

The Impact of the Kimono on Modern Fashion – The Art of Wrapping the Body –

By Okabe Masayuki

How did Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975, Plate 1), who is regarded as the founder of modernism in fashion design, feel when she first saw a Japanese *kimono*? (Plate 2) Vionnet was born in the French town of Aubervilliers on the shores of Lake Lemman near the Swiss border not far from Geneva. In her school days there, she excelled in mathematics. However, at the end of the 19th century, items from Japanese culture would not yet have reached this kind of small country town on the frontier. I am sure that Vionnet saw the Japanese kimono for the first time after she left school at age 12 and headed for Paris to become a dressmaker's seamstress in 1898. Paris at the end of the 19th century was basking in the golden age of Art Nouveau

and Japonisme, and it was fashionable among women to wear beautiful kimonos as dressing gowns or indoor attire.

After two years in Paris, Vionnet was now 14 years old, and the 1900 Paris Exposition had opened. This exposition is often remembered as a celebration of the Art Nouveau movement, but it was also important as it featured a fashion exhibit for the first time. In fact, it marked the dawn of the 20th century – the age of fashion design. One person who symbolized the era was Jeanne Paquin (1869-1936), the pioneering female designer who was put in charge of the entire fashion exhibition. It is important to remember that at the end of the 19th century, French society was very hierarchical and male-dominated, so the presence of a woman in a public managerial position was extraordinary. The role of women is a unique feature of the field of fashion design.

Despite the barriers to women, however, it is surprising to note that in the second half of the 19th century two-thirds of Parisian women were employed. Nevertheless, the types of work women could perform were limited to the occupations of seamstress or washerwoman. The clothes of the European upper class of the 19th century required large amounts of material, and this created a situation where an inexhaustible supply of low-wage female labor was needed to perform the large amounts of labor-intensive sewing and embroidery necessary, as well as the hand washing of clothes. Ironically, in order to maintain societies where the upper-class ladies,



Plate 1: Madeleine Vionnet in her atelier, 1930s

who were ordering, wearing and sending all these beautiful clothes out for washing, did not have to work, a huge population of working women was required.

Faced with this social structure, however, the early female designers set out to improve their position in society. These women were all the heroines of their own success stories, starting as seamstresses and achieving social status in one generation, while also dealing with the other issues in their lives, including marriage, divorce and childbirth. At age 14, Vionnet may have sensed these changes unfolding in society and her own prospects in the world of fashion, as she took in the festivities of the 1900 Paris Exposition.

It was here at the Paris Exposition that the Japanese kimono caught the imagination of Westerners. The pio-



Plate 2: Torii Kiyonaga, "Pleasure Boats beneath Azuma Bridge (part pare)," ca. 1786



Plate 3: Adolfo Hohenstein, "Costume of Geisha, for *Iris* of Mascagni," 1899, Archivio Storico G. Ricordi & C, Milan

neering actress of the *Shimpa* – a form of drama which developed in contrast to *Kabuki* at the time, Sadayakko, wore an exotic kimono and performed a quiet pantomime in the traditional *Noh* style of Japanese theater, fluttering the sleeves of her kimono like a butterfly. Sadayakko, her husband Kawakami Otojiro, and their entire company drew great applause not only in Paris, but all over Europe and America, in places like San Francisco, New York, London, Brussels and Vienna. After the Meiji Restoration in 1868, several Japanese theatrical and acrobatic companies had been performing in Europe. Traveling to Europe alone at around the same time as the Kawakami troupe was the actress Hanako, who performed in Marseilles and Copenhagen. She portrayed the role of a woman committing ritual *hara-kiri*, and also worked as a model for Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). The greatest attraction of these dramatic and acrobatic performances for the

European audiences was certainly the exotic clothing, stage arts and dancing. The essence of this attraction was symbolized by the image of the "geisha girl" wearing a gorgeous kimono and dancing.

Images of geisha girls and Fujiyama (Mt. Fuji) presented a superficial and stereotypical first impression of Japan to the rest of the world, which did no great service to Japan today as it strives to introduce and promote understanding of its culture. However, the Europeans at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries were fascinated by the geisha (both *maiko* and *geiko*) as an image of Japanese culture and art. What fascinated them in particular were not just the superficial stimulating and curious things they saw, but the beauty of the kimono fashion and accessories, which represented Japanese art in the form of the geisha, as well as the Japanese art style of dance performed by the kimono wearer. The character of the geisha or "geisha-style woman" soon appeared in leading roles of various performances from this time, including the operetta *Geisha* performed in Paris in 1898, Pietro Mascagni's (1863-1945) opera *Iris* (Plate 3) that premiered in Rome in the same year, and Giacomo Puccini's (1858-1924) opera *Madame Butterfly* that opened in Milan in 1904. The clothing, movement and expression of these women showed how deep was the impact on Western artists. They found creative inspiration in Japanese cultural objects and art, and especially in the geisha and the kimono that symbolized them.

Right from the beginning, starting in the 1860's, many pictures of Japan created by Western artists, such as James McNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and James Tissot (1836-1902), showed images of women wearing kimonos.

When Western painters depicted a kimono, they initially looked at images from Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints and illustrations in Japanese travel accounts. Later on they painted kimonos that had been brought to the West. Arthur

Liberty (1843-1917), who was the founder of Liberty's – the British company that engaged in importing kimonos from Japan, sent technical experts to Japan in the 1870's to procure the costumes needed for the operetta *The Mikado*. Since this time the Japanese kimono has been widely known throughout Europe and North America. Due to the advancements in fashion produced by Liberty and Company, a new kind of Western fashion design gradually took shape.

The story of Madeleine Vionnet's career began at this turning point in Western fashion design. Vionnet started working as an assistant to Madame Gerber, selecting cloth in Paris and London for the Callot Sœurs fashion house. Then in around 1907 she got a position in the house of Jacques Doucet (1853-1929), which typified the new up-and-coming *maison* of the time as well as that of Callot Sœurs, where she also began to design. After five years, Vionnet decided to go out on her own, and in 1912 founded her own *maison* in Paris. This woman who had been married and divorced in her teens and then went on to make a name for herself, becoming independent at the age of 36,



Plate 4: Madeleine Vionnet, "Japonica; Robe du soir," 1924

realized that the fashion world was entering an era of intense competition. Women's fashion and dressmaking at the end of the 19th century was based on the "S-line" that accentuated the bust and buttocks by binding the waist with a corset. However, after the sensation created by the Japanese kimono at the dawn of the 20th century, fashion started changing rapidly. In 1906, a new designer, Paul Poiret (1879-1944), launched a kimono style coat, and in the following year Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949) unveiled a pleated dress in the style of ancient Greece. These new designers broke through old conventions one after another, and many of them created trends based on inspiration from foreign cultures.

In 1919, it was Vionnet who launched a new dress design using the epoch-making bias-cut by cutting the cloth on a diagonal. (Plates 4, 5 and 6) By hanging the material from the shoulders using the bias-cut, the dress not only fitted the shape of the body, but a beautiful draping effect was natu-



Plate 5: Madeleine Vionnet, "Evening Dress," ca. 1938, collection of Kobe Fashion Museum

rally created. A beautiful flow could also be created when decorative material was attached to the dress also using the bias-cut. All portions of the dress could be made from one large bolt of cloth of two meters in length. This new form and method of geometric magic based on drapings was nicknamed the "Euclid of Fashion." Vionnet's crisp triangular V-cut collar became very popular. Furthermore, her modernistic style was based on solid material in cool light metallic colors that were called "non-colors." This had a huge influence on subsequent designers, notably in the areas of rational cloth usage, functionality and beautiful geometric form.

Vionnet put priority on the selection of materials and textures while also attaching importance to proportion, balance and the correct design and cut. Although the latter elements arose from her mathematical talent, the choice of materials came from her experience as a cloth selection assistant. When Vionnet was searching through the mountain of cloth kept at the Callot Sœurs fashion house, she must have discovered the kimono materials as well as *crêpe de Chine* (silk crepe) and *mousseline de soie* (muslin) that she loved to use in her later designs. As the unique usage of material in her designs reflects the technique of the kimono, many believe that she began studying kimono cloth during the first few years of the 20th century.

Apart from the beauty of its splendid form and patterns, the kimono exhibits a rationality and functionality that fits the figure of any person without having to cut up bolts of cloth into small pieces. The kimono-clad female images drawn by Western painters in the 19th century, and the kimono overcoats actually worn by high society drew interest only to the kimono's flamboyant patterns and designs. Ignoring the true manner of wearing a Japanese kimono, loose garments that looked like dressing gowns



Plate 6: Madeleine Vionnet, "Evening Dress," ca. 1933, collection of Kobe Fashion Museum

were created. It was a development that helped liberate women from the corset, and the new Japanese-style designs of Poiret were also an extension of this trend.

It seems, however, that Vionnet was the one who captured the true essence of the kimono – the original Japanese art form of folding and wrapping – by paying attention to the cloth. The V-cut design with its solid color and geometric cut from just one bolt of cloth represents the special characteristic of the kimono. It is possible to say that by studying the cloth and its usage of the kimono, Vionnet was able to invent the rationality and functionality of modern fashion. **JTI**

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