

# **Hollywood and History**

Costume Design in Film

Los Angeles County Museum of Art December 20, 1987–March 6, 1988 Frances and Armand Hammer Building, Plaza level Every era creates an image of history marked with a contemporary stamp. The view of the past is always influenced by present values. Thus, our perception of history is affected in many ways, from our interpretations of past events and attitudes to our understanding of how people once talked, dressed, and wore their hair.

Hollywood has produced hundreds of movies set in previous centuries. The makers of these period films shape popular ideas about what life was like in earlier times more than any other chroniclers, be they painters, novelists, or historians. Creating a celluloid vision of the past is an elaborate undertaking, and the costume designer plays a critical role in contributing to a film's historical ambience. The designer's job requires knowledge of earlier clothing styles as well as imagination and ingenuity to revive past fashions in an entertaining and convincing form. Although a high degree of historical accuracy may be achieved, aspects of the contemporary aesthetic — the stamp of the time — inevitably are included and in fact are necessary if costumes are to appeal to the audience.

With fifty costumes and more than two hundred sketches, Hollywood and History: Costume Design in Film examines how designers have re-created historical dress and fabricated futuristic attire. The exhibition explores the ways that contemporary fashions have influenced costume designs for cinematic settings from one million B.C. to the twenty-fifth century. In the show the costumes and drawings of such designers as Adrian, Travis Banton, Edith Head, René Hubert, Mitchell Leisen, and Walter Plunkett are arranged chronologically in "film time." Costumes and sketches produced in different decades are assembled in period groupings that enable the viewer to study differences between, for example, Cleopatra of 1934 played by Claudette Colbert and her 1963 counterpart played by Elizabeth Taylor. While Colbert wore 1930s bias-cut gowns designed by Travis Banton (cover), Taylor's flowing, shirt-waisted dresses designed by Irene Sharaff were perfectly in keeping with early 1960s chic (fig. 1). Although neither image represents what the true Cleopatra looked like, moviegoers were enraptured by the two stars' alluring portrayals of the Queen of the Nile, and both films were rightly acclaimed for their exotic, spectacular evocations of ancient Egypt.

A successful period costume generally mixes elements from both historical dress and contemporary fashion. In order to do this, the designer researches period clothing and also considers requirements

set by the story and the stars' personal preferences. The costume is first visualized in the all-important sketch, which captures the essence of the proposed outfit. (Sketches are frequently executed by a sketch artist with supervision by the designer.) After revisions and approval by the director and producer, the next step is to transform the drawing into a finished garment. The appropriate colors, fabrics, and accessories must be found or invented. In this process of envisioning and completing the wardrobe, costume designers both knowingly and unknowingly

# Hollywood and History

## Costume Design in Film



compromise historical accuracy. There are four general reasons why such deviations occur:

- I. The rules of contemporary fashion often dictate the overall silhouette of the garment: straight or full; the position of the waistline; and the type of undergarments that shape the bust and skirt. The fashion of the day also influences surface decoration, detail, color, trim, and pattern as well as accessories such as hats, scarves, and jewelry.
- 2. Most fabrics used in centuries past no longer exist. Designers find ingenious ways to deal with this problem, using contemporary substitutes, but the modern fabrics inevitably alter the drape, movement, and texture of the finished costume.
- 3. Social mores about dress change from era to era. Designers often consciously sacrifice authenticity when it clashes with the contemporary view of what modesty allows.
- 4. Upholding the star's image is always essential. Costumes are

sometimes historically inaccurate to emphasize a performer's distinctive body features. Makeup for a period film rarely differs from the look a star has established in nonperiod films. Likewise, a performer's period hairstyle is generally created using the basic form of the star's modern coiffure, modified with historical elements such as falls, braids, ringlets, and chignons.

Despite these discrepancies, contemporary audiences rarely seem to notice that period costumes are not strictly authentic. At any given time we dress according to a certain stylistic convention and are generally unaware of its particulars. When viewing a newly

released period film, elements of the current convention are not apparent to us and do not seem incongruous in a historical setting. Only after gaining a sufficient amount of perspective on a film, at least ten years, can we pinpoint the idiosyncratic "signs of the times." While it is difficult to see the modern elements in works from the 1970s and 1980s that appear in the exhibition, period costumes and sketches from earlier decades show an obvious contemporary influence. A brief review of period films from the 1920s through the 1960s reveals how modern styles can be seen in the costumes.

In the 1920s the long, tube-shaped silhouette was in vogue. This style is apparent in all period costumes made during this decade. In a sketch by Harold Grieve for the 1926 version of the biblical saga Ben-Hur (fig. 2) one can see the emphasis on the straight up and down look, despite a good deal of trim and other decoration. The woman's figure has the flat-chested, boyish appearance popular in the 1920s. The same silhouette is seen again in the exhibition in Mitchell Leisen's costume

Elizabeth Taylor in Cleopatra (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1963)

Costume sketch for Flavia [Carmel Myers] in Ben-Hur (M.G.M., 1926), drawn and designed by Harold Grieve (U.S., born 1901). Pencil and watercolor, 13½ x 7 in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of the Costume Council (M.86.302.2)

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for Dorothy Vernon of Haddon Hall (1924), set in the sixteenth century and starring Mary Pickford.

In the 1930s the most characteristic silhouette was the clinging, form-fitted look of gowns cut on the bias. Fabric for such dresses was pre-stretched and then cut to drape the body like a second skin. A perfect example of this style is the 1934 Cleopatra dress (cover), which appears in the exhibition next to a 1930s fashion plate that shows the same slinky fit. While the sexy bias-cut silhouette worked beautifully for clothing Cleopatra, it could not accommodate the shape and size of the gowns worn in the time of Marie Antoinette, whose story was told by Hollywood in 1938 with costumes by Adrian and starring Norma Shearer (fig. 3).

In the eighteenth-century French court, dresses sometimes measured more than six feet in width and presented an elaborate artificial figure. Although Adrian's gowns were certainly authentic in scale (their supporting structures were manufactured in the studio's machine shop), he made some compromises in favor of contemporary

Costume sketch for Messalina [Susan Hayward] in Demetrius and the Gladiators (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954), drawn and designed by Adele Elizabeth Balkan (U.S., born 1907). Gouache, 20 x 15¾ in. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, gift of Adele Elizabeth Balkan (M.84.142.4)

Gown worn by Joan
Collins as Beth
Throckmorton,
designed by Mary Wills
(U.S., active 1948-62),
in The Virgin Queen
(Twentieth CenturyFox, 1955). Wool
gaberdine. Los Angeles
County Museum of Art,
gift of the Costume
Council (M.85.4.4a-d)





fashion and the star's image. Bare shoulders were never seen in the eighteenth century, but they were considered attractive in the 1930s. Since Shearer's shoulders were especially beautiful, Adrian cut all her gowns to expose them. Also, because she considered herself short-waisted, he unnaturally lengthened the bodices of her dresses and expanded the width of her skirts to a point not authentic for the period.

Marie Antoinette is to this day one of Hollywood's most opulent and comprehensive attempts to remake history. Its 2,500 costumes were lavished with sequins and intricate embroidery. Authentic period fabrics were obtained in Europe, and Adrian based some of Shearer's dresses on portraits of the queen. The wardrobe exemplifies Hollywood's love of glittery, extravagant costumes in the 1930s.

In the early 1940s with the United States' involvement in World War II, trade restrictions were imposed that curtailed the use of elegant fabrics and rich ornamentation. In response, new types of

synthetic fabrics were developed. Whereas earlier film wardrobes used silk, wool, and cotton, costumes in the 1940s tended to be made of rayon acetate, nylon, and Lurex. These new materials helped designers simulate the past but also increased the risk of misrepresenting the look of the period. For example, the men's tights in the Renaissance melodrama, *Bride of Vengeance* (1949), were made of Lastex, a stretchy fabric, and Lurex, a metallic thread, that together created a sleek shiny look, appealing to the contemporary eye but not in keeping with the baggy wool stockings actually worn by men in the sixteenth century.

During the 1940s the silhouette changed again, becoming more angular and severe with the use of shoulder pads and a narrow waist. The gowns for *Centennial Summer* (1946), designed by René Hubert, are authentic in their 1870s fit but erroneously include shoulder pads. Walter Plunkett, a designer renowned for his attention to detail, avoided the use of shoulder pads in his designs for *Little Women* (1948) and *That Forsyte Woman* (1950), but other discrepancies appear. In the

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Costume sketch for a
Draconian warrior in
Buck Rogers in the
Twenty-fifth Century
(Universal, 1979), drawn
and designed by JeanPierre Dorleac (U.S.,
born in France 1943).
Colored pencil, 16 x 12
in. Collection of JeanPierre Dorleac

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Costume sketch for
Princess Ardala [Pamela
Hensley] in Buck Rogers
in the Twenty-fifth
Century (Universal,
1979), drawn and
designed by Jean-Pierre
Dorleac (U.S., born in
France 1943). Colored
pencil, 16 x 12 in.
Collection of JeanPierre Dorleac





latter film he simulated the effect of shoulder pads by using velvet appliqués to suggest the horizontal emphasis across the shoulders (fig. 4). In *Little Women* the only inconsistency with the period was the cut of the dress bodices, which were made to fit the stars' figures at their own insistence. This may seem only logical — how can a dress not be designed to fit a woman's figure? But women's garments in the 1860s were not cut to fit comfortably the natural shape of the body. Instead, corsets were worn to make the body fit the shape of the dress.

The contemporary influence on the shape of the bodice became even more noticeable in the period films of the 1950s. Newly developed brassieres emphasized the "lifted and separated" look. This style is apparent in practically all historical costumes designed in this decade regardless of the period portrayed. It is seen in Susan Hayward's costumes for the biblical blockbuster *Demetrius and the Gladiators* (1954, fig. 5) as well as in Joan Collins's gray wool gown for *The Virgin Queen* (1955, fig. 6), set in Elizabethan England.

To portray the young and beautiful Beth Throckmorton, Collins's costume reflects a 1950s standard of beauty. It stands in stark contrast to the more authentic outfit — complete with a wired and starched lace collar, a long-waisted, rigid bodice, and a plate-shaped farthingale (hooped petticoat) — worn in the film by Bette Davis as the aging spinster Queen Elizabeth. In this lead role Davis broke new ground in Hollywood makeup and hairstyle. She forsook her star image by wearing historically accurate thick white makeup and in one scene donned a rubber cap to appear bald. The audience was fascinated by Davis's daring portrayal, which demonstrated her willingness to sacrifice contemporary beauty for authenticity.

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Fewer period films were made in the 1960s than in previous decades, although Hollywood did produce the extravagant Cleopatra as well as historical films such as Gypsy (1962), The Music Man (1962), Tom Jones (1963), My Fair Lady (1964), Mary Poppins (1965), Thoroughly Modern Millie (1966), Bonnie and Clyde (1967), and Funny Girl (1968). While big budgets and careful research often led to a high degree of accuracy in 1960s period movies, there are still telltale signs of contemporary influence. For example, 1960s actresses very often sport trendy beehive hairdos. In One Million Years B.C. (1966) the women wear fur miniskirts, and Racquel Welch flaunts her figure in a fur bikini.

While designers have to work from historical precedent when designing costumes for the past, wardrobes for films set in the future have no factual limits. Designers must suggest the future by creating outfits that have never been seen before. Depending on the story and style of the film, they may try to predict how fashion will actually change, or they may fantastically update past modes. More often than not, futuristic costumes are a fanciful mix of styles chosen from contemporary life, the distant past, and the designer's fantasies.

Although the characters may inhabit strange planets light years away, their costumes repeatedly recall our vision of ancient Greeks and Romans, harem girls and sheiks, samurai and geisha, or medieval knights and damsels. In creating the costumes for Buck Rogers in the Twenty-fifth Century (1979), Jean-Pierre Dorleac borrowed styles from the ancient Egyptians and Phoenicians as evidenced in his design for a warrior (fig. 7). Another sketch for the film has Princess Ardala in the "harem girl" mode (fig. 8). In Return of the Jedi (1983) designer Aggie Guerard Rodgers dressed the young hero, Luke Skywalker, as a fourteenth-century serf and used hockey equipment in the costumes of the imperial troops.

In the film Blade Runner (1982), set in Los Angeles in 2019, designers Charles Knode and Michael Kaplan sought to show more realistically how fashion might develop in the future. The costumes reflect a combination of styles, including 1940s film noir fashion (for example, Harrison Ford's Bogart-esque trench coat), 1970s punk styles, and the 1980s trend to combine clashing patterns.

Through their artistry costume designers have brought history to life for us. They have guided us back to Pharaoh's Egypt and beamed us ahead to distant galaxies. As part of the collaboration that includes writers, directors, performers, set designers, sketch artists, seamstresses, makeup artists, and hairdressers, they have shaped our view of who we once were and who we might become. As Hollywood and History: Costume Design in Film shows, that view never completely escapes the boundaries of who we are.

Cover

Claudette Colbert and Henry Wilcoxon in Cleopatra (Paramount, 1934)

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### Related Events

Programs are free to museum members and included in the admission fee for the general public unless otherwise noted.

#### **Events in the Galleries**

#### **Docent Tours**

Docent tours of the exhibition are offered at 1 P.M. daily, except Monday, beginning December 22. Tours meet at the Information Desk, located in the Times Mirror Central Court.

#### Meet the Artist Sessions

Costume designers whose work appears in the exhibition will discuss their methods and experiences in hour-long informal meetings. All sessions are on Wednesdays at noon. Location information will be posted at the entrance to the exhibition on the day of the session.

January 13: Bob Mackie January 20: May Routh January 27: Jean-Pierre Dorleac February 3: Bill Thomas February 10: Elois Jenssen February 17: Moss Mabry

# Curator Walk-throughs Wednesday, January 6, and Friday,

January 8, 9:30 A.M.
These informal talks by Edward
Maeder, curator of costumes and
textiles, Los Angeles County
Museum of Art, are open only to
museum members. Each one is
limited to fifty people. The
Wilshire entrance to the museum
opens at 9:25 A.M., and the walkthroughs meet at the Information
Desk, located in the Times Mirror
Central Court.

### Events in the Leo S. Bing Theater

#### Lectures

Sunday, January 10, 3:30 P.M.
"Hollywood and History:
Historical Dress in Film," Edward
Maeder, curator of costumes and
textiles, Los Angeles County
Museum of Art

Sunday, January 24, 3:30 P.M.
"Hollywood and Seventh Avenue:
The Impact of Period Films on
Fashion," Satch LaValley, costume
historian

Sunday, February 7, 3:30 P.M.
"The Photogenic Formula:
Hairstyles and Makeup in
Historical Film," Alicia Annas,
professor and chairperson, drama
department, San Diego State
University

#### Music

Wednesday, January 6, 8 P.M.
"An Evening with Cole Porter"
Soprano Jan DeGaetani and
pianist Leo Smit will perform.
Admission is \$2 for adults and \$1
for members, students, and senior
citizens with ID.

#### Films

Twenty-eight of the 112 films that are represented in the exhibition will be shown in evening and matinee screenings. Admission for each program is \$5 for adults and \$3 for museum members, students, and senior citizens with ID. Please go to the admissions windows for ticket purchase and information.

Tuesday, January 5, 8 p.m.

One Million B.C. (United Artists, 1940, 80 minutes)

Costumes by Harry Black; starring Victor Mature and Carole Landis

Caveman (United Artists, 1981, 92 minutes) Costumes by Robert Fletcher; starring Ringo Starr, Barbara Bach, and John Matuszak

# Saturday, January 9, 1:30 p.m. Cleopatra

(Paramount, 1934, 101 minutes) Costumes by Travis Banton, Ralph Jensen, and Mitchell Leisen; starring Claudette Colbert, Warren William, and Henry Wilcoxon

Samson and Delilah (Paramount, 1950, 120 minutes) Costumes by Edith Head, Gile Steele, Dorothy Jeakins, Gwen Wakeling, and Elois Jenssen; starring Victor Mature and Hedy Lamarr

### Wednesday, January 13, 8 p.m. Ben-Hur (M.G.M., 1926, 170 minutes) Costumes by Camillo Innocente, Erté, and Harold Grieve; starring

Ramon Novarro, Francis X. Bushman, and May McAvoy

# Saturday, January 16, 1:30 P.M.

Cleopatra (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1963, 243 minutes) Costumes by Irene Sharaff, Vittorio Nino Novarese, and Renie Conley; starring Elizabeth Taylor, Richard Burton, and Rex Harrison

Tuesday, January 19, 8 p.m. Camelot (Warner Bros., 1967, 181 minutes) Costumes by John Truscott;

starring Vanessa Redgrave, Richard Harris, and Franco Nero

# Saturday, January 23, 1:30 p.m.

Captain from Castile (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947, 140 minutes) Costumes by Charles LeMaire; starring Tyrone Power, Jean Peters, and Cesar Romero

Diane
(M.G.M., 1956, 110 minutes)
Costumes by Walter Plunkett;

Costumes by Walter Plunkett; starring Lana Turner, Roger Moore, and Pedro Armendariz

### Tuesday, January 26, 8 P.M.

The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex (Warner Bros., 1939, 106 minutes) Costumes by Orry-Kelly; starring Bette Davis, Errol Flynn, and Olivia de Havilland

The Virgin Queen (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1955, 92 minutes) Costumes by Mary Wills and Charles LeMaire; starring Bette Davis, Richard Todd, and Joan Collins

# Saturday, January 30, 1:30 p.m.

The Adventures of Don Juan (Warner Bros., 1949, 110 minutes) Costumes by Leah Rhodes and William Travilla; starring Errol Flynn and Viveca Lindfors

Forever Amber (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1947, 137 minutes) Costumes by René Hubert; starring Linda Darnell, Cornel Wilde, and George Sanders

Tuesday, February 2, 8 P.M. Marie Antoinette (M.G.M., 1938, 149 minutes) Costumes by Adrian:

Costumes by Adrian; starring Norma Shearer and Tyrone Power

# Saturday, February 6, 1:30 p.m.

Du Barry Was a Lady (M.G.M., 1943, 101 minutes) Costumes by Irene, Howard Shoup, and Gile Steele; starring Red Skelton, Lucille Ball, and Gene Kelly

Monsieur Beaucaire (Paramount, 1946, 93 minutes) Costumes by Mary Kay Dodson; starring Bob Hope and Joan Caulfield

# Wednesday, February 10, 8 p.m.

Little Old New York (Twentieth Century-Fox, 1940, 100 minutes) Costumes by Royer; starring Alice Faye and Fred MacMurray

The Kissing Bandit (M.G.M., 1947, 102 minutes) Costumes by Walter Plunkett; starring Frank Sinatra and Kathryn Grayson

### Saturday, February 13, 3 P.M.

Raintree County (M.G.M., 1958, 166 minutes) Costumes by Walter Plunkett; starring Elizabeth Taylor and Montgomery Clift

### Tuesday, February 16, 8 P.M.

Madame Bovary (M.G.M., 1949, 114 minutes) Costumes by Walter Plunkett and Valles; starring Jennifer Jones, Van Heflin, and Louis Jourdan

Bitter Sweet (M.G.M., 1940, 94 minutes) Costumes by Adrian and Gile Steele; starring Jeannette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy

### Tuesday, February 23, 8 p.m.

Belle of the Nineties (Paramount, 1934, 75 minutes) Costumes by Travis Banton; starring Mae West and John Mack Brown

That Forsyte Woman (M.G.M., 1950, 114 minutes) Costumes by Walter Plunkett; starring Greer Garson and Errol Flynn

Saturday, February 27, 3 p.m. Music Man (Warner Bros., 1962, 151 minutes)

Costumes by Dorothy Jeakins; starring Robert Preston and Shirley Jones

### Tuesday, March 1, 8 P.M.

Easter Parade (M.G.M., 1948, 109 minutes) Costumes by Irene; starring Fred Astaire, Judy Garland, and Ann Miller

Somewhere in Time (Universal, 1980, 103 minutes) Costumes by Jean-Pierre Dorleac; starring Christopher Reeve and Jane Seymour

#### Saturday, March 5, 1:30 P.M.

Flash Gordon
Conquers the Universe
(Universal, 1940, 90 minutes)
Costume designer unknown;
starring Buster Crabbe and
Charles Middleton

Tron (Buena Vista/Walt Disney Productions, 1982, 96 minutes) Costumes by Elois Jenssen and Rosanna Norton; starring Jeff Bridges, Bruce Boxleitner, and David Warner

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