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**MADAME GRES – GODDESS OF DRAPE**  
**Review of 'Madame Gres: Couture at Work', Musee Bourdelle, Paris 25<sup>th</sup> March – 28<sup>th</sup>**  
**August 2011**

With the revived importance attached to object based research for fashion scholars and its obvious significance to fashion designers, the Madame Gres retrospective at the Musee Bourdelle in Paris, promoted an ideal opportunity to analyse her work in close detail. As fashion historian Valerie Steele (1998) commented; "Object based research provides unique insights into the historic and aesthetic development of fashion" (p.27). It allows the researcher to analyse the history, material, construction, design, and function of garments. This can be achieved through touching, feeling and by trying clothes on. The fashion scholar can gain an understanding about a garments cultural significance and its impact on fashion design and technology. The designer or pattern cutter can be inspired by the design and construction of the garment, its fabrication, colour and cut.

For fashion professionals and students, exhibitions that celebrate the work of fashion designers are extremely important and a constant delight. We are extremely pro-active in the fashion department at University of Huddersfield, in encouraging our students to visit as many exhibitions and costume collections as possible. After spending hours poring over fashion magazines in order to analyse photographs of clothes or looking at designer ranges in retail outlets, the chronological legacy of a designers work suddenly comes to life in the exhibition. The garments live and breathe; their aesthetic qualities and even flaws are suddenly visually accessible. This was certainly the case with the Madame Gres display. Her unique and extremely intricate approach to making couture garments through painstaking draping and pleating of fabrics was evoked in dynamic three dimensions.

The exhibition was housed in the museum dedicated to French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle, a building which had also been his studio and living quarters. The designs are showcased both in the exhibition and living space of the sculptor. This gives the clothes a dramatic poignancy, inviting an analogy between both sculpting with stone and draping with cloth. Madame Gres possessed an acknowledged sculptural approach to making clothes, she used her hands to fashion jersey, crepe and taffeta into garments that both stroked and caressed the body. Like a sculptor she both pushed and pulled cloth into structural forms as opposed to cutting into it. This is perhaps best exemplified in her white Goddess dresses, displayed in a specialist section of the exhibition. Minimalist and simplistic at first glance they disguise the complex and subtly hidden couture skills that were embedded into each garment. Closer scrutiny and analysis reveals the highly sophisticated and painstaking technical tricks that were utilised in their construction. The celebrated sensory connection Madame Gres had with cloth and the body was uncanny. It was particularly fascinating to me, as a pattern cutter to physically observe the thorough attention to detail and the hand stitching that carefully arranged tiny pleats and gathers over the human anatomy in order to flatter three dimensional proportions.

As well as garments the exhibition included sketches, swatch books of fabrics, press cuttings, photographs and toile's, providing an insightful glimpse into the designer's work methods. Many of the dresses from the early 1930's to 1989 could comfortably still be worn by the stylish today. This reflects the timeless quality of a Madame Gres outfit and her avowed disinterest in fashion, "She didn't see the necessity to update her look every six months" (Vioght, 2011, p.2). Fashion professionals often refer to Gres as a: "Designers designer" (Benaim, 2000, p.4). This gives credibility to the respect paid by other designers to her work, particularly mirrored in the clothes created by Azzedine Alaia, Herve Leger and Rei Kawakubo today. The beguiling simplicity of her art conceals the technical complexity of its expertise. The clothes for instance are incredibly light and remained so throughout the six decades of her career, transcending periods in fashion such as the 1950's when garments were weighed down with petticoats and underpinnings such as corsetry and padding.

Madame Gres' signature clothes were primarily sculptural, asymmetrical and draped, evoking the antique world of neo-classism. For me personally there were several standout garments from the show. The first was the emerald green, jersey day dress from 1946, with its scrolled fabric around the hips and heavily pleated set in sleeve that emphasised the wide shouldered look of the mid 1940's. It was interesting to note how this scrolled technique was used in a

black crepe dress from the 1980's, the designer transporting her timeless vision throughout the decades. A half toile in white muslin was displayed next to a sculpted Bourdelle figure, half naked and half draped in fabric. It invited a comparison with the sensuality of the Grecian gown and Madame Gres' approach to her work, circling and swivelling drapery around the body, manoeuvring fabric into refined and sinuous forms. The beginnings of this toile could easily have evolved into the Grecian toga inspired, burnt orange, asymmetric dress from the room displaying her 1970's creations. Beyond her signature draped gowns the exhibition also featured examples of Madame Gres' tailoring and dresses in less fluid fabrics such as angora and taffeta. It is here that her dressmakers approach loosens up the structured feel of tailoring. She gathers and tucks her fabric to give volume and shape and was probably one of the first designers to be influenced by a non western sensibility to clothing, appropriating the kimono sleeve from the east and a Japanese sense of folding and manipulating fabric around the human form as opposed to darting and shaping it through cut.

Ultimately what can be learnt from this particular retrospective? In the words of fashion historian Lou Taylor (1998): "Object based research focuses necessarily and unapologetically on examination of the details of clothing and fabric. This process depends on a series of patiently acquired, specialized skills; identification, conservation, display, interpretation" (p.347). In the case of Madame Gres her work demonstrates a reverential respect for a craftsmanship which she evolved and refined throughout her career. Examining her clothes in detail provides a visual master class that both reveals and conceals her technique. For instance how did she manage to intricately pleat large volumes of fabric into purified, polished garments that also remained so light? The exhibition also demonstrates how a designer with a distinctive handwriting can transcend the whims of fashion change and establish an individual fashion identity that remains as stylish and relevant today, as when she began in the early 1930's.

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