



• Everything begins with a story. ♦

JOSEPH CAMPBELL<sup>1</sup>

# SETTING THE SCENE

## A SHORT HISTORY OF HOLLYWOOD COSTUME DESIGN 1912–2012

Deborah Nadoolman Landis

**S**INCE THE EARLIEST FILMS, costumes have served as a critical element of the storytelling process. While the purpose of costuming has remained the same over the past century, the process by which costumes are created for a film has changed significantly and now, a hundred years later, has come nearly full circle. These foundations of costume design, its history, its purpose and its practice, will be explored within *Hollywood Costume*.

### THE SILENT ERA

The history of film-making in the United States begins in New York in the mid-1890s. One of the earliest 'film studios' in the country, the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company,<sup>2</sup> opened its doors in 1896. Throughout the next decade the American film industry and the film crafts quickly began to take shape as public demand grew. Concurrent with this development was the migration of actors and costume designers from the theatre to the newly emerging cinema community.

Costume design is one good example of the 'hit or miss' approach to pioneer film-making during the industry's formative years. The actors themselves provided most of their own costumes, although period and more ornate theatrical garments were obtained from Broadway theatrical costume rental houses. 'Those fortunate actresses who had extensive wardrobes of their own received more parts than more modestly dressed women', according to W. Robert LaVine. 'The point was to "make do" when it came to dressing for a film, and most films were a hodgepodge of apparel.'<sup>3</sup> Contemporary stories were costumed off the backs of the actors. Applicants came dressed appropriately for an audition, hoping to win a role.

OPPOSITE

1 Pauline Garon, Cecil B. DeMille and Clare West discussing designs for *Adam's Rib*, 1923  
Costume designer Clare West

RIGHT

2 'Faking' a snow scene in tropical California, 1920s  
Mack Sennett Studios, Edendale, California

Unfortunately there is little discussion in the literature of costumes in new American cinema during the decade 1900–1910, but one can always watch the old films to evaluate them. Certainly costumes were not granted a significant amount of a film's budget. In a description of the depiction of Native Americans in early films, one author observes: 'In *Captain John Smith and Pocahontas* (1908) ... obvious white actors smeared with brown make-up were dressed in long brown underwear and skull caps to which ordinary chicken feathers were attached!'<sup>4</sup>

There was a visual intelligence at work making immediate choices about style and character for each role, but whether this was the first assistant director, the cameraman or the director is difficult to glean from existing literature of the time. In this primitive world of early film-making no formal costume department existed. And as yet there were no fan magazines to report it.

The beginnings of the industry in California, and Hollywood, occurred concurrently with the heyday of the East Coast production companies. In 1907 California's first dramatic film, *The Power of the Sultan*, was produced by the Selig Company. Within a decade Hollywood had become synonymous with the film industry. Film-makers were drawn west for several reasons:





**3 Sketch for Eleanor Bates (Claire Windsor)**

*For Sale*, 1924

**Costume designer and illustrator Clare West**

**4 Sketch for Ruth Lawrence (Norma Shearer)**

*His Secretary*, 1925

**Costume designer and illustrator André-ani**

the sunny weather of southern California made it possible to film outside all year round (plate 2), and the variety of landscapes around Los Angeles provided an array of natural sets – ‘every variety of mountain, valley, lake, seacoast, island, desert, countryside, and plain that a story might call for’.<sup>5</sup> New York City, by contrast, ‘was a hopeless location for cowboys, Indians, Confederate soldiers, knights or South Seas aborigines’.<sup>6</sup>

When it came to costumes, Hollywood producers relied on the source they knew best from New York: the actresses. But two noted film visionaries – in quite divergent manners – began to create a new approach to costuming films in the 1910s. Producer Adolph Zukor introduced Americans to the concept of the film costume designer as a creative artist,<sup>7</sup> while director D.W. Griffith introduced the practice of creating costumes specifically for American-made films.<sup>8</sup> One of Zukor’s best-known contributions to the emerging film industry was his 1912 purchase of the rights to the French film *Queen Elizabeth*, which starred Sarah Bernhardt wearing clothing designed by the highly respected French couture designer Paul Poiret (plate 152).<sup>9</sup> One could argue that film wardrobe departments came into being largely through



the creative practices of Griffith, whose employment of film design was just one of his many innovations.

Film lore has it that a number of the costumes for *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) were made by actress Lillian Gish’s mother, a source that could be considered a ‘hybrid’ of past and future costuming processes.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, the comments about Griffith’s ‘auditioning’ practices made by his wife, Linda Arvidson, have often been quoted: “I have no part for you, Miss Hart, but I can use your hat. I’ll give you five dollars if you will let Miss Pickford wear your hat for this picture.”<sup>11</sup> Griffith chose a more structured path, however, in costuming his 1916 drama *Intolerance: Love’s Struggles Through the Ages*, considered the first Hollywood film in which costumes were created for lead players and extras alike.<sup>12</sup>

Following Poiret, fashion designers started to design for films with some regularity.<sup>13</sup> This practice was less common at first in California than in New York, where the fashion houses clothed actresses both on and off screen. Couture designers of this era generally worked in tandem with particular performers and, as a rule, did not receive screen credit for their work.<sup>14</sup> Over time these firms, particularly Lucile Ltd, began to fulfil Hollywood’s need for designers.<sup>15</sup> Early silent features had few credits, and none for costume designer. Until the creation of the executive studio designer in the mid-1920s, costume designer credits on films were rare. If acknowledged at all, some credits read ‘Gowns by...’, reflecting that designers were credited for the costumes of a single star.

In addition to fashion firms and the actresses’ own closets, rental houses became an important source of costumes. As



5 Howard Greer with Gypsy fortune-teller (Pola Negri)

*The Spanish Dancer, 1923*

Costume designer Howard Greer

6 Annabelle 'Little Annie' Rooney (Mary Pickford)

*Little Annie Rooney, 1925*

early as 1912 the Western Costume Company in Los Angeles was providing wardrobes for Hollywood films. Western Costume grew out of the personal collection of Native American paraphernalia of L.L. Burns, a trader who accumulated hundreds of items as he travelled across the United States. By 1920 a standardized mode of production led to an accumulation of costumes in the studio costume departments: it made fiscal sense for the studio to retain all the costumes that they had already paid to produce. Furthermore, 'Bookkeepers wrote the cost of all sets and costume against the film for which they were made; as a result, any subsequent uses were free. This encouraged the reuse of sets [and costumes] and a return to the same genres.'<sup>16</sup>

As the output of the studios grew throughout the first decade of the twentieth century, the benefits of obtaining costumes quickly, easily and inexpensively became increasingly apparent and a few producers thus began employing costume designers on a full-time basis.<sup>17</sup> Costume designer Edith Head remembered that 'Most production companies didn't ... have designers on staff until about 1918, when DeMille secured Clare West as head of costume design for his films'.<sup>18</sup> Other than what we can see on the screen, the use of costumes as storytelling vehicles during this time is poorly documented.

However, a wonderful example of the connection between costume and character can be seen in Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, who first appeared in the 1914 film *Kid Auto Races at Venice*.<sup>19</sup> His signature outfit, which Chaplin purportedly scavenged from a communal studio dressing room,<sup>20</sup> was recognized by audiences as the embodiment of humour and pathos: 'The little tramp in a bowler hat, tight jacket and baggy pants, with a duck-like walk and carrying a cane, became immensely popular on screens throughout the world'.<sup>21</sup>

The silence of early films intensified the need for illustrative costumes. In discussing novelist and film producer Elinor Glyn, N. Fowler writes:

In silent films, dressing the part and playing the part were one and the same, as Elinor and the other members of Hollywood's pioneer film industry instantly understood. A February 1916 article in *Photoplay* by actress Louise Howard is called 'How I Teach My Gowns to Act.' Dress had to place a character quickly and effectively in one symbolic sweep.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the First World War Hollywood was firmly established as the home of the film business. The distinctive shape of the major Hollywood studios – an 'integrated' system that produced and distributed films to its affiliated theatre chains – was consolidating. The standard technique for costuming a film employed by the major studios was a blending of the approaches developed in the previous decade: merging the on-site wardrobe production facility with the creative talents and panache of the professional designer. According to Satch LaValley, 'The largest studios began to maintain enormous costume departments: the costume designer, heretofore anonymous for the most part, now began to assume a vital and well-publicized role'.<sup>23</sup>





● Adrian was my favourite designer.  
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clothes should do and what they should say. ●

KATHARINE HEPBURN



OPPOSITE  
7 **Tracy Lord**  
(Katharine Hepburn)  
*The Philadelphia Story*, 1940  
Costume designer Adrian

LEFT  
8 **Anni Pavlovitch**  
(Joan Crawford)  
*The Bride Wore Red*, 1937  
Costume designer Adrian

ABOVE  
9 **Joan Crawford** with one  
of Adrian's designs for  
*The Bride Wore Red*, 1937

**10 Hat making at the MGM studios for *The Women*, 1939**  
Costume designer Adrian

At the pinnacle of these studios, as a producer of quality films, a successful business enterprise and a unifier of skilled and dedicated professionals,<sup>24</sup> was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios. As the silent era was coming to a close, MGM's productive costume department was full of talented professionals and the studio was on the cusp of hiring Adrian, the designer who would lead the studio into the Golden Age of Hollywood.

The busy wardrobe department at Paramount was divided into two sections: women's costumes and character costumes. Paramount's wardrobe chief Howard Greer (plate 5) began his career in fashion design, as an assistant in the popular New York House of Lucile.<sup>25</sup> Greer joined Paramount in 1923 and was the studio's chief costume designer until 1928. In keeping with the practice at the time, as chief designer Greer only clothed the principal women in a film. Having worked in both fields Greer understood the distinction in purpose and scale between fashion and costume design, astutely observing that

Overemphasis, as it applied to acting techniques and story treatments, was essential. If a lady in real life wore a train one yard long, her prototype in film wore one three yards long.... The most elegant Chanel of the early twenties was a washout on the screen. When you strip color and sound and the third dimension from a moving object, you have to make up for the loss with dramatic black-and-white contrasts and enriched surfaces.<sup>26</sup>

With an ever-growing quantity of costumes required to keep pace with the number of films in production at any one time, Paramount was constantly increasing its staff. When Greer hired Edith Head as a wardrobe sketch artist for \$50 a week in 1923, he could not have dreamed how prolific she would be. Head recollected:

I never got down on the set to see the clothes. I never met the stars. But gradually this changed ... sometimes he would take me out in the workroom to watch him drape model figures with the garments made from these designs. It was like watching the drawings come to life.<sup>27</sup>

In 1928 couture-trained Travis Banton, acclaimed as a 'French' designer, took over as the head of Paramount's costume department.



The silent era was about to end by the time RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) hired designer Walter Plunkett in 1926.<sup>28</sup> Plunkett recalled that at that time the studio's costume department was part of the drapery department:

The men in charge of drapery went out and bought or rented clothes, or gave yardage to the maids who pinned it on.... The first day I went to work there, they told me that a girl who was playing a mysterious queen in a Tarzan picture was having trouble with her costume and they asked me if I would get to her dressing room and see what I could do. When I got there, I found her maid ... trying to pin three or four yards of beaded chiffon. She had no idea what she was doing, so I pinned it onto the actress's bra and draped it around her and that was the costume for the day. It was the customary way of doing things.<sup>29</sup>

Of great concern to virtually everyone in the early American film industry were the strong opinions of certain conservative civic and religious groups. In a preemptive strike against federal legislation regulating films, 'Hollywood responded in 1922 by founding the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Inc. [MPPDA], to operate a system of self-regulation'.<sup>30</sup> Led by Will H. Hays, a former Republican Postmaster General,



11 Hand painting a dress at MGM studios for *Marie Antoinette*, 1938  
Costume designer Adrian

award for costume design would not be presented until 1948.

By the close of the 1920s Hollywood costume design had developed a template of normative practices based on economic efficiency. The popular rags-to-riches silent comedies and melodramas communicated character transformation most effectively through costume. The early in-house studio dressmakers were costume designers in all but title; their purpose was to create believable characters for the appreciative silent film-going audience. With the establishment of the executive costume designer in the mid-1920s, whose focus was the female stars, secondary designers or costume department supervisors costumed the male leads and supporting cast.

#### THE GOLDEN AGE

The creation of the talking picture is considered the birth of Hollywood's Golden Age and one of the most significant turning points in film history. The arrival of sound had an effect on virtually every aspect of the industry. The addition of direct sound impacted both the purpose and the prac-

tice of costume design: sensitive microphones suddenly amplified the noise of clicking heels and jangling jewellery, which meant that otherwise innocuous accessories had to be reconsidered (or taped or sewn to the garment), and 'Ruffles, taffeta skirts and the like were troublesome because they made too much noise'.<sup>35</sup> Sound, moreover, gave costumes a new role in the storytelling process: 'With the addition of dialogue, films gradually became more realistic, and less atmospheric'.<sup>36</sup>

On the introduction of sound, the MGM designer Adrian observed:

All the studio costume designers have been thinking in terms of dramatic moments instead of the genuine, real moments that occur in life. When sound came in, a great change came over movie fashions. With the entrance of the human voice actresses suddenly became human beings. A quality of mind came with the characterization and the story. Everything had to be more real. Roses became real roses. Chippendale chairs became real Chippendale. The clothes took on a genuine character.<sup>37</sup>

The factory-like environment born in the 1920s swung into full force at the major studios in the 1930s. Wardrobe departments grew to be small factories that employed as many as two hundred workers

the MPPDA immediately began to create a list of plays and books that could not be used as the basis for films.<sup>31</sup> Costume designers, too, were affected:

Censorship frequently forced last-minute changes. After 1923 the Hays office mandated an anti-cleavage rule; and while it was all right to show a man's navel, women's navels were taboo. The wardrobe department was often called upon to supply a diamond belt or pearls to hide a dancing girl's navel before shooting could resume.<sup>32</sup>

Hollywood movies had become tremendously popular by the end of the silent era. In 1926 some \$120 million was spent making more than four hundred feature films.<sup>33</sup> In order to meet public demand, by the end of the decade 'every studio of rank had its own costume department, with a full-time staff of designers, milliners, tailors, and seamstresses ... The last gap in the team of studio professionals had been filled.'<sup>34</sup> Yet while costume design was gaining attention within the studios and with the public, the newly founded Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences ignored costuming at its inaugural Academy Awards ceremony. Excellence in film art direction and cinematography were honoured at the inception of the awards in 1929, yet the



(plates 10, 11).<sup>38</sup> ‘The costume department of a Hollywood studio was hierarchically organized, supervised by a chief designer who was assisted by the head of wardrobe, several junior designers, sketch artists, period researchers, wardrobe assistants, and seamstresses.’<sup>39</sup> An on-site assembly line was simply the most efficient method of getting actors clothed. Moreover, wardrobe departments accumulated an ever-increasing number of completed costumes. As each film wrapped, the principal costumes were sorted and recycled on extras in future productions.<sup>40</sup>

In general the major studio costume designers of the 1930s did not suffer much at the hands of the Depression.<sup>41</sup> According to D. McCarthy, ‘At the larger studios during Hollywood’s Golden Age, costume designers had no fixed line in the production budget and they worked accordingly’.<sup>42</sup> One source estimates that over \$6 million was spent by Hollywood studios on costumes in 1938.<sup>43</sup> This wonderful confluence of resources – materials, staff, costume stock and finances – was probably in greatest abundance at the very successful MGM studios.<sup>44</sup>

Adrian was the executive costume designer at MGM in the 1930s. Creating a credible character and mood was to Adrian central to his purpose as a costume designer. As a young designer working for Cecil B. DeMille, he reasoned that ‘The dramatic situations in a picture must be costumed according to the feeling of a scene’.<sup>45</sup> Although his designs were often reproduced for the retail market by fashion manufacturers, Adrian recognized that the objectives of costume design and fashion design were completely different, and at times in conflict: ‘there are some clothes that are not in good taste if worn off the set. They are put into the picture like futuristic scenery in some plays to help the drama and are out of place anywhere else.’<sup>46</sup>

At the height of his fame, Adrian understood that:

Few people in an audience watching a great screen production realize the importance of any gown worn by the feminine star. They may notice that it is attractive, that they would like to have it copied, 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.<sup>47</sup>

An equally important aspect of Adrian’s aim as a storyteller was his collaboration with an actress to portray her character. Looking back on her career, Katharine Hepburn said: ‘Adrian was my favorite designer. He and I had the same sense of “smell” about what clothes should do and what they should say.’<sup>48</sup> Adrian’s remarkable talent resulted in a great diversity of costuming feats, from the embroidered period gowns of *Marie Antoinette* (1938) to the whimsical costumes of *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).

OPPOSITE

**12 Jean Harlow (on slant board) with director George Cukor on the set of *Dinner at Eight*, 1933**  
Costume designer Adrian

ABOVE

**13 Travis Banton with actress Ruth Taylor, 1928**



As a starting point for *The Wizard of Oz* Adrian turned to the drawings he had made of the characters as a child, and he scanned the series of books for costume ideas. He made 3,210 individual costume sketches for the film, all painted to match early Technicolor requirements. Virtually every costume was fancifully colourful, and every garment was custom-made since nothing that might be appropriate for the Land of Oz could be found anywhere in costume stock in the MGM Wardrobe Department.<sup>49</sup>

For *Marie Antoinette*, researchers were sent to Europe to gather ‘antique prints, folios of drawings, actual garments of the period, and rare accessories. Adrian carefully studied the objects and made hundreds of sketches for his staff. The MGM costume shop turned out twenty-five hundred costumes.’<sup>50</sup>

In later years, Joan Crawford recognized Adrian’s contribution to her career: ‘Adrian had a profound effect both on my professional life and personal life. He taught me so much about drama. He said nothing must detract. Everything must be simple, simple. Just your face must emerge. He made me conscious of simplicity.’<sup>51</sup>

At the height of the studio system, ‘producers, not the directors, most often determined the look of the films. Costumes were frequently underway before a director and stars had been assigned to a production.’<sup>52</sup> Paramount chief Adolph Zukor ‘spared nothing to see that his stars were dressed in the manner the public had come to expect’.<sup>53</sup> Zukor wanted substantive characters who



14 Travis Banton (seated) and Edith Head (far right)  
at a costume fitting at Paramount Studios

would resonate with audiences, but he also understood the value of style and packaging in the marketing of a film. In this respect the dedication and perfectionism of Travis Banton and Marlene Dietrich were legendary:

When Marlene's clothes for *Morocco* [1930] were ready for fittings, she often spent as much as six hours at a stretch standing patiently on a padded platform while she and Travis pointed and pinched, and the fitters pinned and repinned. In those days, when every film showed their heroines in at least 20 different outfits, stars would be condemned to standing stock still for as many as 120 hours per film.... However long it took to get it right, she was ready to stand and endure.<sup>54</sup>

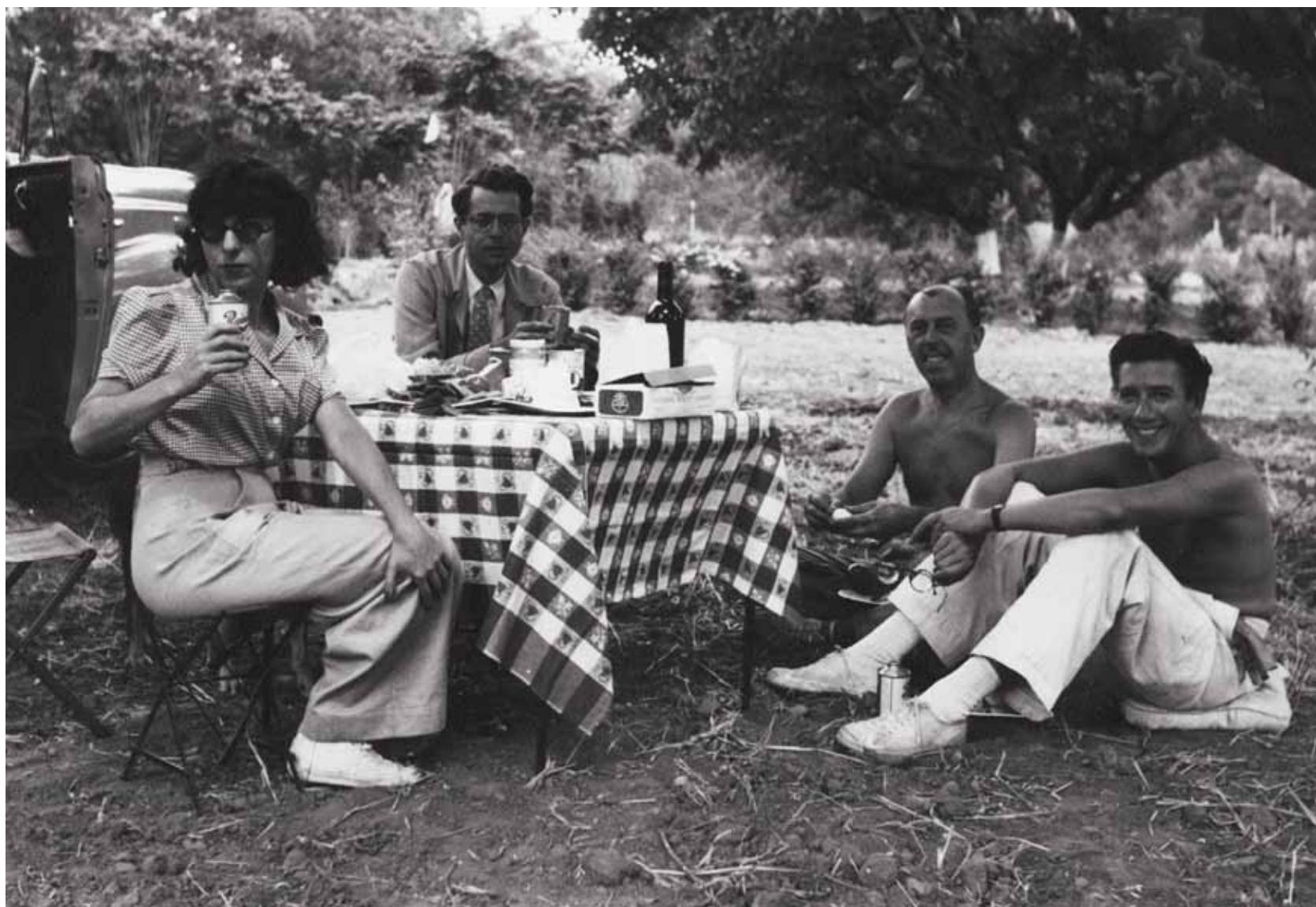
Edith Head assumed Banton's position as Head Designer of Paramount in 1937, where she was always busy during the studio's prolific war years. LaVine reports that for Head: 'It was normal ... to have the wardrobes for three or four films in process simultaneously, a stack of new scripts awaiting her consideration, and fittings scheduled at fifteen-minute intervals.'<sup>55</sup> Head exemplified the costume designer as storyteller. For example, in describing her

work on *Lady in the Dark* (1944), she said that the film 'depended enormously on the clothes to tell the story'.<sup>56</sup> She was also keenly aware that her purpose as a costume designer was not to create new fashionable styles:

I do not consider a motion picture costume designer necessarily a fashion creator because we do what the script tells us to. If we do a period piece, then we re-create fashion that was done before, and if we have a character role, we do character clothes. It is only by the accident of a script that calls for fashion and an actress that can wear fashion that some of the beautiful clothes will emerge. I don't consider myself a designer in the sense of a fashion designer. I am a motion picture costume designer.<sup>57</sup>

This design process had become the normative practice that was followed by the top designers working in studio costume departments, such as Banton and Head at Paramount, and at Warner

15 Edith Head, Edward Stevenson, Howard Greer and Adrian c.1942



16 Mary Stuart (Katharine Hepburn)  
*Mary of Scotland*, 1936  
Costume designer Walter Plunkett



Bros by Orry-Kelly, probably best remembered for his work with Bette Davis. In describing Orry-Kelly's designs for Davis for *Jezebel* (1938) and *The Little Foxes* (1941), McConathy noted that he

depended more on detail than on flash to make his historical points. His psychological understanding of historical period, along with Davis's willingness to change her image entirely for a role, distinguished his beautifully executed ideas.... Bette Davis's classical period came ... in the forties, when she began to play independent, contemporary women whose clothes were a far less obtrusive part of the characterization. Even in those pictures, Davis's collaboration with Orry-Kelly was evident, and the elements of reportage and timeliness were an integral part of her look.<sup>58</sup>

Orry-Kelly's determination to help the actor find her character is seen in his work with Davis for *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939; plate 17). He researched the Elizabethan period thoroughly, but when Hungarian-born director Michael Curtiz saw the costumes for her first tests, he pointed to the hoop skirts and the ruff around Davis's neck and said: 'Too beeg'. But the designer and the star had been around long enough to win their way. Two sets of costumes were made. Davis tested in the scaled-down gowns and wore the larger, historically correct clothes in the film!<sup>59</sup> Bette Davis revived this favourite character much later in *The Virgin Queen* (1955) with the size of ruff and her farthingale intact.

Davis recognized Orry-Kelly's unwavering commitment to character and costume over fashion: 'His contribution to my career was an enormous one. He never featured his clothes to such a degree that the performance was overshadowed.'<sup>60</sup>

Over at RKO, Walter Plunkett continued to act as an executive costume designer throughout most of the 1930s.<sup>61</sup> He

preferred designing period films to creating costumes for contemporary ones because, in his words,

Everyone wants to stick his nose into modern things – the directors' wives, secretaries, actresses with rather bad taste. It's far easier when you can tell them, 'I love your idea, but it's just wrong for the period.' That gets them the hell off the set and out of your hair.<sup>62</sup>

His costumes for David O. Selznick's *Gone with the Wind* (1939) were his crowning achievement, successful because they were realistic enough to be viewed as correct period attire but attractive enough to be embraced by a 1939 audience as evocative of the story's romantic, Southern fairytale quality. Describing his approach to the task, Plunkett stated that he read the novel several times,

making notations of every line and passage containing a reference to clothes or related subjects. Then my secretary read the book to catch any items I might have missed, then we made a script of these notes, and it worked out that there would be almost 5,500 separate items, all of which would have to be made from scratch.<sup>63</sup>

Plunkett travelled to Atlanta to discuss his notes for the costumes with the book's author, Margaret Mitchell. Mitchell brought him to the homes of women who had kept heirloom clothing from the antebellum period and he cut fabric swatches from hems and made sketches as he went.<sup>64</sup> Of his design process, Plunkett stated:

You don't first make a sketch and then go hunting for a fabric that will do what you want it to do. You get that piece of fabric and you hold it, you play with it, you



17 Queen Elizabeth I (Bette Davis)

*The Virgin Queen*, 1955

Costume designer Mary Wills

throw it around to see how it moves, how it reflects light, then you know how you are going to use it. It's like building a house, you have to know the materials you are going to use before you design the house.<sup>65</sup>

Looking back over his career, Plunkett said of *Gone with the Wind*:

I don't think it was my best work, or even the biggest thing I ever did.... But that picture, of course, will go on forever, and that green dress, because it makes a story point, is probably the most famous costume in the history of motion pictures. So I am very glad I did it.<sup>66</sup>

The role of the costume designer is to create the best costume for the character within the context of the narrative and the visual style of the film. The most historically accurate costume may not be the most theatrically effective costume on camera. In a remark that illustrates the dichotomous role of the costume designer within highly pressured collaborative relationships, Plunkett gently complained of his *Gone with the Wind* director:

Selznick wasn't interested in accuracy. I did research in the South because I thought it was necessary. Selznick was much more worried about being true to Margaret Mitchell. If he objected to a design, I'd only have to point out one of her descriptions in the novel and he was satisfied.<sup>67</sup>

During the 1930s everyone involved in the Hollywood film industry, particularly costume designers, paid close attention to the Hays Office of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the censorship organization led by William H.

Hays. In 1930 the Hays Office authored a production code providing 'moral guidelines' for the content and language of films.<sup>68</sup> The censorship code published in 1927 had been largely ignored for the first several years of its passage: Edith Head reminisced that in the freewheeling 1920s and early 1930s, 'Our only rule ... was will it stay on? If dresses fell off, we just shot again'.<sup>69</sup>

The censors of the 1930s became intrusive. Every single dress had to be reviewed for modesty and a representative from the Hays Office, which also ensured compliance on the sets, studied all costume tests. No sign of pregnancy was permitted, no garters, and – heaven forbid! – no cleavage. Even the slightest shadow that suggested cleavage could suspend production. Designers were called to sets to adjust problematic necklines, and handkerchiefs and extra ruffles were always in great demand to camouflage bare skin.

Hollywood's Golden Age continued through the Second World War. Americans flocked to the cinema, 'with weekly attendance climbing from 80 million in 1940 to nearly 100 million in 1946'.<sup>70</sup> The war brought changes to the film industry, such as a shift toward more 'realistic' films,<sup>71</sup> reflecting both tightened budgets and the sober mood of the nation. The work of costume designers was affected by this change. Of more direct impact, however, was the new rationing of fabrics. In an effort to conserve resources in 1942, the United States government issued a directive known as L-85, which, according to Edith Head, 'drastically limited the amount of fabric that could be used in any garment construction – including Hollywood costumes. It meant no pleats, no cuffs, no ruffles, no long jackets, no extra frills'.<sup>72</sup>

By the mid-1940s resourceful costume designers had found economical ways to cope with wartime shortages while maintaining the integrity of their purpose to honour every script. The



**18 Ringo Kid (John Wayne)**  
*Stagecoach*, 1939  
Costume designer Walter Plunkett



**19 Delilah (Hedy Lamarr)**  
*Samson and Delilah*, 1949  
 Costume designers Edith Head, Gile Steele, Dorothy Jeakins, Gwen Wakeling and Elois W. Jenssen

**20 Sketch for Delilah**  
*Samson and Delilah*, 1949  
 Costume designers Edith Head, Gile Steele, Dorothy Jeakins, Gwen Wakeling and Elois W. Jenssen  
 Illustrator Donna Kline



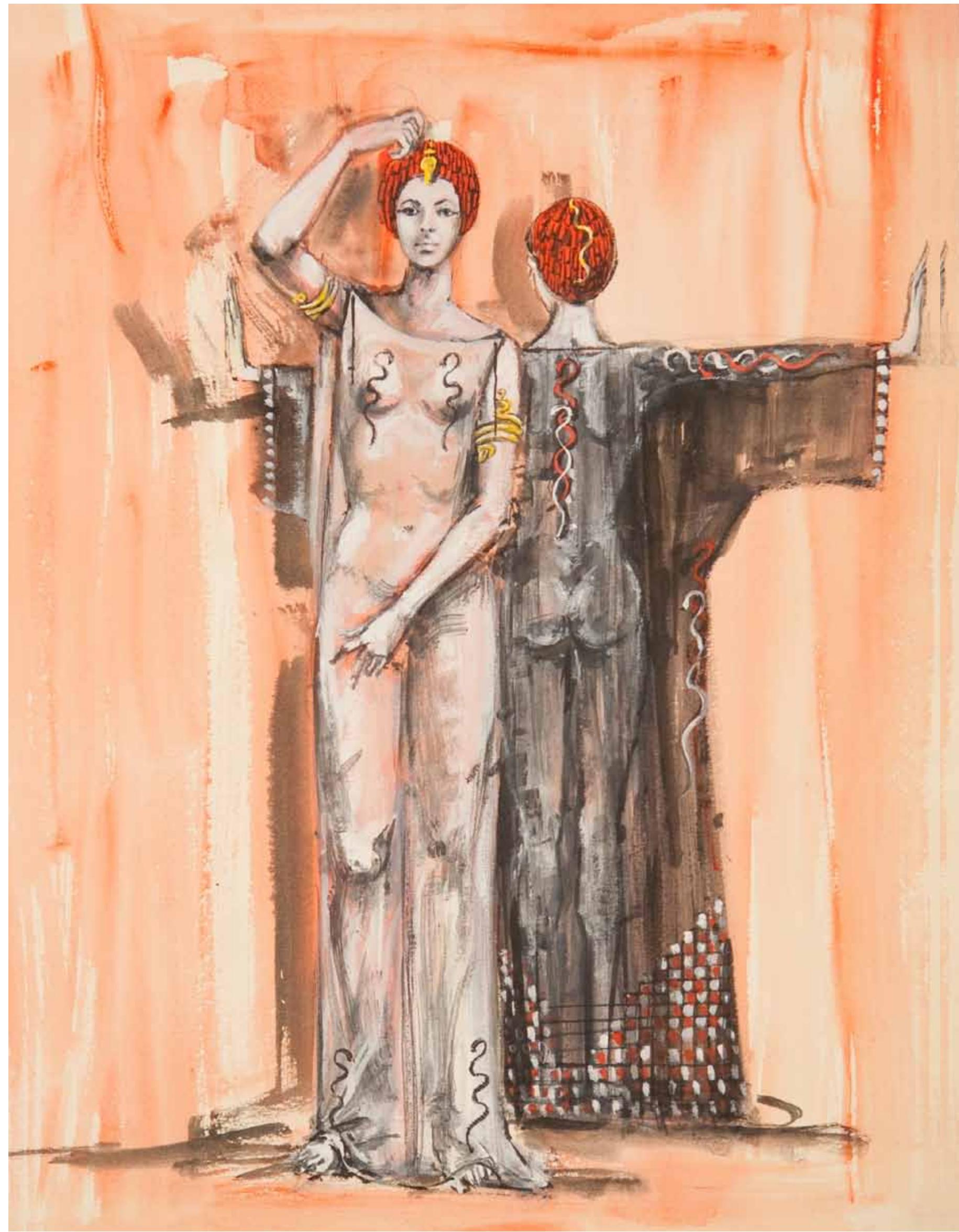
factory system at the major studios was in full swing, the amassing and recycling of costumes continued, and wardrobe stocks grew as pictures were produced in multiple genres. These well-worn costumes became vital assets when fabric shortages made new costume construction during the war impossible.

The Golden Age was a time of consolidation of the classical Hollywood style.<sup>73</sup> Under the management of the executive costume designer, the costume department was subdivided into costumers who worked on the set with finished costumes and those who toiled in the workroom manufacturing the costumes. The assembly-line process was streamlined and the internal hierarchy of the department became formalized.

Throughout the Golden Era, costume designers continued to design primarily for lead actresses. However, this procedure was to change forever with the arrival of Irene Sharaff, a veteran Broadway designer from New York. The overall responsibilities of the costume designer grew in the early 1940s, as Miss Sharaff wrote:

One fundamental difference, which I found at MGM in 1942 between designing costumes for the screen and for the stage illustrates a step in the changing role of designers. At that time there was an almost Victorian attitude in the separation of designing of men's costumes from those of the women. Hardly any attention was given to integrating the costumes of stars with the others, and little thought was given to a degree of coherence in the look of a scene and of the production as a whole.... The situation began to change in Hollywood, and I believe it soon became generally accepted that one designer was put on a picture and worked on all of the costumes on it.<sup>74</sup>

Before Sharaff's arrival in Hollywood most film designers analyzed each script for the costumes they needed to design for individual actresses. But Irene Sharaff and Helen Rose, both designers with Broadway careers, introduced to Hollywood the concepts of an





OPPOSITE

**21 Sketch for Cleopatra**

*Cleopatra*, 1963

Costume designers Irene Sharaff, Nino Novarese and Renie  
Illustrator Irene Sharaff

ABOVE

**22 Irene Sharaff arranging the costume for Cleopatra**

(Elizabeth Taylor)

*Cleopatra*, 1963

Costume designers Irene Sharaff, Nino Novarese and Renie

overall colour palette and the design integration of an entire cast of characters that were commonplace in the theatre. Thus designers began to work closely with the art director from the beginning of each production, approaching screenplays in the same way as their counterparts in the theatre. The immediate effect of the 'one designer' approach was a cohesive and integrated look for each film.

### THE 1950s AND 1960s

The decline of the studio factory system did not mean the end of the Hollywood studio, nor did it mean the end of the Hollywood film, as both are still very much with us today. What began after the close of the Second World War was a slow dissolution of the 'studio system of moviemaking, the near-absolute power that the studio wielded over the American movie industry'.<sup>75</sup> Many events contributed to the demise of the studios' power, including a renewed zealousness of antitrust activity by the United States Justice Department and the growing popularity of television.<sup>76</sup>

No two studios were affected by these changes in precisely the same way. According to Thomas Schatz, MGM 'held out against the inevitable longer than any other company, turning out the last of Hollywood's studio-era productions'.<sup>77</sup> To costume designers this meant that for the moment they retained their regular studio positions, luxurious facilities and craftspeople. Certainly the wardrobe department at MGM retained a factory-like quality after the war, and the studio executives were still very interested in having their say about costumes. Chief designer Helen Rose and her staff remained at MGM, Twentieth Century-Fox retained Charles LeMaire as Executive Designer and head of wardrobe until 1959, and Jean Louis stayed at Columbia until 1958.<sup>78</sup> However, the studios were cutting back on contract staff during this transitional period. For most others, costume design became a freelance career.

It is axiomatic that costumes designed for Hollywood's post-war years retained their character-creating purpose and definition. Orry-Kelly's determination to create outrageous characters is seen in the classic comedy *Some Like It Hot* (1959), in which Monroe wears a series of sheer cocktail dresses. One story circulating at the time claimed that Marilyn Monroe wanted an even more revealing wardrobe for the film but, rising to the challenge, 'Kelly argued it was wrong for the character, saying "Sugar Kane is the kind of girl who will go so far and no further"'.<sup>79</sup>

By the 1950s the film director had emerged as the final stylistic authority as the power of the studios began to wane. Edith Head remembers her guidance in the 1950s coming solely from a director, Alfred Hitchcock. About her first Hitchcock film, *Notorious* (1946), Head remembers:

He was very specific about costumes for his leading ladies. He spoke a designer's language, even though he didn't know the first thing about clothes. He specified colors in the script if they were important. If he wanted a skirt that brushed a desk as a woman walked by, he spelled that out too. For *Notorious*, he repeated many times that the clothes must not be a focal point, that Bergman was to be a believable secret agent.<sup>80</sup>

Hitchcock cared deeply about the clothes of the characters in his films, and they are very specific. He used costume to balance the frame with colour and scale, working out the look of the picture by using storyboards extensively. He worked closely with his Edith Head; prior to shooting he insisted on knowing how every costume would look in the frame (see p.85).

Constant and vigilant awareness of the censors' mandates continued to be one of the tasks of Hollywood costume designers. In 1956 the Motion Picture Production Code was revised, but most of its provisions remained virtually unchanged.<sup>81</sup> Irene Sharaff recalled:

With the emphasis on bosoms at the time, the amount of cleavage permitted was left to the discretion of a man from the censorship office, whose OK was necessary for every dress and costume before it could be shot.... This taboo on crannies and expanses of flesh started a prodigious use in Hollywood of nude-colored soufflé under transparent materials, for so long as there was a covering, however thin, the studio could claim that the actress was fully clothed.<sup>82</sup>

An on-site censor was not uncommon. Head consulted at length with the studio specialist concerning Hedy Lamarr's scanty costumes for *Samson and Delilah* (1949; plates 19, 20), recalling that the censorship issue was so delicate that she was still visiting the set to consult with the censor on the last day of shooting.<sup>83</sup> Censorship reigned omniscient in the industry and was a thorn in the side of the costume designer in the post-war years, until the ratings system finally replaced the Hays Code in 1968.

In an attempt to heighten the appeal of films, the industry began experimenting with new ways to lure Americans back to the cinemas (and away from their television sets). One cause of flagging attendance – at least for big studio 'A' films – was the exodus of Americans to the suburbs, away from the downtown movie palaces, and the arrival of the drive-in theatre. Wider, deeper screens were developed to accommodate new methods of making bigger, more visually impressive films. One such innovation was CinemaScope, a technique that Twentieth Century Fox announced in 1953 would be applied to 'all future productions'.<sup>84</sup> The first Fox film produced in CinemaScope was *The Robe* (1953), originally scheduled as a black-and-white film designed by Charles LeMaire and Emile Santiago.

The films offered grandeur of scale – as seen in action, sets/location, and costumes – that simply did not project on the television screen. Therefore Hollywood focused on 'big' films in the 1950s as another way to attract an audience. Although the Western had always been a favourite with American audiences, it

#### OPPOSITE

**23 Helen Lawson (Susan Hayward)**  
*Valley of the Dolls*, 1967  
Costume designer William Travilla

**24 Costume for Helen Lawson**  
*Valley of the Dolls*, 1967  
Costume designer William Travilla  
The Collection of Motion Picture Costume Design Larry McQueen



was given a new life as a main feature:<sup>85</sup> until 1960, half of all films produced in Hollywood were Westerns. The Western had traditionally been the product of the smaller studios such as Republic, and although costume designers routinely contributed to them, the men's costumes for these films were generally pulled from costume stock by costume supervisors from the studio's wardrobe department. But with the rebirth of the Western as a high-budget commodity, the most established costume designers began to lend their skills to the genre. For example, Walter Plunkett designed costumes for Selznick's *Duel in the Sun* (1946) René Hubert designed costumes for Twentieth Century Fox's *Broken Arrow* (1950), and veteran Frank Beets was credited as the costume designer for *The Searchers* (1956; plate 344).

The new wide screens were perfect for the 'epic' and the 1950s brought a host of gladiator, ancient history films, and musicals. With casts of thousands, it is not unexpected to see the label 'costume picture' applied to these epics, period and fantasy films. Approximately fifty thousand people appeared in *Ben-Hur* (1959),<sup>86</sup> the best of the 'sword-and-sandal' epics. Creating the costumes for these films required a tremendous amount of design and organization, and it was not uncommon to hire several costume designers for one picture. Five costume designers are credited on two DeMille/Paramount epics – *Samson and Delilah* (1949)<sup>87</sup> and *The Ten Commandments* (1956).<sup>88</sup> Hollywood also turned to lavish musicals to regenerate public interest, such as the classic *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), with costumes by Walter Plunkett.

'If any film made in the sixties symbolized the end of old Hollywood, it was *Cleopatra* [1963], the costs of which finally accelerated to \$40 million.'<sup>89</sup> Irene Sharaff, who designed Elizabeth Taylor's costumes for the film (plates 21, 22), recalled that the magnitude of the project was complicated by the fact that the script and schedule were not complete when she started working:

I had a rough breakdown of the scenes in which she [Taylor] appeared, by which to figure out what would be needed and which scenes were likely to be shot first. Since the ceremonial costumes were the most complicated to make and would need more time, I started them in Hollywood and also put into work three others, totaling sixteen. The rest of her costumes were made at the same costume house in Rome where additional costumes were being made for the new cast and for the crowd scenes.<sup>90</sup>

*Cleopatra* was a financial disaster, and although it was not the last epic-style production offered by Hollywood in the 1960s, the interest in smaller, more thematically complex films was on the rise by the middle of the decade. New American film-makers from both coasts – such as John Cassavetes, Arthur Penn, Roger Corman, Sam Peckinpah and Mike Nichols – were finding a voice, and experienced directors were exploring new approaches to storytelling. This casual approach to film craft and 'realness', coupled with the financial woes of the studios,<sup>91</sup> diminished the studios' willingness to spend money, hire costume designers or generate the energy to manufacture costumes. By the mid-1960s, 'budgets assumed major importance and the costume departments were one of the first places that expenses were cut'.<sup>92</sup> As Edith Head put it, 'the studio designer ... was suddenly a thing of

the past'.<sup>93</sup> This was a dark foreshadowing of what would become in the next decade a fight for the very existence of the profession.

Although the status and prestige of the costume designer had grown in the late 1940s and early 1950s, with the first Academy Award for best costume design in 1948, the film industry's overall slump prompted a sharp reduction in feature releases, resulting in deep job cuts in the costume department. The studio workrooms were decimated and many studio designers lost their contracts. Edith Head, who left Paramount for Universal when her contract was not renewed in 1967, reflected that at that time: 'More and more contemporary costumes were simply being purchased in Los Angeles and Beverly Hills department stores – and that was a job for an increasingly important person in the wardrobe department, *the shopper*'.<sup>94</sup> 'The growing demand for utter realism required costumes that had a straight-from-the-rack look; indeed, countless films were so costumed, with a designer acting more as a "shopper" for suitable garments than as an artist who was an integral part of a carefully conceived production.'<sup>95</sup>

With the rise of super-naturalistic film-making, Hollywood costume budgets were reduced and the overall recognition of the costume designer was diminished. Directors such as Mike Nichols, Sidney Lumet and Arthur Penn continue to trust and collaborate with costume designers but the polished style of the Hollywood Golden Age was an anathema. With few exceptions, desire for a 'real' or 'raw' near-documentary style led costume designers to buying and coordinating costumes for modern films in boutiques, department stores and thrift shops. Costume designers lost ground in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the perception grew among producers that contemporary costuming could be accomplished by 'anyone'.

Regardless of whether costumes were manufactured, pulled from costume stock or bought at a thrift shop, their core purpose – to realize the people in the story – remained a constant during the 1960s. Sadly there are only a handful of recollections and observations from those involved during this era. Costume design and character continued to be taken very seriously by the best film-makers and substantive conversations continued about the clothes. Authenticity continued to be the hallmark of great work. For the extras' costumes on *My Fair Lady* (1964), Cecil Beaton was asked by director George Cukor

to start looking right now for old clothes to wear in Covent Garden – old used clothes, not just things that are dirtied up by the prop man, but real old, worn materials, and masses of them: vests and shirts and jersey and coats on coats, and lots of petticoats under skirts.<sup>96</sup>

Beaton was committed to the realization of his own childhood memory of Ascot:

In this production there are virtually no 'extras' and, with the exception of the tails at the Ball, and the grey frock-coats at Ascot, there are no 'repeats'. Even the men in the cockney scenes are being created as individual characters.... Among the four hundred women at the Ball and at Ascot, there is not one



**25** Fanny Brice (Barbra Streisand)  
*Funny Girl*, 1968  
Costume designer Irene Sharaff

**26** Sketch for Fanny Brice  
*Funny Girl*, 1968  
Costume designer and illustrator Irene Sharaff





**27** Virginia Hill and Bugsy Siegel  
(Annette Bening and Warren Beatty)  
*Bugsy*, 1991  
Costume designer Albert Wolsky

**28** Sketch for Virginia Hill  
*Bugsy*, 1991  
Costume designer Albert Wolsky  
Illustrator Shawna Leavell Trpcic

costume that has not been specially designed, or recreated from museum sources, with the care and attention given to a principal's clothes.<sup>97</sup>

Janet Leigh, the star of Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), related her experience with the film's costume designer Helen Colvig and set costumer Rita Riggs:

It was the practice at the time for wardrobe to be custom-made, but Mr Hitchcock insisted we shop in a regular ready-to-wear store. He asked us to buy Marion's two dresses off the rack and only pay what a secretary could afford. We all agreed.

The slip mentioned in the novel and script became a bra and half-slip. For the opening love scene, a white bra and half-slip were chosen. Then after she steals the money and is changing for the ride to see Sam, we switched to a black bra and half-slip. Mr Hitchcock wanted even the wardrobe to reflect the good and evil each of us has lurking within our inner selves.<sup>98</sup>

At the end of the decade, costume designer Theadora Van Runkle was hired by Arthur Penn for her first picture, *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967; plate 29). When she showed her costume illustrations to Penn, he declared, 'If the film is as good as your drawings, it will be a hit'. Van Runkle said that 'the minute I opened the script, I saw ... everything everybody should wear as I read. And I never really deviated.'<sup>99</sup>

Some designers, such as William Travilla, were still creating couture clothes for every actress in the film, and often the result was a stage-bound, stilted affair harking back to an earlier era. Reflecting on *Valley of the Dolls* (1967), fashion critic Simon Doonan remembers:

Individually, the clothes in this film weren't all that exceptional. It's more how they worked as a whole to define the three types of women – as well as to illustrate their transformations from prissy to tarty – that made these looks so memorable. When we look back at these girls they seem so sweet and composed in their very dressmaker-chic sixties outfits. The film is about druggies, about being addicted to pills and booze, yet the characters look like Lady Bird Johnson.<sup>100</sup>

The Hollywood studio entered the 1960s trying to find a cohesive identity in the new world of media conglomerates. Film historians consider the mid-1960s to be the absolute end of 'Old Hollywood'. By this time, "the studio system" was all but gone. The studios would survive – as production plants, as distribution companies, as familiar trademarks – but the studio era had ended, and with it Hollywood's classical age.<sup>101</sup> By decade's end the Hollywood film had been deconstructed and redefined.

**29 Sketch for Bonnie Parker (Faye Dunaway)**  
*Bonnie and Clyde*, 1967  
Costume designer and  
illustrator Theadora Van Runkle

Many inside and outside the industry feel that the true turning point came with the release of the costume designer-less *Easy Rider* (1969): 'The impact of *Easy Rider*, both on the film-makers and the industry as a whole, was no less than seismic.... To the Hollywood old guard, the good news was that after nearly a decade of floundering the films had finally *connected*, found a new audience.'<sup>102</sup>

The normative practices of costume design established fifty years earlier (whether practiced by a costume designer or someone else) survived as modern scripts were dissected for continuity, characters evaluated and diagnosed, sketches generated, and colour palettes devised and discussed with the art and camera departments. Actors continued to arrive at the studio or on location for fittings and to discuss the costumes for their characters, and purchased clothes were altered, adjusted, dyed and aged. Bought or borrowed, rented or manufactured, beautiful or ugly, vulgar or sophisticated, costumes continued to serve the script, the character, the frame and the director.

#### THE TWENTIETH CENTURY BOWS OUT

The mid-1970s was a time in Hollywood when the last veteran craftsmen of the studio system were on the cusp of retirement and the producers and executives who had entered the film business after the Second World War had taken over the management of the major studios. The craftspeople working both in studio workrooms and soundstages were an eclectic mix of the old guard and the new. Many film directors were now the youngest people on the crew.





30 **Travis Bickle (Robert De Niro)**

*Taxi Driver, 1976*

**Costume designer Ruth Morley**

OPPOSITE

31 **Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford)**

*Raiders of the Lost Ark, 1981*

**Costume designer Deborah Nadoolman**

32 **Sketch for Indiana Jones**

*Raiders of the Lost Ark, 1981*

**Costume designer Deborah Nadoolman**

**Illustrator Steven Spielberg**

The Hollywood studios entered the 1970s with an identity crisis, half-empty back lots, skeleton staffs and a few very confused and panic-stricken executives. Costume design had come full-circle in some respects. As in the early, primitive days of Hollywood, on low-budget independent modern films, actors might be asked to provide their own clothing as costumes if it worked for the part. It was common practice in the 1970s for costume designers to be hired to design a film and then be forced to depart after the commencement of principal photography – producers were not willing to keep the designers on the payroll for the run of the picture. The production component of the designer's role became radically foreshortened, missing the opportunity to continue to design new characters as they were cast in the film, check the principal actors' costumes on the set, and work with the assistant director and cinematographer to place the background talent to best advantage on the set and within the frame. By default, the costume supervisor gained as a result of the designer's demotion, shouldering more of the designer's responsibilities and decision-making power on the set, as the person ultimately responsible for the physical costumes and management of the department. According to an article in *The Los Angeles Times*, with

● In *Taxi Driver*, when I finally found the plaid shirt Bobby wanted to wear, when I found the army jacket, the pants, well, he wanted to wear them. ●

RUTH MORLEY, COSTUME DESIGNER

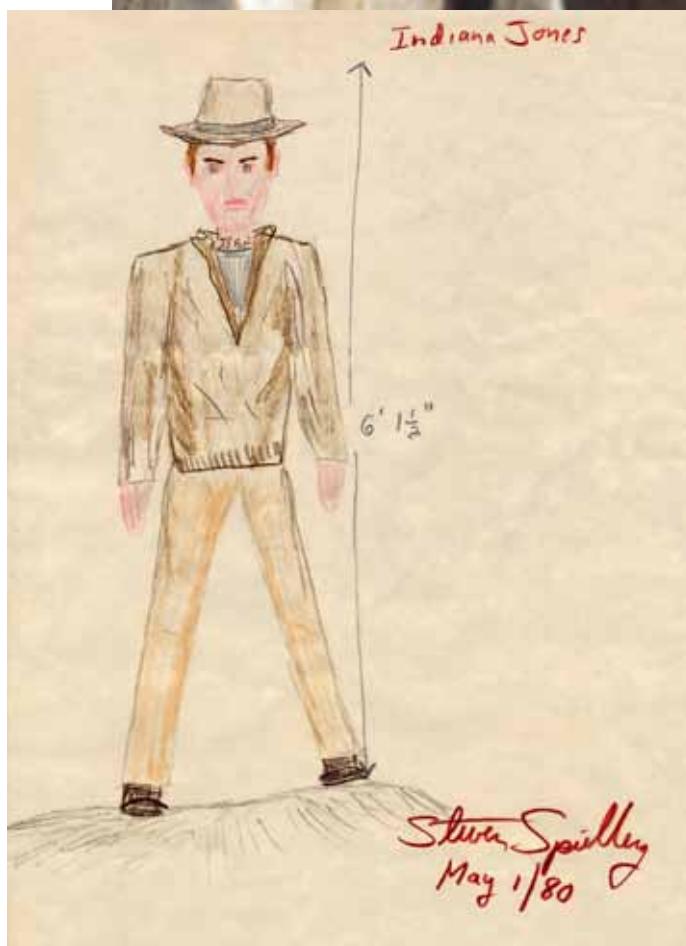
half of Hollywood...teetering on an economic tight-rope.... The way it looks for costume designers, they might as well jump. Their equilibrium, it seems, has been upset not only by the move to shoestring cinema but by a radical shift in how actors and actresses should look and who should help them look that way.<sup>103</sup>

But towards the end of the 1970s budgets grew, and greater risks were taken. The traditional role of the costume designer became solidly re-established in action and adventure, science fiction and fantasy films. Directors in these genres required full partnership with a costume designer in order to accomplish their vision. *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977) progenitor George Lucas said, 'On the first films I purposefully avoided intense design cultures. I kept the costumes very, very simple and the costumes were designed not to draw attention to themselves' (plate 33).<sup>104</sup> As the industry recovered, the studios were willing to spend more money for a greater return on their investment. Directors were given the tools to allow their imaginations full reign. At the suggestion of director Ridley Scott, designer John Mollo used an unlikely source of inspiration to create costumes for *Alien* (1979). Science fiction has a tradition of leveraging ethnography and world culture for invented worlds: rather than designing spacesuits based on gear worn by astronauts, Mollo's space travellers wore outfits derived from the armour of Japanese Samurai.<sup>105</sup>

Costume designers continued to produce valuable work in naturalistic stories as well. Among New York film-makers, character was king. Martin Scorsese collaborated with costume designer Ruth Morley to create a rough and recognizable New York story, *Taxi Driver* (1976; plate 30). This required total commitment by the actors; in Morley's words, 'I like working with actors who care more than with actors who say "Put something on me"'. In *Taxi Driver*, when I finally found the plaid shirt Bobby wanted to wear, when I found the army jacket, the pants, well, he wanted to wear them.'

By the 1980s the studio hierarchy had shifted to the new order and the structure of the film business had finally stabilized. It was a time when Hollywood regained its equilibrium. Although many sophisticated films for adults were produced, the primary target became the teen audience and the studios produced a flurry of 'high-concept', 'popcorn' films.<sup>106</sup> 'The eighties, goes the conventional wisdom, was the decade when Hollywood gave up any pretence of engaging the emotions and challenging the intellect, concentrating solely on meeting the demands of the marketplace', writes Jon Bernstein.<sup>107</sup>

When Steven Spielberg first gave me the script of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981; plates 31, 32) he described it as a big 'B' film. In fact, Spielberg screened the 'B' film on which it was based, *The Secret of the Incas* (1954), in order to ascertain whether he could



replicate the exciting and heroic Saturday morning serial experience of the film. Spielberg, echoing *Raiders* producer and *Star Wars* (1977) director George Lucas, had a male teenage audience in mind from the very beginning.

Although he was not the original choice for the role, Harrison Ford did more than wear the clothes that I designed; he inhabited Indiana Jones, saying:

I intentionally keep my interpretation simple. I don't make up a character who could have a life without benefit of the specific story. Han Solo [Star Wars], Indiana Jones [Raiders of the Lost Ark], Rick Deckard [Blade Runner] – they wear different clothes and they live in different times. I'm not being glib when I say it's as simple as that.<sup>108</sup>

From the earliest days of the industry, some films had always been made outside the studios on distant locations. The 1980s saw the real beginning of production flight from the home base of Hollywood studios. Shooting in East Africa posed a serious challenge for designer Milena Canonero in creating costumes for Sidney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985; plate 162). Canonero's rigorous research had to include not only the details of the Belle Epoque clothing worn by Europeans in the 1910s, but also the tribal costume of the East Africans: 'It's not easy to find references in books showing what the Somalis wore in those days.'<sup>109</sup> Canonero was astonished that after its release, 'The costumes in *Out of Africa* had quite an impact on fashion. It was as though the fashion world was ready for the styles of the film; the costumes just caught something that was in the air.' But the fashion accolades did not reassure Meryl Streep who, accustomed to taking on the challenges of a new role, was unsure of her performance. On her portrayal of Danish writer Isak Dinesen, Streep said, 'It's hard to feel you're doing justice to the ghost. I always feel inadequate toward it. I'm intimidated by walking in someone else's shoes.'

The integrity of designing and manufacturing contemporary costumes survived the cutbacks of the 1970s and '80s. Purchased and sourced clothing was aged to look worn just as as custom-made clothes had been in the past. In the words of Milena Canonero,

In contemporary films, often, our work is less obvious, but I try to find, beside the palette, something more satisfying ... I hate it when people think that a contemporary film is not really costume-designed because so much is bought. It is like saying that a production designer does not 'art direct' because a film is shot on existing locations. I do believe that selections and choices constitute designing a look.<sup>110</sup>

The seamless integration of modern costume into the story was an imperative, the clothes telling the story quietly and with confident authority. Ultimately the clothes must never overwhelm the dialogue. Ellen Mirojnick, costume designer for *Wall Street* (1987; plate 372) and *Basic Instinct* (1992; plate 307), described the transformative effect that modern costumes have on performers (and on the audience): 'I get scared stiff the character will look like a cardboard cutout up there on the screen. Because, if the actor can't move *into* his or her clothes – the character's clothes – then the audience will notice the clothes, not the man, not the woman, not the body, and I've failed.'<sup>111</sup>

As the marketplace continued to evolve in the 1990s, directors maintained their role as authors of the film while stars gained ever more power. Deals were leveraged more and more on the drawing power of stars, based on the opening weekend box office grosses. Eager to offset risk, studios counted on fans wanting to see their favourite actors.

As the countdown to the end of the twentieth century began, studios continued to release full-length features as entertainment for all ages. Baby-boomers wanted to enjoy 'family' entertainment with their children. Full-length animated films were revitalized by the Michael Eisner and Jeffrey Katzenberg team at



33 Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia Organa and Han Solo (Mark Hamill, Carrie Fisher and Harrison Ford) *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, 1977  
Costume designer John Mollo

Disney, and by Steve Jobs and director John Lasseter at Pixar. These witty, child-friendly multigenerational films, such as the Oscar-nominated *Beauty and the Beast* (1991) and the revolutionary *Toy Story* (1995), were novel in that they could also be enjoyed by parents. Costume designers were asked for the first time to design the costumes for animated characters – Joanna Johnston for Robert Zemeckis' early groundbreaking *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) and later, Isis Mussenden for *Shrek* (2001).

The turn of the century was also marked by the national reporting of weekly Hollywood box office returns in such industry papers as *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* and read by the film going audience in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*. This was the era of populist ratings (thumbs up or down) and the death of the long-suffering drive-in theatre. The huge opening-day profits and success of such films as *Titanic* (1997; plates 37–9) led to even greater opening weekend pressure on producers and studios seeking to top other studios – and themselves.

Although the James Cameron film was rumoured to be a production nightmare, with the costume department dealing with the challenge of hundreds of stunt people in period clothes jumping into the water, *Titanic* broke every worldwide box office record. The film attracted an adoring public. Its broad appeal included the legend surrounding the ship herself; the romantic storyline; the hit musical score; and the boatload of endearing characters, from first class to steerage. Winner of an Academy Award for Best Costume Design, Deborah L. Scott said that 'This was an era of great formality. People of wealth changed their wardrobe four and five times a day. Their clothes were so elaborate that personal maids and valets were absolutely necessary. The clothes were incredibly beautiful and detailed.'<sup>112</sup>

The formulaic blockbuster was bait to studio executives, luring the public to multiplexes with the new digital special effects, Dolby Sound and a spectacle that the small screen could not possibly offer. By 1999 the dye was set with the *Matrix* series, which also broke new boundaries with computer generated effects. Costume designer Kym Barrett approached this science fiction thriller as she would any film:

I'm looking at the big picture of the whole film and every member of the cast and all the different conceptual worlds we move through. It's a very organic process we go through. Things are coming to me from all over the world and people are working in little shops all around the city or in different countries. It's like its own corporation almost.<sup>113</sup>

While many of the studios' films went on to gross over \$100 million, the special effects-laden, high-concept scripts left the door wide open for audiences seeking edgy films like Ethan and Joel Coens' *The Big Lebowski* (1998; plates 75, 145). Jeff Dowd, who was the basis for Jeff Bridges' character 'The Dude' in the film, revealed that 'When my daughter saw a poster of the film, she said, "Daddy, where did they get all your clothes?"'<sup>114</sup> Such intimate, smaller-scale, character-driven narratives were often to be found in independent films, but these were not the films that studios were interested in making at the time. Their costume designers, such as the Coen Brothers' constant key collaborator Mary

Zophres, were overlooked at the Academy Award nominations for Best Costume Design. Independent films were most often made cheaply, on location, with a company of actors and minimal special effects. Their opening weekend box office expectations were modest and, with marketing and advertising budgets skyrocketing, they entertained a small but dedicated audience.

As they gained steam at the box office and attracted critical acclaim, Hollywood responded by institutionalizing the indies by acquiring them. The studios developed their own in-house 'independent' production arms. In the 1996 Academy Awards race, four of the five nominees for best picture were from independent studios. But earning studio-level grosses was a near necessity in the new economics of independent films. Every studio was looking for the next *Shakespeare in Love* (1998; plates 40, 42), which won the Academy Award for Best Picture, six more Oscars plus Best Costume Design for Sandy Powell.

As actors' fees grew ever higher, studios focused their interest on the stars they felt could guarantee a big opening weekend. In seeking less risk and more reward, they backed the stars to bring in the audiences. Costume budgets continued to shrink, alongside those in all below-the-line departments, to offset the overall cost of the cast.

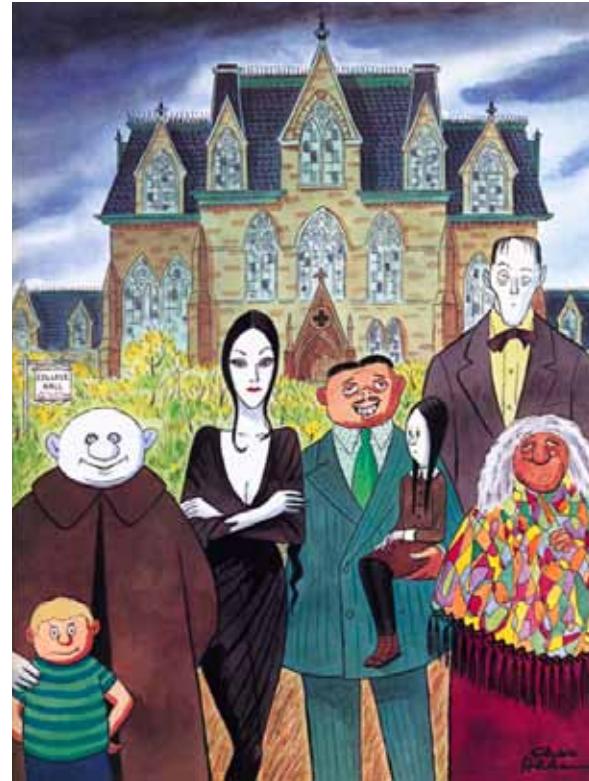
Hollywood production ramped up as the twenty-first century dawned, and by the end of the 1990s the annual number of films produced (450–500) rivalled the Golden Age. Because of the exorbitant marketing and advertising costs of each film release, which cancelled out box office profits, much of this product was sold direct-to-video with no cinematic release at all. VHS and, subsequently, DVD rentals were big business and those studio departments thrived.

As to the effect on costume designers, by the turn of the century 'runaway production' became the plague that the Hollywood labour unions could not stop. President of the Directors Guild of America (DGA) Jack Shea defined the practice as 'US-developed feature films which are filmed in another country for economic reasons'. Runaway production came to mean that the designer and the costume supervisor had to rebuild the entire studio costume workroom for each production outside the studio and often outside California – or even the United States. Without the physical plant of the studio (vast quantities of clothes, stocks of fabrics, trims and notions), the support of a veteran costume workroom with seamstresses and tailors and an experienced costume crew, designers were under unprecedented pressure to be ever more resourceful.

## THE DAWN OF THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

The first decade of the 2000s was a time when the studios' demand for fashion designer labels on clothing in films became a recurrent obstacle for costume designers. Cross-promotion and 'synergy' were the new bywords. Imposed by studios seeking to offset production and marketing costs, product placement, always a minefield, threatened to sabotage authentic characterizations. In the word of costume designer Anthony Powell,

I don't mind using a suit if it's right for the character, but if I have to use that name exclusively it bothers me terribly because nobody dresses that way. Nobody, unless



34 *The Addams Family*, 1991  
Costume designer Ruth Myers

35 Charles Addams (1912–88), the Addams Family standing in front of College Hall, University of Pennsylvania, first published as the cover of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 1973  
© 1973 Charles Addams  
With permission Tee and Charles Addams Foundation

OPPOSITE  
36 Costume for Morticia Addams (Anjelica Huston)  
*Addams Family Values*, 1993  
Costume designer Theoni V. Aldredge  
The Collection of Motion Picture Costume Design Larry McQueen



it's a story point, dresses from head to toe with one designer all bought three weeks ago at Barneys. You wear something from five years ago, you have something favorite, you mix this, you mix that, something got a little tight on you, something's more worn than something else. That's what clothes are about. That's what we have to accomplish designing modern costumes.<sup>115</sup>

Fashion's ever-passionate love affair with Hollywood heated up. This symbiotic relationship benefits fashion designers by associating their name with a film and an actor and by giving them licence to market clothes popularized by a film; and it benefits the producer by providing cash to offset costs, clothing and free advertising. The sacrifice can be the integrity of the story and the film. The director and the costume designer may argue vigorously against the intrusion of fashion labels and product placement, while the producer may be faced with a choice between making art and making money. Most just try to do their best not to lose money.

Audiences continue to want to dress like their favourite stars. The green bias-cut gown created by costume designer Jacqueline Durran for *Atonement* (2007; plate 315) spawned thousands of copies, introducing bright green to the prom dress market seen at graduation parties everywhere in 2007. With a modern sensibility aimed at re-creating the height of the Golden Age, Durran said, 'We used a modern aesthetic with '30s shapes. We literally made everything for the '30s scenes, finding original costumes and using shapes from that era remade with modern fabrics.'<sup>116</sup>

The 2000s have provided Hollywood costume designers much to sing about. Colleen Atwood has continued her role as muse to directors Tim Burton and Rob Marshall. Of her collaboration with Marshall for *Chicago* (2002; plate 306) she has said:

Rob definitely had a vision of the film, but as far as specifics about the costumes, he was very open to what I thought. We tried to keep a contrast between the real world Roxie lived in and the imagined world of the stage. It's like a parallel universe.<sup>117</sup>

For *Dreamgirls* (2006), designer Sharen Davis worked closely with the film's stars:

Beyoncé said the costumes forced her into a position of such uprightness that it gave her absolute confidence in what she was doing as a performer, while Jennifer [Hudson] said it made her feel like a Barbie, and made her stand up straight, which she didn't like to do!<sup>118</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Over the past century Hollywood films have become part of our shared global mythology. During the Golden Age of Hollywood the talent and craftsmanship at work in the major studios were of such a high calibre that even the 'B-pictures' displayed a level of storytelling that remains unequalled. Costume designers today continue to work in motion pictures using the same creative process and

values. It is the success or failure in telling a story that makes a film a classic or instantly forgettable. Whether it scared us, made us laugh or cry or just amazed us, the finished product, the film itself, is what makes these clothes in *Hollywood Costume* so special.

Mary Lea Bandy, retired director of the Film Department at the Museum of Modern Art, once asked me: 'Isn't there a better word for what you do than "costume"?' Her point hit home. The word 'costume' summons images of Halloween, carnival, circus and masked balls, where it is decorative, embellished, and an intrinsic part of spectacle. But cinema costuming aspires to be much more than superficial style. The characters are just like us – with a life lived before each film begins. Our clothes are inextricably part of our identity and our memory. The costume designer and actor search for that truth together. When Robert De Niro was honoured with an American Film Institute Lifetime Achievement Award, Martin Scorsese said: 'To be certain, he has an extraordinary genius to be able to transform himself, to undergo a metamorphosis, and to simply be, just BE the person he's playing.'

The clothes in *Hollywood Costume* are memorable because of the rich collaborative film-making process that creates great movies. Costumes are one tool that the film-maker has to tell the story. Nothing in the film frame is arbitrary and nothing is allowed to get in the way of the script. The 'best' costume design may be invisible. Director Sidney Lumet captured the essence when he said, 'Good style, to me, is unseen style. It is style that is felt.' Dorothy's gingham dress instantly brings that particular MGM picture to mind. The hat and leather jacket belonging to Indiana Jones and Holly Golightly's little black dress will always be identified with the films in which they appear (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*) and the actors who played those characters (Harrison Ford and Audrey Hepburn). Our expectation is to be entirely seduced, and that is what the film-maker must deliver if he or she expects us to care about their journey, to love the film and to elevate the characters into icons.





OPPOSITE

**37** Jack Dawson (Leonardo DiCaprio)

*Titanic*, 1997

Costume designer Deborah L. Scott

ABOVE

**38** Rose DeWitt Bukater (Kate Winslet)

*Titanic*, 1997

Costume designer Deborah L. Scott

RIGHT

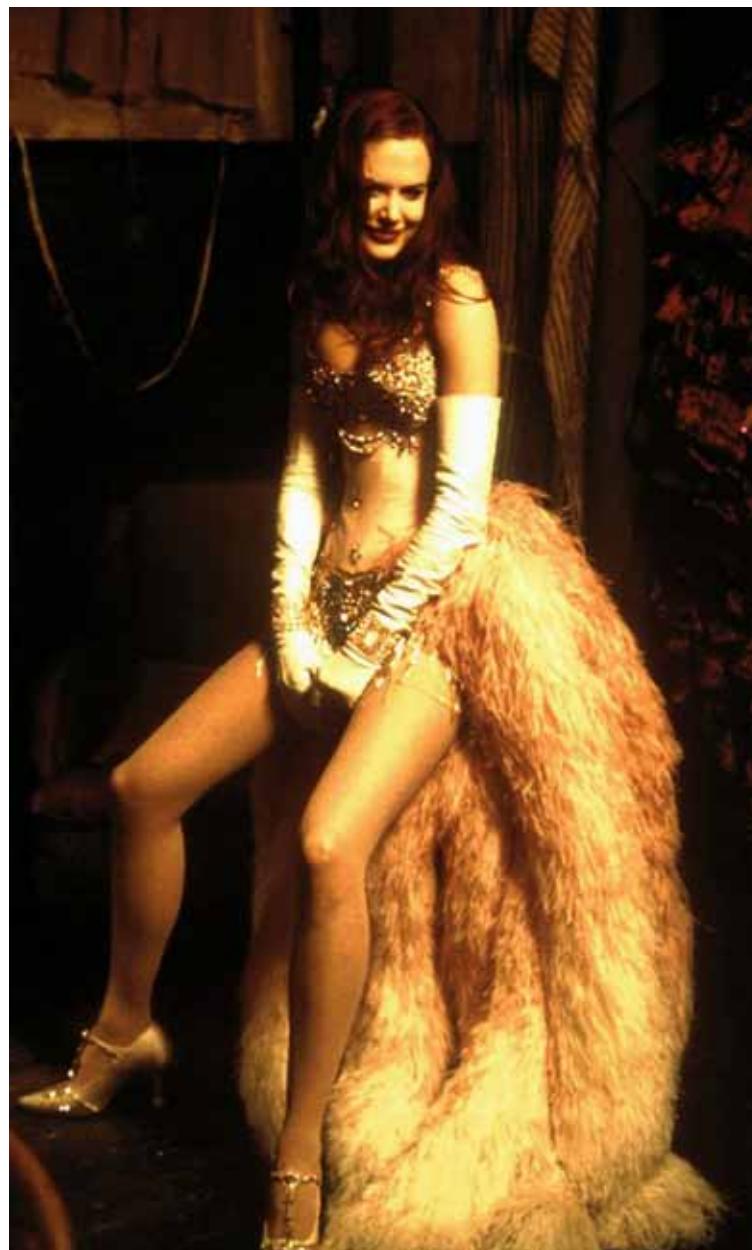
**39** Sketch for Rose DeWitt Bukater

*Titanic*, 1997

Costume designer Deborah L. Scott

Illustrator David Le Vey





ABOVE LEFT  
**40** Sketch for Viola De Lesseps  
*Shakespeare in Love*, 1998  
 Costume designer and illustrator  
 Sandy Powell

ABOVE RIGHT  
**41** Satine (Nicole Kidman)  
*Moulin Rouge!*, 2001  
 Costume designers Catherine Martin  
 and Angus Strathie

LEFT  
**42** Viola De Lesseps and  
 William Shakespeare  
 (Gwyneth Paltrow and  
 Joseph Fiennes)  
*Shakespeare in Love*, 1998  
 Costume designer Sandy Powell

OPPOSITE  
**43** Sketch for Satine  
*Moulin Rouge!*, 2001  
 Costume designers Catherine Martin  
 and Angus Strathie  
 Illustrator Angus Strathie



*J.C.*  
Jaque Chikine