



Bête Noire-Extreme Asymmetry

Susan L. Hannel, PhD

University of Rhode Island

Keywords: body asymmetry, curvilinear, 1920s, velvet

The literal translation of *bête noire* is 'black beast'. It is typically used to describe something that is disliked.¹ This design has been a work-in-progress for over two years. I've remade the garment twice, determined to make it balance the client's extreme physical asymmetry and be visually appealing. Over time it became my 'Bête Noire', a design which I disliked, before it became the satisfying and beautiful work it is now.

The design problems considered in *Bête Noire* were; 1) use asymmetrical visual strategies and curvilinear lines to balance the client's asymmetrical body, and 2) do so by recreating a 1920s red and black silk velvet *devoré* dress.²

The design process began when the client's body was replicated through the creation of a custom made dress form.³ Garment patterns were developed on the form using draped pattern methods. The finished gown appears fairly straightforward and traditional. Under closer inspection it is a complicated amalgam of structural asymmetry and visual impact masking a curved spine and 1" shoulder height difference.

The original 1920s era garment panels and individual motifs were cut apart to facilitate the creation of asymmetrical shapes. The front panels were split diagonally to draw focus away from the high left shoulder. The upper edges of the front panels were also positioned to lessen the impact of the high shoulder; the right side panel is higher than the left panel.

A curved black polyester velvet band was inserted between the two panels. The band extends from the right front armhole down to the left hip and around the back and up to the right back armhole. The meandering velvet curve serves to pull visual focus away from the shoulders and down to the appliquéd floral motifs in the skirt. Red velvet flowers, leaves and vines were scattered and hand-appliquéd in order to complete the curvilinear motion created by the black velvet curve. Appliqués were placed from the front left hip and sleeve down to the right hem of the skirt and around to the back. The motif pattern in back then shifts upward again from the right skirt hem to the left sleeve. The curving, wave-like asymmetry of split

¹ Oxford English Dictionary;

<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/18285?redirectedFrom=b%C3%AAt+noire#eid>
(Retrieved May 30, 2017).

² The model in the photographs is not the intended client. The original 1920s dress was purchased in pieces. It had two sleeves separated from the body and one piece comprised of front and back panels stitched together at the shoulders.

³ Plaster mold taken from client's body then filled with expanding foam. Plaster was removed, foam smoothed and covered with knit fabric. Form then attached to a rolling stand.

panels, s-shaped velvet band and carefully positioned appliqués from the front upper right to the left hip and down to the right side hem serve the goal of masking the client's asymmetric body.

The curved seam structures used in this project expands upon past design research which explored the use of curves for decorative and fitting purposes. Curves were previously created using bias welts for arched pocket edges or included piping to create edge definition along intricately curved fitting seams.⁴ Here the curve was used as a tool to mask asymmetry and velvet piping cut on the bias was used to emphasize the edges of the devoré velvet.

In order to challenge both my pattern making and construction skills, garment panels were draped to be as large as possible. The right silk chiffon panel that runs from under the right arm to the floor is the largest piece; it extends to the left fold of the front skirt where it joins the lower left side chiffon panel. The left side panel extends from the front just to the left side of the chest around the arm and across the upper back. All velvet pieces have clean-finished, hand-applied silk charmeuse linings. The ensemble includes a silk knit slip draped in one piece with a seam in the front and two asymmetrical shoulder seams matching the positioning of the outside upper front velvet panels.⁵

⁴ "Gifts of Silver and Gold." ITAA, Alexandria, Virginia, 2005. "Sanguine." ITAA, Montreal, Canada, 2010. "Pahoehoe Kikepa." ITAA, Honolulu Hawaii, 2012.

⁵ Not photographed separately due to lack of visual impact.

