

From Haute Couture Model to Best-Seller Madeleine Vionnet's "Little Horse Dress" as a role model for different interpretations of a pattern, based on an antique example

Christine Waidenschlager
Kunstgewerbemuseum – Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Germany

Abstract:

Madeleine Vionnet's "Little Horse Dress" as a role model for seven different interpretations of a pattern, based on an antique paragon. Taking Madeleine Vionnet's "Little Horse Dress" as an example, this article is about the power of a pattern that enabled fashion industries to produce – during several years – astonishing changes and interpretations of this Haute Couture Model.

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The Berlin Dress



Fig. 1:
Berlin "Little Horses Dress", copy of Modell 1113 by Madeleine Vionnet,
Inv. No.: 2003,KR 458 © Stephan Klonk, KGM/SMB Berlin.

The starting point for my paper was a dress which the Museum of Decorative Arts of Berlin had acquired in 2003 as the authorised copy of a Madeleine Vionnet model (fig. 1). An assessment which Betty Kirke, the great Vionnet specialist, had given to Martin Kamer, the previous owner of the dress.

It is embroidered and of simple cut, typical for the time around 1924: a straight bodice, and a slightly gathered skirt attached at hip level. The front and back necklines are oval-shaped, while the front is lower. The armholes are slightly cut out.



Fig. 2:
Detail of Berlin "Little Horses Dress", copy of Modell 1113 by Madeleine Vionnet,
Inv. No.: 2003,KR 458 © Stephan Klöckner, KGM/SMB Berlin.

The dress gets its specific effect from the finesse of its embroidery (fig. 2). On the bodice, as well as upon the skirt, there are the bodies of horses facing to the left riding through sparkling azure blue waves, which are arranged in bands of different widths above and below. They are intertwined in a perfect combination of positive and negative. In the negative the actual images stand out effectively from the background outlined in golden-brown beads.

The hem of the dress is worked in dagging up to knee height which, following its form, is likewise embroidered with a blue and golden-brown outlined spikes motif.

The Paris Dress

The original of this dress is in the Musée Arts Décoratifs (the former Musée de la Mode et du Textile) in Paris. It is published in Pamela Golbins catalogue, Madeleine Vionnet. *Puriste de la Mode*, page 105. Madeleine Vionnet gave the dress to the Union française des Arts du Costume in 1952, together with her complete archive. The dress from the winter season of 1921/22 is called "Robe à petites chevaux" or "Robe au vase grècque" and is listed under number 1113 in the copyright albums of Madeleine Vionnet's collection.



Fig. :
Madeleine Vionnet: Evening Dress, Winter 1921, Model Nr.: 1113, © Musée des Arts décoratifs, Paris.

Here, too, are horses riding through a wave motif, however in the opposite direction and other differences are immediately apparent. First of all the colour scheme: the Paris dress features dark embroidery on a terracotta background, whereas the Berlin model is tone-on-tone. Then the cut: the Paris dress shows the typical cut of the early 1920s – overcut shoulders, a bodice falling over the waist like a blouse and a wide, almost ankle-length skirt. This skirt is attached to a wide yoke under the hips. This yoke is bordered at the top by a belt zone with circle motifs and at the lower end it shows thin spikes pointing upwards. The hip yoke and the circle motifs are missing on the Berlin model, the spikes pointing upwards are already integrated here into the skirt attached at hip level. Thus the Berlin dress appears

more staid and less elegant in comparison with the original, an impression, which is reinforced by the carelessly executed seam (fig. 4). We can therefore assume that the Berlin dress originally had a yoke with circles which was removed at some time by an inexperienced hand whilst being shortened.



Fig. 4:
Detail of Berlin „Little Horses Dress“, © Thomas Arens, KGM/SMB, Berlin.

The quality of the embroidery is also different. The Parisian horses are executed more delicately and nervously and their interiors are drawn in a more detailed fashion. By contrast the Berlin horses are more like homely little ponies.

The material of the Berlin dress is dark blue crêpe romain, embroidered with plum-blue small rectangular bugle beads and slightly smaller, likewise rectangular, golden-brown glass beads – a very harmonious colour combination. The Paris dress was made out of brick-red crêpe romain and embroidered with bugle beads in alternating rows of blue and black. The motifs are outlined in round black beads. A golden metallic thread located parallel to these further emphasises the features. This was also used to shape the interiors of the manes and the expressive heads of the horses. This embroidery is a masterpiece from the studio of Albert Michonet, who worked together with Madeleine Vionnet.

Questions

How could it be that a dress designed for the winter season of 1921/22 and which is consistent with the cut of its time turns up again three to five years later in a completely different style? Where did the differences come from? I started a research in the archives of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, in the hope that I could find a clue to a possible sale of the little horse dress to the USA in Madeleine Vionnet's order books. But it was in vain. Instead I found out that Madeleine Vionnet had already used the motif of horses riding in her summer collection of 1921 (fig. 5). Here as a delicately-coloured dress with light-coloured bead embroidery, the bodice of which is likewise embroidered with a frieze of horses, the skirt, however, with equal-sided crosses. The model is documented in Madeleine Vionnet's copyright albums and pictured on the inner cover of the French Vogue of 15th August 1921. The prominent wearer was the Duchesse de Gramont.



Fig. 5:
Duchesse de Gramont, French Vogue, 15th August 1921,
Portrait by W. Rehbinder ©Kunstabibliothek, smb/Dietmar Katz.

However, this visit to the archives gave me a second surprise. I met a private collector, also researching in the archives of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs. He told me:
Oh, a little horse dress. There are many of those. Just this morning I threw the skirt of an unauthorised copy into the wastepaper basket! The bodice was so much the worse for wear that it couldn't be saved.

Since I naturally wanted to know what exactly I should visualise as being an unauthorised copy – also in comparison with our so-called “authorised” copy – I asked the gentleman to have a look if perhaps the skirt was possibly still in the wastepaper basket? It was. And the next day he brought me the skirt, as a gift for the Museum of Decorative Arts in Berlin. That was definitely a surprise.

Only a few weeks later I also received the bodice sent by post (fig. 6). I assume that you are just as surprised as I am at the rather seemingly absurd disintegration of the embroidery into an amorphous form. But when I later returned to visit the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris and saw the original Madeleine Vionnet dress lying in its case, I realised that you could, at a fleeting glance, perceive the bead-embroidered areas to be asymmetrical forms. And this impression seems to have been accomplished here. Which could lead you to consider that the pattern for this dress – as a non-authorised copy – may have been taken quickly and fleetingly from the original lying down? The blue Berlin dress is quite different with its almost identical reproduction of the design in the bodice and skirt. The material of the “found” dress is – similar to the original – reddish crêpe romain, embroidered with dark-blue beads.



Fig. 6:
Unauthorized copy of Madeleine Vionnet's „Little Horses Dress“ © Thomas Arens, KGM/SMB, Berlin.

The Genesis of a Pattern

Before I continue, I would like to talk about the origins of the little horse motif. In 1919 Madeleine Vionnet hired the young designer Marie Louise Favor, called “Yo” (1895-1986), to design the surface decorations and encouraged her to concern herself with studying antique works of art, in particular antique vases. As documented in an original photo preserved in the Vionnet Archives in Paris, Yo also studied the so-called “Pronomos Vase” from the National Museum of Naples (fig. 7; I am grateful to Lydia Kamitsis for her tip about this photo). It shows, in two registers, the rehearsal of a satyr play: *The wedding of Bacchus and Arianna*. In the upper row we can see richly-dressed actors, on whose robes the bodies of rearing horses can be seen, framed by bands of waves (fig. 8). The centre of the robe is marked by a belt-like discus frieze. Marie Louise Favot transported this decoration, accurate in every detail, into an embroidery pattern. And as we now know this was realised in 1921 and 1921/22.

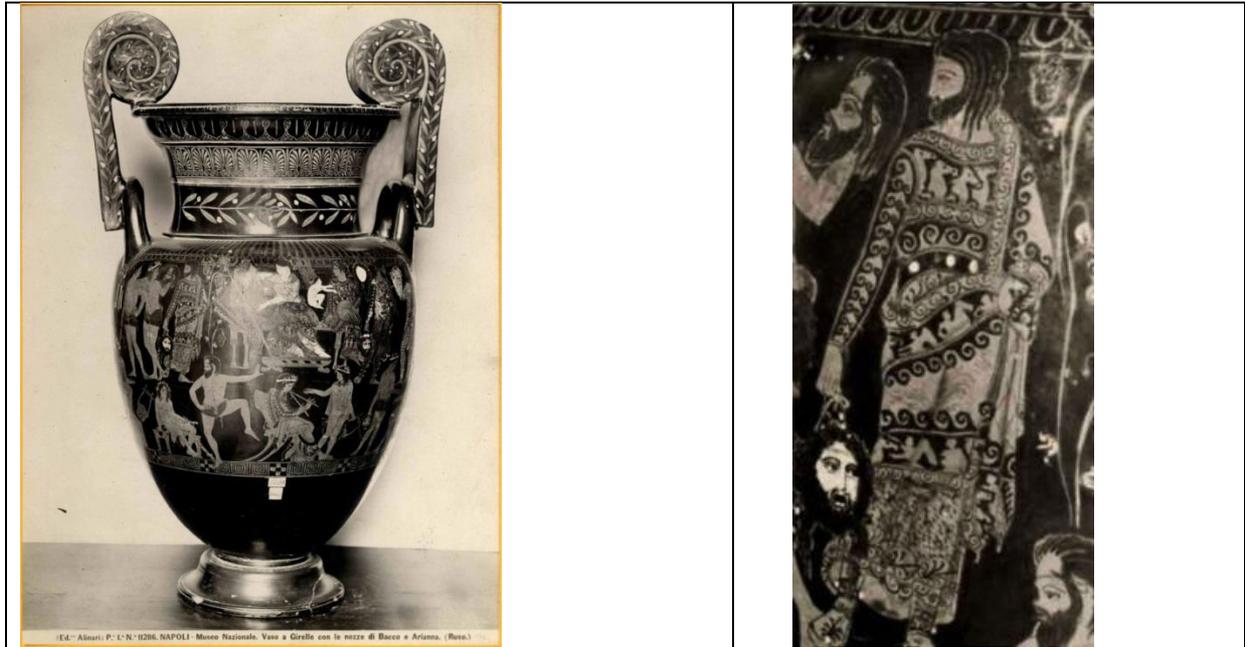


Fig. 7-8:
 Contemporary photograph of the Pronomos Vase, National Museum, Naples
 © Les Arts Décoratifs, Paris.

Original and Interpretation

Betty Kirke, who had had the opportunity to speak to Madeleine Vionnet personally, commented that the red little horse dress was one of her favourites dresses. Perhaps this is the reason why George Le Feure also displayed the little horse dress in his series of antique-style beauties when designing the large showroom in his new business headquarters at Avenue Montaigne 50 (fig. 9).



Fig. 9:
 Fresco by Georges de Feure, detail of "The black-and-white Salon de Présentation" of Vionnet et Cie at 50 Avenue Montaigne. © Betty Kirke: Madeleine Vionnet/Christine Waidenschlager.

The Story Goes On

Now I already had three little horse dresses. I found a fourth in Betty Kirke's catalogue: *Madeleine Vionnet*, about the art of Madeleine Vionnet, where she presents an "unauthorised" copy, made in New York as a ready-to-wear model (fig. 10).



Fig. 10:
Unauthorized reproduction of Madeleine Vionnet's „Little Horses Dress“.
© Betty Kirke: Madeleine Vionnet/Christine Waidenschlager.

But this dress, which she describes as: *white crêpe with green embroidery* in reality is a dress of the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York (fig. 11-12). It is made of celadon-green crêpe rayon and embroidered with small black bugle beads which are outlined by small golden-coloured beads. The skirt is attached under the bust and likewise embroidered with crosses. The material, rayon-crêpe, is completely different from the original crêpe roman. Because of the simplicity of the cut and the embroidery, but also of the use of a less expensive material, we really can consider this dress as an unauthorised copy.

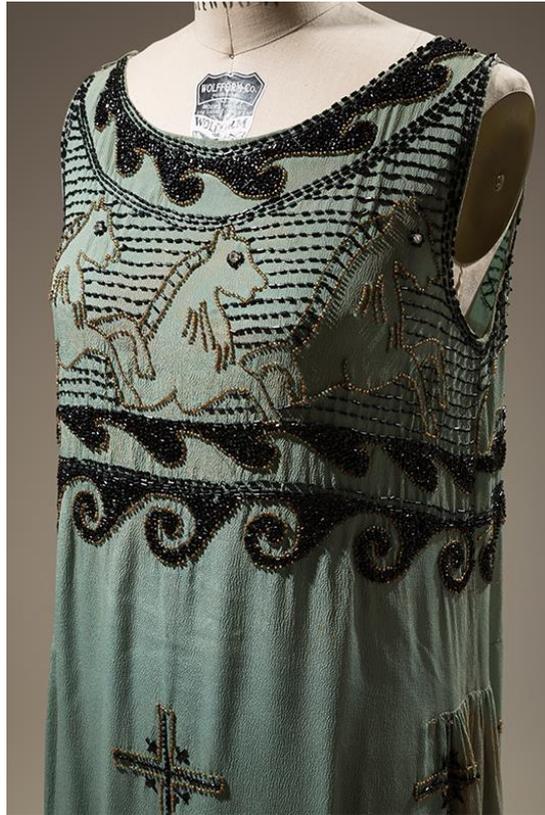


Fig. 11-12:
Unauthorized reproduction of Madeleine Vionnet's „Little Horses Dress“. Inv. Nr. 76.125.1
© The Museum at FIT/New York.

Two dresses with red backgrounds and contrasting dark-blue embroidery are likewise aligned to the shorter, scanty line around 1925/26 in cut. One of them can be found in the collection of The History Museum in South Bend, USA (fig. 13-14).



Fig. 13-14:
Reproduction of Madeleine Vionnet's „Little Horses Dress“, © The History Museum, South Bend, USA.

The second one came up for auction in London in 2013 (fig. 15). Both models show only three horses on their bodies and their skirts are likewise embroidered with three rows of crosses, arranged in a staggered manner. A separately-worked belt-like, disc-shaped frieze is attached and covers the top row of crosses of the dress in South Bend. This is a measure which possibly took place when the dress was shortened, because the frieze is integrated in the London dress.



Fig. 15:
Red Reproduction of Madeleine Vionnet's „Little Horses Dress“
© Kerry Taylor Actions, London.

A variation in the embroidery is also common to both dresses. The points of the wave curves are additionally emphasised with rhinestones. This gives an especially glittering effect and would suggest that both dresses were made in the same studio. The person who donated the dress to The History Museum in South Bend stated that the dress had been bought in New York as a “Vionnet” in 1926. This would suggest a may be authorised copy made in America.

Recently I found a third example of this style on Pinterest, a light yellow dress, with the same rhinestone clusters.

Another variation is shown in a black dress, which came up for auction at the Parisian auction house of Drouot-Richelieu in Paris on 6th July 2011 and which is attributed to the studio of Eva Boëx. This studio was situated in the Rue Castiglione 14 and had had the right to reproduce the designs of Madeleine Vionnet since 1922, as long as at least three dresses per model were sold. Interestingly enough Pamela Goblin has proved that Eva Boëx's company had already belonged to Madeleine Vionnet since 1921. Was this an ingenious opportunity for Madeleine Vionnet to sell models correspondingly cheaper in a trimmed-down version?

Due to its rather looser cut this black dress seems to be a copy of the light-coloured model from the summer collection of 1921 and thus attributing this to the Boëx studio seems plausible. However, there are also differences apparent upon closer inspection. Instead of four rearing horses there are only three executed here. The alignment of the neckline edge with the higher-situated horses' heads at the sides on the original is missing and the distance between the horses' heads and the neckline edge is significantly greater than on the original. The crosses on the skirt are only arranged in three rows vertically under one another. On the whole the embroidery seems to be coarser than that of the original.

How to Interpret that Variety?

First of all it should be noted that: all of the models, apart from the two copies from Berlin, have in common three horses on the bodice and three rows of crosses on the skirt. Only the two Berlin copies show horses on the bodice and on the skirt. Therefore they are explicitly oriented towards the red dress from the winter of 1921/22.

Moreover, none of the dresses reproduces the complicated cut of the Paris dress. In general this seems to be of secondary importance in all versions. What counts is the pattern and its easy recognisability, because it is only due to these that all of the dresses, whether authorised or unauthorised, can be identified as: "Vionnet", "Vionnet-style", oder "typical Vionnet".

Why do We Find These Dresses in 1921 but also in 1924-26?

We know that Madeleine Vionnet attempted to prevent pirated copies of her dresses by all available means. She adopted very different strategies to fight this battle. One of these measures was the foundation of *Madeleine Vionnet Inc. at Hickson's* in New York in February 1924. It was an attempt to give the retail company Hickson's the exclusive rights to reproductions of her models in the USA. Betty Kirke states that on the occasion of the opening in New York, Madeleine Vionnet is said to have worn her favourite dress, namely the red little horse dress.

Since the foundation of this company was accompanied by great attention in the media, for the huge American market craved for Madeleine Vionnet's models, I can imagine that she wore her red dress from 1921/22 very consciously on this occasion, since the memorable embroidery could be reproduced in a simplified form with relatively simple means, especially if you decided on the embroidery of the 1921 summer model and combined it with the modern simpler cuts from 1924/25 onwards.

Therefore, I am inclined to assess the two red dresses, which are worked in very high quality, as authorised copies, likewise the blue dress from Berlin, which comes closest to Madeleine Vionnet's favourite dress.

If anyone should know of any other *Little horse dress*, I would be grateful for a hint.

Post Scriptum

As a first result of this lecture I gave in London, Hildegard Ringena, a German dress historian was so kind to give me the information that the Berlin fashion house *Johanna Marbach*, advertised in 1922 the exact copy of the original Vionnet dress as her own model in the German fashion magazine *Die Dame*. Following the description: *Pompeian-red Crêpe-Georgette with royal-blue perl- and light gold-embroidery*, it was an exact and probably an authorised copy of the Parisian dress (fig. 16).



Fig. 16:
Pompeian red Crêpe Dress by Johanna Marbach, Berlin; "Die Dame", Nr. 24, 1922, P.8
© Kunstbibliothek, smb/Hildegard Ringena.