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THE TALK

Revival of the Fittest

By GIOIA DILABERTO

To most if not all of the designers showing clothes in Paris this fall, Madeleine Vionnet is a dressmaking god, fashion's own Supreme Being. "She is the source of everything, the mother of us all," says Azzedine Alaïa, who owns a valuable collection of Vionnets.

A short, stout Frenchwoman who died in 1975 at 98, Vionnet changed the course of design by inventing the bias cut, among other techniques, producing timeless clothes that are considered some of the most beautiful ever. Few outside fashion, though, know her name. White-haired and unglamorous, she shunned the limelight sought by her archrival, Coco Chanel, who got her start making hats and whom Vionnet often derided as just a milliner. Late in life, Vionnet conceded that Chanel had taste, but she forever felt superior to the popularizer of quilted handbags and black-toed slippers. Chanel might have had a distinctive look, but Vionnet thought of herself as the da Vinci of dressmaking, couture's only true artist. "I never made fashion," she once said. "I don't know what fashion is. I made clothes I believe in."

Vionnet dresses are like no others. They are ingeniously conceived, some of them cut from a single piece of cloth that spirals around the body to form both bodice and skirt. They mold to the figure without clinging and recall a very particular and lost glamour — of Garbo movies and Gershwin tunes. Throughout the Jazz Age and the years before World War II, movie stars, members of royalty and the superrich flocked to Vionnet's couture house in Paris, at 50 Avenue Montaigne, where fashion shows were held in the lavish Art Deco salons and where Vionnet would drape her creations on a small wooden doll. Vionnet, a toll collector's daughter who divorced twice and lost her only child in infancy, had come up through the ranks of the *midinettes* and always identified with working girls. She provided health care and training for her staff, and — unlike Chanel and nearly all of their contemporaries — actually paid decent salaries. When she closed shop in 1939 on the eve of the war, a kind of artistry and gentility passed from the scene.

Now Vionnet is back. Buoyed by the success of Balenciaga, Gucci and other revivals of faded luxury labels, a young Frenchman named Arnaud de Lummen will reintroduce

her house early next year. De Lummen's ambition is no less than to someday preside over a billion-dollar empire as big as Chanel. "Why not?" he says in a tone as bright as a gold button. "Vionnet is the only brand with the DNA and the inner potential of Chanel."

At 29, de Lummen is slight and wiry, with dark, close-cropped hair and spectacles that give him a scholarly air. Few things are more difficult than starting a fashion house, but he has the confidence of someone who's been groomed for the task since childhood.

Eighteen years ago, his father, Guy de Lummen, who had developed a reverence for Vionnet while heading the ready-to-wear department at Balmain, bought the rights to her name and spent two decades exploring ways to re-establish the brand. For a while he sold perfume, hand-painted scarves and alligator bags under the Vionnet label out of a boutique in the Place Vendôme. Two years ago, de Lummen fils took over the effort to start a clothing line.

He has hired a creative director, the Greek-born Sophia Kokosalaki, who is busy draping a line of luxury ready-to-wear (like Vionnet, Kokosalaki doesn't sketch) that will be distributed in January through Barneys New York and at the Vionnet studio in Paris. Kokosalaki's first runway collection for Vionnet will be shown in October 2007.

"In the 80's and 90's, it was a sacrilege to talk about reviving Vionnet. People said, 'It's a magical name, don't do anything with it, don't touch it.' But now the time is right," says de Lummen, lighting a cigarette, one of several he smokes throughout the afternoon.

We are sitting in the bar of Le Meurice hotel on the Rue de Rivoli, a few blocks from the Rue de la Paix, historically the center of Parisian couture. The current generation of shoppers and fashionistas has never heard of Vionnet, de Lummen explains in the English he perfected while studying at [Harvard](#) Law School, so they don't associate her name with a lost golden age. At the same time, he hopes that something of Vionnet's prestige and avant-garde spirit will seep into the new label.

Developing a brand that is timeless and hip is "a very long process," he says. "You don't wake up one day with all the elements in place." Working out of an office near where his father's boutique once stood, de Lummen spent two years interviewing designers, studying Vionnet's career and assembling his team: a financial officer and creative and marketing experts, including Jean-Philippe Evrot, the former art director of Colette, who joins us in the bar at the Meurice.

The choice of designer was key, Evrot says, a [Tom Ford](#) type in a blue jacket and crisp white shirt. “We needed someone who was a technician like Vionnet. We didn’t want someone who said, ‘O.K., I’m just going to do something pretty,’ because for Vionnet it was more complex than that. She was an architect of fashion. Designing for her was an intellectual process.”

In their search, de Lummen and Evrot concentrated on designers whose approach was sculptural. They interviewed Zac Posen, among others, but ultimately chose Kokosalaki because her interest in technical innovations, combined with her romantic, feminine clothes, fit nicely with Vionnet’s legacy.

What the new designer will not do is copy Vionnet directly. “That would be a big mistake,” Evrot says. “Seventy years have gone by. The woman of today is not the woman Vionnet dressed. If we want to keep the spirit of Vionnet alive, we have to think, If she was starting today, how would she present fashion? We’re not going to do little T-shirts with ‘Madeleine’ across the chest, but we’re also not going to do haute couture.”

For one thing, the armies of highly skilled seamstresses trained in the time-honored techniques of hand sewing on which Vionnet’s business depended are long gone. So is the kind of customer who had to have every garment hand-fitted.

De Lummen speaks earnestly about Vionnet’s “codes,” the elements that made up her unique aesthetic, which he is determined to honor. To that end, he plans to incorporate in the new collections some embroidery designs done for Vionnet by the venerable Parisian brodeur Lesage. He’s also formed the Vionnet Association to promote the couturière’s legacy through research and exhibitions. Members include Herbert Givenchy, Madeleine Chapsal (Vionnet’s godchild) and Betty Kirke, the author of “Madeleine Vionnet,” a definitive study of the couturière, recently reissued by Chronicle Books.

De Lummen says that he will need an estimated 1 million euros (about \$1.27 million) for the first runway collection alone and, within five years, 15 million euros (about \$19 million) to keep the label alive. To attract clients he plans to let Barneys promote the new ready-to-wear line (dresses are to start at \$3,000) through parties and other events, and de Lummen is counting on that to create buzz: “We want to show that Vionnet is a success from a marketing point of view because we have customers who are buying the clothes. Hopefully, that will attract investors.”

Didier Grumbach, the president of the *Chambre Syndicale de la Haute Couture*, the organization that has overseen France's couture industry since 1868, says he believes that "it can work if there are enough positive energies, and I mean good people, a good organization."

His expression, though, is skeptical. Sitting behind a horseshoe desk in his office on Rue Faubourg Saint-Honoré, he looks like an aging Agent 007, tall and elegant with hair the color of aluminum. Grumbach recites a long list of failures, including attempts to revive the fashion houses of Jacques Fath and Elsa Schiaparelli. Someone even brought back the house of the founding father of couture, Charles Frederick Worth. "There is a Worth collection every year," Grumbach says, rolling his eyes and grimacing. "And that's a name far more famous than Vionnet." In July, Rochas was added to the list.

Grumbach stares at the ceiling for a minute, as if he is seeing through the roof of the building to the sky beyond and a heavenly house of couture. The "most exciting" reincarnation of Vionnet today is Alaïa, he proclaims finally, returning his gaze to mine. "Now, I ask you: If you want to wear something like Vionnet's, who would you buy? Vionnet as designed by Sophia Kokosalaki or by Alaïa?"

A cheaper option would be to sew something yourself. Betty Kirke's book on Vionnet contains 38 patterns, which she recreated from a meticulous examination of Vionnet originals. A former costume designer, Kirke, a youthful 81, fell in love with Vionnet while restoring dresses for a 1973 exhibition at the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), and she has devoted the past 30 years to unlocking the mysteries of Vionnet's techniques.

In 1974 she talked her way into an audience with the couturière at Vionnet's Art Deco town house in Paris. "I brought her a bouquet of flowers in the colors she liked — purples and certain shades of red," Kirke recalls. "Vionnet was then 97, and she hadn't been out of the house in five years. She talked about Balenciaga, who'd been her great friend, and cried because he'd died."

Vionnet lent Kirke some dresses, from which Kirke made muslin mock-ups, known in the trade as *toiles*. Many of them are inspired by designs on Greek urns and are gowns that involve wrapping, looping, twisting and tying fabric. On the day I visit Kirke in her Inwood, N.Y., apartment, they lie on a sofa like a pile of old rags. "I know, they seem like nothing," Kirke says, offering me a wisp of muslin to try on. "But they're very cleverly made."

So clever, in fact, that it is difficult to figure out how to wear them. Vionnet's clients sometimes called her in desperation, unable to get into the clothes for which they'd paid a small fortune. Kirke and I have trouble, too. "Let's see, does it go this way?" she asks, struggling to recall how the long sash attached in the front of the waistline of the toile I'd slipped on formed the bodice.

It takes several minutes to get it right, but the effort is worth it. The dress feels so light and flowing that it is almost like wearing liquid silk. No one makes clothes like that anymore.