

## THE GODDESS OF CUT:

# Madeleine Vionnet

■ Eleanor Keene



Vionnet has been credited as the 'greatest Dressmaker in the World', 'The Architect of Couture', 'The Goddess of Cut' and 'the Creator of the bias cut'. Her technical ability to work cloth and use its natural drape qualities was inventive, new and daring in its time.

While researching Madeleine Vionnet for this article, I was moved by the many personal accounts I read of how Vionnet's work had inspired others. Her work created so much admiration and inspiration, as are the accounts of those who met her. Vionnet touched the life of many, including my own. My first experience of seeing her gowns came about in my early teens, in a travelling exhibition.

I was struck by Vionnet's copper coloured 1920s dress with its embroidered scale-like design, worked in delicate stylised rose heads in metallic thread to a fine silk ground. It hung on the mannequin like it was weightless, and caught the light in the translucent way that insect wings shine, the spotlights picking up the metallic embroidery thread and the lamé under-slip below.

MADELEINE VIONNET, Paris (couture house)  
French est. 1912  
Madeleine VIONNET (designer)  
French 1876–1975  
Evening dress 1924  
silk tulle, metallic thread, silk and metallic thread lamé  
(a) 127.5 cm (centre back) 46.3 cm (waist, flat) (evening dress) (b)  
104.8 cm (centre back) 48.5 cm (waist, flat) (slip)  
National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the  
assistance of David Syme & Co. Limited, Fellow, 1977



A second Vionnet garment was made of gold lamé and belonged to the end of the 20s, with a dropped waist, and long hem. This gown expressed more of the technical cut Vionnet is synonymous with. Fashioning a bias double cowl neckline and a single cowl to the back, the way it hung and caught the golden light was magical. This exhibition 'Worth to Dior', in which the Vionnet gowns featured, was a pivotal experience in my young life. (Both of these gowns can be found in the collections of the NGV.)

I was lucky enough to have this experience further indulged in my adult life when I visited the Vionnet retrospective exhibition in Paris in 2009. Viewing so many of Vionnet's creations in one place I was able to appreciate further, as many have before me, why she is acknowledged as being one of the most technically superior dressmakers of the 20th century. Her ability to cut cloth and drape was like nothing I had seen before. One dress was simply constructed out of four large squares of ivory crepe fabric joined by their corners on the shoulder, with vertical straight side seams. However the seams were nowhere near the edge of the fabric as one would expect, but rather a third of the way in from the fabric edge, giving, when the garment was on a form, an amazing fall of soft folds. These were brought together by a thin waist sash which helped contain the shape. The construction was very simple, but the idea and the execution was outstanding. I later read a quote that Vionnet had once reputedly said, "Simplicity is what is most difficult in this world; it is the last stage of experience and the first stage of genius". I could certainly attribute this quote to this dress. (Dress model number 700, Winter 1920.)

From the 1920s and into the 30s Vionnet's magic reigned. Along with beaded and embellished gowns which she did so beautifully well, with lace inserts, heavy stripes of glass beads, or rows of long fringing; she created a range a cream crepe statuesque 'goddess' gowns (these were all about classic, unembellished, clean draped lines). Here we see the influence of Roman and



Greek drape and shape which she had started exploring in her 1920s dresses, but became open homages to the Grecian look in her 1930s gowns.

She is said to have spent time in Rome when the First World War broke out, where the art and antiquity of Roman and Greek artefacts took her interest. Back in Paris she continued to spend time studying the Greek artefacts at the Louvre. Along with the Grecian influence, Vionnet like many of her peers of her time also had a fascination with the Orient. Like her contemporary Paul Poiret you can see the influence of Japanese costume in her work, with Kimono cut sleeves and the wrapping style based on traditional Japanese dress.

This Japanese influence can be seen in my latest brush with Vionnet fashion, in the form of an orange silk wrap-around top I found in a Sydney collection last year (pg 36) and arranged the sale of at Christies in London. Out of hundreds of items of vintage fashion I was sorting through, an amazing twist of fate bought this garment into my hands, as someone who could truly appreciate its significance and value.

### **So where did it all begin for Vionnet...**

Vionnet opened her first salon in 1912, but her much anticipated success was put on hold as war broke out. As the war ended women were letting go of the corset and the confined dress styles of the Edwardian period and were moving into an age of change and Vionnet was ready to make her mark on the world! She greatly advocated the demise of the corset and promoted freedom of movement, using the stretch of the bias cut, she created drop-waisted gowns which floated on the body in falling folds.

Gold lamé is a favourite we see throughout Vionnet's work. A fabric made popular by the Callot Soeurs with whom Vionnet worked for many years and who gave her scope to perfect her craft, working with luxurious fabrics and trims. From Callot Soeurs she went on to work



Right: MADELEINE VIONNET, Paris, France, c 1930. An evening dress made of cream silk jersey with a gathered cross-over bodice consisting of three panels with a low cut back, skirt is cut on the bias into shaped panels. Jewelled shoulder straps are decorated with glass corals and crystals set in metal mounts, dress has waistline fastening concealed in right side seam. Collection: Powerhouse Museum, Sydney. Photo Sue

Below: MADELEINE VIONNET, Paris (couture house)  
 French est. 1912  
 Madeleine VIONNET (designer)  
 French 1876-1975  
 Evening dress and underbodice (c. 1927)  
 silk, metallic thread lamé, satin ribbon, metal clasps  
 (a) 129.0 cm (centre back) 61.4 cm (waist, flat) (evening dress)  
 (b) 27.9 cm (centre back) 43.0 cm (waist, flat) (underbodice)  
 National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne  
 Purchased through The Art Foundation of Victoria with the assistance of David Syme & Co. Limited, Fellow, 1979



for Doucet, however there she found her modern vision for fashion suffocated, so left to start her own business.

The bias cut Vionnet is so famed for inventing had in fact been in use for many centuries, but not for a whole dress in the way Vionnet manipulated the fabric, but more commonly as trims and edgings in the 19th century. Vionnet was a 'master' of cloth, she sculpted her gowns on mini model forms, draping and cutting the fabric by eye, and creating small scale frocks out of muslin before embarking on replicating the gowns on life size human models. This soft approach is far removed from the structured fashions from the previous century, and Vionnet's youth, of constrictive and corseted dresses and high necklines.

Vionnet is quoted as saying, "When one knows one's craft, one takes a piece of fabric not only on the bias, but in every possible direction (warp, weft, bias). But, of course, you have to know the obedience of the fabric".

Vionnet saw herself as a Technician or a dressmaker, not 'a designer', as she didn't design her dresses on paper she created her visions by draping them out, letting the fabric and her vision dictate the garment.

As the Second World War broke out Vionnet closed her business in 1939. She had seen great success in her time and it is reported that in 1926 her business employed 1200 staff. She is commended for the socially progressive working environments she created for her employees, with medical facilities and maternity leave.

Vionnet (although I am not sure that anyone really knew how old she really was), is said to have died one year short of her 100th birthday in 1975. What an incredible life! She must have lived through and witnessed so many changes in the world on so many different levels. Although she retired from her business many years before, it is said she continued to play an active role with her ongoing love of fashion, and could be found sitting in fashion parades or lectures.

Vionnet was an inspiration to so many peers of her time, and many designers since. Sadly her name has been forgotten and unknown to many of today's young fashionistas. However this may start to change as the Vionnet label has recently been resurrected and is being run by Italian based Russian entrepreneur Goga Ashkenazi. Although on a much simpler scale, they have tried to produce new fashions that play homage to the old, and with the talented Hussein Chalayan having just been appointed as Vionnet's couture designer the label is set take off on new levels.

A MADELEINE VIONNET ORANGE SILK TAFFETA BLOUSE, Paris, France, 1930S  
Short jacket/blouse tied at the waist with angular-cut puff sleeves  
Labelled MADELEINE VIONNET, with couture number '50689'  
Sold at Christies, London in 2013 for £7,500.  
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## Notes:

*There are two standard methods of dressmaking, flat pattern construction, and draping. The first is the more conventional route and used by most, where one has a paper pattern that is used as a guide to cut cloth into pieces, which the garment is constructed from. Drapery is where one drapes fabric over a form to create the shape, usually a dress maker's model, which can be either a static form or a live model.*

*Bias cut, is where fabric is cut across the natural grain of the fabric. Fabric is usually constructed in a basic 'basket' weave with a horizontal and a vertical thread (warp & weft). By cutting pattern pieces diagonally to this grain, the fabric has a natural elasticity and stretch, which is known as bias cut.*

*Further reading: 'Madeleine Vionnet', by Betty Kirke (Chronicle Books 2012); 'Madeleine Vionnet', Edited by Pamela Golbin (Rizzoli 2009).*

*New Vionnet ready-to-wear can be found at Flagship David Jones Department stores in Australia.*

