

Materials of Fashion

From
Analogue
Principles
to
Hybrid
Practices

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Fashion Creation as an Embodied Practice: of the Kimono, Patterns, and the Space in- between

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Short Bio of the author: *Karen Van Godtsenhoven is an author and curator of fashion with a specialisation in gender and feminist theoretical perspectives. She is also a PhD-researcher at Ghent University, Belgium, with a thesis project on the poetics of female fashion designers, supervised by professors Maude Bass-Krueger and Ilya Parkins. With an MA in Comparative Literature, an MA in Library and Information Science and one in Women's Studies, she has worked as a curator at MoMu the Fashion Museum Antwerpen (2009-2017) and The Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2017-2021). She has edited and written over seventeen exhibition catalogs, including Camp: Notes on Fashion, Fashion Game Changers: Reinventing the twentieth-century silhouette, Living Fashion: Women's Daily Wear 1750-1950, Olivier Theyskens: She Walks in Beauty, Kimono Style, and recently co-curated the exhibition Women Dressing Women at The Costume Institute. She is currently working on an exhibition on fashion and motherhood, Mothers and Others at the Hasselt fashion museum and is working on numerous international exhibition projects.*

Intro

This essay is a development of the lecture “Fashion as an embodied practice: Of Patterns, Bodies and Exhibitions”, given at the University of the Arts Bremen in June 2023, prompting reflection on the underlying themes and theoretical notions about fashion design and the body running through several of the author’s curatorial fashion projects and exhibitions. Therefore, this text will explore these central theoretical notions (the kimono, *ma*, patterns, self-taught methods, authorship in design and design as language, hybrid practices between analogue and digital) in connection with use cases (designers and exhibitions) from the author’s practice, as an ongoing critical investigation of the discipline of fashion design as seen through the lens of curatorial practice.

Kimono & “ma”

Fashion history has, up until recently, linked the birth of fashion with modern times in the West and the rise of capitalism, crystallizing in court culture in eighteenth century France. Dress in other cultures was mainly seen as static and timeless, isolated from the caprices of Western changing silhouettes. However, as Monika Bincsik and Eric Wolf separately argue, the changing patterns and styles found in the kimono styles during the Shogunate era (Edo, 1603-1867) can also be considered to be a fashion system.⁰¹ Another factor that underlines the system’s similarity to European culture in the Edo period is the appearance of sumptuary laws, which prescribed and regulated which classes should wear which types of garment, which color, etc., and which ones they were not allowed to wear. These sumptuary laws also existed in most European countries in early modern times (1300-1700), with an apex in sixteenth and seventeenth century Italy. In Japan, for example, only the samurai women were allowed to wear textiles of the highest sophistication, and only they could wear certain bright colors and have certain styles of sumptuous embroidery. Even though they were the highest-ranking women and were allowed to wear these exquisite fashions, they also had to obey the strictest sumptuary laws, whereas women from lower classes had a little bit more freedom. This constraint set in motion a certain form of mimicry, whereby the new moneyed classes copied the old money’s fashions, techniques and textiles, in a game of hide and seek, which prompted ever-changing fashions, just as described much later by Thorsten Veblen in his seminal work the *Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Theory of Institutions* of 1899. In terms of publication

and dissemination of the changing kimono fashions, the sophisticated distribution through woodblock-printed pattern books (hinagatabon) could be compared to the printed Western fashion magazines⁰².

The kimono, often seen as an unchanging, genderless, T-shaped garment may therefore be reconsidered, not just as a timeless icon but as a changing signifier through different eras and cultures, as described by Ulrich Lehmann as “fashion’s Tiger’s Leap”, following Walter Benjamin’s notion that “fashion leaps from the contemporary to the ancient and back again, without coming to rest exclusively in one temporal or aesthetic configuration.”⁰³ The most important notion and difference between western (yofuku) and eastern (wafuku) systems dress may be that the kimono has a fixed T-shape, which houses the body in an intimate space (ma), a column of air which resides in between body and garment, and that western fashion, since the Renaissance, employs tailoring techniques which make the garment fit close to the body, with its culmination in the S-shaped corsets of the late nineteenth century. Looking at the gradual evolution from loose medieval garments to the late nineteenth century corset, it seems that the female body, the more modern it becomes, the more it is tailored to, constricted and patterned into a certain shape- before the new modernity and looser, straight dresses of the New Woman and la garçonne. This innovation in the 1910s and 1920s of the twentieth century was prompted, or catalyzed, in part, by the advent of the kimono on Western shores, which had structural repercussions on how couturiers approached the body.

The kimono’s shape and its current of air between body and garment, enveloping the body, exemplifies the interval in time, or emptiness in space as expressed in the Japanese concept of “ma”. Its Japanese symbol combines the word “door” and “sun”, symbolizing the empty space which allows for a shaft of light to enter the space. It is the in-between space, where creativity grows and the silence is full of potential. Unfortunately, this concept does not have its parallel in Western speech and thought, which may be the reason why Western capitalist society is destroying itself at such a frenzied speed, without pausing to reflect on the future of the planet, as mirrored in the state of the current fashion system.

In terms of fashion design, the opening up of Japan to Western trade and influence, influenced both kimono fashions and Western couture.⁰⁴ After Japan opened up and participated in International

Exhibitions and World Fairs, its influence reached couturiers like Paul Poiret and Madeleine Vionnet, who collected *ukiyo-e* (wood-block) prints. Poiret's autodidactic style (meaning he could not make patterns in a classical 'tailoring' method) contributed to his loose draping of garments onto the body, and Vionnet's study of the kimono, as Betty Kirke argues in her work on Madeleine Vionnet, catalyzed her experiments with the bias cut, which enveloped the body in a way that allowed for better movement and a sensual, haptic caress which was enjoyable for the wearer.⁰⁵ Perhaps Vionnet was the first designer to introduce the female gaze in fashion, stating: "The dress must not hang on the body but follow its lines. When a woman smiles, her dress must smile with her."

Mid-century couturiers like Cristobal Balenciaga and Charles James applied the kimono principles of *ma* and the idea of the shoulder as a structuring element, rather than the waist. Charles James, whose mother was photographed as a young girl wearing a kimono,⁰⁶ called the application of *ma* in his sculptural silhouettes, "the thin wall of air".⁰⁷ He also used the two-dimensional pattern of the kimono in his concept of *plattitudes*,⁰⁸ which were flat pattern pieces or part of a pattern piece, which existed to find a line on the body that could become seam lines in a garment. A platitude worked like a ruler for the body, helping to create a shaped seam or design line that circulates smoothly around the body and avoids right-angled seaming. The platitude could be a shoulder strap, a contoured belt, or any section of a pattern which has a smooth curvilinear shape. It was a tool for developing new designs and thinking through them, on the body.

□ FIGURE-1 □ FIGURE-2 □ FIGURE-3A □ FIGURE-3B

Two exhibition projects co-curated by the author, *Game Changers: Reinventing the twentieth century silhouette* (ModeMuseum Antwerpen, 2016, with Miren Arzalluz) and *Kimono Style* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2022, with Monika Bincsik), looked at the influence of the kimono on the radical innovation of the twentieth century silhouette, from the early innovators like Paul Poiret and Madeleine Vionnet, through the sculptural shapes of the midcentury couturiers Cristobal Balenciaga and Charles James which went (partially) against the body-contouring hourglass fashions of Christian Dior, to the Japanese and Belgian designers at the end of the century.

In an instance of circular time in fashion, another example of the Tiger's Leap, young Japanese designers like Issey Miyake, Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo conquered the Western fashion world with silhouettes which departed radically from the form-fitting and muscular shapes of the 1980s "power fashion". "I felt I should be doing something more directional, more powerful ... [so] I decided to start from zero, from nothing, to do things that have not been done before, things with a strong image", said Rei Kawakubo to the New York Times in 1979, and for that tabula rasa, she went back to the basic "uncut" principles of the kimono.

Both the exhibitions ended with the most radical silhouettes by Rei Kawakubo, and *Game Changers* also included British designer Georgina Godley who deconstructed the ideal feminine silhouette by adding padded lumps and bumps to its outline, in an instance of fusion between body and dress. Both shows also included examples of Alexander McQueen and John Galliano's skillful mastery of both Western tailoring and bias-cut techniques as well as Eastern inspirations and volumes.

Finally, the ample volumes of the "oversize" look of Martin Margiela, launched for the season of spring/ summer 2000 and still influential today, was based on his experiments with a found mannequin in Italian size 48. By using this size of mannequin for the construction of the silhouette, he deconstructed the idea of the ideal body type and size in fashion, housing it in an architectural shape, with a lot of *ma*. At the turn of the twentieth century, this collection symbolizes the culmination of the influence of the kimono and the idea of *ma* in fashion design, opening the horizon for new "becomings" in fashion in the twenty-first century.

Azzedine Alaïa

Self-taught French Tunisian fashion designer Azzedine Alaïa, known for his use of synthetic jersey ('the King of Cling') and autonomous position within the fashion system⁹, was a master in the two main disciplines which make up haute couture and fashion design, the *tailleur* (cutting) and the *flou* (draping) methods. As an avid collector of haute couture and experimental garments (resulting in an encyclopedic collection conserved in the Alaïa Foundation in Paris, and recently partially exhibited in *Azzedine Alaïa, Couturier Collectionneur* at the Musée de la Mode- Palais Galliera), Alaïa would use his collection of haute couture garments as a study collection, liter-

ally opening up jackets and dresses to look at the construction, and sewing them back together himself, like a seamstress. Similarly, he would sometimes work up to two years on a jacket of his own design, continuously refining the pattern, showing it on a model, and taking it back from the shop in order to keep working at it. This usage of time can also be interpreted as an application of the idea of *ma*: by leaving intervals of time between working sessions on a garment, he allowed for reflection and breathing space for his own ideas and techniques.

□ FIGURE-4A □ FIGURE-4B

Recently, in the Spring of 2023, the exhibition “Forms and Patterns of Azzedine Alaïa by Thomas Demand” at the Alaïa Foundation, juxtaposed Demand’s photographic, near-abstract images of Alaïa’s colorful patterns with a window looking into the late designer’s studio, which was left untouched after the passing of Monsieur Alaïa. The studio, like his collection of couture, design objects and artworks, looks like the jumble of a ragpicker, however, there is a certain personal method and eye which unites and animates all the objects. As Mieke Bal states in her seminal work *Telling Objects*¹⁰ “collecting (art) is a way of knowing and understanding the world”. The act of collecting is like an ever-ongoing narrative, and each object propels the plot forward. The poignant juxtaposition of images which featured the master’s tools and implied his hand, with a look into the actual working space of the master, cluttered with tools, boxes, models and items pointing towards the being who animated them, stands a beautiful tribute to the figure of Alaïa as well as his method of thinking through and doing fashion.

□ FIGURE-5A □ FIGURE-5B □ FIGURE-5C □ FIGURE-5D

When one looks in detail at the paper patterns, which were still used by the studio’s design team after the designer passed away, one can see that the patterns were used as tools for communication, for repeating the design by the designer, for the atelier staff to work with. They contain little instructions in the actual handwriting of the designer, but their shapes are also a form of handwriting, they contain the “écriture” of the designer and, by extension, the work culture or *modus operandi* of the atelier. Jagged, pierced, perforated, incised and curled up, they testify of both the embodied and written labor at the heart of fashion design. They were created on bodies, by bodies, and also serve as a form of written instruction, a model for repetition.

Azzedine Alaïa’s autonomous position in the fashion industry was paralleled by his idiosyncratic way of working: his disobedience with

regards to the fashion week schedule extended to his disobedience to standard sizes and metres. He had his own ruler and measuring meter, not using a standard industrial tool, because he did not believe in it.

Alaïa's own meter recalls the 1913–14 work “3 Standard Stoppages” by Marcel Duchamp, which, in his own words, was a joke about the meter. By dropping a one-meter thread from a height of one meter onto the canvas, and fixating it in the aleatory form it takes, he deconstructs the rational idea of standard measurement units. He then cut out the shape of the meter three times, creating “three standard stoppages”. These stoppages resemble the flat pattern pieces of Charles James' Platinudes.

□ FIGURE-6

In a 1971 TV emission “L'invité du Dimanche- Le Temps des Images¹¹”, Tunisian architect Bernard Zehruss, an early champion of Alaïa together with his wife Simone Zehruss, asks a young Azzedine Alaïa about the similarities between architecture and fashion. Alaïa responds that they have proportion in common, but that architecture, to him, is an art, and fashion an artisanal practice. He continues to elucidate that he addresses himself usually to one woman, not to the masses, because he has a small couture house, and that he wants the woman to feel at home and at ease in her garment. Zehruss then equates this to the work of an architect who also creates a home for people, and takes into account their personalities and desires when he designs their house. Alaïa retorts that he has a sense of complicity with the woman he dresses, because he does not want to impose anything onto her, and that he wants her to keep her own personality. According to him, the premise of architecture is different and more imposing of a certain style. What Alaïa describes, the complicity between the designer, the dressed body and the dress, echoes the philosophy of Madeleine Vionnet.

Hybrid design practices: Olivier Theyskens

In 2017, the MoMu exhibition *Olivier Theyskens: She Walks in Beauty* focused on a survey of the career (1997- 2017) of the Belgian self-taught fashion designer who after, founding his own brand in 1997, subsequently worked for the houses Rochas, Nina Ricci, Theyskens Theory and Loris Azzaro (up until 2023). This exhibition was curated by the author in collaboration with Lydia Kamitsis. An extraordinary draughtsman, as well as a deft hand at both the tailoring as well as the flou skills, Theyskens talks candidly about his views

on drawing, draping and patterning, and his own hybrid, self-taught practice resulting from the several fashion houses he has worked at: “A drawing is a tool for communication, the modelist (the technician who makes the toile) has to learn to understand the nuance and particularities captured by the drawing. Then the modelist translates it into a three-dimensional model with a toile, from which a pattern is derived in a flat, two dimensional plane. The toile is like a “battle plan”, which you use to determine the next steps forward. Then rules of tailoring and drapage apply. Once you have a very good toile, you can draw a pattern from it, then you are close to a final pattern, and this depends on the quality of the modelist who made the toile. This is how fashion creation happens in the old fashioned way, and these things require an education, a technical knowledge about the flou and tailleur techniques, which then leads to a notion of authorship, an *écriture*, the hand of the master which becomes recognizable. I have always liked the way when the conceptualiser or designer is the same person who executes the design. By making things you discover and learn new things that you can bring to the design. These things take a lot of time, it’s a durational skill, and it is empirical.”¹²

□ FIGURE-7A □ FIGURE-7B

Theyskens, who left the renowned Brussels fashion school of La Cambre after attending just one year, because, even in his own teacher Francine Pairon’s words, he was “already formed”, could be considered a self-taught designer, but interprets his own learning process as a collective amalgam of the technical people he has worked with over the years. To him, a “*première*” is often the most important person next to the designer, because it’s in her/ his way of making things, that the atelier culture of making things is expressed, and this becomes a handwriting for the house:

“I am supposedly self-taught, but my education really stems from my experience and from the multitude of technical people I’ve met along the way, who all had their own method, from which I’ve gleaned things. An Italian modelist who made some trousers for my first brand Olivier Theyskens (1997-2003) taught me to make a pattern without tools, with a floating, free hand (*à main levée*), it’s a sort of personal education. The only tool used was a triangle, but no rulers or measuring tape.

When I was at Rochas, everything was done internally with the *première d’atelier*. She also oversaw quality control and communication between technicians. They had their own knowledge of finesse and nuance and would impose that. There would also be a certain atelier culture at every house, a certain way of doing things, which was linked to the handwriting of the *première*. When you have a skilled person, this can accelerate the collection to new heights, make you experiment and innovate more. When your technician is

less skilled, this also puts a brake on the collection and you have to play it more safe. I also plead against too many corrections, which happens when it's a bad toile, and you end up losing the pattern. As with everything, it's better to have a skilled person."

With regards to changing hybrid practices between drawing, draping and using the computer for patterning, as a fashion design teacher at the IFM Paris, he mentors young students in an innovative way to push forward their perspective on materials and three-dimensional possibilities. However, he does not believe a design student can learn how to think in three dimensions by learning and working primarily on a screen:

"Computer programmes are good for verification of how much fabric you use, for scaling and sizing, but in my experience of thirty years, the digitalisation of a pattern always comes after the paper pattern is made, and then we digitize the pattern for further distribution to manufacturers. From the vectorisation, the manufacturers can pull the different sizes, adjust the different materials, and translate the cut for the machines. It's difficult to imagine a pattern study on a computer, because the sizes are always different, it's not the real size you see. When I see a pattern on the screen, I already know by its shape whether it's close to the body or loose, and what to adjust. This is hard to teach to a student, it's something that comes with experience.

At *Theory* (2010–2014) we worked on the bust, with paper and fabric. After a few years we had to start using software, people got eye damage from staring at screens. There is nothing better than three-dimensional draping, thinking with your hands, and then digitize the pattern afterwards. The knowledge is in the making, not in the digital part, this is just a tool for communication. At *Theyskens Theory* (the more upscale line) we had two fitting models, this way of working was like heaven to me, as it's still the best to create on the living body. We could integrate the whole team in the process, it was a real collaborative team effort. For jackets (tailoring), we could do it very rigorously on patterning paper. When it's more *frou*, it's nicer to work on the body. And then everything changes all the time, the circumstances, the team, the fabrics, so it's good to not repeat and keep pushing for new ways of making things, especially in interaction with the experts, the professionals, this way you learn the most. There are as many or even more methods as there are modelists, they each have different methods for different things."

Since the pandemic, which has thus far not had the predicted effect of slowing down fashion's pace, or a return to more quality and craftsmanship in fashion, Theyskens is one of the only designers who has taken steps to radically rethink his own practice, reflecting on his own instagram page that "we have destroyed the house we

are living in". Cut off from the factories in Italy and China, he did a *tabula rasa*, a start from zero, so to say, by just using the 'thousands and thousands' of fabric swatches he collected over his career of twenty five years:

"My latest three Theyskens collections (S/S 2022, A/W 2022-23, S/S 2023) were made from archival fabrics, cut and sewn on the bias, creased and painted with tie dye techniques. The dresses were cut directly, without toiles, and sewn immediately on the sewing machine. I recently also made a bridal gown on the bias, with such a delicate fabric, I could not translate it to a toile, so we draped it already in the final fabric, and sewed it with a *fil floche*, by hand, then undid everything recut it, placed it on the panels of the toile, replaced it on the new fabric, twice the same dress in the real fabric, without any trace left of the pattern. This was the only way to make such a *frou* dress. I saw Balenciaga patterns at the *Exploding Fashion* exhibition at Momu in Antwerp in 2023, I think he sometimes did the same with the stiff gazar fabric: there is no pattern between toile and execution. However, I prefer to make a pattern."

□ FIGURE-7C

Finally, he reflects on the duration and interval of time it takes, the *ma*, if you will, for a student to become a designer who has integrated the practice of creating into the circuits of the brain and the body:

"Personally, I don't see why a fashion student would learn to design patterns digitally, because he has to print them anyway, to make patterns on the fabric, cut them out and sew them, and then re-digitize them. Real talents are good at studying volume, like sculptors in 3D. Experience is key. There are so many possibilities in terms of manipulation, silhouettes, fabrics, you only know what works from trying them, from experience between the hand and the eye. To accelerate this process, trying to go straight to the end result can be dangerous. One needs a long term practice-based experience with sleeve insets, the fall of the fabric, etc."

□ FIGURE-7D

Theyskens' words remind us of the theory of the extended mind, by Andy Clark and David Chalmers¹³, who posited that material objects take over a part of our thinking, become ingrained into our brain circuit, and thus undo the age-old Platonic separation between body, mind and environment. They speak of hope in a world where this artificial separation has led to human and planetary burn-out, environmental catastrophes and a gradual decrease of creativity due to commercial and algorithmic formulas. To fashion students, they offer a new access point for enjoyment, of designing, creating and wearing fashion, by looking at fashion practices through new eyes and with both hands.

IMAGE-1



Family album photo of Charles James' mother as a girl in an original Japanese kimono, 1892.

IMAGE-2

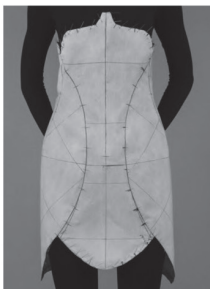


Charles James' The Great Coat; Drawing by Antonio Lopez, 1974

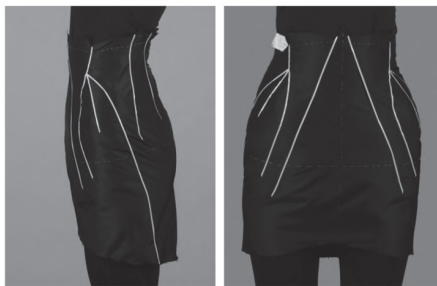
IMAGE-3A

**MRS. CARMICHAEL'S DRESS**

Our model shows the 1972 carapace of the dress for Mrs. Carmichael in stiffened muslin. Note that the center front section is cut on straight grain, and the side sections are cut on the bias grain.

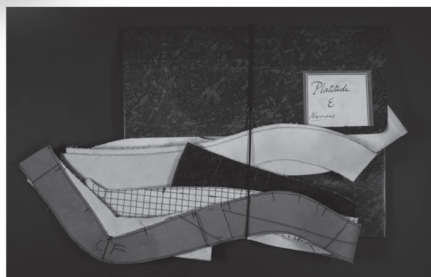
**DOROTHY SKIRT**

This skirt is named after a famous fitting model who worked for Charles James during the early 1950s. This version has no pleats in the front. Here, they are replaced with darts. Our muslin, in silk taffeta, was made for an American client who was "flat in the back like a pancake," so the back waist and hip line had to be altered for her.



Examples of
Charles James'
Platitudes.

IMAGE-3B



Examples of Charles James' Platitudes are made of hard paper or stiffened canvas. The canvas versions are made with three layers of fusible interfacing on straight to bias grains—making them pliable but firm.

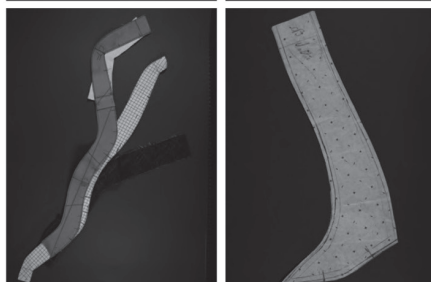
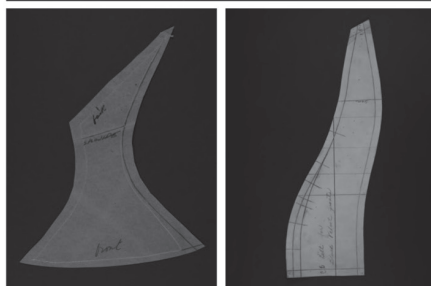


IMAGE-4A



Azzedine Alaïa in
his studio

IMAGE-4B



IMAGE-5A



Exhibition views
*Formes et
Patrons
d'Azzedine Alaïa
par Thomas
Demand* at
Fondation
Azzedine Alaïa,
Paris, 2023

IMAGE-5B



Exhibition views
of Alaïa's studio
in the exhibition
Formes
et Patrons
d'Azzedine Alaïa
par Thomas
Demand at
Fondation
Azzedine Alaïa,
Paris, 2023

IMAGE-5C



IMAGE-5D



IMAGE-6



Marcel Duchamp,
"3 Standard
Stoppages",
1913-14

IMAGE-7A

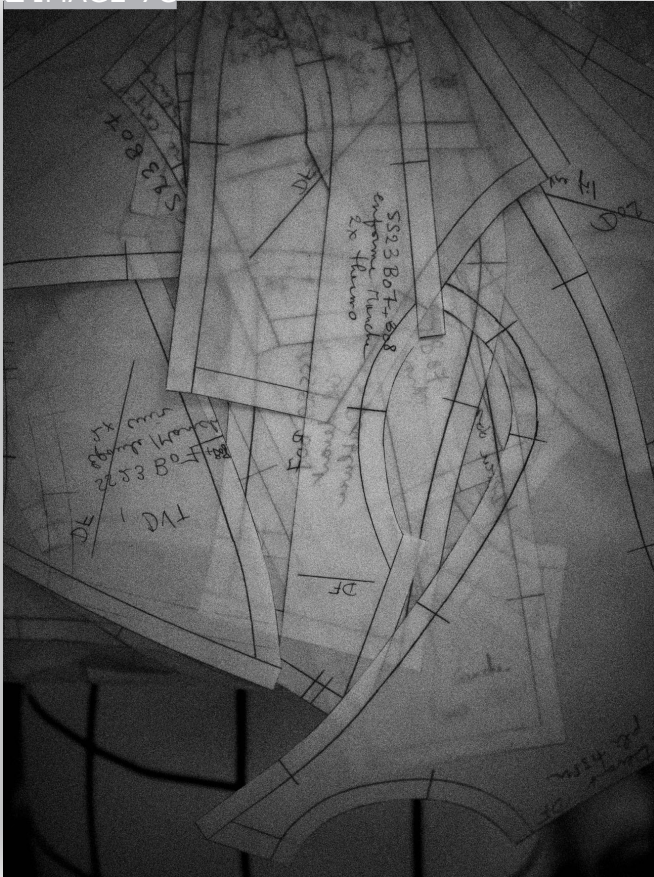


Olivier
Theyskens
at work

IMAGE-7B



IMAGE-7C



Patterns at the Theyskens studio

IMAGE-7D



Olivier
Theyskens at
work

Image Credits

IMAGE-1

Family album photo of Charles James' mother as a girl in an original Japanese kimono, 1892.

Layne, Homer/Mink, Dorothea: *The Couture Secrets of Shape* – Charles James; p. 027; Spector Books, 2019

IMAGE-2

Charles James' *The Great Coat*; Drawing by Antonio Lopez, 1974.

Layne, Homer/Mink, Dorothea: *The Couture Secrets of Shape* – Charles James; p. 322; Spector Books, 2019

IMAGE-3A, -3B

Examples of Charles James' Plaititudes.

extracted from Layne, Homer/Mink, Dorothea: *The Couture Secrets of Shape* – Charles James; p. 298 u. 293; Spector Books, 2019

IMAGE-4A

Azzedine Alaïa in his studio; Paris, 2015. Copyright: Dorothea Mink

IMAGE-4B

Azzedine Alaïa in his studio; Paris, around 2015 – 2017.

Copyright: Carla Sozzani

IMAGE-5A, -5B:

Exhibition views *Formes et Patrons d'Azzedine Alaïa par Thomas Demand* at Fondation Azzedine Alaïa, Paris; 03. 2023. Copyright: Dorothea Mink

IMAGE-5C, -5D:

Exhibition views of Alaïa's studio in the exhibition *Formes et Patrons d'Azzedine Alaïa par Thomas Demand* at Fondation Azzedine Alaïa, Paris; 03. 2023. Copyright: Dorothea Mink

IMAGE 6

Marcel Duchamp, "3 Standard Stoppages", 1913-14.

Copyright: 2023 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Estate of Marcel Duchamp

IMAGE 7A; 7B; 7D:

Olivier Theyskens at work. Copyright: Thomas Deschamps

IMAGE 7C:

Patterns at the Theyskens studio. Copyright: Thomas Deschamps

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