so that this Means the Place will be a comfortable Support for fome Beau who has spent his Estate in dressing.

The Reasons offer'd by which we expected to gain Approbations of the Publick, were as follows.

Frist, That every one who is considerable enough to be a Mode, and has any Imperfection of Nature or Chance, which it is possible to hide by the Advantage of Cloaths, may, be coming to this Repository, be furnish'd herself, and furnifh all who are under the same Misfortune, with the most agreeable Manner of concealing it; and that on the other side, every one who has any Beauty in Face or Shape, may be also furnish'd with the most agreeable Manner of shewing it.

Secondly, That whereas fome of our young Gentlemen who Travel, give us great reason to suspect that they on'y go abroad to make or improve a fancy for Dress, a project of this nature may be a means to them at Home, which is in effect the keeping of so much Money in the Kingdom. And perhaps the Ballance of fashion in Europe, which now leans upon the France, may be so alter'd for the future, that it may become as common with the Frenchmen to come to England for their finishing stroke of Breeding, as it has been for Englishmen to go to France for it.

Thirdly, Whereas several great Scholars, who might have been otherwise useful to the World, have spent their time in studying to describe the Dresses of the Anciets from dark Hints, which they are feing to interpret and Support with much learning, it will from henceforth happen that they shall be freed from the trouble, and the World from useless Volumes. This project will be a Registry to which Posterity may have recourse for the clearing such obscure Passages as tend that way in Authors, and therefore we shall not for the furture submit

ourselves to the learning of Etymology, which might perswade the Age to come, that the Farthingal was worn for cheapness, or the Furbeloe for warmth.

Fourthly, Whereas they who are old themselves, have often a way of railing at the extravagance of Youth, and the whole Age in which their Children live; it is hoped that this ill humour will be much suppress'd when we can have Recourse to the Fashions of their Times, produce them in our Vindication, and be abel to show them that it might have been as expenfive in Queen Elizabeth's Time only to wash and quill a Ruff, as it is now to buy Cravats or Neck-Handkerchiefs.

We desire also to have it taken Notice of, That because we would shew a pratical Respect to Foreigners, which may include them to perfect their Breeding here in a Knowledge which is very proper for pretty Gentlemen, we have conceived the Motto for the House in the Learned Language. There is to be a Picture over the Door, with a Looking Glass and a Dressing-Chair in the Middle of it: Then on one Side are to be Seen, above one another, Patch Boxes, Pin-Cushions, and little Bottles; on the other, Powder Bags, Puffs, Combs, and Brushes; beyond these, Swords with fine Knots, Whose Points are hidden, and Fans almost closed, with the Handles downward, are to stand out interchangeably from the Sides, till they meet at the Top, and form a Semi-circle over the rest of the Figures; Beneath all, the Writing is to run in this pretty founding manner:

*Adeste, O quotquot sunt, Veneres, Gratir,
Cupidines,
Em vobis adsunt in promptu
Faces, Vincula, Spicula,
Hinc eligite, sumite, regite*

I am, Sir,

Your most humble servant,

A.B

Judith Clark Costume gallery was founded in 1998, the first experimental gallery devoted entirely to exhibiting fashion and historical dress. The curator encourages exhibition proposals to be sent to the gallery in writing. The journal both commissions original research and draws attention to seminal texts in the field of fashion and museum theory. The gallery is a U.K. registered charity (No. 1069778) and does not charge admission to exhibitions and therefore relies on sponsorship and membership to survive. To receive information on how to make donations, please write to The Membership Department, Judith Clark Costume, 112 Talbot Road, London W11 1JR. Education Programme: Please contact the gallery regarding gallery talks.

Contributors

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Acknowledgements

The gallery is grateful to Martin Kamer for his warm generosity throughout this project both through the loan of his collection and that of his endless time and enthusiasm. Seth Bright at Sotheby's and Angus Hyland at Pentagram for their kind support of this project.

Forcoming Exhibition

Pablo & Delia - The London Years
26 April – 5 June 2001