After helping prepare costumes for the 1973 exhibition *The Tens, Twenties, and Thirties—Inventive Clothes: 1909–1939* at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, Betty Kirke decided she would "try to solve the mysteries found in Madeleine Vionnet's dresses." She did that. And then she wrote a book about it. We talked with her recently about her book, Vionnet, and the mysteries solved—which led to a favorite Horner & Company topic: the intersections, through history, time and technique, between design for costume and interiors.

discovering vionnet (again)

pursuing the vionnet mysteries

an interview with betty kirke, author, *madeleine vionnet*

In your book, you explain how you first became interested in Vionnet, writing, "I noticed that her dresses had structures I had never seen before. From their cut and types, and uses of fabrics, to their decorations and stitching techniques, each had a unique individuality—each dress had something new to be discovered. Vionnet's dresses were thoroughly calculated, even in the subtlest of details, and all were beautiful. I wanted to know more about the designer." You and Harumi Tokai, the book's editor, also write about the enormity of the task of turning that interest into a book.

There were problems—after I finished the book and was looking for a publisher, the curator in Paris who allowed me to take the patterns died. We'd had a verbal agreement as to what I would pay for the use of the patterns. Luckily, after looking at the book, the woman who took her place said she would hold to the old agreement. With nothing in writing, we just had to trust each other.

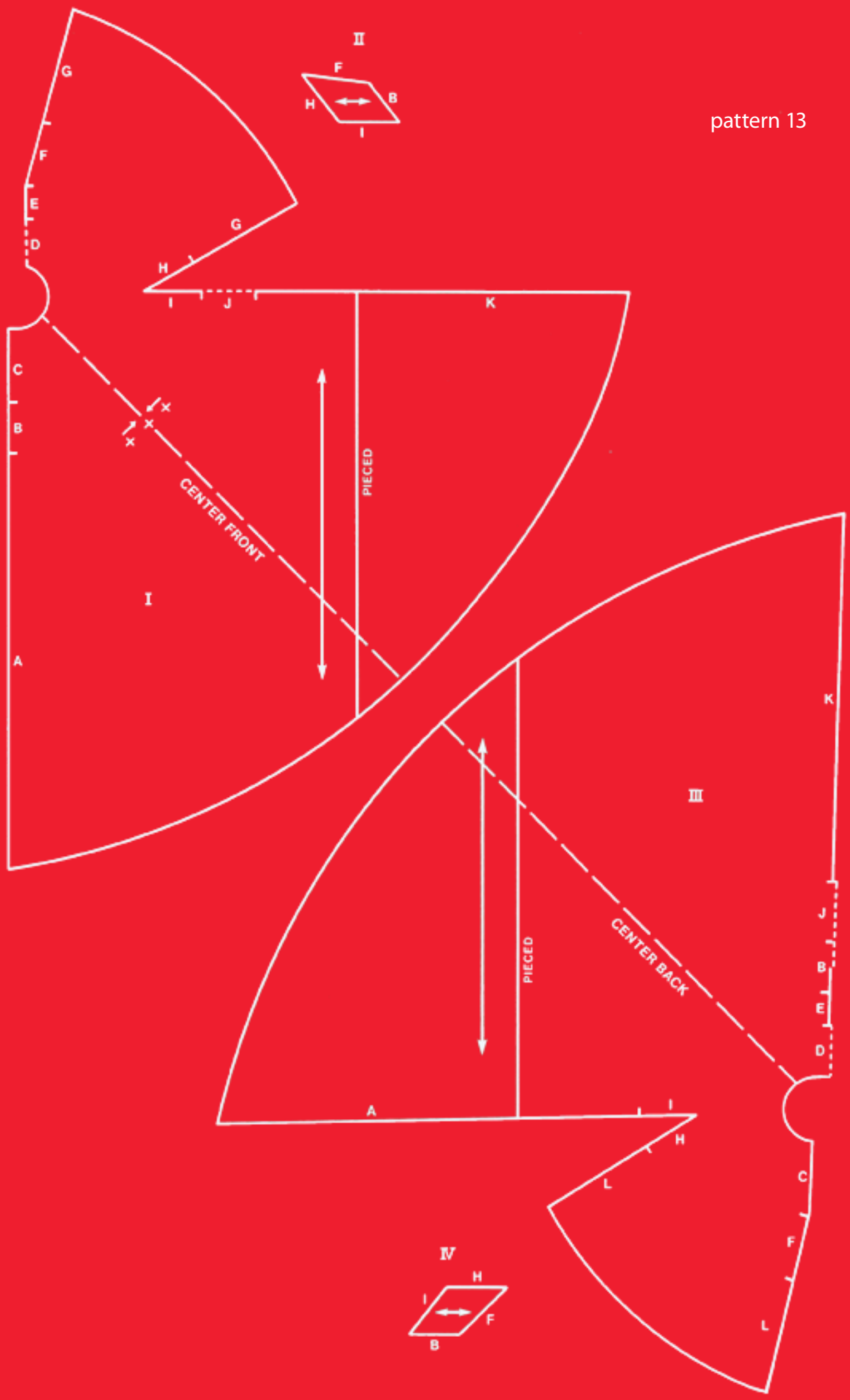
I couldn't find anyone to publish the book for three years. Either they loved it but wouldn't do it because no one knew who Vionnet was, or they wanted the book but didn't want to include the patterns. They didn't get it.

The book was finally published in Japan in 1991, and it was expensive, but I had people ordering it in Japanese, sending money without having seen the book. Then one day I was giving a lecture demonstration to a marvelous group of dressmakers. They were so excited, I decided to model the toiles—or they weren't going to let me leave. They were thrilled because they could handle them; you can't do that in a museum. Now, I let students model the toiles, and they get it, they really get it.

The way Vionnet approached covering the body was so different than how we were taught—and how it's still taught—with flat patterns. Everything is still made that way, it's why we have a repeat of everything that's been done in the past, but it isn't done as well. Students have to have inspiration, and it has to start at the foundation, with how a pattern is made. Right now, I'm working on a DVD about how to drape patterns, because cloth is two-dimensional but becomes a three-dimensional object—a knot, a twist, or a dress—and animation is really the only way to understand that. We have a small movie on my

cover right + this page: photography by hideoki
cover left: photography by irving solero

pattern 13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Web site that helps demonstrate that point, with two bits of animation at the end. They're not totally accurate, so I can't use them with the students, but they give you an idea of what it is.

When I first started to give demonstrations, I was draping on a full-scale mannequin, as you're taught to do, but I soon learned you couldn't drape the way Vionnet did, there is too much fabric to handle. It has to be draped at half-scale—it's so *easy* at half-scale, and it takes so little time to scale it up.

What do you think about Vionnet's genius, where did it come from?
She was of her time. After WWI, women were working, for one thing. And in the 1920s, everything changed—philosophy, art, furniture. Vionnet was one of the first to get into art deco—again, geometric shapes, and that's what she was all about. She did her own house, with a lot of the furniture designed for her by people who weren't well known at the time, but who became famous afterwards.

It isn't in the book because I didn't know it then, but I know now that Vionnet did take from ancient Greek dress she found depicted on vases. In Athens, in the summer of 2004, I gave a lecture during a week of lectures on clothing at *Ptyshosis: from Ancient Greek Dress to the 21st-Century*, an event held during Greece's International Conference for the Cultural Olympiad. One morning we went up to the Parthenon and I saw one of the goddesses; a man nearby said, "It's not the original, it would have been ruined being outside, but they show the originals once in awhile inside the museum." Which was very small and not well lit. But I went in, turned around, and there I saw Vionnet's pattern 3.

The fabric hadn't been cut; similarly, Vionnet had eliminated excess cutting. The dress was folded back at the shoulder and pinned with a long pin; Vionnet had twisted it, and got the same effect with cloth. She was totally into textiles, but she had textiles that we don't have today, and that's unfortunate. Although Issey Miyake did duplicate some of them in man-made fibers, in crêpes, and they came out very nicely.

In the book you write, "Vionnet's original techniques with fabric—wrapping, looping, twisting, tying, tucking the material, methods of diversifying themes—had come to a deadlock. As she said, 'I created a system of cutting and have ended up by becoming the slave of my own system.'" What do you think her designs would have been like in the 1940s if she'd carried on? This was such a remarkable period in history; if she had come along ten years earlier or ten years later. . .
She *was* around ten years earlier and it didn't work.

You know you've got something on, but it's like you've got nothing else on but your body.

Yes, the corsets—she'd said, "I have never been able to tolerate corsets myself, so why should I inflict them on other women." But, you write, "With no one to sell her dresses to the clients so that they could be worn publicly, the reality of her suppression of the corset would have to pass unknown. Shortly after this collection was presented, Paul Poiret, the fashion designer, introduced his collection of uncorseted models. . . . Poiret got the credit for the elimination of the corset, a fact that Vionnet would always resent."
I have two drawings of two dresses that were done in her first business and there's an inkling of where she was going to go, but it certainly wasn't the Vionnet that we know. I found out much more about Thayaht, he had an enormous influence on her. In fact, Thayaht very much influenced Claire McCardle and Adrian. They both were at the Parsons school in Paris when he taught there, and you can see his influence on their work.

You said you'd try to solve the mysteries found in Madeleine Vionnet's dresses. Some elements of a mystery will always be a mystery, and that's good because that's its power, but to get as close as you can is a journey worth taking.
But she makes it simple. Before I left FIT (Fashion Institute of Technology), we had an exhibit with one room of Vionnet's clothing made up of borrowed things, including a nightgown owned by a dealer. I decided to put that pattern in the book because there are just two pieces. When you see the dress, you think, 'Two pieces? How did we get there?' It's so simple and it's so pretty. When you get through, you look at it and think, this is so simple, why didn't we think of this before? But you have to think about it differently.

That reminds me of what Jacques Griffe wrote in the preface: "During these visits, she would reveal her philosophy, such as, 'Simplicity is what is most difficult in the world; it is the last stage of experience and the first effort of the genius.'" But I'd like to revisit an earlier question; what do you think she meant when she said, "I created a system of cutting and have ended up by becoming the slave of my own system."
I think she said that because at the end of the 1930s, we were going towards the war and clothing that was—just think of Balenciaga—totally tailored. Where she went to the natural body, we went away from the natural body. She didn't fit in, her clothing wasn't timely any more—although every time it came back to the natural body, in *Women's Wear Daily* it would be Vionnet, Vionnet, Vionnet! Now, I think we're moving more to the natural body than we ever were. I don't think we're going to go away from it.

photography by hideoki

You make an important observation in the book: "The structure and silhouette of clothes thus could be further interrelated. Vionnet created harmonies, and through these she reached the goal of all good design: unity. In this unity, the integration of dressmaking and design was so complete that no part of the design could be removed without destroying the dress."
Because of mass production, sizes have to be made in such a way that they can be altered to fit individuals, so we end up with seams in certain places on the body. That's not good. This isn't in the book, I got it later from one of her employees, who told me Vionnet used to say, "I don't know why they put seams where they do because the body doesn't have seams." She relied on the whole body, and everything she did was always to a minimum; you couldn't interfere with that, or you would ruin the garment.

In the book, I write about how, when I was trying on Vionnet's clothes, she was so concerned with the negative space—who even thinks of negative space these days? The idea of the whole was there. But if you *wear* her clothes, that's the thrill.

I made pattern 13 (*see page 4*) to wear to parties. It's in quadrants, and it was actually used for a wedding gown. I made it mid-calf so I could wear it to any kind of party. I had three friends, each with a different height and bulk, who wanted that dress. We copied the pattern, they made it, and we all said the same thing: You know you've got something on, but it's like you've got nothing else on but your body. Its excess just floats with your body. I wore the dress out.

If you have a different experience of your body in three dimensions, doesn't it change the way you think?
Absolutely.

Vionnet had her own peculiar way. She used scissors to cut muslin that she draped on her wooden artist's mannequin to determine the details and shapes of the dress. "I never learned sketching. . . . I would not use this method. We should not dress with a pencil, but start using the fabric," Vionnet said. In draping a muslin pattern, one must think in the third dimension while implementing the elements and relationships of dressmaking. Here is Vionnet's interesting comment about her approach: "My head is a real workbox. . . . It has always held scissors, needles, and thread. Even when I'm walking down the street, I can't stop myself looking to see how the clothes of a passerby are made, even men's clothes. I say to myself, 'supposing one were to put a tuck there, to give breadth at the shoulder.'" In Vionnet's method, the elements of dressmaking and design are fused.
Betty Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet*

a geometry of the feminine

sherrie horner, www.hornerandcompany.com

Vionnet's process of mentally deconstructing clothing is a familiar one to me. I do the same thing with curtains and soft furnishings. Whether viewing something made or photographed, I'm always examining how it was cut, sewn and constructed. It's a mental exercise but not at all abstract, as it's based in my experience of cutting.

Cutting is an art, and it happens in three dimensions. But when a client draws an idea for a curtain design, that drawing—as with clothing design—is a two-dimensional rendering that imagines fabric behaving in ways that it often can't or won't on a three-dimensional form or body.

But there are many wonderful things draped fabric *will* do on a human body or three-dimensional form, and you will see the fabric in ways you can't, or that simply can't occur, in two dimensions. Drawings can never capture the marvellous dimensional quality of textiles, or anticipate what the textile will do depending on how it's cut, or how it will meet the form that it is going to clothe or cover.

Vionnet, it seems, was *always* in a 3-D state of mind, not just when draping her wooden mannequin. It was the way she saw, the way she conceived of what she was making—she conceived a form exactly as it would be.

Pattern cutters are trained to make patterns on a grid and there are certain conventions—specific forms and places where ease and fit are created with darts, tucks, seams or gathering—that make it easy to think conventionally.

Grid-based training doesn't train one to think dimensionally about what one is making. Decades before computer-modelling made it easy for anyone to do, Vionnet thought of the grid as a three-dimensional reality.

In her book *Madeleine Vionnet*, Kirke observes, "When designing her dresses, she was less concerned about the front and back than about their three-dimensionality. For Vionnet, the ultimate goal was to 'create harmonies.'"

In modelling fashion, models pose to show the front or back of a dress. But Vionnet's designs clothed the three-dimensional dynamic reality of the body, which extends into space; Vionnet actually conceived and designed clothing as it would be worn, and as it would move with the wearer.

photography by hideoki

photography by cindy sirko

In Thayaht's illustrations, the lines of the dresses are drawn into the surrounding space to create the illusion of movement. . . . Garments extend into surrounding space, and space into the garments, thereby creating dynamic movement.

In emulating the futurists' drawn images that blend the subject into its surrounding space, Vionnet, through careful draping of the pattern parts beyond their utilitarian needs, introduced a new aesthetic dimension for clothing.
Betty Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet*

Designing with textiles demands patience for problem-solving by trial and error, and the ability to imagine in 3-D. We've just finished curtains for three rooms in a modern San Francisco apartment where the form was the same—Ripplefold curtains on motorized tracks—but the fabrics were completely different. As part of the problem-solving process we made multiple samples, trying to find how each fabric could assume the form in the most fluid and beautiful way. It was a very technical but necessary exercise, because you can never get that essential, dimensional information when viewing fabric flat on a table or bolt.

Fabric for the living room curtains was quite a difficult casement—linen with a weave that was somewhat uneven and because of that, so unstable that adding a self-bias binding fractured the structure of the weave, it looked like it was starting to shred. We even tried using a microtext lingerie needle, but the structure still split.

We had to add interfacing for stability, but carefully. When fabric is pleated and hung, the bottom edge must follow the structural flow of the form which, depending on how it's pleated, will fall in columns or cones. Following with ease in both movement and stillness, the bottom edge should resemble ribbon candy's even, rounded curves. Using the wrong type of stitch or too much interfacing can break this line, ruining the flow and forcing the bottom edge into a cracked or zig-zag shape.

We'd done vertical seams without the interfacing, and clearly that hadn't worked, but when we put interfacing in the bias binding that also continued along the hem, it prevented the hem from following the ripple of the heading. It actually took four days of experimentation before we got the best finish, using iron-on interfacing *only* in the bias binding on vertical edges.

But if we hadn't made samples—even with my previous experience with this particular form and type of fabric—making a best guess is the best I could have done. Making samples helps one see the reality of each fabric in three dimensions, as well as what's required in terms of structure.

For Vionnet, the body *was* the structure. While I work with structured forms such as slipcovers, pillows, and four-poster beds, structure in a curtain derives from the way it's hung and what it's hung from. How it's constructed is equally important; a curtain needs sufficient internal structure to support fluidity, move on a track or pole when drawn, and retain its shape.

Fluid movement and its extension into space can't be added on as an afterthought, both must be integrated into the design at the structural level—this is as true of clothing as it is of curtains.

Kirke writes about Vionnet's designs, "In Thayaht's illustrations, the lines of the dresses are drawn into the surrounding space to create the illusion of movement. Patterns 1, 3, and 4, and many others, actually moved into their surrounding space."

In their design and as they are drawn, curtains, whether motorized or not, extend

photography by hideoki

into the surrounding space. Their relationship with the room and its elements must be true in proportion and expression. Achieving that begins at the beginning, with the choice of fabric, cutting techniques, stitches, and sometimes, even the choice of needle.

Ultimately, whether it's in the way it was cut or sewn, or whether it was interfaced—however one gets there—the finished piece should look completely at ease, and the fabric should look its absolute best.

That doesn't necessarily mean loud. This particular linen, for example, wasn't overly dramatic, it was just quietly 'there.' With subtle fabrics such as these, a curtain's construction can help reveal and enhance their beauty. In fact, a textile will naturally adorn itself, looking just that much more beautiful and alive when constructed and sewn the right way.

Yet it isn't always obvious what that way is, and it's easy to get impatient with the time and experimentation it takes to get it right. But the best results can't be achieved without it. And there are ironic and delightful surprises: in hanging the curtains for which we'd made samples, we observed how the same characteristics that made the linen difficult also made it shine beautifully in the room's light.

This unique combination of form, technique, textile and light was stunning if a little unexpected; it's amazing how one can bring decades of experience to design and fabrication yet still discover better-than-imagined possibilities.

As Kirke relates, "When one knows one's craft," said Vionnet, "one takes a piece of fabric not only on the bias, but in every possible direction (warp, weft, bias). But of course, you have to know the obedience of the fabric."

Vionnet's knowledge of textiles was physical. She was always thinking about how a fabric would respond, how it would drape or reflect light, and where on the body it should do so for best effect. She would use a fabric's qualities in the most inventive, intentional ways.

Kirke elaborates, "Vionnet often created contrasts through color, fabric, or texture. The most frequent was her use of both the shiny and dull sides of satin-back crêpe. In pattern 7, she chose to use velvet and take advantage of its unique characteristic, the nap. When woven, the pile surface is pressed in one direction, resulting in a light side when viewed from one direction and a dark side when viewed from the opposite direction. Vionnet used this contrast in value here by alternating the direction of the pile for each square."

With Vionnet's dresses, the more one looks, the more one sees. If the fourth dimension is time, the fifth dimension could be described as transcendent experience via art and archetype. If one works in the four dimensions with a certain level of passion and mindfulness, the fifth is present. I was thinking about that recently as I viewed the *Quilts of Gee's Bend* exhibition at San Francisco's de Young museum.

Obviously, there's no linear connection between Vionnet and the Gee's Bend, Alabama quilt makers, but the commonality is this: the more one looks, the more one sees the reality of that dimension in their work. It's an essence that knocks you for six.

Yet as Kirke asks in her book, "Why was Vionnet, the great architect of couture, the creator of bias cuts, and highly respected in the history of fashion, not as well known as Chanel, Poiret, or Schiapparelli? It was in part her distaste for publicity.

Moreover, her designs, due to their unique cut, were just too difficult to copy."

I think Chanel wanted to be a brand, she wanted that kind of renown, and today, Chanel under Lagerfeld is still making suits, double-C handbags and shoes with black patent leather toes—products that are commercially viable because they can be replicated easily.

Vionnet was more the dressmaker's dressmaker.

Kirke writes, "She looked to the classical, for her own concept was that her dresses were 'not for fashion . . . I only like that which lasts forever.' Vionnet reminisced, 'Why should waists be high one season and low the next? . . . A waistline should suit the wearer's proportions.'"

Noting the unique dimensionality of Vionnet's dresses, American journalists of the period dubbed them 'anatomical cuts', Kirke tells us, adding, "In the use of anatomical cuts, Vionnet exercised her theory that the body is composed of geometrical shapes and thus dress parts should correspond to these shapes. Through the anatomical cut, she was able to achieve a cohesive relationship between dressmaking and design."

I do see something of Vionnet's influence in the 1960s' and 1970s' designs of the late Jean Muir—the bias cuts, the drape, the fit. Of course it had been quite revolutionary when Vionnet introduced these concepts decades earlier. Pattern 11, for example (*see page 12*), was astonishingly modern. Created by Vionnet in 1928, it looks as though it could have been designed at any time in the last 80 years.

Kirke observes, "Only through draping could a dress with so many features be produced from a single quadrant." On the pattern (*see opposite*) you'll see a line with an arrow at each end. Imagine for a moment that straight line represents the straight grain of the fabric; instead of placing the pattern on the fabric as Kirke has it marked, it's placed so the arrow, the straight grain of the fabric, goes from the armhole to the hem. It would be a dress. But it wouldn't be the same dress—at all.

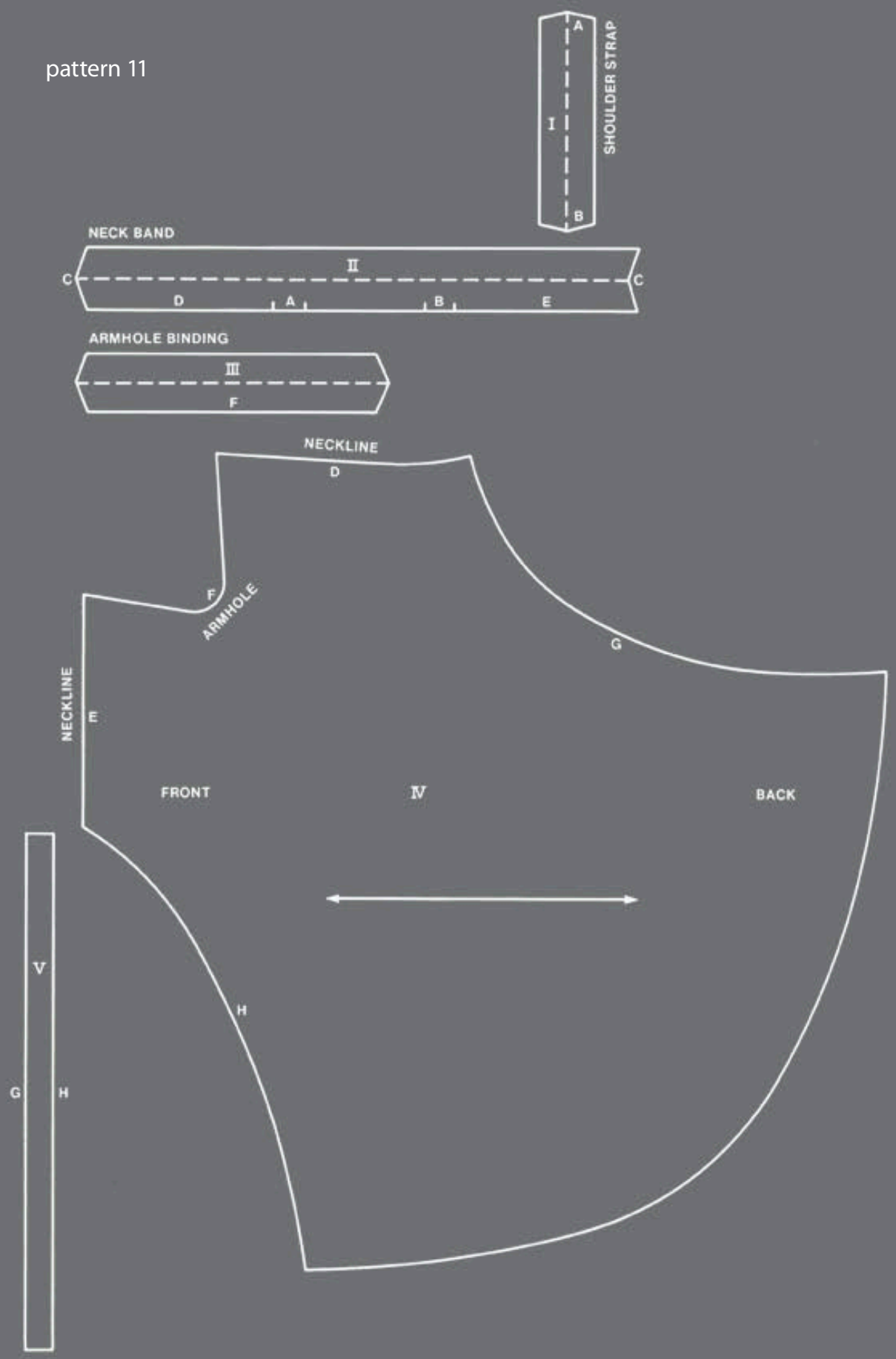
With the arrow where it is in Kirke's drawn pattern, the dress and the curve of the hem fall in varying degrees of bias. In the photo, the dress is on a mannequin so it's not as obvious, but if this were on a human body, you'd get varying degrees of bias going across the hip, torso and leg. It's very simple but it has great finesse, great subtlety.

You don't often see patterns like this where the design isn't just the shape, it's how the shape is cut and in which direction; fabric can have a very varied physical presence and expression depending on how it's cut.

When fashion journalists wrote that Vionnet discovered the bias, she was astonished. She remembered that, during the nineteenth century, bias was used mainly for adornment such as flounces, edgings, and pleats, but she discovered techniques to control it so that she could use the bias freely, as no one had before. Vionnet learned the character of cloth used in that direction, and obeyed its rules.
Betty Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet*

Just how difficult Vionnet could be was underscored for us when a researcher at the Kyoto Costume Institute told us that the collection included some Vionnets that no one alive today had any idea how to wear.
Harumi Tokai, *Madeleine Vionnet*

pattern 11



Ruffles in the mid- and late-19th century were used in layer on top of layer of fabric on top of a corseted body. There were no corsets in Vionnet's designs, and it was the revealing way in which she used bias-cut cloth on the body—flesh and form were clearly visible beneath the fabric—that was so shockingly new.

Cutting fabric on the bias can seem almost magical, it releases in the fabric an ability to move in a way that it otherwise can't. But cutting and sewing on the bias requires exceptional care. It's quite difficult, for example, to make the hem on a circular skirt hang evenly because the fabric falls three ways from the waist and hip: on the straight grain, on a degree of bias, and on the true bias.

Imagining a square of fabric, the diagonal across that square would be the true bias. If that square were paper, you wouldn't feel any resistance as you cut along its diagonal edge, but with woven fabric, you'll feel a certain resistance because you're cutting against the grain.

In working with bias-cut fabric, it helps to understand its character and behavior. When making bias binding, for example, fabric must be cut on the true bias or it will pucker when going around curves. A ruffle cut on the bias has a completely different inner structure and presence; it stands up, it has more body and volume. Fabric will also read differently; a plaid cut on the bias and that same plaid cut on the straight create quite varied expressions—a contrast that can be exploited by adding bias-cut ruffles to a pillow, curtain, or dress cut on the straight grain.

There are inherent difficulties in the bias as well as fluid, elegant drama, and Vionnet mastered both. As Kirke explains, "When the bias is hung vertically, the cloth is greatly extendable due to gravity's pull. This is of little consequence unless the part hung contains all directions of the cloth. Vionnet often used the quadrant for skirts. Because these skirts are partially hung on the bias, their 'hang-out,' or uneven stretching characteristic, is problematic.

"At the core of this problem is variance within the fabric. Gravity pulls on quadrants from every possible direction, but it tends to stretch the fabric most in the bias direction. When hung continuously, the hemline becomes distorted. The vertical, and to some degree the horizontal, direction of the fabric holds its own weight and will not stretch and appear to hang out at the hemline. The resulting uneven hemline of circular cuts has always been a problem, making them less popular among designers, even today.

"Vionnet's circular-cut skirts did not suffer the distortion of hang-out because she used a variety of techniques to prevent it. One way was to force distortion. One of Vionnet's employees taught me the following method:

Adjustment of the bias

1. Mark the warp and weft by hand stitching at even intervals in a checkerboard pattern.
2. Cut or fold the fabric into quadrants.
3. With the apex at the top, pin the top and both right and left edges flat against the wall.
4. Hang several weights along the bottom and allow to stay for a period sufficient to stretch the susceptible areas.

Two large cardboard boxes arrived from New York. Inside were pasted patterns made of nonwoven fabric pliant enough to drape easily. The thirty-eight doll-like pieces looked like little envoys sent to bear witness to Betty's passion for the project.
Harumi Tokai, *Madeleine Vionnet*

photography by hideoki

Pattern 14, opposite: This dress is an example of quadrants being weighted—of bias doing its work—which allowed a traditional rule of dressmaking to be broken, that of never joining bias to grain.

What happens at the waistline determines what happens at the hemline. To correct the problem of hang-out, the number of threads in each ripple has to be the same, then the weight—gravitational pull—is the same. Vionnet created circular-cut skirts with even ripples at the hemline through draping. The beauty of this dress can be attributed to the movement of the ripples at the hem. Ripples occur in concert with movement in bias-hung materials. Vionnet's goal for harmonies included the aesthetic desire for a harmonious interplay of ripples as the wearer moved, a result of the material being hung at different points of the grain. What Vionnet achieved with even hem ripples may have pleased her aesthetically, but what she achieved technically were circular-cut dresses that retained their shape over several decades.
Betty Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet*

"When the quadrant was removed from the wall and ready to cut, Vionnet would say, *'le biais a fait son travail'* (The bias has done its work)."

On the one hand, the pattern 14 dress (*see opposite*) looks extremely simple because it's so elegant, but its degree of difficulty and complexity of construction would rate a ten out of ten. The capacity to create its structure, to cut it to fit the body as it does, to sew it and sew it well, is its own kind of genius. It goes beyond our modern concepts of fashion to something that is essentially true.

Vionnet was most concerned with the essence of the textile and with mystery and fluidity, the archetypal aspects of the feminine—that is the power and appeal of her work.

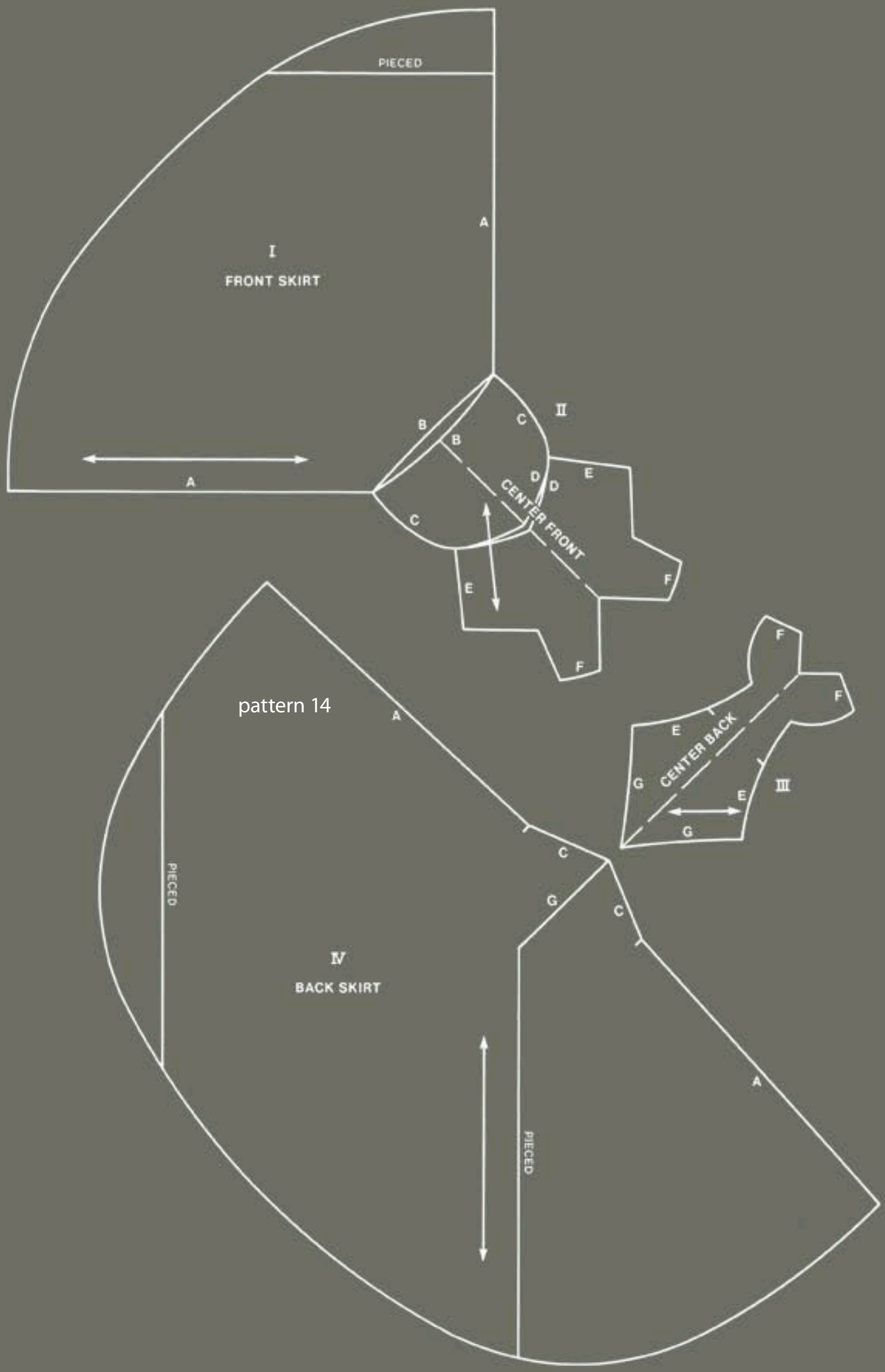
As Kirke writes in the introduction, "The questions raised by Vionnet's work presented a challenge I decided to pursue—I would try to solve the mysteries found in Madeleine Vionnet's dresses."

That is what she did. How she did it was a marvel of patience and counting, a forensic sleuthing of geometry and riddles.

Clothing by Vionnet is preserved in museum and private collections worldwide, which means Kirke couldn't take anything apart to make a pattern from it—though even when permitted, that has to be done very carefully to preserve the information.

When deconstruction isn't an option, it's possible to create a pattern from an existing item by laying muslin on top of it and marking the seams, but that's difficult to do and harder still to be certain it's absolutely exact. Plus, Kirke notes, that wasn't permitted in museum archives either. The solution was a painstaking process of measuring yarns.

Kirke explains, "The base of fabric is the rectangle formed by the interlacing warp and weft yarns. By taking length measurements from the point of the interlacing of the warp yarns and the weft yarns, then continuing the procedure with parallel yarns, one can build the shape of each part of the pattern. This is easy for parts that adhere closely to the grain and luckily, much of Vionnet's work is cut on the grain. Taking patterns from Vionnet's more bias-oriented pieces was much more difficult, but it could be achieved through the same method. Take the example of a Vionnet circular-cut skirt. Usually warp grain extends the length of the skirt, from waist to hem. Most circular skirts are wider than the fabric (as in pattern 14), and so they must be pieced. The piecing seam is generally made along the warp grain, and I found it a good place to start. To take a pattern of Vionnet's circular-cut skirt, I drew a line on dotted marking paper the length of the pieced seam. Then, at two-inch intervals,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III
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IV
BACK SKIRT
PIECED
A

pattern 14

I measured and marked at right angles the length of the yarns from the seam to the hem in one direction, and to the waist and other seams in the other direction. I then linked these marks by drawing with curves and a ruler to outline the part.

"For more complicated cuts, it was often necessary to work off one of the weft yarns following the same procedure. If the grid had been distorted through stretching at the bias, I nevertheless adhered to it, noting the point and amount of stretch. Often this indicates that something happened at this point that forced the fabric out of its grid. These notations were helpful in finding the way fabric was manipulated in certain dresses.

"By taking many patterns of Vionnet's work, I came to understand the unique structure and the techniques of asymmetrical cuts, slashes, and gussets. One can see fabric change immediately from two to three dimensions when cutting a slash, spreading, and inserting a gusset."

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Sheltering the body and soul is such an important part of the human experience, and textiles play a central role, clothing the body and adorning the home that shelters the body. These two purposes are so intertwined I think of them as one and as generating, throughout history, a whole, wide world of cloth: so many different cultures, each producing textiles luxurious and plain for ceremonial and daily uses, each with a completely different expression.

Textiles are intrinsically contextual, especially when used in forms designed for specific interiors—they won't achieve the same effect if taken out of context. Being organic, they're physically vulnerable to sunlight and use; in costume, they're also aesthetically vulnerable to shifting social and cultural contexts: As Kirke notes, Vionnet's concepts didn't catch on at first, then did—wildly—but were eclipsed as WWII approached and brought with it a return to more structured forms.

Kirke places Vionnet's genius and innovative techniques in this larger context, describing her role in the revolutionary transition away from corsets and restrictive clothing; for women, the impact of this new physical freedom was enormous.

Kirke also details the influence of futurist concepts and artists such as Thayaht on Vionnet's designs. In movement, her dresses often seemed to embody the futurists' manifesto, "Everything moves, everything runs, everything turns swiftly. The figure in front of us never is still, but ceaselessly appears and disappears. Owing to the persistence of images on the retina, objects in motion are multiplied and distorted, following one another like waves through space."

It's not possible to make the clothing Vionnet designed without a deep appreciation of the physical body and its dimensionality—an appreciation apparent in Vionnet's disdain for seams because, as she observed, the body doesn't have seams, and in the geometric planes and shapes she combined so masterfully. Interested in artists who were experimenting with forms in this same way—reflected even in her choice of furniture for her home—she was, as Kirke notes, very much of her time.

If, when working in the present with historical forms, you know the history of a design and its application, you'll know what can be stretched and how far, or what can be adapted or altered. As time passes, period contexts tend to be forgotten, but with Vionnet's designs, Kirke puts that history and context right in front of you.

photography by hideoki

A labor of love, Kirke's book opens up a world of experience, and it offers a depth and breadth of information about Vionnet's life and work that was previously unavailable. And it's doubly precious because textiles *are* vulnerable to time. But photos, books and the knowledge will exist long after the garments no longer do. In *Madeleine Vionnet*, Betty Kirke has made Vionnet's genius, art and legacy come alive.

One of the most important inspirations I experienced while editing Vionnet came from the Frank Lloyd Wright exhibition I saw in December of 1990. Wright advocated an "organic architecture," a totality of harmony and beauty in which every aspect of humanity, nature, and architecture echo each other. Wasn't the vision that possessed Vionnet, Wright's contemporary, an image of "organic clothes"? Not unlike a Möbius band, Vionnet sought to embody paradox in her design: simplicity and complexity, light and shadow, body and space. The brilliance of her artistry lies in her unique ability to achieve that goal with tangible objects. Similarly, we have sought to make the mystery of Vionnet tangible.
Harumi Tokai, *Madeleine Vionnet*

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→ view a selection of Vionnet dresses at the Metropolitan Museum of Art Web site
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