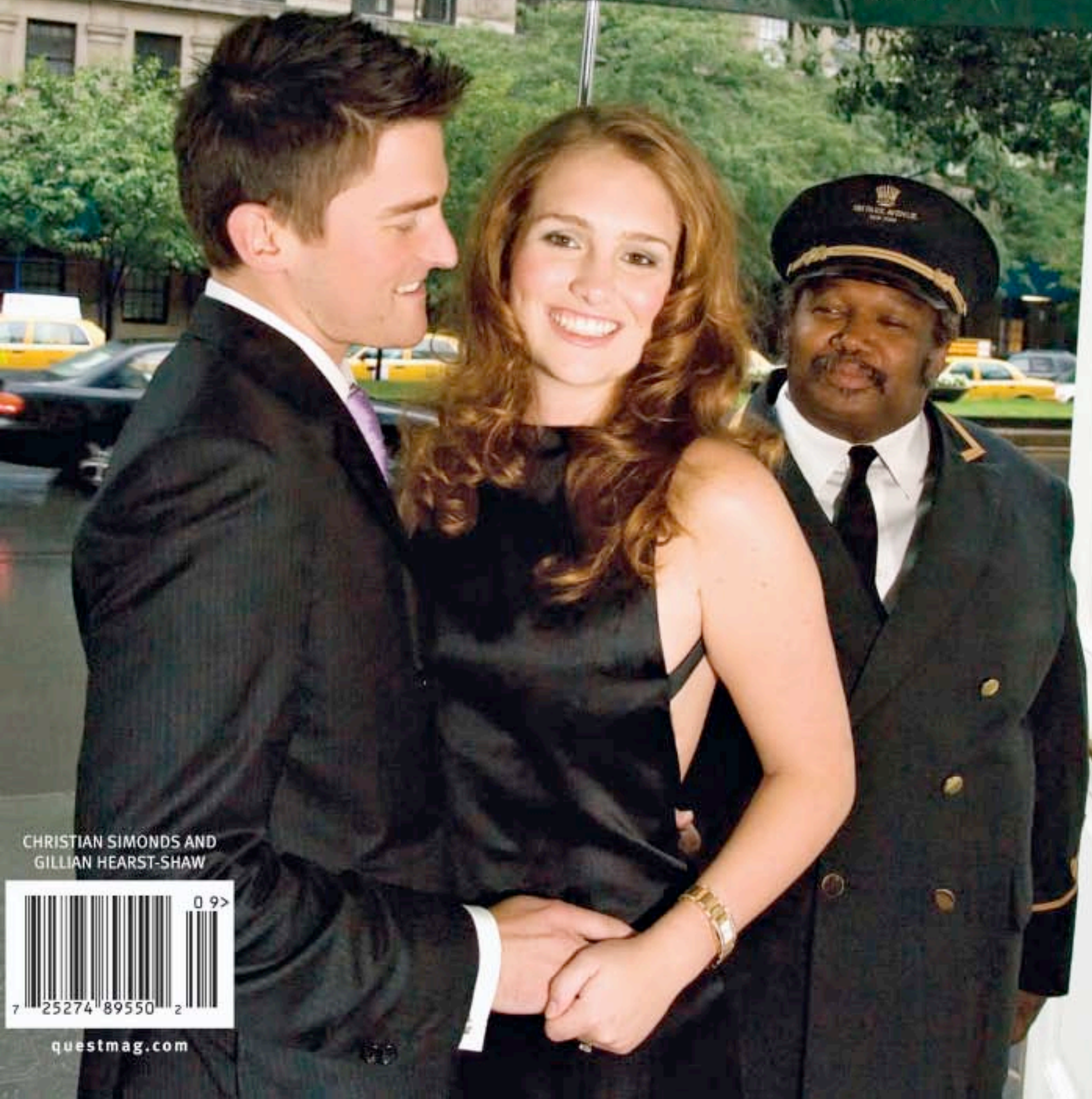


QUEST

THE
FASHION
ISSUE



CHRISTIAN SIMONDS AND
GILLIAN HEARST-SHAW



questmag.com

This page: A Vionnet gown from the pages of *French Vogue*, 1934. Opposite page, left to right: Madame Vionnet at work, 1923; An expertly draped dress from the current collection.



REVIVING VIONNET

A classic French house sashays back into fashion with the help of a timeless legacy and a newly-appointed creative director.

BY ANGELA GAIMARI

MUCH WAS ADO ABOUT the re-launch of storied French fashion label Vionnet last season. Barneys New York unveiled the collection—basically a worldwide exclusive (the only other opportunity to purchase the expertly draped eveningwear was at appointments in Paris). During Fashion Week, the store feted Vionnet with a sumptuous presentation, doubling as a debutante ball of sorts for Greek wunderkind Sophia Kokosalaki, a designer who has garnered critical praise, but less fame than perhaps has been her due.

Although it seemed like a perfect match—Kokosalaki's Greek goddess dresses closely mirrored the iconic draping of Madeleine Vionnet—the marriage lasted but one season, after which Kokosalaki resigned to focus on her own line, which had recently gotten funding from Diesel. But her departure has not squelched efforts to bring back Madame Vionnet's legacy of artistic integrity and innovation to today's fast fashion market.



CEO Arnaud de Lummen quickly named new creative director Marc Audibert to pick up where Kokosalaki left off.

Simon Doonan, creative director of Barneys New York, agrees Audibert is a good fit for the fabric-conscious label. "He's credited with integrating the military nylon at Prada in the late '80s and he did amazing stuff for Hermès," Doonan says. "He's a fashion innovator."

Those mindful of fashion history will be curious to see what Mr. Audibert will turn out in homage to Madame Vionnet, a designer compared to masters of fine art.

Madeleine Vionnet had been referred to as curmudgeonly and frumpy, sure, but her clothes were anything but. In the early part of last century, she freed women from corsetry and whalebone necklines in exchange for garments that cut on the bias, a revolutionary way of draping fabric. Her technical skills ranked her with her good friend Cristóbal Balenciaga, but unlike him, she worked less in innovative





structure than in carefully crafted draping—the kind that accentuates the female form without altering it, the way constrictive construction or voluminous silhouettes can. With contempt she referred to another of her contemporaries, rival Coco Chanel, chiding her as an overrated press hog less committed to the craft than to her image. Today's landscape of camera-happy celebutantes and designers more famous for ad campaigns than for an ability to wield cloth shows that not only was her dressmaking forward thinking, her fashion worldview was on point to boot.

Azzedine Alaïa has an expansive archive of Vionnet's designs, naming her as a massive influence—as do other acolytes like Zac Posen, Karl Lagerfeld, and John Galliano. One of her direct protégés was Pierre Balmain. Arnaud's father Guy was head of ready to wear for Balmain's label when he discovered and bought the rights to the name Vionnet. That was 1988, long after the closure of her Avenue Montaigne workshop in 1939.

"I want to find the origins of the brand," says Audibet. "But I also always look to the future." Smart. Because with

fashion house revivals, nostalgia is freshest in small doses. A perfect case study is that of Nicolas Ghesquière, who crusaded into the archives of Balenciaga, the house he was named to resuscitate—and emerged with a few meaningful seasons of rifts on the classics. He has since taken his label in various directions, garnering praise at each turn for his brazen looks into the future. Similarly, when Karl Lagerfeld reawoke Chanel, he brought the tweed suit back and made it new again. Both Ghesquière and Lagerfeld absorbed and appropriated the legacies of their respected houses before liberally applying their visions—first gaining the trust of the fans, and now taking liberties under the umbrella of a venerated fashion label.

So after the historical recap, from the early 1900s to last season, why and to whom is Vionnet important? Besides celebrity fans like Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich, and more recent gamines like Renee Zellweger and Kerry Washington, for whom is Vionnet intended?

“The Vionnet woman is a free woman who expresses her dignity and elegance,” says Audibet. “She is still current, and maybe even ‘avant-garde.’ The Greek goddess dresses are what women have always dreamed of for evening dresses.”

“I think the Vionnet chick is a glam eccentric,” observes Doonan. “Unconventional, but someone who still has her femininity—think Isadora Duncan with a bit of Zelda Fitzgerald. She appreciates design. She’s not just dressing to attract men, but to satisfy her own intellect.”

Audibet’s scheduled debut of his inaugural Vionnet collection during the Paris couture shows in July was postponed, as the dresses weren’t ready, and the current plan is to unveil the couture collection during prêt-à-porter in October, with a runway show in the works. After all, with dresses that are meant to be timeless, season-less, and exemplifying the care that Madame Vionnet showed her work, a few extra months is mere moments to wait. ♦

This page: A belted coat from the current collection. Opposite page, left to right: A flirty, bustled suit from the current collection; A Vionnet goddess gown from 1935 recalls today’s Greek revival looks.

