

THE BUSINESS OF FASHION

Paris Fashion Week: The resurrection of Vionnet



In the 1920's, a young French designer named Madeleine Vionnet created a virtual tornado in the in the fashion industry when she developed the bias cut. By cutting fabric against the grain, she enabled it to cling, drape and give in a way that was flattering to the body. Vionnet went on to build an enviable and innovative business, dressing clients such as Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, and Greta Garbo.



The house was shut down during the Second World War, but since then, Vionnet's technique has been widely used by numerous acclaimed designers, including Azzedine Alaia and John Galiano, who has made the bias-cut dress one of his own signatures.

Now, almost 70 years after it faded into oblivion, the House of Vionnet may not be dead for much longer. Not if Vionnet CEO Arnaud de Lummen has something to say about it. Over the past few years, he has been quietly laying the foundation to resurrect this once-great house to its former glory. De Lummen's father bought the rights to the Vionnet business 20 years ago and has waited until now to task his son, a Harvard-trained lawyer, to make this ambitious vision a reality.

After Sophia Kokosalaki's one year stint heading up design, Mr. de Lummen installed French designer Marc Audibet at the helm of Vionnet -- a move which was lauded by many industry insiders, some of whom feel that Kokosalaki was unable to carve out an identity for Vionnet that was distinct enough from her eponymous label.

The choice of Mr. Audibet, who has long been an admirer and practitioner of Vionnet's techniques, is an inspired one. Not only does he have experience at some of the finest European fashion houses, including Prada and Trussardi, there is no other label to compete for his time or creative energy.



The Business of Fashion sat down with Mr. De Lummen at Vionnet's recent presentation for S/S 2008 at Place Vendome during Paris Fashion Week to learn about his strategy for building the Vionnet brand. We also took in an abbreviated presentation of Mr. Audibet's series of dresses which were immaculately in tune with Madame Vionnet's vision. While I wish they had been shown in a setting more suited to Vionnet's grand style (the stark white backdrop with modern mirrored gizmos felt anachronistic), there was no denying the power of Audibet's designs.

With all of the talk of Diego Della Valle's search for a designer to revive the House of Schiaparelli and the ongoing efforts of Harvey Weinstein to rebuild Halston, Vionnet will certainly be an interesting story to watch

On sales and distribution...

Barney's will continue to hold the exclusive rights to distribution in the USA, but as of S/S 2008 the Vionnet will slowly open up distribution in other key markets. To secure its exclusivity, Barney's effectively funded the working capital costs for production by paying for its order up front.

On marketing and communications...

While Mr. Audibet's dresses are undeniably complex and intricate in their design, to the untrained eye, many of the most difficult techniques might be lost.

Communicating in this, the fashion era of sound-bites and celebrities, means that educating consumers on Vionnet's techniques will be crucial.

And, the Press are listening. There was no shortage of editors at the presentation, including Le Pli magazine's Take Hirakawa, whose smiling face and great style I recognised from **Diane Pernet's blog**.



On case studies for the Vionnet strategy...

Reviving a fashion label -- let alone a Parisian Couture house -- from the dead is no easy task. Just ask the people trying to rebuild Asprey or Pringle or Bally or Ungaro. De Lummen says he and his team have been very careful to respect the codes of the Vionnet brand. When asked about a potential case study, he insists

"there is no case study for what we are doing...though I look at Chanel when I am thinking about where we should be aiming for."