CHAPTER II

THE LAWS UNDERLYING ALL COSTUMING OF WOMAN

That every costume is either right or wrong is not a matter of general knowledge. "It will do," or "It is near enough" are verdicts responsible for beauty hidden and interest destroyed. Who has not witnessed the mad mental confusion of women and men put to it to decide upon costumes for some fancy-dress ball, and the appalling ignorance displayed when, at the costumer's, they vaguely grope among battered-looking garments, accepting those proffered, not really knowing how the costume they ask for should look?

Absurd mistakes in period costumes are to be taken more or less seriously according to temperament. But where is the fair woman who will say that a failure to emerge from a dressmaker's hands in a successful costume is not a
tragedy? Yet we know that the average woman, more often than not, stands stupefied before the infinite variety of materials and colours of our twentieth century, and unless guided by an expert, rarely presents the figure, chez-elle, or when on view in public places, which she would or could, if in possession of the few rules underlying all successful dressing, whatever the century or circumstances.

Six salient points are to be borne in mind when planning a costume, whether for a fancy-dress ball or to be worn as one goes about one's daily life:

First, appropriateness to occasion, station and age;
Second, character of background you are to appear against (your setting);
Third, what outline you wish to present to observers (the period of costume);
Fourth, what materials of those in use during period selected you will choose;
Fifth, what colours of those characteristic of period you will use;
Sixth, the distinction between those details
which are obvious contributions to the costume, and those which are superfluous, because meaningless or line-destroying.

Let us remind our reader that the woman who dresses in perfect taste often spends far less money than she who has contracted the habit of indefiniteness as to what she wants, what she should want, and how to wear what she gets.

Where one woman has used her mind and learned beyond all wavering what she can and what she cannot wear, thousands fill the streets by day and places of amusement by night, who blithely carry upon their persons costumes which hide their good points and accentuate their bad ones.

The *rara avis* among women is she who always presents a fashionable outline, but so subtly adapted to her own type that the impression made is one of distinct individuality.

One knows very well how little the average costume counts in a theatre, opera house or ballroom. It is a question of background again. Also you will observe that the costume which counts most individually, is the one in a key
higher or lower than the average, as with a voice in a crowded room.

The chief contribution of our day to the art of making woman decorative is the quality of appropriateness. I refer of course to the woman who lives her life in the meshes of civilisation. We have defined the smart woman as she who wears the costume best suited to each occasion when that occasion presents itself. Accepting this definition, we must all agree that beyond question the smartest women, as a nation, are English women, who are so fundamentally convinced as to the invincible law of appropriateness that from the cradle to the grave, with them evening means an evening gown; country clothes are suited to country uses and a tea-gown is not a bedroom negligée. Not even in Rome can they be prevailed upon "to do as the Romans do."

Apropos of this we recall an experience in Scotland. A house party had gathered for the shooting,—English men and women. Among the guests were two Americans; done to a turn by Redfern. It really turned out to be a tragedy, as they saw it, for though their cloth skirts
Greek Kylix. Signed by Hieron, about 400 B.C. Athenian. The woman wears one of the gowns Fortuny (Paris) has reproduced as a modern tea gown. It is in two pieces. The characteristic short tunic reaches just below waist line in front and hangs in long, fine pleats (sometimes cascaded folds) under the arms, the ends of which reach below knees. The material is not cut to form sleeves; instead two oblong pieces of material are held together by small fastenings at short intervals, showing upper arm through intervening spaces. The result in appearance is similar to a kimono sleeve. (Metropolitan Museum.)
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Woman in Greek Art about 400 B.C.
were short, they were silk-lined; outing shirts were of crêpe—not flannel; tan boots, but thinly soled; hats most chic, but the sort that drooped in a mist. Well, those two American girls had to choose between long days alone, while the rest tramped the moors, or to being togged out in borrowed tweeds, flannel shirts and thick-soled boots.

That was some years back. We are a match for England to-day, in the open, but have a long way to go before we wear with equal conviction, and therefore easy grace, tea-gown and evening dress. Both how and when still annoy us as a nation. On the street we are supreme when tailleur. In carriage attire the French woman is supreme, by reason of that innate Latin coquetry which makes her feel line and its significance. The ideal pose for any hat is a French secret.

The average woman is partially aware that if she would be a decorative being, she must grasp conclusively two points: first, the limitations of her natural outline; secondly, a knowledge of how nearly she can approach the outline demanded by fashion without appearing a cari-
cature, which is another way of saying that each woman should learn to recognise her own type. The discussion of silhouette has become a popular theme. In fact it would be difficult to find a maker of women's costumes so remote and unread as not to have seized and imbedded deep in her vocabulary that mystic word.

To make our points clear, constant reference to the stage is necessary; for from stage effects we are one and all free to enjoy and learn. Nowhere else can the woman see so clearly presented the value of having what she wears harmonise with the room she wears it in, and the occasion for which it is worn.

Not all plays depicting contemporary life are plays of social life, staged and costumed in a chic manner. What is taught by the modern stage, as shown by Bakst, Reinhardt, Barker, Urban, Jones, the Portmanteau Theatre and Washington Square Players, is values, as the artist uses the term—not fashions; the relative importance of background, outline, colour, texture of material and how to produce harmonious effects by the judicious combination of furnishings and costumes.
To-day, when we want to say that a costume or the interior decoration of a house is the last word in modern line and colour, we are apt to call it à la Bakst, meaning of course Leon Bakst, whose American "poster" was the Russian Ballet. If you have not done so already, buy or borrow the wonderful Bakst book, showing reproductions in their colours of his extraordinary drawings, the originals of which are owned by private individuals or museums, in Paris, Petrograd, London, and New York. They are outré to a degree, yet each one suggests the whole or parts of costumes for modern woman—adorable lines, unbelievable combinations of colour! No wonder Poiret, the Paris dressmaker, seized upon Bakst as designer (or was it Bakst who seized upon Poiret?).

Bakst got his inspiration in the Orient. As a bit of proof, for your own satisfaction, there is a book entitled *Six Monuments of Chinese Sculpture*, by Edward Chauvannes, published in 1914, by G. Van Oest & Cie., of Brussels and Paris. The author, with a highly commendable desire to perpetuate for students a record of the most ancient specimens of Chinese sculp-
ture, brought to Paris and sold there, from time to time, to art-collectors, from all over the world; selected six fine specimens as theme of text and for illustrations.

Plate 23 in this collection shows a woman whose costume in outline might have been taken from Bakst or even Vogue. But put it the other way round: the Vogue artist to-day—we use the word as a generic term—finds inspiration through museums and such works as the above. This is particularly true as our little hand-book goes into print, for the reason that the great war between the Central Powers and the Entente has to a certain extent checked the invention and material output of Europe, and driven designers of and dealers in costumes for women, to China and Japan.

Our great-great-grandmothers here in America wore Paris fashions shown on the imported fashion dolls and made up in brocades from China, by the Colonial mantua makers. So we are but repeating history.

To-day, war, which means horror, ugliness, loss of ideals and illusions, holds most of the world in its grasp, and we find creative artists—
apostles of the Beautiful, seeking the Orient because it is remote from the great world struggle. We hear that Edmund Dulac (who has shown in a superlative manner, woman decorative, when illustrating the Arabian Nights and other well-known books), is planning a flight to the Orient. He says that he longs to bury himself far from carnage, in the hope of wooing back his muse.

If this subject of background, line and colour, in relation to costuming of woman, interests you, there are many ways of getting valuable points. One of them, as we have said, is to walk through galleries looking at pictures only as decorations; that is, colour and line against the painter’s background.

Fashions change, in dress, arrangement of hair, jewels, etc., but this does not affect values. It is la ligne, the grand gesture, or line fraught with meaning and balance and harmony of colour.

The reader knows the colour scheme of her own rooms and the character of gowns she is planning, and for suggestions as to interesting colour against colour, she can have no higher
authority than the experience of recognised painters. Some develop rapidly in this study of values.

If your rooms are so-called period rooms, you need not of necessity dress in period costumes, but what is extremely important, if you would not spoil your period room, nor fail to be a decorative contribution when in it, is that you make a point of having the colour and texture of your house gowns in the same key as the hangings and upholstery of your room. White is safe in any room, black is at times too strong. It depends in part upon the size of your room. If it is small and in soft tones, delicate harmonising shades will not obtrude themselves as black can and so reduce the effect of space. This is the case not only with black, but with emerald green, decided shades of red, royal blue, and purple or deep yellows. If artistic creations, these colours are all decorative in a room done in light tones, provided the room is large.

A Louis XVI salon is far more beautiful if the costumes are kept in Louis XVI colouring and all details, such as lace, jewelry, fans, etc.,
PLATE V
Example of the pointed head-dress, carefully concealed hair (in certain countries at certain periods of history, a sign of modesty), round necklace and very long close sleeves characteristic of fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Observe angle at which head-dress is worn.
Metropolitan Museum of Art

Woman in Gothic Art

Portrait showing pointed head-dress
kept strictly within the picture; fine in design, delicate in colouring, workmanship and quality of material. Beyond these points one may follow the outline demanded by the fashion of the moment, if desired. But remember that a beautiful, interesting room, furnished with works of art, demands a beautiful, interesting costume, if the woman in question would sustain the impression made by her rooms, to the arranging of which she has given thought, time and vitality, to say nothing of financial outlay; she must take her own decorative appearance seriously.

The writer has passed wonderful hours examining rare illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages (twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteen centuries), missals, "Hours" of the Virgin, and Breviaries, for the sole purpose of studying woman's costumes,—their colour, line and details, as depicted by the old artists. Gothic costumes in Gothic interiors, and Early Renaissance costumes in Renaissance interiors.

The art of moderns in various media, has taken from these creations of mediæval genius, more than is generally realized. We were look-
ing at a rare illuminated Gothic manuscript recently, from which William Morris drew inspirations and ideas for the books he made. It is a monumental achievement of the twelfth century, a mass book, written and illuminated in Flanders; at one time in the possession of a Cistercian monastery, but now one of the treasures in the noted private collection made by the late J. Pierpont Morgan. The pages are of vellum and the illuminations show the figures of saints in jewel-like colours on backgrounds of pure gold leaf. The binding of this book, —sides of wood, held together by heavy white vellum, hand-tooled with clasps of thin silver, is the work of Morris himself and very characteristic of his manner. He patterned his hand-made books after these great models, just as he worked years to duplicate some wonderful old piece of furniture, realising so well the magic which lies in consecrated labour, that labour which takes no account of time, nor pay, but is led on by the vision of perfection possessing the artist’s soul.

We know women who have copied the line, colour and material of costumes depicted in
COSTUMING OF WOMAN

Gothic illuminations that they might be in harmony with their own Gothic rooms. One woman familiar with this art, has planned a frankly modern room, covering her walls with gold Japanese fibre, gilding her wood-work and doors, using the brilliant blues, purples and greens of the old illuminations in her hangings, upholstery and cushions, and as a striking contribution to the decorative scheme, costumes herself in white, some soft, clinging material such as crêpe de chine, liberty satin or chiffon velvet, which take the mediæval lines, in long folds. She wears a silver girdle formed of the hand-made clasps of old religious books, and her rings, neck chains and earrings are all of hand-wrought silver, with precious stones cut in the ancient way and irregularly set. This woman got her idea of the effectiveness of white against gold from an ancient missal in a famous private collection, which shows the saints all clad in marvellous white against gold leaf.

Whistler’s house at 2 Cheyne Road, London, had a room the dado and doors of which were done in gold, on which he and two of his pupils
painted the scattered petals of white and pink chrysanthemums. Possibly a Persian or Japanese effect, as Whistler leaned that way, but one sees the same idea in an illumination of the early sixteenth century; "Hours" of the Virgin and Breviary, made for Eleanor of Portugal, Queen of John II. The decorations here are in the style of the Renaissance, not Gothic, and some think Memling had a hand in the work. The borders of the illumination, characteristic of the Bruges School, are gold leaf on which is painted, in the most realistic way, an immense variety of single flowers, small roses, pansies, violets, daisies, etc., and among them butterflies and insects. This border surrounds the pictures which illustrate the text. Always the marvellous colour, the astounding skill in laying it on to the vellum pages, an unforgettable lesson in the possibility of colour applied effectively to costumes, when background is kept in mind. This Breviary was bound in green velvet and clasped with hand-wrought silver, for Cardinal Rodrigue de Castro (1520-1600) of Spain. It is now in the private collection of Mr. Morgan. The cover alone gives one
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