

indigenous Aboriginal baskets. It is impossible not to be moved by their spirituality, practicality and beauty.

In 1901 Lutheran missionary J. G. Reuther recorded the meaning of many words used by the central Australian Diyari people in a German dictionary, subsequently translated into English. On the evidence of the 45 baskets displayed in the exhibition, the Diyari phrase *billielli pankina* – ‘to make a great fuss about one’s fine dillybag’ – still resonates a century later. ‘For us the basket is a symbol of the things that we have, that we know and that we can share,’ says north-east Arnhem Land contemporary basket-maker Lak Lak Burarrwanga.

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Finding fidelity within the fashion house

Madame Grès, la couture à l'oeuvre
 Musée Antoine Bourdelle, Paris
 25 March – 24 July 2011
 Catalogue: €37, hb

Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

The couturière Madame Grès is a French fashion legend, famous for her draped ‘Grecian’ gowns and stunning silhouettes. Even today, many of the techniques she used are mysteries.

Over her working life of six decades, Grès lived like a monk. Though she mixed with and dressed countless celebrities, her own existence was consecrated to her métier. She once treated herself to a blue Jaguar, had it lined with mink, then installed a television. Yet it went unused: she still trolled second-hand markets on foot. In 1972, by a unanimous vote, she was elected head of Paris couture’s *Chambre Syndicale*. Four years later, that body gave her its highest award. Yet she was resolute in shunning all publicity. When the first book about her work appeared in 1980, Grès bought the whole run just so she could confiscate it. A year later, at the last moment, she cancelled a retrospective.

Now fashion’s sphinx is the star of a show as fine as her work. Curated by Olivier Saillard, it marks his debut as the new director of Musée Galliera. This is the fashion museum of Paris, currently closed until 2012. In exporting his first exposition to the Musée Bourdelle, Saillard has demonstrated a showman’s grasp of its subject. For as Grès often asserted,



BOTH BASKETRY IMAGES © THE TRUSTEES OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM | GRÈS IMAGE © STEPHANE PIERA / GALLIERA / ROGER-VIOLETT



Madame Grès creating an evening dress at Macy's, Paris, 1936

'I wanted to be a sculptor. For me, it is the same to work with fabric as with stone.'

Thus Saillard has placed her oeuvre throughout the workplace of Antoine Bourdelle, who studied with Rodin and sculpted Isadora Duncan. Its modern wings are built around his studios, the museum's vast central hall and dusty ateliers a fantastic backdrop, Bourdelle's sculptures echoing Grès's obsessions.

There is a huge amount to see in the exposition: 80 garments made between 1933-89; 50 fashion photos and the rare jewellery Grès created. One can also pore over hundreds of working drawings donated by the Fondation Pierre Bergé - Yves Saint Laurent. It is all sublime art from a stubborn personality, one more demanding of her craft than Madeleine Vionnet, more unforgiving than Chanel - and more relentless than anyone since.

Like her style, 'Madame Grès' was a self-creation. Born Germaine Krebs, she first designed under the name 'Alix Barton' (Grès was the pseudonym of a Russian sculptor she briefly married). Even as 'Alix', however, her work had attracted notice. Its special pleats created an update of classical elegance that worked in harmony with the female body. Although each robe consumed enormous amounts of jersey, the final shapes exuded sensuous, fluid charm. Unusually, Grès worked directly on live models, cutting and pinning each of her creations by hand.

During the 50s, Grès was inspired by ethnic traditions; she explored their

histories for simpler cuts and purer lines. The end result, in collection after collection, was a parade of silhouettes exhibiting perfect composure and balance. Her gowns, dresses, coats and suits curve and sweep with a magical volume. During the 70s, Grès pared away her drapes to highlight naked flesh. In 1986, she unveiled a dress that was made without stitching.

All were merely versions of her single-minded vision, a very exact idea of the feminine that eschewed all artifice. Its stylistic consistency came partly from Grès's own character (she named her first perfume *Cabocharde*, which translates as 'hardhead'). But it was also a product of her training at Maison Premet - a house founded at the time when couture was defining itself. For Grès, it was a high art, requiring 'extreme perfection'.

Her own template for this is one-of-a-kind. In its constant revisions, says Saillard, 'we find the future - both the Japanese creators and the Belgian school. She defined minimalism before there was a word for it.' In a calling based on change, fidelity such as hers was a sin. But it was her sheer tenacity, just as much as skill, which enabled Madame Grès to take her work well beyond fashion. *Cynthia Rose is a journalist and broadcaster based in Paris and London*

Why education needs hands, head and heart

On Craftsmanship: Towards a new Bauhaus

Christopher Frayling, *Oberon Masters*, £9.99, hb

Reviewed by Grant Gibson

'From the word go, I always resented the prejudice of some of my more academic colleagues from the ancient universities, that craftsmanship is "merely vocational", something to be done with the hands rather than with the head,' explains the former rector of the Royal College of Art in the introduction to his new book. Over the following 127 pages, through a series of essays, Christopher Frayling examines the changes in perception, attitude and, most particularly, education in the crafts world.

Now it should be mentioned here that most of the material isn't original - a fact only alluded to on the Acknowledgments page rather than in the essays themselves, which seems a trifle curious. Instead it's a collection of essays written between 1982

and 2007 (a couple of which appeared in this magazine) that have been, in Frayling's own words, 'revised or tweaked' for the new publication.

Many of them are aimed with a rather specific, academic audience in mind - it's not a book likely to cross over to a wider market as Matthew Crawford's or Richard Sennett's did. The first essay, entitled 'The Schoolmaster and the Wheelwrights', was originally published in *Crafts History One* for instance, and, while an interesting examination of George Sturt's book *The Wheelwright's Shop* as a means of exploring social history, is a curiously bloodless opening. In some ways, however, it sets the tone of the book. Because you sense the thing about Christopher Frayling is that he's very nice. Very nice and very clever and very erudite and very reasonable. His (always readable) prose elegantly sketches out both sides of the argument before politely reaching its conclusion. Reading *On Craftsmanship* makes you realise why he was appointed to chair such organisations as Arts Council England and the Design Council - you suspect he is by nature a brilliant conciliator.

Now I have to confess to feeling a bit of a heel for nit-picking at such obvious civility - after all we live in an era dominated by often unsubstantiated and regularly downright rude columns, blogs and tweets - but there were moments in the book that I was crying out for a bit of two-fisted journalism, for the author to dive in and sod the consequences. Which might explain why the most compelling character to emerge from its pages is David Pye, who stars in a transcript of a public interview chaired by the author.

None of this, incidentally, is to suggest that *On Craftsmanship* isn't regularly illuminating. Frayling unstitches commonly held perceptions around the Bauhaus and the English attitude to the Arts and Crafts movement beautifully and, in his essay entitled 'The Medium and The Message', effectively charts a path for the future of contemporary craft. Arguably he saves the best until last with a manifesto on what the design school of the future should look like, drawing a line from Walter Crane, head of the RCA at the turn of the twentieth century, through Gropius and the Bauhaus to a 'place where art, craft and design can engage with the post-industrial age, and with educating a new kind of artist or craftsman or designer or all three who in turn can flourish within a post-modern society and culture.' It will, he writes, be a school that creates 'a convergence between the head, the heart and the hand'.

At a moment when higher education in the UK is in a state of flux, it's an inspiring note on which to finish.

Grant Gibson is editor of Crafts magazine

