

Elements of Style

By LINDA GRANT, July 4, 2007

Theme: Alumni Focus



Credit: Courtesy of Vionnet

Arnaud de Lummen LL.M. '02

When Arnaud de Lummen LL.M. '02 was only four years out of law school, he began the relaunch of one of the great Parisian houses of haute couture, pinning his hopes on a legacy and a family dream.

De Lummen first heard about the House of Vionnet as a boy, when his father, a textile engineer who had headed the ready-to-wear departments at Balmain and Ted Lapidus shared his reverence for the simple and timeless look of Vionnet clothing. Madeleine Vionnet, widely considered one of the dressmaking geniuses of the 20th century (she invented the bias cut), had turned out exquisite dresses known for flowing, layered styles and the inventive use of fabric, until World War II forced her to shut down. The house lay dormant for years.

But in 1987, de Lummen's father bought the Vionnet name and the rights to the business, and for the better part of the next two decades pondered what to do with the legacy. "It wasn't yet the right time to launch a name like Vionnet," says de Lummen fils. "Everyone thought it was an old name full of dust."

After HLS, de Lummen worked as an associate in the Paris branches of Cleary Gottlieb and Debevoise & Plimpton, representing clients including Gucci and Yves Saint Laurent. In 2005, sensing that the time had come to reintroduce the Vionnet label, he became CEO of the fledging "re-startup."



The Vionnet legacy helped de Lummen build a strong management team and lure some of the best designers and professionals in the fashion business. Their mission: to update Madeleine Vionnet's vision, while paying homage to her original designs and using some of the fabrics and details she favored.

De Lummen also drew on his familiarity with contracts. He signed a two-season exclusive

distribution agreement with Barneys New York, allowing him to get the business off the ground.

In 2007, Vionnet debuted its ready-to-wear collection – it sold out in less than three weeks, according to Style.com. The fashion world took notice – in Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, Elle France and Vanity Fair. This month, Vionnet made its debut on the Haute Couture calendar with its spring-summer 2008 collection, which will be distributed worldwide.

But de Lummen says he is never “satisfied enough.” Glued to his Blackberry day and night, he hovers over every detail of the “house” with the passion of Madeleine Vionnet and the drive of someone striving to turn a family name into an empire.

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