

The collaboration between Thayaht and Madeleine Vionnet (1919-1925).

The idea of “colour scales”, the *planches* for the *Gazette du Bon Ton* and the design of clothes, fabrics, decorations and objects.

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Thayaht is well-known in the international fashion world especially for having contributed to creating the brand of the *atelier* “Madeleine Vionnet” (1919) and a number of graphic-compositional solutions, among which the design of the famous label, marked by the digital imprint of the *couturière* as a guarantee of uniqueness.

This solution was first devised in Florence between 1920 and 1921, where the artist took on the challenge of producing also a golden plate, as big as the fabric label which it was to be placed on (a $\sqrt{3}$ rectangle), which was especially perforated to allow Vionnet to insert her ink-dipped thumb, thus avoiding smudges on the fabric. Quite likely, the workshop that produced this object was that of the goldsmith Foti of Por Santa Maria, who was often mentioned by Thayaht as one of his customary suppliers.

Yet, Thayaht’s creative contribution was certainly not confined to defining the logo and the coordinated image of the renowned Parisian *atelier*; rather, it extended to the design of clothes, of decorative patterns for fabrics made with miscellaneous techniques, of embroideries, jewels and even colour scales (colour cards) to be used to dye fabric and customize tailoring models.

In 1921, Thayaht felt again the urge to deepen his artistic training on the elements of composition, and thus decided to pursue technical-artistic studies at Harvard University in Cambridge (Massachusetts), under the guide of Professor Denman Waldo Ross, an abstract design theorist who had published *A Theory of Pure Design*¹ in 1907. Thayaht attended the latter’s seminar on scientific colouring from October to December that very year, though then applied it according to his own rules and sensitivity to his work for Vionnet. Indeed, the Florentine artist repeatedly expressed his wish to be artistically autonomous from any school or system: quite often, the artistic and theoretical sources he applied, as well as his sources of knowledge, were made perfectly homogeneous by his outstanding creative personality, which sometimes took on an even anarchical stand against the excessively severe and punctual application of strict theorizations.²

His first reference to “colour compositions” for fabrics and clothes can be traced back to 1919, and can be found in the rich collection of letters of the CLM Seeber Collection of Rome (Thayaht’s nephew): “*I was quite delighted (...) at the appreciation shown for my silks and designs for costumes and color compositions!!!*”³. In this letter, Thayaht added that his suggestions had aroused special interest out of his many artistic attempts in Paris in the autumn of 1919, where he had landed hoping to gain fame and success.

There exists another invaluable, unpublished document of the same year, namely a notebook full of notes on colours, where he jotted down interesting thoughts on abstract painting, noticing how it could become a “colour composition” with music-like chords, harmonies, dissonances and how this never tired the spectator since there was never an exact representation of anything; rather, abstract painting appeared to be different according to one’s mood and could well be suited to fabric decorating and to fashion.⁴

¹ D. W. Ross, *A Theory of Pure Design*, Boston-New York, Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1907. Thayaht had been familiar with D. Ross’s theories at least since 1916. See letter of 20th October 1916 from Mary Berenson to Thayaht (Mart. Tha. 1.2.7)

² Correspondence to Denman Ross of 27th May 1921 about his theories: A. Scappini, *Thayaht. Vita, scritti, carteggi*, Milan 2005, pp.184-186, letter 8.

³ Rome, Coll. CLM Seeber, E. Michahelles (Nen), *letter to grandmother*, Paris 24th October 1919, letter n. 8, sheet 2 recto.

⁴ Marina di Pietrasanta, Toto Collection, *Appunti sulla teoria e sulla pratica della Composizione a Colori*, 1919

In a document of 19th May 1920⁵, Thayaht reassured Louis Dangel, the artistic director of Maison Vionnet, that he was preparing a colour scale sample on a mauve *crêpe* fabric that he had received from the Parisian *atelier*. After announcing his imminent trip to Paris in June, he said that he would include two shaded colour samples for the *atelier*'s attention, specifying that they could be produced in softer colours if Vionnet so preferred. Such an eye for shaded colours characterized Thayaht's entire collaboration with the fashion house, right from his exclusive contract for his *Haute Couture* creations, which was signed in October 1922 (though running from December) and which included his obligation to spend two two-month periods a year in Paris.⁶ In fact, his colour "harmonies" were used even as a decorating element of many garments made by the Maison, becoming the latter's recurrent distinctive trait in the early 1920s; these were used in many different kinds of light intensities and ranges, often combined with clothes featuring a geometric repetition of shaped flounces or sewn petals forming the surface of the model, thus conveying the idea of visual movement, amplified by arranging fabrics in *degradé* colours.⁷

Many fashion sketches created by the artist - now included in public and private collections - bear witness to such "tonal harmonies", where Thayaht had the opportunity to "show off" his studies on dynamic symmetry, which he applied also by using colours that could create precise geometric interplays of concentric spirals or rectangles; in doing so, he often referred to the geometric positioning of similar scaled-down figures aligned on a diagonal, as published by the American researcher Jay Hambidge in "*The Diagonal*" since 1919.⁸ In the text of his twelfth lesson at the University of Yale, the theorist of "geometric progression" published a plate that demonstrated the possibility of reducing or enlarging a rectangle proportionately by acting on its diagonal, just like when developing sizes in a tailor's workshop. This scheme is identical to the construction basis of the famous dress "*Orage*" (1922) in silk *crêpe* fabric, shaded from beige to brown and currently kept at the Musée de la Mode et du Textile in Paris, which was also reproduced by Thayaht in grey shades in one of his famous *planches* for the *Gazette du Bon Ton*, published in 1923. The same geometric progression, whose value is both constructive and ornamental, had been previously elaborated by Thayaht in another drawing published in 1922, called "*Souvenir de Pâques à Rome*" for the homonymous magazine run by Lucien Vogel, whose office was located in the same building in rue de Rivoli as that of Maison Vionnet.⁹

Indeed, this opens up, once again, the debate on the paternity of some models which were drawn by Thayaht with the *pochoir* method on this elegant fashion magazine, which came out in Paris from 1912 to 1925. Before many of the documents I hereby refer to had been deeply examined, the paternity of all the models published in the *Gazette* was attributed to Thayaht; indeed, his importance within Vionnet's *atelier* had been established only according to such a homogeneous set of documents.¹⁰ In truth, however,

⁵ Rome, CLM Seeber Collection, E. Michahelles, Collection of rough drafts, *letter to Louis Dangel c/o Madeleine Vionnet*, Florence 19th May 1920, letter n. 27, sheet 1 recto, published in: A. Scappini (edited by), Milan 2005, pp.177-178, letter n. 4.

⁶ Rome, CLM Seeber Coll., E. Michahelles, Collection of rough drafts, *letter to Louis Dangel c/o Madeleine Vionnet*, Paris 6th October 1922, letter n. 85, sheet 1 recto in: A. Scappini, Milan 2005, pp. 203-205, letter n. 22

⁷ In particular, I am referring to a photo that shows an early 1920s, Vionnet model with shaped flounces in *degradé* colours, worn at the Longchamp race course and published in: B. Kirke, *Madeleine Vionnet*, San Francisco, 1998, page 214, and to the triptych kept at the Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, Vionnet Archives, folder 42/1, n. 1644

⁸ "*The average modern artist knows that rectangular shapes are enlarged or reduced by a diagonal. If the painter or designer desires to make a shape similar to the shape of his canvas, or to any other rectangular area he may be using, he draws a diagonal*" from "Lesson 12- General Constructions for Similarity of Figure" in J.Hambidge, *The Element of Dynamic Symmetry*, New York, Dover 1967, page 65, fig. 63.

⁹ *Souvenir de Pâques à Rome*, n. 5 of the *Gazette*, *planche* n. 40, 1922; *L'Orage*, n. 2 of the *Gazette*, *planche* n. 10, 1923.

¹⁰ R. Martin (edited by), *Cubism and Fashion*, New York, Abrams 1999, pp. 127-137.

only some models represented in the *planches*¹¹ may be surely attributed to the artist; for others, he might have been only the *atelier*'s official designer, probably using, since 1922 onwards, some images (kept at the Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs in Paris) which he was given by Madame Vionnet's collaborators: this would be confirmed by the typical poses of the models which appear to be perfectly alike both in some triptychs of Vionnet's archives and in those chosen by Thayaht for his illustrated *planches*.

Leaving aside the *planches* with sketches featuring tonal harmonies - largely documented throughout their different design stages and which, in their proportional and geometric grid-like arrangement, clearly betray the artist's creative method -, I would attribute the *planche* "*L'Essayage à Paris - costume pour tourisme aérien*"¹² to Thayaht. This shows one of the many variations of his woman's TUTA, which is clearly mentioned also in a letter between the artist and his grandmother of 29-30 January 1922. Thayaht described a costume that was designed for boarding a plane, made up of a special tunic that kept the legs always covered, and which he called "*Robe d'Aviation*"¹³. The name and the description of this model can be matched with that shown in the *pochoir* of the *Gazette du Bon Ton*; moreover, that very same year, we know that Vionnet registered and filed a patent in Paris for the "Tuta" and "Bituta"¹⁴, the Anglo-Florentine's well-documented creations, and that at the same time, the *atelier* was highly interested in their potential variations and future developments.

Different reasons prompt me to associate the *planche n. 55 "Dans la Serre"*¹⁵ (1924) to this nucleus by Thayaht. The former shows a pink, silk, evening dress whose bust is entirely decorated with satin ribbons that create rhombus-shaped motifs, where geometric spirals are inserted according to an alternated chess-board design: this kind of decoration perfectly matches the graphic exemplifications on rectangular-based logarithmic spirals shown in the plates 61 and 62 of Hambidge's eleventh lesson on dynamic symmetry¹⁶, which can be clearly seen also in the corresponding triptych kept at the Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs in Paris.¹⁷

What is more: in the curious though refined interplay of the model's double shoulder-straps, you can make out Thayaht's wish, often expressed graphically, to reproduce his client's initials - "M V". These, just like in many other drawings, become in this case a subtle expedient to stress a continuity with his studies on corporate graphics which marked most of his design and which became an extravagant trademark of his own: they may not be very visible to distracted eyes, though they were purposefully created to link and bring back even the most strictly tailoring part of his work to the brand's identity.¹⁸

Substantial analogies may be traced also between two watercolour paintings by the artist (both marked by the *atelier*'s stamp demonstrating the use of progressive sketch numbers and the indication of the season¹⁹), depicting the same evening dress in two different, colour combinations: one is set against a dark background while the other against a clear one, with a train on the back and a high band decorated around the hips, resembling a Japanese "*obi*"; this detail makes them stylistically similar to the *planche* of the *Gazette* "*Japonika*" (1924) and, above all, to the elegant model that is shown on the left in the

¹¹ We know that Thayaht displayed some *planches* of the *Gazette* at the first Exhibition of Decorative Arts of Monza in 1923 (May-October). See: *Catalogo della I Mostra Internazionale delle Arti decorative*, Rome, Casa Editrice D'Arte Bestetti & Tumminelli, 1923, page 87.

¹² "*L'Essayage à Paris (Croydon-Bourget)*" n. 4 of the *Gazette*, *planche* 27, 1922 ; this model's photo is published in J. Demornex, *Madeleine Vionnet*, Paris 1990, page 215.

¹³ Rome, CLM Seeber Coll., E. Michahelles, *letter to grandmother*, Paris 29-30 January 1922, letter n.18, sheet 3 verso.

¹⁴ Rome, CLM Seeber Coll., E. Michahelles, *letter to grandmother*, Paris 16th February 1922, letter n. 19, c 1 verso, See the essay by Enrica Morini "*La Tuta. Da Antimoda a Haute Couture*", in *Thayaht. Un artista alle origini del Made in Italy*, Prato, Museo del Tessuto Ed. 2007, pp. 24-33.

¹⁵ "*Dans La Serre*", n. 10 of the *Gazette*, *planche* 5, 1924.

¹⁶ In: J. Hambidge, *The Element of Dynamic Symmetry*, New York, Dover 1967, pp. 59-64, fig. 61 and 62.

¹⁷ Paris, Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, Vionnet Archives, folder 42/1, model n. 2180.

¹⁸ See the abovementioned *planche* and sketches with their preliminary drawings for packaging, kept at the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, Cabinet des Dessins.

¹⁹ This detail of a rectangular stamp bearing the French words: "Toile", "Croquis" and "Saison" leads us to presume that these models were approved and produced by the Maison. Lucca, private collection.

planche published by the editor Vogel “À Biarritz, Chez Madeleine Vionnet”²⁰, the last out of nineteen illustrations by Thayaht of the 1924-25 years, and thus perfectly corresponding to the date shown at the bottom of the abovementioned fashion sketches.

Although some changes were brought to Thayaht’s model to convert it into the final one, the traces of his design process are still visible: in this case, we even find out about the great success of this model thanks to its publication in an issue of “*Vogue-NewYork*” in May 1925, which dedicated a full page to the refined evening dress that had been bought and worn by the wife of the American tycoon Reginald C. Vanderbilt.

Indeed, I am sure that a close examination of the magazines of the time would reveal many more interesting details, allowing us to find out what was made and published out of the many projects that Thayaht provided *atelier* Vionnet with between 1920 and 1924/25.

In fact, the magazine “*Vogue-New York*” issued in June 1923 reveals an important piece of information that allows us to relate other significant *haute couture* models of *atelier* Vionnet to Thayaht. In this case, three elegant day dresses are depicted in a single *planche*: the first model is remarkably *déco* in the stylized graphics of its pattern, and is described as made in embroidered black silk with a pattern of orange and red carnations – the original sketch of this textile decoration is now kept at the Museo del Tessuto in Prato and includes, *inter alia*, the wording “*décidé*” which confirms its ensuing production. The second model is made in white *crêpe* fabric, with black satin appliqués depicting an African landscape, which had been suggested by Thayaht in light blue and black in the original drawing, where the shape of a feline can be clearly made out among the luxuriant vegetation – a watercolour painting of the so-called ‘panther’ is now part of the Toto Collection at Marina di Pietrasanta.²¹ Lastly, on the right of the *planche* published by *Vogue* stands the third outfit in opaque blue *crêpe de chine*, decorated with appliqués depicting cypresses reflected in water of two shades of green, which clearly matches the artist’s watercolour painting “*Robe Paysage*” (now part of a private collection).

There are extensive, detailed documents on all the stages of development of this last model, up to the photo shooting kept at the Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, which all show the gradual simplification of the original idea into the finished dress.²²

Hence, many correspondences can be traced between several photo *planches* belonging to Vionnet’s copyright archives, kept in Paris, and the graphic production of this prolific artist, who often relied, at particularly busy times, on his brother Roger (RAM) and on his friend Lelio Salmoiraghi for his drawings.

Besides, the rich archives of the Louvre visually clarify Vionnet’s preference for dress decoration techniques that particularly favoured appliqué embroidery, inlaid work, direct prints or appliqué prints and patchworks, for which Thayaht always suggested interesting solutions and which were then manufactured with excellent results. At the same time, the archives reveal that the Parisian *atelier* used to propose two different executive solutions for the same dress, using both worked fabrics (*Bianchini-Ferrier*, *Ducharme*, *Léonard*²³) and embroidery (*Michonet* or *Lesage*); at the same time, we discover that some elements that were created or elaborated by Thayaht were exploited by Vionnet²⁴ more than once, in different solutions and for several collections. Quite often, the subjects chosen by the artist for textile design had a stylized or totally geometric figurative basis: indeed, Thayaht knew very well how to make the most of his deep, theoretical knowledge in this field. In this respect, we can find obvious similarities between some of the sketches he

²⁰ “À Biarritz, Chez Madeleine Vionnet”, n. 2 of the Gazette, *planche* n. 11, 1924-25.

²¹ Another Vionnet model created by Thayaht shares the same “exotic-colonial” touch, and is now kept at the Photograph Library of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs as n. 1697, folder 42/1.

²² Paris, Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, Vionnet Archives, folder 42/1, model n. 1630.

²³ M. Chapsal, *La Chair de la robe*, Paris, Fayard 1989, p. 59.

²⁴ Quite interestingly, Thayaht’s sketch of an elephant, which was part of the series of colonial-inspired themes, was used by the *atelier* as an *appliqué* decoration for at least two different models: see Paris, Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, Vionnet Archives, folder 4271, model n. 1697; Copyright Vionnet Album, model n. 7021.

included in some letters and documents and some models that were later produced by Vionnet, with large schematic decorations or “*large patterns*” as called by the artist.²⁵

In other cases, the artist underlined how technique and aesthetics were meant to coincide. The most well-known example of this idea is his famous evening dress “Henriette”, which can be now safely attributed to the artist and which is currently kept at the Kyoto Costume Institute²⁶ (whose triptych and drawing have been found in the Parisian archives): through the alternating, T-shaped (the artist’s initial), gold and silver scraps, placed in a mirror-like fashion and thus creating two identical panels made up of 28 elements, the dress proves that a single module, sewn according to a repeated and overturned scheme, can be both a decorating motif and a key element of the garment. Shape, function and decoration perfectly match each other.

Thayaht did not just provide inputs for *haute couture* design and compositions, neither did he merely concern himself with the saleability of the garments which he designed, so much so that he once said: “*Vionnet is more and more dependant on me*”. In fact, some documents prove that he also became an interior designer for the *atelier* located at 50, avenue Montaigne, being involved in decorating some rooms of the *atelier* itself and in designing accessories.

Indeed, there is evidence of drawings and projects for boxes, clasps, buckles, candelabra and object-holders, produced under his direction by the firm Luciano Bracci of Florence²⁷, which were meant for the exclusive *Lingerie* department that had been opened in 1923 in the new, sumptuous Parisian office.²⁸

In the light of such exuberant information about Thayaht, we can certainly hold that his work was essential for the Parisian *griffe*, at least for the period he was involved therewith; on the contrary, it is inaccurate to claim that Thayaht reached more visibility at the time precisely because of this collaboration which, on the contrary, was kept quite hidden (as often complained by the artist)²⁹. Rather, the ideas of such a creative, whimsical though irregular artist were able to take flight also thanks to the large organization of one of the most important *ateliers* in the world. In any event, it is unquestionable that he was the forerunner of today’s art directors or creative directors, who have become such vital and strategic figures for the most important luxury and fashion houses.

²⁵ See the Maison Vionnet dresses with the geometric patterns of equilateral triangles, published in J. Demornex, Paris 1990, p. 196, and some of his sketches included in the CLM Seeber Collection, E. Michahelles (Nen), *letter to aunt*, Paris 10th August 1922, letter n. 172, sheet 2 verso.

²⁶ See A. Fukai (edited by), *La Moda. Dalla Collezione del Kyoto Costume Institute*, Köln 2003, pp. 416-417, inv. AC6819 90-25AB; and Paris, Photograph Library of the Musée Des Arts Décoratifs, Vionnet Archives, folder ss. 1924, model 2074.

²⁷ Rome, CLM Seeber Collection, E. Michahelles, Collection of rough drafts, *letter to Luciano Bracci*, Paris, not dated, letter n. 84, sheet 1 recto.

²⁸ Rome, CLM Seeber Collection, E. Michahelles, Collection of rough drafts, *letter to Mr. Armand Trouyet*, Paris 10th October 1923, letter n. 116, sheet 1 recto, in A. Scappini, Milan 2005, pp. 213-217, letter n. 28.

²⁹ “*Vionnet always takes all the credit*” in CLM Seeber Collection, E. Michahelles (Nen), *letter to grandmother*, 28th July 1923, letter. n. 78, sheet 3 verso.