

Feature



Fashions by Vionnet Kathé Gust*

She set a glamorous trend in early 20th century clothing that influenced Hollywood costumers and Paris fashion designers. Historical costumers should know her too.

Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975), a self-described “enemy of fashion”, was an original creative mind whose innovative design sense continues to inspire to this day.

Between 1917 and 1939, the original *Maison Vionnet* created an estimated 500-600 garments per year for her customers. Most of the surviving examples are still as fresh and currently fashionable as anything you will see on a modern catwalk.

Madeleine Vionnet began developing her distinctive style around 1907 while working for Jacques Doucet, but was not successful under his label. She established her own *atelier* (workshop) in 1912, but was still not well known and was forced to close the establishment from 1914 to 1917 by the advent of World War I.



After the war, new backers helped her re-start the business to great success. Apparently, the time had come for her styles to find acceptance in the post-war sensibilities of wealthy women.

A new freedom for women and a more liberal political attitude were central to the development of changes in fashion design. The look became casual in contrast to the corseted fashions of the previous decades.

Freedom of movement was a priority and designers such as Jean Patou, Madeleine Vionnet, Erte, Poiret, Gabrielle (Coco) Chanel, and Elsa Schiaparelli created clothing for the “modern woman”. Of the big three contemporaries, Poiret, Chanel and Vionnet, only Vionnet had dressmaking expertise. Poiret did not know how to sew and Chanel began as a milliner.

“My personal formula is that of the dress that’s beautiful just because it is well cut.”

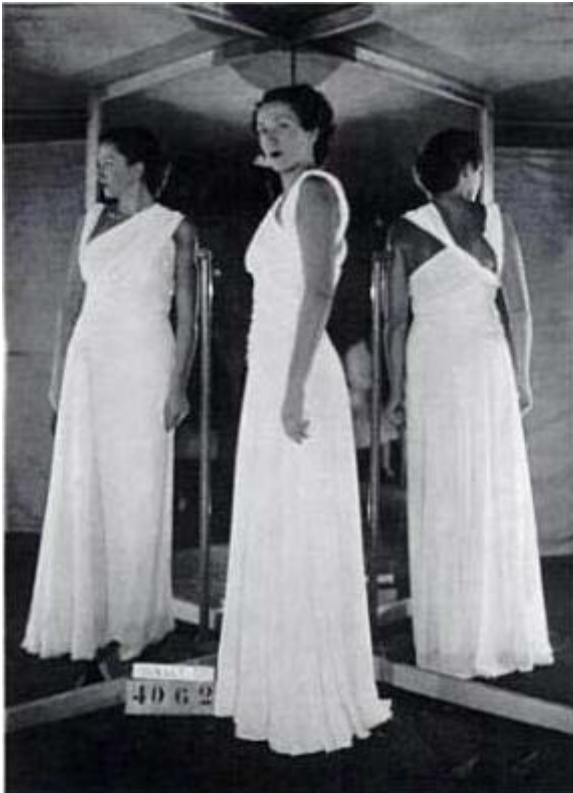
A Vionnet design is usually the result of complex geometric manipulation of fabric. Her understanding of fabric and the way it would react to stresses resulted in circular skirts that maintain their even hems for decades, dresses with only one seam, and floating drapery that reveals the body without inhibiting movement.

By the end of the 1920s, her technique of cutting dresses on the bias (across the grain of the fabric) was adopted by most couturiers and became the trademark of 1930's fashion. She did not invent the bias cut, but she did apply the technique to entire dresses. Characteristic Vionnet touches also include the handkerchief dress (below), the cowl neck, and the halter top.



Handkerchief dress, 1935 made of four squares.
Photo: France Magazine.

Some Vionnet gowns are so totally unconstructed that they take shape only when on the body. There were many stories told of clients who had to telephone in a panic because they (and their maids) could not remember how to put on the dress.



Ivory crepe “twisted” evening dress, 1935-36 (copyright photo).

One client used to tell a story of a slightly different sort on herself. She claims that her husband hated those “twisted” dresses (above) because he had a difficult time helping her out of them after a party.

One night the combined efforts of wife, husband and a hotel chambermaid could not

succeed in removing a favorite red gown that she recalled as “very comfortable once you got it on”. The maid finally opened a seam to get the gown off.

Some *toiles* (muslin patterns) for similar gowns were among those left by the designer to the *Musée de la Mode et du Textile*, and not all of them have been figured out. Apparently “Madame” never forgot how to put them on, but in her absence scholars have to rely on the photos in her 75 copyright albums (held by the *Union Française des Arts du Costume*) and by experimentation with the *toiles* to re-drape the “twisted” gowns for exhibitions.

Fortunately Vionnet did have her designs photographed for copyright purposes. She was one of the first to hit on this method of protecting her collections from unauthorized copying. In some cases those photographs are the only remaining record of a garment that no longer exists.

“I have never cared to dress myself well. I am short ... and I hate short women.”

During an era when other designers would have had their clientele look like adolescent boys or machines, Vionnet insisted on making her clients look like women. But she was inclined to design sensually draped gowns for tall, statuesque figures. This is not to say that those with less height cannot wear a Vionnet design, but some attention must be paid to select more flattering styles.

She was inspired by the fluid and simple lines of Grecian tunics and the severity and geometricity of Japanese kimono in her early collections, but had no objection to adding ornamentation to this simplicity to the point of opulence through extensive beading and embroidery.



Evening dress in green silk, embroidered with pearls and crystals, 1924.

This carry-over from the extreme ornamentation of the pre-war era as

represented by the House of Worth, and Callot Soeurs (another early employer) stood her in good stead. Her garments were comfortable to wear, and fit admirably, but were still lush enough to appeal to wealthy women who patronized the haute couture.



1920s gown with beaded ornamentation.
Photo courtesy of Sally Norton.

During the 1930's Vionnet found an additional inspiration in the garments of the Middle Ages.



Coq de Roche colored crepe, 1935. Victoria & Albert Museum.

The influence can be seen in the increased use of *godets* and *gussets* to control fit and add fullness to the designs of that era, and even in the fur coats she was

creating at that time. She also took a more traditionally romantic direction than previously. She still used delicate fabrics, but went in for wide belled skirts and added volume at a time when other designers were creating more severe, utilitarian looks.

In the early 1920's an estimated 300-350 models per year were being created, but usually only two or three clients would select the same model. This helps explain the great variety of designs created in a relatively short time, and the variety found today in museums. Vionnet garments were individually created for the person who was purchasing them, and she was at one time the most expensive modiste in Paris.



Wallis, Duchess of Windsor, day dress and belt with hip-length jacket, Photo: Corbis.

Maison Vionnet made more than gowns. Although her evening gowns and

day dresses (below) are the best-represented items in museums, the house also provided every item a woman might need to include in her wardrobe.



Silk chiffon day dress, c. 1933. Photo courtesy of Kyoto Costume Institute.

A client could purchase lingerie, bathing costumes and cover-ups, coats and

capes, sportswear, shoes and accessories in addition to dresses and suits of all types. Very few of these items have survived to appear in museum collections.



3/4 Length Wrap Over Coat with Broad Grey Fur. Drawing by Madeleine Ruegg.

If the house sold ten of the same, the design was considered a success. A particular cream silk day dress was seen in quantity at the races, another taffeta gown was selected by 50 clients in various colors – a triumph, and one model was sold to an American manufacturer who had 1000 copies made, but these were the exceptions.

She came to understand that a collection needed to have something for all body types, and she also offered every piece in a choice of five colors as well as black and white.

Sewcabulary

Bias cut (cross-grain in UK) – across the grain at a 45-degree angle to the selvage edge of a fabric

Godet – a triangular piece of material inserted into a garment to create a flare or fullness.

Gusset – triangular or square piece of fabric inserted into a seam to add breadth or reduce stress.

Haute couture – exclusive custom-fitted clothing made to order for a specific customer. In France, it is a "protected name" only used by firms that meet certain standards.

Toile - a version of a garment made to test a pattern. May be referred to as "muslin" in the United States.

“I only like that which lasts forever.”

Madeleine Vionnet was a dressmaker’s dressmaker. Her name is revived whenever fashion returns to a celebration of the natural body, but is not a household word like “Chanel”. The clothing designed by Coco Chanel became a brand, and is still a brand with her signature double-C logo, but Chanel’s great successor Karl Lagerfeld once said that, "Like it or not, everyone is under the influence of Vionnet."

Vionnet was one of several couturiers that reluctantly permitted certain designs to be copied and manufactured in quantity for American department stores in order to gain

name recognition for the atelier and increase profits in a declining market, but she worried that allowing too much mass-market access would destroy the desirability of her exclusive designs for the higher-end buyer.

Refusing to permit some legal replication of designs also courted illegal copying of her originals by those who would not pay a fee to the designer. Due to the unique 3-dimensional designs she created, her gowns were very difficult to copy for mass production, but that did not prevent her having to bring a law suit in 1921 for illegal replication.

There were not enough “easy to replicate” styles to ever make Vionnet a household name. Her off-the-rack “Repeated Originals” are still collectible today, particularly with an intact label (below), but there were not all that many of them to begin with. Most of them were 'one size fits all' draped styles.



“Repeat Originals” label with Vionnet’s signature and thumbprint.

A select group with plenty of money—Hollywood costume designers—made her styles famous in another way. Several film stars, Katharine Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich and Joan Crawford (above right) among them, wore Vionnet designs in private life. This led to studios embracing similar design concepts for use in on screen wardrobes.



Joan Crawford, 1938. Photo by P. Horst.

One reason the dresses in her signature style worked so well on film was their movement. They mold to the body without drawing the eye away with unnecessary detail. Unfortunately for her, the source of their influence was never credited on screen.

Her major fashion ideas were ones that could be used by any designer. What sets her

gowns apart from the rest were the ways she combined her ideas and the quest for perfection that were hallmarks of a Vionnet ensemble. Those are so distinctive that they can be discerned even without a label (see sidebar at end of article).

You can also see the influence of her work reflected in designs by Jean Muir, John Galiano, Halston, and Issey Miyake; proof that she achieved her aim to stand apart from the whirlwind of fashion and achieve something more lasting. Every year the collections contain clothing based on her ideas.

In August 1939, Madeleine Vionnet presented her last collection in Paris. Her staff remained during WWII, working independently for her clientele, and keeping the atelier ready to reopen. But, when World War II ended, she was nearly 70 years old. The world had become a different place and she knew there was no going back.

“I could, of course, live in Rome. But I love my country and I wish to die here.”

The Lummen family acquired the Vionnet label in 1988. They re-opened the house in 1996, and focused primarily on accessories and the launch of new perfumes. The first new collection was unveiled in December 2006, in the US edition of *Vogue*.

The creative force behind the label was a pool of designers, whose identities were not revealed. In February 2008, Arnaud de Lummen told *Women's Wear Daily* that he

wanted to focus on the label's expansion and not on its designers. He said, "Vionnet does not need to be associated with a designer's name, it's an institution."

The re-envisioned Vionnet also involved historical partners of the house, such as the couture embroiderer Lesage.

In 2009, an Italian textile group acquired the label, moved the business to Milan, and hired Rodolfo Paglialunga as designer. Prior to Vionnet, he spent 13 years as a designer of womenswear at Prada, and the previous four years at Romeo Gigli.

Only time will tell what impact this change will have on the venerable fashion label. Since Vionnet herself spent the hiatus years of WWI in Italy and spoke of returning there after her retirement, she may not have been displeased with this outcome.



From 2009 Vionnet Collection. Photo: Paris-LA.com.

Museums

If you are visiting Paris, the largest collection of her work can be seen at these museums:

- Musée de la Mode et du Textile. (130 items) 107 rue de Rivoli, Paris 75001 France. +33 1 4455 5750, daily except Monday.
- Musée de la Mode et du Costume. (30 items) 10 Avenue Pierre 1er de Serbie Paris 75116 France. +33 1 4720 8523, daily except Monday.

Collections

Other large collections (items may not always be on display) include:

- Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England. (22 items)
- Kyoto Costume Institute, Kyoto, Japan. (28 items)
- Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, U.S.A (80 items)
- Museum at the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York City, U.S.A. (22 items)
- Brooklyn Museum of Art, Brooklyn, New York, U.S.A. (20 items)
- Chicago Historical Society, Chicago, Illinois, U.S.A. (18 items)

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Quotations

- Madeleine Vionnet quotations from:
- Interview May 28, 1937. *Marie Claire* (magazine, France)
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Photo Credits

- 'Coq de roche' coloured crepe evening dress, 1935 (Victoria & Albert Museum U.K.)
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85665/evening-dress-coq-de-roche/>
- Chiffon day dress (Kyoto Costume Institute archive) <http://www.kci.or.jp/>
- Photo of Joan Crawford by Horst P. Horst. Veja São Paulo.
<http://veja.abril.com.br/vejasp/150904/exposicao.html>.
- Evening dress in green silk, embroidered with pearls and crystals, 1924.
<http://www.style.it/cont/photogallery/0710/2014/vionnet-1924.asp>.
- From the 2009 Vionnet collection.
<http://paris-la.com/category/fashion>.

Le Strange Fruit

A joint V&A/London College Fashion Designer in Residence, a position created in January 2006, looked through much of the fashion collection piece-by-piece. The aim was to seek out unknown, misunderstood, misconstrued, or forgotten items of unknown. The working title for the project was 'Le Strange Fruit'.

One of the [blog entries](#) tells about the re-discovery of a Vionnet gown and makes for interesting reading. The resident designer noticed a complicated gold metal and tulle overlaid dress that looked incredibly like a Vionnet piece – all her typical signature details: He insisted that it must be a Vionnet original.

Fortunately, an overlooked label was found to confirm identification, but it had been waiting for 30 years in the “anonymous” area for someone to find it. It is a clear example of the unique spirit of Vionnet versus merely copying her major styling elements.



Kathe Gust enjoys creating clothing for many historical periods, and for various sci-fi and fantasy genre. Visit her [web site](#) to read articles and see photos for some of her costuming projects.