What is Costume Design?

CHAPTER ONE

"The Art of Costume Design." What is the meaning of this phrase? Why this growing interest in the thing called Costume Design? Is it a new "—ology," or "—ism," or is it a real art, founded on definite artistic principles? Have you endeavored to penetrate the real meaning of this comparatively new, but extensively used expression?

Costume Design is approaching more and more to the eminence of a fine art. Its history may be traced far back to the earliest ages. The costume designed by nature was far different from the dainty garden clothes worn by young women of today. The initial stage in the development of costume was one of adaptation. Primitive man found that not only is the flesh of his four-footed enemies good to eat, but that the skins of these animals made warm extra coverings during the colder months. Just as the purpose of the early costume was the protection of the wearer from the cold, so too, this same instinct to counteract climatic conditions was evidenced in tropical lands by the weaving of broad leaves into head-gear to keep off the rays of the sun.

As the evolution of primitive man progressed, a greater variety of costume was developed. In Egypt,
the simple loin-cloth lengthened itself into a short skirt, falling below the knee.

Class distinction was indicated by the differing qualities of materials in the costume. People of rank adopted the wearing of a fine, lighter skirt over the loin-cloth. At this period, however, the style of costume did not express difference in rank among women. A tight, foldless tunic was worn by all women from peasant to princess.

During this early period, the Semites and the Asiatics had developed a much more elaborate costume than the Egyptians; their long, highly-colored tunics—reaching from neck to ankle—had sleeves, and were frequently embroidered.

The classic Greek costume is, perhaps, richer in suggestion than the costumes of any of the other ancients, because of the beauty that the Greeks obtained through simplicity. There were two general classes of Greek garments: the Chiton, worn next to the skin, and the Himation, or outer garment. The chiton was cut very long, but when the girdle was put on and drawn tight, the garment could be pulled up at pleasure to any height desired, sometimes being worn as high as the knees. The himation, or cloak, was oblong in shape, and was draped about the figure according to the taste of the wearer.

Figures 1 and 2 are illustrative of the characteristics of the Grecian costumes.

The Roman costume of that early period was similar to the Greek, except that the Toga was substituted for the himation. The toga was a semicircular piece of goods, about six yards long, on the straight edge, which was draped about the body in a number of dif-
ferent ways. When the Romans conquered the ancient Britons, the vanquished race adopted the toga, and as a civic garb it became the symbol of peace. Later the toga came to be a sign of power and authority, and it was, in reality, the forerunner of the robe or gown, worn by judges and high dignitaries of both church and state.

Old English artists have given us a clear picture of early British attire before the Norman Conquest, when a man's chief garment was a loose-sleeved tunic reaching to the knee, and generally open on the side.

However, the period that is most interesting to modern designers is the Middle Ages. Before this time much greater variety was to be found in the costumes of men than in those of women. Beginning with this period, women's costumes show a distinct development, and therefore have greater interest for the modern designer.

It was early in this period that, in France and in England, women's costumes began to assume definite styles, with almost as constant a tendency to change as have those of today. We are all more or less familiar with the high ruffs and collars, the puffed sleeves and the stiff-spreading skirts of the time of Queen Elizabeth, which, strange as it may seem, followed one of comparative simplicity in dress.

Notwithstanding the fact that many nations—indeed all nations—had an influence on the art of costume design, it is an acknowledged fact that France has been the leader in the world of fashion. So generally accepted is her judgment in the selection of styles, that the modes of almost every other civilized country in the world are suggested by the styles of Paris.

[15]
French styles of the last four or five centuries have not only had a most important place in the history of costume, but they have a recurrent influence on our modern style.

The first definite American garments were closely modelled on the French styles of the Second Empire, with tight bodices, and skirts held by stiff petticoats. The close observer will quickly recognize the similarity in model of the Quaker dress of 1870 to the panier skirt of the Second Empire.

The effect of French fashions has extended far beyond Europe and America. The improvements in methods of communication and transportation that have marked the more recent years have helped to disseminate the French designs among peoples to whom the European costumes are least suited. Among the Eastern nations, Turkey was first to feel the effects of "European fashion in women's dress," and Turkish women are rapidly acquiring a taste for French fashions. The women of far-away India, too, are fast discarding their native garb for foreign modes, or a modification of them.

In Japan, European clothes are now the custom of the court and of the upper classes in general on public or ceremonial occasions; but in the home the comfortable, ancient kimono is still worn.

Chinese women still wear the traditional costumes of the country, with occasional slight French or American innovations.

The women of America, as well as those of all other countries, are realizing that the artistically designed costume is not only beautifully pleasing in itself, but that it enhances the charms of the wearer. They are
WHAT IS COSTUME DESIGN?

demanding that their clothes shall accentuate their own loveliness and hide any defects they may have. This the designer can accomplish only by availing himself of certain expedients which are—Line, Form, and Color.

The costume designer has another important object in mind when creating a costume, and that is to suit the costume to the particular occasion upon which it is to be worn. As an extreme example, one would not be appropriately dressed at a banquet in clothes that would be suitable for a boat ride.

Taking these basic principles as a whole, we arrive at a clear and comprehensive definition of Costume Design:

Costume Design is the art of decoratively creating costumes that will protect the person from the weather, conform with the traditional customs of the land where they are worn, and through line, form, and color bring out or hide personal characteristics of the physique, and answer to the conventional needs of the occasion.