Art in Costume Design

CHAPTER I

MODERN COSTUMES

"The body is the shell of the soul and the dress the busk of that shell; but the busk often tells what the kernel is." — Anon.

With fashion constantly changing, it is a problem to secure a foundation upon which artistic clothing may be designed. Some say, "design regardless of the changes" — but that cannot be done successfully, neither do modern designers care to work in that way. The study of historic costume furnishes the foundation so needed. Artistic garments have been created in each age, although each period has its own idea of art.

In the most beautiful designs there were certain principles of art that survived; these must have been good to have outlived the criticism of centuries. If one uses these same principles of proportion, balance, color, harmony, etc., he will be able to create good designs. The ideals, the principles, the experiences of the historic peoples are of infinite value to the modern designer. The professional designers of Paris, London and New York make a serious study of the history of costume and design before attempting to create original work.

One cannot draw water from an empty vessel; it must be filled to over-flowing before the drops rush out into a stream; so with the mind when one begins to produce original designs. There must be so much information stored away in the brain that the least demand upon it will evoke numerous ideas. This information may be stored there by the study of history and nature, and observation of the works of others. After sufficient study, the individual may be trusted to work according to his own inclination. Do not hamper him with rules such as, — never design costumes with large sleeves, beware
of tight skirts, do not have long or short waists, a person with blue eyes should never wear red, etc.

The designing or the selecting of modern costumes which are becoming to the wearer, suitable for the occasion, artistic in color and at the same time fashionable, is a task every woman or girl must perform, so the subject of costume design must be made interesting to the masses as well as to the few who make art a special study.

Some may become commercial designers and produce most artistic garments; a few may have sufficient means to purchase such gowns or to employ tailors to make clothing especially becoming to them, but the masses must be restricted to their own selection, or creation. If the taste be naturally poor, and has not been refined by the study of art, the person must suffer; if his taste be naturally good, it may be made better by the study of the best. Since clothing is a necessity, since all, whether rich or poor, have an equal right to appear at their best, is it not just that those who have not inherited what is called "good taste" should be assisted in such a way as to enable them to compete with those who have been especially favored? It is certainly true that an individual's appearance has an influence upon those about him. Then, is it not a person's pleasure and advantage to appear attractively dressed, and a duty to society which should not be under estimated? The best way then to assist society is to educate the individual. "The foundation of every state is the education of its youth." —*Dionysius.

Costumes reveal not only the character of the people, but the state of civilization of the country and the spirit of the age. A home, a school or a community is often judged by the appearance of the raiment of those that come from it; not necessarily by the value of the clothes worn, but by the color, the neatness of the making and the manner in which they are worn.

It is self-evident that the first step in any work worth while must be its simple construction. In the subject of costume and design the constructive study becomes so interesting and spread over so varied a field that it is difficult to come to a place where one may
pause. One never finds what he may consider the end, for it seems to be a circular study, with practical work as a segment interchangeable with research and historical study. The knowledge gained by one's own experiences in the practical work of designing and selecting garments is of equal or greater value than that gained from study. Study is necessary to enable the student to gain a systematic way of thinking, of planning and of working; it supplies him with definite knowledge; it teaches him to be a closer observer and to appreciate the works of others; it gives him greater confidence in his own ideas.

The constructive study for costume designing is similar to the constructive work of a house. Many houses may have the same kind of foundations, rafters and beams, but no two look alike after the various workmen apply their individual ideas.

If the person reading these pages is one who is interested in plays and pageants, he may desire to use the information gained especially for designing costumes for that purpose. Great pains should be taken in selecting the material for garments used for theatricals. It is not always easy to find the desired colors or designs. Stenciled, dyed or painted effects can often be used to produce more accurate results. The quality of the material is of little importance since the garment is not constructed for durability. It is the general appearance that counts; the color, the chief lines and ornament. If these costumes are to be used on the stage, the color and detail may be exaggerated to a certain extent to give a bold effect that will carry well. Smallness of detail is not desirable, as it cannot be seen at any distance and only detracts from the general appearance. In designing costumes for historical theatricals an important point to consider is that of uniformity of detail. For instance, if the time is that of the Egyptian period, then the costume should show the chief Egyptian characteristics and in no way be united with other styles that force a confused impression upon the audience. The audience should know at once, from the general appearance of the costume worn, the period the actor represents.
When making historical costumes, the student will find books showing cuts of drafted patterns most helpful. The suggestions gained from these patterns adapted to a plain commercial pattern of the proper size and measurements will be sufficient aid for anyone having the knowledge of sewing, to produce the desired historical costume.

If the reader is one who wishes to receive greater pleasure from his reading by having more definite information concerning the appearance of the characters he sees or the descriptions that he reads, it may be interesting to make a collection of prints showing costumes and designs characteristic of the various periods, together with quotations describing such styles.

To those interested in sewing, the information in these chapters may be of constant use as reference and suggestive study. Simple commercial patterns may be used for the foundation for original dress designs when the student is not able to draft her own patterns. The knowledge of plain sewing should be gained, however, before one endeavors to execute original designs. The designing of modern costumes showing the color schemes, designs and proportions of a particular period, is an excellent exercise to impress the principles of art upon the mind of the student. For example, a blouse may be of an original design, but show a Greek color scheme; the design may be modern, but have curved lines of the Byzantine style, ornaments of Byzantine character with detail of beads or metallic effect, and the material of the waist of the rich Byzantine blue. Many interesting and practical problems may be worked out in a similar way showing the various principles of art, contrast of colors, balance, harmony, etc.

The person interested in art is interested in all phases of costume study. He may be required to make sketches of costumes for a whole or part of a cast in a theatrical performance. A definite idea of the various periods is a great asset in such an undertaking. Much time and energy are saved by having in his mind a simple idea of the
historical periods, and the appearance of the people living in the various ages.

When making illustrations, he has similar problems with which to deal; he must work in harmony with those who write and edit books; must be able to portray in every detail, the characters described in the story or poem.

For those studying costumes from this point of view it is most practical to make sheets of sketches of ornament and costumes of the different periods; sketches of costumes worn by persons of various occupations; charts of color schemes showing the combinations which are pleasing where persons in costume are seen in groups; the effects of light upon colors at different times of day and different seasons of the year. For instance, a chart may be made showing the colors of costumes worn by a group of persons in moonlight, giving the effect of subdued light; one in strong sunlight, etc.; one showing how the figure of chief interest may be made to stand out from the others by the use of protruding colors.

Persons designing costumes for any purpose should work in closest harmony with the person making the garments. If the designer does not do the actual sewing, she should understand and thoroughly appreciate the problems which confront the seamstress.

The one who has the opportunity of making or directing the making of her garments and who invents her own designs, is the person who may show greatest individuality in her dress. Industrial education gives the student the greatest help in this work and the community which offers such advantages is greatly repaid by the refined and economic influence exerted by those who profit by such instruction.

Charts of materials and color schemes, collections of prints, pictures by master painters, as well as the drawings and paintings made by the student, assist in the thorough study of costume and design. The study of drapery and the representations of various materials in different mediums is essential.
After one has studied the costumes of the different historic periods; has analyzed the construction of both design and costume; has carefully watched the varied taste of men, women and children of different ages and stations of life, one should be able to answer the question, what is a really artistic costume?

Consider the costumed figure as a composition. The face must always be the center of interest; if the costume or any detail of it detracts from the face, the design is a failure. The lines of the costume should add grace and ease to the appearance of the figure; the proportion of the costume should leave the impression of a well proportioned figure, whether it is naturally so or not; the color should be charming, a delight to the sensitive eye. The ornament, in every detail, should be in harmony with the costume as a whole and in keeping with the character of the general style of the garment. The entire effect should be of lasting interest to the wearer; she should not become tired of its general appearance after wearing it a few times.

An artistic costume then, is one which may be analyzed as a picture, and the construction of its parts found to comply with the general principles of art. It is the necessary covering for the body, refined by the influence of civilization and education; it is an expression of a person’s character, modified by the influence of his environment and the social conditions of his time; it, combined with the figure, is a pictoral or decorative composition worthy of admiration.

OUTLINE FOR LESSONS.

The amount of time required for the following lessons will depend entirely upon the ability of the student. The lessons are numbered according to the various steps in the work, and not according to class periods. Any lesson may be subdivided in as many parts as the teacher finds most convenient.

If the periods for costume work are short, the problems may be divided among the students and all the drawings, charts, etc., put up
for general discussion at the close of every two or three lessons. This gives the individual the opportunity of seeing the various steps in the work and of hearing the criticism and suggestions made by the instructor. For classes which may have only a few periods a term for costume study or which are composed of younger students one or two problems from each chapter may be selected for practical work, and the remainder presented in lectures by the instructor. The instructor should use charts, drawings and prints as illustrations.

Costume designing may be studied from four different points of view, for four distinct purposes, namely (A) sewing, (B) illustration, (C) theatrical, and (D) art appreciation.

The instructor should determine before she starts the work of her class, which of these divisions will be most practical for her students, and give the work accordingly. Some of the problems which may be omitted for one division may be most essential for another. In the lessons the problems necessary for particular divisions are marked by the letter found before the respective name, for example, chart especially for sewing — marked “A”.

LESSON I.

Part 1. Prepare a portfolio for sketches and charts — card board backs 10 x 12 inches, — space between boards for thickness 1 inch. Cover with heavy paper or art canvas. The following lettering may be printed on the cover: “Art in Costume Design,” the name of the division of the work, as “Sewing,” and the name of the student. The sheets contained in portfolio should all be 9 x 12 inches with margin line ½ inch from edge and title of page printed across the top of the sheet about 1 inch below the margin. Write or print the answers to the following questions (a well arranged printed sheet is more interesting if sufficient time be given the students).

For what purpose do you wish to use your study in costume designing?

What is an artistic costume?
Why is the study of historic costume and design and the study of nature necessary?
From what sources may one gain information concerning costume designing?
Does an individual’s appearance have an influence upon those about him?

Part 2. Make one sketch of each of the following either in pencil, ink, wash, or water color; — a piece of heavy woolen cloth, of satin, of figured silk, of velvet, of thin cotton material, of heavy cotton material and one of fur; these may be arranged on one sheet.
Make a chart containing samples of the materials mentioned. Give name and price of each below the sample. (A) Make one sketch of each of the following, — cloth that is tucked; gathered; pleated; embroidered; piece of lace. These may all be on one sheet.
Make a chart containing samples of the materials mentioned. (A)

Part 3. Make a sheet of sketches of flowers or plants that may be used as motifs for original designs. Show the growth of the plant, the detail of the blossoms or fruit and the leaves.