

Couturier Knock-off and Old World Values In Tact in Orinda

By Linda U. Foley



Johanna Behrsing

Photo Linda U. Foley

Any woman who's done any 'serious' shopping or "Vogue" reading and knows her Givenchy from Dior, also knows that glamour and timelessness hinge not merely on gorgeous quality fabrics but on the details. No one lays better claim to this than the French.

A mutual friend had arranged a coffee klatsch recently with Johanna Behrsing in Orinda. We are all native Germans—from Schleswig Holstein to Bavaria—and appreciated the opportunity to share homemade poppy seed cake, whipped cream, fragrant coffee and learning about Johanna's voyage to becoming a master seamstress, a profession lost to mass production today and the dictates of the current fads.

Johanna lovingly unfolds her French 'knock-off,' which she created—more than 45 years ago—copying the dress from a Vogue magazine as a seamstress apprentice.

Each of us has memories of the value of handmade clothing; the seamstress coming to the house, an elder's heavy coat or silk dress retailed for oneself and drew comparisons to what is available in stores today. We also recalled how handmade things endured forever. And—being raised not to discard anything that was perfectly good—that durability and timelessness were not always appreciated by the younger generation.

Surrounded by many artifacts from her girlhood in the Black Forest, Johanna wove her personal history.

In post war Germany, families in her rural area sent their daughters to the county seat to learn sewing in order to enable them to make their own clothing and earn their livelihood. After mastering the basics, several of the best students were selected to stay on as apprentices. At the conclusion of her apprenticeship, Johanna had to pass an arduous test, which included a Gesellenrock or apprentice skirt.

The grey wool fabric was spread before us on the table purveying in exacting detail every intricacy of skilled sewing: hidden seams, reversible pockets and lapels, handmade buttonholes, kick pleats, cording, concealed zippers, embroidery and not a pucker, pull or bulge in sight. Not even hinting on its reversibility, the same perfection was seen as she flipped the piece over.

Johanna said, "I was so fearful of my instructor. She would just tear the seams open if they looked even slightly bumpy, and we had to redo it all painstakingly."

Sandwiched between three years of apprenticeship and six months of Meisterschule in Stuttgart—which would include designing ensembles and

rudimentaries of business management—Johanna was required to work five years in various salons. "Once a client brought in for alteration a beautiful skirt she'd bought in Paris. The owner of the salon was so fascinated with the skirt—as no one knows sewing and style as well as the French—that she had us take it completely apart to copy the pattern."

To finally earn her master's seamstress diploma, eight years of fine honing culminated in a one-week 'sewing marathon' under the watchful eyes of the judges situated on the periphery of the room. "The finale was a Modenschau or fashion show and we had to model our work ourselves. It was nerve wracking." The mere memory colored her cheeks pink.

Johanna worked in her profession until she got married and moved to California in the mid 60's.

Infused by the romp through memories and our interest, Johanna brought out her great-great-grandfather's linen shirt reminiscent of a cosack's. It is in perfect condition and white as a commercial. Johanna's hands caressed the lace neckband, which is handmade as is all the fabric. "For the cost of her meals, a woman would spend the winters at my great-grandparents home, spinning," added Johanna. In the corner of the room, next to her grandmother's wardrobe, sat the silent historian—the spinning wheel.

Johanna brought out her grandfather's sheep fur-lined hat, her mother's going-to-church black silk apron—now a handsome pillow—black crocheted scarves, the water kettle that used to hang inside the wood stove.

The enlarged photos on the walls enhanced Johanna's recollections of another time. Solemn black and white relatives sitting in front of sepia doors, on benches next to thick wood piles, chickens pecking. A hint of forest in the distance.

As she held up her Goldenrod colored "knock-off," the timelessness of Audrey Hepburn came to mind in Breakfast at Tiffany's. Simple lines, pleats, styling achieved with great knowledge and care.

We all reached for our personal historical details and understood. The afternoon nodded toward the end. We said our goodbyes, happy to know that the past, the skills and history are tangible parts of the present—it's all in the details.



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