Grès matter

ANNE HOLLANDER CONSIDERS ALIX GRES

In September 1994, the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum mounted an exhibition of works by Alix Grès (born Germaine Krebs in 1903), spanning the five decades of her career as a couturière. The show was accompanied by an illustrated catalogue in which the curators, Richard Martin and Harold Koda, dealt with her oeuvre in the most elevated esthetic terms, aligning Grès with poets and painters, with composers and architects at the highest level of modern creative effort. Notably, they did not place her in relation to any other contemporary designers of clothing, with the single exception of Mariano Fortuny, whose rare productions at an earlier epoch in this century had evoked similar responses.

In our time this designer stands alone, it was implied, alone where any serious artist in civilization has always stood, essentially (though not, of course, practically) remote from utility and commerce, from society and politics, close only to the exacting demands of the work at hand, its internal challenges and its forever intractable medium. The catalogue further indicates that Grès is more specifically to be considered among the modern neoclassicists, those twentieth-century artists who linked their own inspiration with the disciplined expressions of earlier neoclassic periods. Mme. Grès's path implicitly follows that of Raphael and Poussin, J. L. David and Ingres, Bach and Bellini—not the great past masters of excess, the Berninis and Rossinis, nor the dealers in anguish, the Grünewalds and Goyas.

Her modernity is thus to be classed with that of cubism and Le Corbusier, of Hindemith and Brancusi, not with surrealism, German expressionism, futurism, or abstract expressionism, neither with Klee nor Chagall. Grès cannot be linked with any modern form of art exploring absurdity and waywardness, social grimness and political madness, private demons, fakery and trumpery, the ecstatic and the dreadful, the current and immediate, or the potent charms of nostalgia—and most emphatically not with any art that bewitches the public in endless multiples of itself, in mass media for mass markets.

For a contemporary fashion designer, this is a hard path to walk. Fashion itself is now founded on waywardness, nostalgia, fakery, and so forth, certainly on markets. Any designer refusing to deal in them and to profit from them must lead the austere, solitary life of the dedicated artist right in the middle of a ferociously competitive, fad-driven show-businesslike milieu, trying to maintain balance in a vertiginous world. And so Mme. Grès did, calmly proceeding with her uncompromising work for fifty years, until she was inevitably forced out of business altogether, even saw her atelier sacked, its toiles and half-finished models brutally discarded and the dress forms chopped to pieces, for nonpayment of rent. At the last she withdrew in dignified sorrow to an old peoples' home in a remote part of France.

During the period just before the museum exhibition opened last fall, cautious efforts were made to reach Mme. Grès in her seclusion. Results were forthcoming: cordial messages from her, of pleasure at being remembered and honored in this way, of best wishes and thanks, were all transmitted through her daughter. Months later, the world was stunned to discover that Mme. Grès had in fact been dead for almost a year when the show opened. The daughter had kept the secret, inventing the messages and prolonging the illusion that her mother still lived—perhaps to feel, however temporarily, in real possession of her at last.

An artist's dedication is very stern stuff. The life and death of Mme. Grès were not only solitary but secretive and unworldly in the extreme, although it is known that she indulged herself in certain extreme luxuries (a custom-made car with mink upholstery, for example; she owned various homes, and an Ingres), but these, too, were private pleasures. Personal display and social visibility were of no interest to her. She wore her famous turban to hide her hair at all times, like a nun, and garments of utmost inconspicuousness to match her inconspicuous body—neat as a nun, too, nothing casual and scruffy. She never went noticeably about the fashionable world or about town, nor presided over a salon in the celebrity manner of Chanel. She did travel, however, and her works show the influence of her esthetic discoveries, especially in Asia, where she learned to make robes that stood piquantly away from the body, sometimes with quilting, and jackets with a crisp flare to the skirt or sleeve.

Grès was, one must conclude, not especially gifted for familial or social or even professional relationships. Her husband left her for good in 1937, after less than a year of marriage, and the life she resumed soon after seems to have been one of unrelenting dressmaking, most of it accomplished alone. She trained no one and had no assistants, although she did have technicians who finished what she had worked on in solitude for hours to perfect, draping and pleating and folding and pinning the fabric with her hands on the living body of the mannequin—no sketches. In this way she produced a collection of 350 pieces each year. The mannequins stood and stood and stood, and were fired if they couldn't stand it. Grès rarely saw her actual clients, although she had a few close friends among them, some of whom she dressed for free. There are no rumors, scandals, or even plain reports about her personal life; those who worked with her found the deprived atmosphere somewhat oppressive.

Her devotion was to beauty and perfection, her obsession was the solving of abstract problems posed in terms of fabric, to be arranged on the feminine body. Her clothes, so detached from normal fashionable life with its trends and fads, are therefore called "timeless"—to which one might add heartless, if one dared, and perhaps even passionless and humorless, despite the frequent drama of their textile conception.

She clearly had the detachment from vulgar humanity needed for such work; the passion all went into the creation, in this case the silk and wool and the infinite possibilities for beautiful wrap and cling, sweep and fall—but certainly in the métier of fashion, a leavening of vulgar humanity gives bite and texture to the sartorial imagination. The austerity of the Grès fantasy gives it an immense overriding elegance, but it is faintly sterile at moments.

And how in fact do the clothes themselves justify the respect they inspire, apart from the respect for the woman herself and her inviolate principles? To begin with, they are French, as she was. They exemplify not modern art, nor the essence of modern fashion, but rather the purest haute couture in the unique French tradition, in which elegance and only elegance is the aim, not coquetry, energy, smolder, or wit. Those should be the properties of the woman, not of her clothes. To achieve true elegance in a garment, absolute technical perfection must match the highest quality of material and a sustained finesse in the design. There must be no cheating or carelessness in the interior construction or finish.

Elegance above all requires that there be no traps, practical or esthetic, that might render the wearer ridiculous for an instant, however she might momentarily slump or stumble, however hastily or awkwardly she might suddenly have to move. She must be able to put on the dress and forget it. Once on, it must never need any adjustment whatsoever by the wearer. Fastenings, linings, edgings, and attachments must be absolutely reliable, and any ornamental elements must always behave in total accord with the main shape and mass of the garment—there must be no big bow that might crush and need fluffing, no decorative drape that might slip and need hitching, no

facing page: photograph, Hoynigen-Huene, 1938. Courtesy *Harper's Bazaar*

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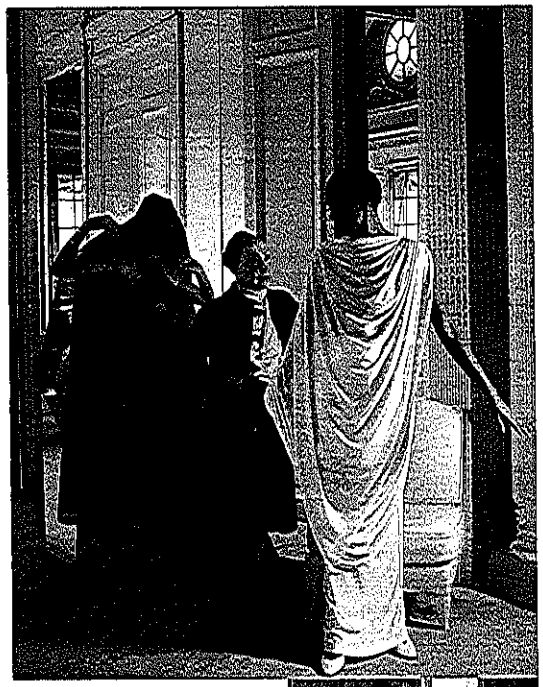
outsize silk rose that might waggle, and the skirt must always sway back into place by itself. The standard is the same in a good costume for any stage performer, especially a dancer.

Thus the dresses Mme. Grès created by this standard barely live at all on the static mannequins in an exhibition, although their complex conception and structure may be appreciated. What they need is the performance, the coquette in action, her own wit in motion, her body on the move, the occasion in process. Then the glorious width of the fabric, fifty yards of silk jersey without a seam, may float and swing and settle richly around the lower body, before gathering itself in to begin its intricate climb up the bending, breathing torso in serried interwoven folds, which finally part or swerve or simply stop, so the expressive shoulders and head may crown the composition.



Grès disliked cutting and piecing the fabric with seams that might interfere with its fluid behavior. She had extra-wide materials woven to her order, so she could constrain it and release it at will, concentrate the folds and then suddenly spray them out. It was not possible to wear a bra with the draped dresses, or perhaps any personal underwear. Grès created an individual substructure for each one: "I do what I please with the breasts," she is alleged to have said. This meant moments of deliberately unexpected exposure, perfectly controlled by the original vision, never inadvertent—again, a tradition of the dance stage.

The famous similarity to Greek drapery that everyone sees in these dresses is quite false. Although some Greek dresses were pleated and others hung in free folds, they all fell directly against the skin and were never strictly laid down against a fitted lining, as all of Grès's were. What everyone means is not actual Greek drapery at all, but Greek statues and paintings of drapery; and there they are right. Like all those who design Greek drapery for dancers, such as Bakst for Nijinsky's *L'après-midi d'un faune*, Grès followed the effects created by sculptors and vase painters—she did not seek to find the way the garments worked in real Greek life. The desired effect is the breathtaking tactile beauty generated by a harmonious movement of flesh and fabric together, a counterpoint that looks both natural and perfect; and art alone can achieve this. The Greek sculptors showed how to do it, and they remain the best examples in the whole tradition of Western art. Nature alone is notoriously unreliable, usually accidental, casual, and disharmonious, certainly when it comes to the combined action of bodies and cloth. Sculpture and painting, dance and couture all must invent a beauty for it.

When Alix Grès was still Germaine Krebs, her middle-class parents had refused to let her study sculpture, to consider a career as a artist. They had no objection to polite feminine accomplishment, and she did study dancing, but they objected to a career as a dancer. The girl had desired these particular creative paths, had felt herself fit for them. And she ultimately had her perpetual revenge, giving herself unreservedly like a priestess of art to endlessly re-creating her personal synthesis of beauty in form and beauty in motion, ignoring polite accomplishments, social status, everything but her own version of perfection.

Dressmaking might be thought even less respectable than sculpture or the stage. But in France as nowhere else, the haute couture was a serious calling, an elevated craft of the greatest prestige. Before the couture was officially established in the late nineteenth century, French hundred years, bringing not only celebrity but revenues to France; the couture simply confirmed those standards, and that fame, in modern commercial terms. When Germaine Krebs became Alix Barton in the early 1930s, and later Madame Grès, the mode in Paris probably commanded as much reverence as Greek sculpture did, among worldly and cultivated folk. She chose her métier well. When her failing house had to be sold in 1984 to the plebeian businessman and politician Bernard Tapie, she could announce to him succinctly as she was escorted off the premises, "*I* am in the museums. *You* will never be there."

Toward the end of her career, she was immensely proud of preserving the highest French standards of dressmaking, even if it meant eventual disaster in the postmodern world. "The way I practice haute couture is totally ruinous," she said in 1982, "but it is essential that the image of French quality and elegance that I carry abroad with me survive." And later, "Today, luxury is confused with waste and excess, and its only value to the authorities is that it is exportable and therefore brings in foreign currency. But beauty has no price. It must be protected."

Ultimately it wasn't. On December 14, when *Le Monde* broke the story of her death, it gave particulars of her life, career, and importance—contemptuously and justly referring to current famous practitioners such as Romeo Gigli, Jean-Paul Gautier, Rei Kawakubo, and Martin Margiela as "stylists." The likes of them inhabit a new and different world, one where it is just as well that Grès cannot see what has become of the effort to protect beauty in the ancient classical sense, let alone create and maintain it. ✣ ANNE HOLLANDER

Mme. Grès at work

top: photograph, Horst. Courtesy Staley-Wise Gallery

bottom: photograph, Eve Arnold. Courtesy Magnum Photos

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