

**Madame Grès: Sphinx of Fashion** / Patricia Mears.--New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, in association with the Fashion Institute of Technology, New York, March 2008.--184 p.: ill.--ISBN: 978-0-300-13692-0 (cl., alk paper): \$50.00.



Madame Alix Grès was a prolific Paris couturier whose creative career spanned more than sixty years. Known for her Grecian-style pleated and fluted gowns, she cut, draped, and stitched each garment personally, never relying on assistants to interpret her designs. Discouraged from a career as a dancer or sculptor, she began work as a couturier despite minimal experience in clothing construction. She replaced her given name "Germaine" with "Alix" and later adopted the surname "Grès," an anagram of her husband's name. Alix Grès established her own firm in the 1930s, when women dominated the French couture houses. Despite international economic chaos and a downturn in the French fashion industry, she draped and pleated voluminous silk yardage into finely detailed gowns that accentuated the female form. Her soft and sculptural line of exquisitely made clothing received widespread critical acclaim. By refusing to bend to commercial coercion, her firm "Grès" endured until 1988 despite drastically changing styles and a marked increase of ready-to-wear clothing. Although she briefly marketed eyeglasses and scarves, it was her fragrances that brought tremendous commercial success,

especially "Cabocharde," which author Patricia Mears translates to mean "stubborn," "obstinate," or "pig-headed."

Widely known as the "Sphinx of Fashion," Alix Grès lived reclusively and died penniless; her death remained a secret for more than a year. Although not intended as a biography of the couturier, Mears addresses several unresolved mysteries, often relying on Grès's own recollections. Mears chronicles Madame Grès's creations and outlines her legacy by drawing parallels between her designs and contemporary art, theater, fashion photography, and other social developments. An exhibition of her work was held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1994; her gowns were also prominently featured in the 2003 exhibition "Goddess: The Classical Mode" also held at the Metropolitan Museum.

Published in conjunction with a 2008 exhibition at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York, this volume is richly illustrated with photographs and select drawings. With the exception of a few vintage images by photographers including Man Ray and George Hoyningen-Huene, the fashions are shown on mannequins. Although descriptions of individual garments emphasize Madame Grès's exceptional construction techniques, it is occasionally difficult to match garments to their description, as the text and images are not always aligned. The volume contains a select bibliography, but does not include an index.

This intriguing volume about a remarkable woman is recommended for academic, museum, and public libraries supporting research on fashion, and clothing design and construction.

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