

[Madame] Grès in Black

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Abstract

Although more associated with a neutral palette composed of whites, beige, *poudré*, and marble tones that refer directly to the stone (related to her sculptural archetype, the long, classically inspired draped gowns), Madame Grès was a magnificent colourist. Her consistent body of work shows that she was not only interested in draping and pleating. A demanding and sophisticated designer in her study of color, she had her materials dyed to obtain exquisite tones. The deep and sophisticated shades of black—*encre de chine* black, coal black and mute black—she produced, in addition to the mastery of cut she showed, enhanced and marked the contrast with vivid colours. Black had a crucial place throughout the French couturier's six-decade career, since the bold models of the 1930s and 1940s, even assuming a form of manifesto when turning away from 'Alix' to become 'Grès' in 1942.

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Inimitable

The expressive use of pleating and drapery was Madame Grès' hallmark. Born Germaine Emilie Krebs (1903-1993) in Paris, she worked for six decades in Parisian haute couture, initially going by the name Alix, creating clothes as if they were living sculptures, and always in search of the *ideal* dress. The couturier had a profound respect for the textile material, honouring its integrity, preferring not to cut it but reducing its size through successive pleats—the amplitude of her dresses and skirts could occasionally reach twenty meters in diameter. Since the beginning of her career, the couturier's draped and pleated models were so complex and unique that they were hard to describe, as attested by *Vogue*: 'Il est difficile

de décrire les épaules des modèles Alix. Ses manches semblent partir d'une torsion du tissu, d'un drapé, avec une originale élégance. Elle réussit particulièrement ainsi une robe de jersey de laine marron moulant le corps mais d'une ampleur mystérieusement épanouie aux manches et à la poitrine.¹

Grès' inimitable work uses an admirable technique to express subtlety and individuality: draping. This draping is an intimate part of the cut and does not exceed it: it falls, slips, and suggests itself. It is shaped by the body. Symmetrical or asymmetrical, it does not matter. Sometimes all the breadth is brought forward, sometimes it is tight and twisted, and sometimes it is entirely pushed to one side: a shoulder, an arm, or a hip are caught in the movement. We do not know where it begins or where it ends. But the lower body remains free; the legs can move. Without fullness or hindrance, it is vertical, fluid draping (**Fig. 1**).

Draping black

*La couleur est reine dans ce petit univers de printemps. Les bleus, tous les bleus triomphent, du pastel au delphinium, du pervenche au marine, du bleu franc de Vermeer de Delft au bleu embrumé de Cézanne. Mais il lui arrive de rencontrer du vert cru, du rose, du marron, du beige naturel. Il est souvent opposé à du blanc. **Quant au noir, il n'apparaît que pour faire valoir la couleur.** Celle-ci est tellement choyée, recherchée, arrogante même dans des contrastes inattendus.* (Press release, maison Grès, Spring-Summer 1960)

Although more associated with a neutral palette composed of whites, beige, *poudré*, and marble tones that refer directly to the stone (related to her sculptural archetype, the long-draped gowns), Madame Grès was a magnificent colourist. Her consistent body of work shows that she was not only interested in draping and pleating. For this French designer, couture was more than a métier; it was the pursuit of perfection, just as a painter pursues the perfect colour with his/her paintbrush (**Figs. 2a & 2b** side by side).

Demanding in the study of colour, she had her materials dyed to obtain exquisite tones: blood reds, poppy reds, burgundy, intense hazelnut, browns, and greens in all shades of nature, with a preference for deep ones, scales of grey, singular blues and violets; and in the 1960s and 1970s, bright, warm, and intense yellows; fuchsia and purple.

Despite the fact that she only emphasised black to enhance colours, it nevertheless played a significant role in her work. The deep and sophisticated shades of black—*encre de chine* black, coal black, mute black—she produced, in addition to the mastery of cut she showed—enhanced and marked the contrast with vivid colours, relying on the most avant-garde fabrics. Madame Grès' exquisite blacks extended beyond evening pieces, giving shape to daytime clothing, such as dresses and coats (**Fig. 3**).

Notwithstanding the association of the designer's archetype with white, it was a black dress that featured alongside the manifesto that Madame Grès, still as Alix, wrote in 1937. The couturier's enlightening words about her draping, placing it in the present and the future—

¹ *Vogue*, April 1935, p.120.

and not in nostalgia—refuted the classical genealogy attributed to her work. More than any other press article, this text sheds light on her positioning concerning draping. The designer begins by saying that she likes all the methodological possibilities her métier offers her, but that draping gives her creative freedom. The couturier directly establishes the link between draping and sculpture, referring to the emotion and liveliness of fabric modeling. For her, draping is alive. It relies on close interaction with the body, but not only. When she refers to the ‘interior rhythm’ of the woman she is creating for, she is making a statement that designing clothing (and the act of dressing) has a more subtle dimension that goes beyond the physical; it is this very rhythm (emotional, psychological) of the female body (the client or the model) that dictates the orientation of the pleats and guides the act of sculpting the fabric, as well as the hands (and also the inner rhythm) of the creator herself. For the couturier, the drapery dresses the body but also undresses it, revealing its natural beauty. Creating is, according to her, an act based on the harmony between the body, the clothing, and the creator. As Anne Hollander (Hollander 1982, 97) wrote: ‘Beauty is the overriding standard of the body, of the fabric, and the possible combinations of the two.’² The couturier concludes by clarifying that her purpose is contemporary and that she does not seek historical reconstitution (despite admitting inspiration from history and art). Transversal to the entire oeuvre of the couturier, the modern reinvention of the draping (referring or not to the classical ideal) spans all her six-decade work (**Fig. 4**).

Despite her focus on the present, and even though her art of draping evolved into intricate pleating from the 1940s onwards, it has maintained, throughout the years, a classical approach connotation, as we can see in press publications from the 1970s and 1980s, the last two decades of her career.

Through five case studies, namely dresses directly observed from the collections of the Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris, as well as from the collections of the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, both international museums that conserve in their collections more Alix and Grès models, this article intends to show that the study of black had a crucial place throughout the French couturier's six-decade career, since the bold models of the 1930s and 1940s, even assuming a form of manifesto when turning away from ‘Alix’ to become ‘Grès’ in 1942.

The couturier's dresses from the 1930s have no interior corset, presenting a loose, draping, virtuous, and complex style, gently enveloping the body. It was through a profound respect for the fabric and the body, and a sculptural approach to textile materials that Alix created modern, desired, and desirable bodies, a revolution already initiated by her predecessors like Madeleine Vionnet (1876-1975), albeit using different methods. Grès had a sculptural approach to fabric, a more intuitive process than the methods used by her 1930s contemporaries, like Vionnet or Cristóbal Balenciaga (1895-1972), who relied on and tended to emphasize the geometry of the cut. Using her hands, the dressmaker carved the cloth as if it were stone. The first step of the process took place in the solitude and silence of her workspace. She claimed to use only pins to sculpt the *toile* in a wooden dummy, never sewing, and only employing scissors (**Fig. 5**).

² Anne Hollander, «A Sculptor in Fabric», *Connoisseur*, August 1982, 97.

The ideal body from the 1930s had a natural predisposition to be deified, surrounded by inspiring narratives and metaphorical drapes. Deeply rooted, the goddess Alix took it upon herself to dress modern women in accord with history and contemporaneity. The relationship between clothing and the body is profoundly intimate and inseparable. In addition to the couturier's stylistic memory, many models from this period found resonance in contemporary fashion (such as the Alix dress 1935-1940, inventory no. 1973.104, The Costume Institute/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), namely in Japanese designers such as Yohji Yamamoto (b.1943).

The 1938 Alix Long dress in black silk jersey (Spring-Summer, inventory n° 2009.300.1214, The Costume Institute/The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) has an asymmetrical drape, two rows of diagonal shirring on the bodice extending into an asymmetrical hip yoke; diagonal closure at the right shoulder; cut-in-one elbow-length sleeves; bateau neck; full skirt, tightly gathered at the waist. The dress belonged to Millicent Rogers. This same gown was used by Muni (Marguerite Dupuy, 1911-1999), her favorite model. In an article about draped bodices published in the November 1937 issue of the *Femina* magazine, Muni showed herself wearing this same gown pleated in two different directions. This feature appears to be one of the first published photographs of the long association, personal and professional, between the exotic dancer and actress from Madagascar and the French couturier.

It was as if the couturier's creative impetus was only completed through Muni. The movement of her hands, folding pleat after pleat, seemed to continue across the lithe body of her chosen model. The couturier carved the dresses, and Muni gave them life, *anima*. By projecting herself onto Muni's body (the inspiring body) through her dresses, the couturier (the creative body) reviewed herself onto Muni. If her dresses were self-portraits, the couturier and Muni would merged into a single entity. Muni was like a creation of the couturier, melting into her own body. The model represented the couturier's dream, and she designed Muni's dreams, materialising them through the fabric.

Her travels also influenced her pursuit of simplified shapes, as Anne Hollander (Hollander 2000, 48) noted: 'She did travel, however, and her works show the influence of her aesthetic 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.

In 1947, *Femina* named Grès the 're-inventor of the kimono sleeves': 'Deux manteaux très amples, une des grandes nouveautés de la saison. Grès, à qui nous devons le renouveau des manches kimono, réalise à merveille ce vêtement large, confortable en gros tissu "pied de poule" de Lesur. [...]'³; the following year, Grès continued being 'fidèle aux manches kimono [...]'.⁴ The couturier integrated different influences into her collections, which she interpreted in her contemporary lexicon.

³ *Femina*, April 1948.

⁴ *Femina*, Collections Report, May 1949.

The 1943 long dress (inventory no. Gal.1976.48.4, Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris) presents loosely draped kimono sleeves with pleats fixed on the shoulder. The skirt has a draped waist with a diagonal double *bouffant* (a double band with pleats in opposite directions). It is made in black viscose jersey, presenting two waist seams: one at the waist level and the second, asymmetrical, falling on the left hip. This gown with a contemporary allure reunites draping and pleating, the two main features of the couturier's work, representing the transition from Alix to Grès.

The 1947 Grès' sheath dress (inventory n° Gal.1976.48.5, Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris) has a triangular cut-out in the back bodice and long kimono sleeves, a shawl collar, and a skirt draped at the waist level. In her collections, the back of the body was often highlighted, in line with the aesthetics of the time, whether it concerned beach, day, or night pieces. 'Alix travaille beaucoup le dos de ses robes', emphasized the *Jardin des Modes* magazine in November 1936. This dress resembles an Alix Barton model from the beginning of the couturier's career, featured in *L'Officiel de la Couture et de la Mode de Paris* in September 1933.

Grès' Manifesto

From Alix to Grès, there had been no rupture. The lexicon acquired by the couturier in the previous decade proceeded to express itself in a flowing sequence of time and memory. She kept a Spartan spirit and focus. This change was, in reality, rather an administrative and logistical one, keeping the same artistic discourse and a natural continuity. Intrinsicly related to the inimitable draping (an unmistakable signature), the name Grès did not need to have its genealogy traced. On the contrary, Alix's association with Grès flowed harmoniously, like the couturier's sequence of drapes and pleats.

To mark her identity in her transition from Alix to Grès, the couturier created a manifesto with the most beautiful and complex draping, turning it into a hyperbolized pleating that was technically demanding and inimitable. There could be no doubt that Alix, an accomplished master, would continue her journey, despite the change of her name, claiming for herself the codes that had brought her fame and recognition, while taking them to a new dimension. An example is the model of a dress from her first collection, 'Winter 1942', which she presented as Grès, thus symbolising a stylistic turn and a historic milestone in her career. This gown would dictate the decades to come, moving away from the 1930s loose draping linked to classical aesthetics. This model represented a new and more ambitious approach to the female body: until that moment, the couturier had been wrapping the body with fabric; from that moment, she was creating the dress and the body itself with textile materials—the virtuous game of pleating, modeling the bust, sculpting the body, and referring to an intricate weaving of muscles and arteries. The chosen Rodier silk jersey colour, blood red, is even more evocative of carnal matter.

This manifesto dress reveals the time-consuming technique of the couturier. This exquisite gown required a special presentation. *Marie-Claire* highlighted this dress, combined with a loose hood in black taffeta, in an article dedicated to Muni, who interpreted it with her gifted movement: 'L'heure de la collection. La danseuse n'est encore que mannequin. Robe rouge

en Jersey drapé qui nécessite un mois de travail car le dos est également entièrement drapé.⁵

In *Votre Beauté* magazine, Lucien François (François, 1942), who also photographed Muni in the dress, described it as an 'oeuvre de maîtrise', emphasising the excellence of the couturier's manual work as representative of national identity: 'Madame Grès, qui fut célèbre sous le nom d'Alix, apporte dans ce que le travail de la couture a de plus traditionnellement artisanal, en France, une inspiration qui rejoint les plus admirables conceptions du vêtement féminin.' *L'Officiel de la Couture et de la Mode de Paris* also noted the new stylistic signature of Grès, focusing on the complex pleating of the bodice as the heart and identity of her artistic practice: '[...]très beaux mouvements drapés des corsages, des encolures, des manches.'⁶

A very similar model in black, belonging to the collection of the Palais Galliera, also presents an intricate game of pleats resembling musculature (Autumn-Winter 1942/1943, inventory n° Gal1977.37.15, Palais Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris). Although this gown has no label, its technical complexity leaves no doubt about its authorship.

Light and dimness

The secretive Madame Grès reinvented herself throughout her career; her life was the most intricately draped dress she has created, with several directions, intersections, places of shadow, and deep folds, deeply expressed in black. The black dresses described in this article have the ghost of her past in them and do not only represent the designer's genealogy, but also the foundations of contemporary fashion (**Figs 6a & 6b**, side by side).

René Char (Char, 1962, 154) wrote: 'Dans nos ténèbres, il n'y a pas une place pour la Beauté. Toute la place est pour la Beauté.' [In our darkness, there is no place for Beauty. The whole place is for Beauty]. In the black shadows of Alix Grès, the whole place *is* for beauty. Her black pieces constitute the shadows of her white dresses, with more blurred and abstract contours but no less complexity. Black coats her draping in mystery and subtlety, and enhances her rigorous cut. While absolutely contemporary, black gives Madame Grès' work even greater timelessness. In bright colours, like poppy red, white, or black, Madame Grès' technique is always fascinating, but the darker shades make her oeuvre even more mysterious and compelling. As Anne Hollander (Hollander 1984, 80) stated: 'Black is everything and nothing. A color vibrant with a mysterious ambiguity, a color that allows whatever takes it on to enjoy total associative freedom'.

⁵ «Mouni le mannequin dansant», *Marie-Claire*, 20 April 1943, 3-4.

⁶ *L'Officiel de la Couture et de la Mode de Paris*, Spring Collections Report, Mai 1943.

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Fig. 1

« Drapé à l'antique cet ensemble d'Alix en jersey d'albène. »
Photograph: Horst, *Vogue*, April 1935, p. 45.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figs. 2 & 3



Left: « ALIX voile de chantilly noir sur un fourreau de mousseline rouge. »

Right: « Robe d'Alix, une ample jupe en Organcrin de Colcombet recouvre un fourreau en crêpe imprimé noir et blanc. »

Photographs: Horst, *Vogue*, April 1937, pp. 50-51.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.





Alix

Manteau en lainage noir drapé à la façon d'une cape rejetée sur l'épaule, laissant voir l'envers de velours violet. Chapeau à haute calotte en velours

Fig. 4

« Alix. Manteau en lainage noir drapé à la façon d'une cape rejetée sur l'épaule, laissant voir l'envers de velours violet. Chapeau à haute calotte en velours. »
Vogue, November 1936, p. 68.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Fig. 5

The couturier's manifesto « Le drapé, par Alix ». Photograph: Saad, *Rester Jeune* n°45, June 1937, pp. 24-25.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.



PHOTO SAAD.

Le Drapé

Par ALIX

J'AI ME le drapé comme j'aime toutes les possibilités de mon métier, mais avec cette prédilection spéciale que donne le manie ment plus libre d'une souple étoffe...

On commence par un bout sans parti-pris, sans se préoccuper exactement de ce que l'on fera ; le tissu — qui a ses caprices — glisse, se dérobe, retombe puis tout à coup cède et se « place », avec une beauté définitive de sculpture. C'est un jeu passionnant.

De tout temps, j'avais envié le rôle des « vestéplices » de ces Grecques raffinées auxquelles femmes et hommes de la Rome impériale confiaient le soin de draper leur toge ou leur péplum, selon les règles mystérieuses du goût. Car il n'y a pas de technique pour l'art du drapé, et c'est ce qui le rend si vivant, si splendidement humain.

Selon le corps de la femme que vous devez habiller, selon ses attitudes, ses gestes, son rythme intérieur — différent pour chaque personne — vous donnez à vos plus une orientation nouvelle : vous faites partir plus haut ou plus bas tel groupe de fronces, tel enroulement, tel coquille ; vous découvrez ici les épaules, et là vous les recouvrez avec soin. Tantôt vous serrez la ligne des hanches, et tantôt vous l'enveloppez, au contraire, de souplesse et d'imprécision.

J'estime que rien n'est plus favorable à la beauté féminine que cette formule de vêtement, si proche de la nudité... Le drapé habille et déshabille, ne laisse rien ignorer des perfections de la plastique. C'est la mise en valeur absolue des grâces féminines sous quelque aspect qu'elles se présentent.

La femme, digne de ce nom, doit être toute douce, toute harmonieuse dans ses lignes et ses volumes.

Un dernier point que je tiens à noter : ne croyez pas que je « m'inspire » de telle ou telle époque, que je veuille « évoquer » l'Égypte, la Grèce ou la Renaissance, et que je « reproduise » le drapé de telle ou telle statue. Si je le fais, c'est sans m'en douter. Que j'aie beaucoup regardé les chefs-d'œuvre du passé, pour lesquels j'ai un culte, cela est hors de doute ; mais quand je travaille, je n'y pense plus. Une robe moderne n'est pas un costume de théâtre, encore moins une reconstitution archéologique.

Faits sur des femmes et pour des femmes d'aujourd'hui, mes drapés sont actuels, au premier chef...

alix

Fig. 6

« Alix. Cette robe est en fin jersey noir, à corsage kimono, très ample devant au moyen de fronces qui partent de l'épaule. Le milieu du corsage est garni d'une suite de plaques de métal ciselé. Petit groupe de fronces à la jupe, d'où part l'ampleur ramenée sur le devant. »
Vogue, April 1935, p. 68.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.



Figs. 7 & 8

Two draped dresses by Alix.

Left: « Des fronces moulent la jupe de la taille aux genoux et les draperies qui partent de l'épaule tombent en plis souples jusqu'à terre. La robe est noire, en jersey de soie Triomphe, les bijoux sont de Mauboussin. »
Right: « Tout le devant de la robe est drapé par des fronces au corsage et sur les manches larges ouvertes sur l'avant-bras. L'ampleur de la jupe part de la taille. Robe en jersey Triomphe blanc. Bijoux de Boucheron. »
Photographs: Cecil Beaton, « Des fluides drapés aussi simples que savants », *Vogue*, October 1936, pp.36-37.

Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

