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Vionnet – without bias

Vionnet without the bias cut would be a fashion tragedy. The bias cut liberated women from the restrictions of corsetry and padding in the 1920's and 1930's and established a sinuous and elegant silhouette that defined a modernist look. This look has become a classic that was fully exploited by Vionnet and her innovations permeate throughout the work of many contemporary fashion designers. An in depth investigation of Vionnet's career reveals the full extent of her work, beyond her use of the bias. The first retrospective exhibition of her work at Les Arts Decoratifs - Musee De La Mode, in Paris, is an opportunity to view the full portfolio of her ideas. The exhibition has been in the planning stage since 2007 when Les Arts Decoratifs undertook a major restoration of its Vionnet archive. The final layout of the exhibition was designed and curated by interior designer Andree Putman. Vionnet without the bias would certainly be a fashion tragedy, however the exhibition serves to enlighten and influence the fashion cognoscenti about the full cornucopia of her work from her use of fabric, pattern technology, colour, embellishment and her overriding pursuit for purity and harmony in fashionable dress. The bias means the direction of a piece of woven fabric at 45 degrees from the warp and weft threads. When a garment is cut on the bias (or on the cross) it has a far greater elasticity and drapability. It really accentuates body lines and curves as it both clings and drapes simultaneously. Due to this, it can really only be worn over the natural lines of the body without any underpinnings such as corsetry. Vionnet used the bias in many ways and in fabrics, that hadn't previously been considered suitable. Handkerchief dresses, clinging dresses in satin, chiffon or crepe de chine, cowls at the neck or at the back. Dresses with seaming that combined a clever use of straight and cross grain. As Pamela Golbin describes;

'The bias...the importance of the perfect cut...harmony, which was the basis for everything with Vionnet, and the exacting standards of simplicity. (Golbin, 2009. p 290) Essentially Vionnet made dresses that were severe yet fluid, decorative details were only used to support the initial structure of the dress and expand its overall impression. Colour was selected in clean solid shades; she seldom used print or pattern which would have interfered with the seam lines in her use of cut, as she said;

'Above all, the purity of solid colours. Black, white and good, clean tones. Blues and greens that set off eye colours, reds that echo lips, but no poorly defined colours.'
(Golbin, 2009, p 19)

The exhibition demonstrated that the designer was not really a great colourist. There was little experimentation with its use, in unexpected combinations, colour blocking or in its use of new shades and hues; instead it was stamped with the solidity and purity she describes. She was far more interesting when she experimented with subtle shades of beige and flesh tones which relied on the shading and play on light that was captured in her intricate use of drape.

Vionnet manipulated fabric and liked them to obey her in order to create her extremely fluid dresses that enveloped the body. She enjoyed the challenge of a tightly woven fabric that surrendered to her will and gave up their resistance. She said

'I never came across any fabric that disobeyed me.' (Golbin, 2009, p)

The designer worked from a small wooden mannequin to create her designs. This iconic figure forms the centre piece at the entrance to the exhibition. The designer lamented the

fact that she couldn't actually draw and felt this would have helped her communicate her ideas more effectively. This however would have destroyed the now legendary image of the designer at her scaled down figure coaxing, caressing and draping, putting things together and taking things apart until she was satisfied.

The exhibition exhibits many of Vionnet's most distinguished garments in chronological order. Garments that have only previously been viewed through photography in books, suddenly come to life as the opportunity presents itself to really examine the three dimensional form. This presents the flaws as well as the perfections and the analysis gives a real sense of the working methods of the designer. I found it interesting to note how seemingly awkward and frumpy were the garments that Vionnet had designed and cut using the straight grain. They lacked the grace subtle sexiness and effortless fluidity of her bias cut work – Vionnet, without bias was clearly not a comfortable designer. Her work although timeless, in its classicism captured the zeitgeist of the time and was ideally suited to dresses, fluid tops, skirts and capes. Here she was a flawless and refined technician. Her attempts at tailored and structured garments were not as successful. One particular example of this was a crimson, wool coat at the end of the exhibition from 1939. This was also incidentally the year Vionnet closed her business. By 1939 worldwide fashion had become far more geometric and structured and the shoulder pad had increased in significance. Vionnet's coat looked extremely out of synch with the times, it appeared lumpy and demonstrated a technical lack of empathy for and understanding of tailoring technology.

The signature looks created by Vionnet using the bias; drape and asymmetry are not significant trends in contemporary fashion collections, particularly in the current seasons for 2010. Many trends appear to be very geometric and symmetrical, almost square and boxy, this is reflected at both designer and high street level. The bias and drape have however been revived in fashion many times since 1939 and it was particularly enlightening to see garments that bore striking resemblance to the work of John Galiano and Ossie Clarke in the exhibition. Contemporary fashion for 2010 appears to be without any significant exploitation of bias cutting and drape therefore it will be extremely interesting to observe how this major international fashion exhibition influences contemporary designers in moving the current trends and the fashionable silhouette forward.

Kevin Almond.

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