

Hollywood Costume

Movies are about people. They are at the emotional core of every film and it is their story that moves us. A film's characters hold our attention and are of endless fascination to the audience. Hollywood Costume is about the costume designer's role in bringing these people to life – from script to screen.

The exhibition celebrates 100 years of cinema, from the early silent era to today's digitally enhanced productions. Costume designers have an integral role in this history – serving the script, transforming the actor, realising the director's vision.

When a character or a film capture the public imagination, their costumes can ignite worldwide fashion trends. They quickly become part of our modern mythology. Cinematic icons are born when the audience falls in love with the people in the story. And that is what costume design is all about.

Scene I. What is costume design?

Costume design in film has both a narrative and visual importance. It is a distinct discipline that takes as its starting point the written word of the screenplay.

Costume design is not just about the clothes. Unlike fashion, which is designed for our three-dimensional world, the costume designer's work appears on-screen inside a two-dimensional frame, a flat moving image. Colour, texture and silhouette are all part of this visual jigsaw puzzle.

In a 1938 interview, MGM costume designer Adrian said, 'Few people in an audience watching a great screen production realise the importance of any gown worn by the feminine star. They may notice that it is attractive, that they would like to have copied it, that it is becoming. But the fact that it was definitely planned to mirror some definite mood, to be as much a part of the play as the lines or the scenery, seldom occurs to them. But that most assuredly is true.'

Designing the character

The costume designer must first know *who* the character is in the screenplay. Drawing inspiration from art, literature, nature, music, childhood memories and other films, the designer works with the director and actor to create a new person.

Nothing that appears on-screen is casual or accidental. Every accessory and article of clothing is a deliberate choice. Regardless of genre – period, modern or fantasy – all films require extensive research.

Films ask their audiences to believe that the people in them are authentic and had a life prior to the start of the action. We join the cast of characters at one moment in their lives. Everything about them must ring true, including their clothes.

Character and Composition

Characters are people, just like us. We all wear a mix of clothes, some old and some new. We are an amalgam of stories, each item telling its own unique tale.

Part of the costume designer's role is to create such stories for each film character. Attention to detail is the hallmark of great costuming. A close-up may emphasise or disclose details – a cuff, a lapel, a piece of jewellery. These clues function as social and emotional signposts for the audience.

Even in Hollywood, the integrity of the story takes precedence over glamour. Opulent fashions, when inappropriate, can sabotage a serious scene. When clothing is authentic, the audience believes in the story – the character's past and future, their moods, taste, personality and aspirations.

Visitor's Stories

A costume designer must first know who the character is before we can design a costume. No matter the period or genre, the audience is asked to believe that the people in the movie are real and that they had a life prior to the start of the film.

Like fictional characters, our own clothes take our life journey with us. These details provide us with more than personal style. Costumes provide essential information to the audience.

Part I:

Composition: Jason Bourne

The people in the story will always be the foreground action – in the centre of the frame. Nothing that appears on screen is casual or accidental. Every costume is a deliberate choice made by the designer and ultimately, the director.

The colour of the costume allows the audience to find the actor in the frame. It is the director's choice whether to conceal or reveal a character. Jason Bourne's invisibility as a spy is vital to his survival in a hostile environment. Bourne wears camouflage grey and is perfectly designed to disappear into a crowd.

Part II:

Composition: The Dude

Characters are always designed to exist within a narrative and visual context of the movie. More than any other element the costumes must be appropriate for the scene and the story.

Costume designers must establish that the costumes are correct for the:

Weather;

Location;

Date;

and Genre of the story.

Is the costume appropriate for each scene?

Serving the Story

A common misperception about costume design is that designers go out and purchase modern costumes, which reach the big screen unaltered and fully accessorised.

Throughout Hollywood history, motion pictures have used a combination of designed, bought, rented and manufactured clothes. Depending on the movie, a designer may sketch and create new clothes, or shop for and age existing clothes.

Many designers contend that contemporary costume is more difficult to design. Since everyone gets dressed in the morning, audiences consider themselves experts on modern clothes. In most cases, modern costumes are considered successful if audiences *do not* notice them, but they remain nonetheless deeply connected to the characters. Designer Ellen Mirojnick contends that creating contemporary costumes means ‘you have to work doubly hard to make them disappear’.

Marit Allen

‘For the first fitting I had for Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal with director Ang Lee, I had gathered lines of vintage, classic, beat-up and new Western wear. They tried on jackets from the 1960s to the 1980s.

‘The boys [Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal] were nervous: testing, by turns prancing, joking, unsure, unfamiliar. There were rules to observe: ranch-hands like Ennis only wore Levi’s, rodeo-riders wore Wranglers... And we were also considering the trajectory of the story: for Ennis, from hopeful to desolate; for Jack, from broke to married wealth.’

Jake Gyllenhaal

'I met with a lot of different cowboys and rode horses and learned how to pack mules... When I read the script for the first time, I thought, "Oh, Ang [Lee] will want me to play the Ennis part", because I've played isolated characters before. That's an obvious, actorly way of thinking, because actually Heath and I (as people) are really much more than the characters that we play.'

Heath Ledger

‘It’s the most complex character that I have been offered to play... It was a story that hadn’t been told, which is extremely rare. Love, in general, is a little recycled and it’s a little stale. I thought I’d be crazy to turn it down.

‘I grew up in Western Australia. There’s something universal about people who spend all day and night on horseback. I knew a lot more about Ennis than he ever will – why he was unable to express his love. Any expression had to be painful.’

Shirts

Designer Marit Allen: 'They could only take two shirts up the mountain. Jack (as the tough rodeo rider) was moulded into the classic dark denim shirt of the time. That was the shirt Jack wore on their last day on the mountain. It symbolised their entire relationship. We customised all the shirts, of course: slimming the profile, changing the snaps for vintage ones.'

'That 1970s polyester [in Heath's shirt] was different. It hugged the body and has a sexual connotation that a pure cotton just doesn't convey.'

Jeans, boots and hats

Cowboys wear Wrangler jeans (they're much tighter) and ranchers wear looser Levi's. 'Even the shape and heel height on a cowboy boot tells a tale,' says Marit Allen. 'So does the height, colour, brim and shape of a hat, which also varies from state to state. Jack's broader Texas hat is different than the one Ennis wears in Wyoming. And all of this is unspoken but rigorously observed.'

'A couple of items from Gyllenhaal's and Ledger's wardrobes (boots and belts) went missing when filming ended. They wanted some things to remind them of the filmmaking experience.'

Deconstructing Character

Inhabiting a character is the actor's profession, and they transform themselves into hundreds of roles over the course of their careers. Actors often discover their characters in the fitting room. This is not so much a change of clothes as a change of skin.

Costumes are so much more than clothes – they are the means to channel new people. The actor's gait, posture, gestures and their entire physicality are informed by what they wear.

When it's well-designed, costume embodies the psychological, social and emotional condition of the character at a particular moment in the story.

The Addams Family

Charles Addams created the morbidly funny Addams Family, which appeared in cartoons in the *New Yorker* magazine from 1938 to 1988. It was not until 1964, when the producer of the television series asked Addams their names, that he christened them Morticia, Gomez, Wednesday and Pugsley.

In bringing the Addams Family to life for the cinema, costume designer Ruth Myers said, 'The idea always was to express the sense from the cartoons that these people were like royalty, people of endless wealth and taste. I tried to make them look so beautiful that you feel they're right and the rest of the world is wrong.'

Morticia

‘I’m just like any modern woman trying to have it all – loving husband, a family. It’s just, I wish I had more time to seek out the dark forces and join their hellish crusade. That’s all.’

Fight Club

A controversial novel by Chuck Palahniuk, *Fight Club* presented the unusual problem for the costume designer of creating the clothes for two different actors playing a single person – a fact not revealed until the surprise ending.

Keeping both personalities true to their shared identity was a challenge faced by the costume designer Michael Kaplan, the actors and the director David Fincher.

Kaplan said, 'It was a strange movie because of the level of unreality – people who weren't real, but still had to look and seem real.'

Raiders of the Lost Ark

Producer George Lucas came up with the story for the 1981 film, Raiders of the Lost Ark. 'Indy was always a character who was in over his head. He was always getting hurt or in trouble. He wasn't quite up to what he was supposed to be, a classic serial hero.' Director Steven Spielberg said, 'Let's make this look like an old adventure movie.'

The success of Indiana Jones' costume, based on Hollywood action heroes of the 1940s, exemplifies a perfect collaboration between the director, the actor (Harrison Ford) and the costume designer (Deborah Nadoolman). The audience is asked to accept Ford as the daring adventurer, archaeologist and scholar Indiana Jones. A cultural icon was born.

Indiana Jones

Indiana Jones is an archaeologist, a man whose work is of and beneath the earth. The colour palette for the costume, whether in professorial tweeds or leather jacket and khakis, is the warm colour of the ground he walks on.

Brown is a colour that is at once vulnerable, accessible and approachable. His leather flight jacket is emblematic of his character: tough, straightforward, honest, utilitarian, impermeable, but also soft, warm and comfortable. These are the clothes that Indy slept in – they were his second skin.

Harrison Ford

‘It’s a very bizarre costume, when you think about it. It’s this guy sporting a whip, who’s off usually some place really hot in his leather jacket.

‘There’s something about the character that I guess is a good fit for me, because the minute I put the costume on, I recognise the tone that we need and I feel confident and clear about the character.’

Costume Sketch

At the start of production, Steven Spielberg drew a stick figure of Indiana Jones with a little hat, a little jacket and a bandolier of bullets. He specifically notes Indy's height – 6' 1/2".

When the costume was finished, Spielberg was delighted because it was what he had exactly imagined. 'Deborah really refined the costume, made it less painterly and more lived in and more honest to who Harrison Ford was. So she pretty much redefined the outfit, so Harrison would indelibly be Indiana Jones for the rest of his career.'

Hat

Indiana Jones' fedora was adapted from an Australian hat from milliner Herbert Johnson in London. To flatter the actor's face and allow the camera to see his eyes, costume designer Deborah Nadoolman lowered the crown and narrowed the brim.

She rolled the hat in her hands and then sat on it. She let Harrison Ford sit on it, and then aged it with mineral oil and fuller's earth. At least a dozen identical hats were created for Indy's stunt doubles and dummies.

Jacket

The jacket has a deep 'action back' of inset pleats, a 1930s pattern device used on flight jackets that allowed for wide arm movement. It also has patch pockets and adjustable tabs at the waist.

Deborah Nadoolman recalls, 'Only one leather jacket was ready the night before shooting. I sat with Harrison Ford and using his Swiss Army knife, a steel brush and sandpaper, destroyed my hands by aging Indiana's first leather jacket (of the ten jackets we manufactured). When Harrison arrived on the set at dawn the next morning, it looked as if he had been living in that jacket for the last 20 years.'

A Royal Romance

The political scheming of the royal court and the sex lives of the aristocracy have always been a source of popular entertainment. Today's 'lifestyles of the rich and famous' cannot compete with the romance, glamour and tragedy of historical royal melodrama.

The story of Elizabeth I, one of the most iconic women in history, has been retold on film for every generation. Monarchs and aristocratic personalities based on legend (*Camelot*), literature (*Barry Lyndon*, *Dangerous Liaisons*) and history (*Queen Christina*, *Marie Antoinette*) continue to enthral the public.

These stories of doomed kings and queens allow contemporary audiences to savour the pageantry and intrigue of what has come to be called a 'costume picture'.