Elements of Costume Design

CHAPTER THREE

Let us delve deeper into the expedients which the costume designer has at his disposal. While he is able to create costumes that will suit a particular individual type through using the mediums of line, form, and color, there are certain considerations that determine the manner in which he is to properly use these elements of costume design.

In order to design for an individual, the costume designer must carefully observe the color of her eyes, the color of her hair, her complexion, her figure, and her individual personality—all different from those of other women, and all potent factors in the creation of a suitable costume.

Long ago designers became cognizant of the fact that different types of women should wear different colors, in order to produce a pleasing effect to the eye. This law of color harmony and contrast brought to light the use of "line" and "form."

It was further discovered that long, perpendicular lines in a costume tended to make the figure seem taller and slimmer, and that horizontal lines running around the garment made the figure appear shorter and stouter. Using these principles as a foundation, other theories have been evolved whereby deformities may be hidden and good lines made more obvious.
As the result of the use of "line" what is known as "form" is secured. In garment building, this is produced through the use of seams, pleats, girdles, buttons and other accessories, in such a manner as to divide the surface of a costume into distinct areas, which either make the costume one of beauty, or distort the effect entirely. These elements of costume design are of the utmost importance, and each will be duly considered.

Let us first discuss the subject of line. Look at figure 9. Which horizontal line, 1 or 2, is the longer? Apparently 2 is. Now measure them. They are exactly the same length. This exercise has often been given
as an example of optical illusion, and it holds an im-
portant place in fashion designing. "What is it," you
ask, "that makes 2 appear longer than 1, when both
are actually of the same length?" This is explained
by the theory that a line, divided or broken by other
lines that carry the eye outward into space, appears
longer than one of the same length that is checked by
lines which tend to carry the eye inward. We con-
clude, therefore, that a costume, the lines of which
tend to run up and down, will make the wearer appear
taller, while a costume, the lines of which run around
the person, will make the wearer appear stouter.

Observe figure 10. The long, narrow collar, the long,
pointed panels, and the one-sided effect of the waist
detract from the width of the figure and make it ap-
pear more slender; and the narrow, pointed inserts on
the long sleeve make the arm appear longer and less
stout. Here we have tried to indicate what can be
done to make the stout figure appear slimmer. You
will notice that vertical lines have been used in this
costume—also note the lines forming the silhouette
of the bust, waist and hips. If possible, these lines
should be almost continuous—otherwise the width of
any one or two of these parts will be emphasized by
the smallness of the third.

In figure 11, observe how the fullness about the
waist, the hips and the sleeves tends to make the fig-
ure appear stouter—it gives the breadth that is so
much desired. For an over-slender figure, the design
illustrated is excellent; the wide neckline, the loose,
gracefully draped blouse and the extension at the hips,
all tend to make the figure appear broader and less
angular.
In figure 12, the line of the collar, the partial suggestion of the yoke, the belt and the stitching around the bottom, cannot destroy the first impression—that of lines running up and down. Thus, while we have horizontal lines in the upper part of the jacket, and horizontal breaks in the formation of the skirt part, the impression of the vertical lines is still maintained.

Long lines, therefore, do not necessarily have to remain unbroken. One may use a narrow belt at the waist, and thus break the long lines of a jacket. It is true, also, that in a costume where horizontal lines predominate, vertical breaks may be made in the flare of the waist and at the hips. Observe figure 13. It follows, therefore, that the consistency of the important lines may be maintained, despite slight breaks in them.

An evening gown for the stout figure is shown in figure 14. It is made of black satin, with the yoke and the lining on the panels of silver cloth. The one-piece dress is slightly draped around the bottom. A panel starting in a strap at the nape of the neck comes around toward the under-arm, and hangs in straight lines on either side, forming a short train. Black net is used to fill out the waist and to form a short sleeve. A corsage of hand-made flowers gives a touch of color to the dress.

An afternoon dress, figure 15, is made of henna satin with a panel of brown chiffon on either side, starting at the waistline and ending in a tassel just below the skirt. Two bands of gold, henna, and blue embroidery run down the front. The upper part of the waist and the sleeves are of brown chiffon with narrow bands of satin on the lower ends.
FIGURE II
INSTRUCTIVE COSTUME DESIGN

The designer should guard against inconsistent line effects. For example, the portions above and below the waist should never be so broken by lines that the relation between them is destroyed. This same idea in design must be carried out in the entire costume. The costume designer must have a general idea as to the type of costume he is to design. If he wishes to design a tailored costume, the tailored idea must be carried out. In brief, the completed costume must represent but one type.

The abnormal figure may seem to have been taken for general consideration, but there is reason for doing this. How many women possess an ideal figure? Very few indeed. However, through the proper application of the theories of line, form, and color, we may correct many abnormal defects and bring the figure to as near the proportion of the perfect figure as is possible; and after doing this, it is a comparatively simple matter to design clothes to suit the ideal form.

In designing for the stout figure, long, simple lines should be used, and the details of the costume should be carefully considered. No matter how beautiful a line may be, if it tends to give prominence to the breadth of the figure, it should be avoided in costumes for stout people.

For example, short sleeves in heavy materials, and collars that are wide and square, will give width to the figure.

The designer should be especially careful in the trimming for stout figures, as trimming that is very elaborate will attract the eye to the breadth of the figure. Like short sleeves, short skirts must be avoided, no matter what the fashion may be, for they detract
from the height and add to the width. Among other details that should be considered as inappropriate in designing for stout women are short tunics, wide hems and deep collars.

In referring to this principle of line, the details of a costume deserve comment. You should always be careful not to over-decorate. Too much elaboration is a sign of poor taste and it often mars the effect of an otherwise good design. Diagonal lines, when running in the same direction, may produce pleasing effects; but you are cautioned against using combinations of diagonal and vertical, or diagonal and horizontal lines, until you have attained some proficiency in the art.

You should also keep in mind the fact that long skirts tend to make a girl appear taller, and that short skirts make her appear shorter; therefore, when Dame Fashion decrees that long skirts are to be in vogue, exceptions should be made in the case of the tall, slim girl or woman; and when short skirts are "in style," the short, stocky person must not have her size apparently reduced by a too abbreviated skirt.

This brings us to the subject of silhouette, which is most vital in the art of design, and which will be treated at length in a later chapter. For the moment, it is well to remember that designs should conform to the lines of the figures.

Let us consider now a few of the important principles of design that will be beneficial to you.

We have in costume design a theory which permits the pleasing arrangement of areas over a given surface, in such a way as to produce the best effect. From the early artists we have learned that the best results are obtained by placing a figure a little above or a little
below the center, and to one side or the other of the center. This so-called law of art may be applied in costume design when dividing any space for the arrangement of tucks, pleats or ornaments.

The subject of scale, or balance, too, is one that is generally misunderstood, and in order to properly comprehend the subject, one must develop good taste through the study of good example.

Size is estimated by comparison. For example, if you looked at a large statue for the first time, you would probably have no conception of its size; but if a man whom you knew to be six feet tall should stand by the side of the statue, you would immediately measure the number of six-foot heights, and in that way get a fair idea of its size.

The proper application of "scale," too, is something for which we must all strive. It would appear most ludicrous to see a short, slender woman wearing a gown covered with large polka dots, about the size of a saucer, would it not? You would intuitively know that the dots should be smaller. In reality, you would here apply the principle of scale.

This same theory of scale is applicable to any two parts of a costume. One part should not overbalance the other.

Scale, then, as has been indicated, is nothing more than a matter of taste; and a person possessing naturally good taste will have a feeling for "scale."