Hollywood Designs 1930s

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GREEN: One, two, three, four, all right. This is Robert L. Green in Hollywood, California and the subject of this particular tape is based upon a lecture given by me on Hollywood. They’re a series of lectures and I will try to get them all on tape because they do capture the whole world of Hollywood costume design. And for this particular tape, I’m going to concentrate on the focus of the golden era of cinema glamor, the ’30s. It was a period -- well, then of course you realize that films glorified the traditional American dream of success, riches in the face of a great world depression.

As I thought about it, you realize it’s reality that mingled easily [1:00] with fantasy and the screen presented us with romanticized and idealized visions, images of ourselves. In the ’30s, glamor was the core adjective to any star’s aura. The studios took the time and money to find and polish star quality. It was no secret or mystery that people who had ordinary backgrounds, and sometimes came from limited education, and little taste at all, were polished. The attempt was to find the star quality. No effort was spared to redefine, I suppose is
the term -- or maybe reinforce -- to reinforce the indefinable attraction that you found in those people that had faces then. Greta Garbo, Dietrich, Crawford, [02:00] Hepburn.

The ’30s shimmered. With Hollywood at its grandest, it was a dream reinforced by costumes and gowns and even today, epitomized sophisticated beauty and a kind of timeless satisfaction and fascination. It is a classic memory of Hollywood in glamor that we have to do everything we can to preserve because it will never come again.

It was a need for enormous emotional release. The world was in a depression. Almost everyone had areas of unhappiness and burdens to cope with. Part of the film industry grew and prospered by providing the people with the entertainment and emotional release they demanded. Now, you have to always remember that the studios were in business to make money -- lots of it -- but in the beginning, they were willing to dispense the effort necessary to achieve [03:00] quality and excellence too.

I don’t think we’ll ever see it again, but there was an enormous task force of skilled workers who were sustained by the major studios to reach the magnificent heights and visions by a handful of gifted designers. I think we’ve all heard the term
“going Hollywood.” Well, then as now, it denoted a sort of fantastic quality of slight overdramaticism and artificiality bordering at times on the bizarre. In the ’30s, it also meant style and, of course, ultimate good taste. Hollywood was a never-never land where the fine line separating illusion and reality was joyously blurred.

It was so successful that even the stars themselves began to believe the magic images that were manufactured [04:00] for them by the studio and the PR departments. It’s hard to realize now in today’s world of $7 movie tickets, that in the ’30s, those fantasies were fulfilled for a significant price of 25 cents.

All the favorite idols had to look fantastic on the screen. I remember talking to Walter Plunkett, who was the man who designed the clothes for Gone with the Wind, and he was really a most talented costume designer. What he told me was that it’s just as important to look ridiculously gorgeous as it was to make a beautiful false front house and have it look wonderful. It was gorgeous. It was expensive. It was also phony. You went to see a dream. You had a glorious time because it was exciting, [05:00] but it was never reality.

Now, of course, if you’re in the middle of the Depression and
you’re surrounded by poor, and you’re surrounded by the threat of poverty, and the destruction of a whole economic society. What you want to escape to, of course, is the world of the rich, stylish people, and the movies naturally glorified their clothes. The film designer had to create a fashionable screen image, but not necessarily fashion. Creating fashion and designing costumes for the screen are really two vastly different crafts.

I remember sitting in the Beverly Wilshire hotel having an endless lunch, it seemed -- a wonderful endless lunch -- [6:00] with Edith Head, who at that point was America’s best known designer. And to her, Hollywood was never a fashion center because it did not manufacture clothes to be bought. To Edith Head and of course the other designers, a fashion center designs clothes for the public. You know, it does fashion shows, it has press conferences. it manufactures clothes. Buyers come in, the stores buy, and they sell to faceless people of all sizes and shapes. Well, I suppose you have to think of it this way. Patou, Vionnet, Chanel, Lanvin, Mainbocher in the ’30s were the fashion designers. New York and Paris were both fashion centers in the ’30s. Today, Los Angeles can be included as a fashion center.
Movie fashions, or more correctly called [07:00] movie costumes, because they are costumes worn by very specific actors and actresses playing a very specific role in a movie and then nothing more. It is true that occasionally costumes have influenced fashion but they never made -- and it was not to be expected that they would make -- Hollywood a fashion center.

I’ve gone through all of my notes taken over the years, and endless visits to Hollywood, and endless different levels of articles written for the major publications in this country by me, and I found some notes from George Cukor, who, of course, directed a number of the great classic movies of the ’30s. And what George had to say at that time was that -- do try to understand that Hollywood wardrobes are created all to serve the picture, not to make fashion. [08:00] They have to fulfill two requirements. They must serve the dramatic purpose in the script by helping to make the character believable and not -- and I think this is very important -- not to distract from the scene. And they must be photogenically the best for the actress. All these clothes should be a dramatic element in the play and that is the difference between costume and fashion.

Because, you see, the Hollywood designer really was expected to do a lot more than just design clothes. For instance, if you
were a Paris designer, your only responsibility was to design the clothes. Edith Head, for instance, when I remember asking her if she could analyze for me the true role of the cinema designer, and what she said was, “I don’t consider a motion picture costume designer necessarily a fashion creator because all we do is what the script tells us to do. If we do a period piece, then we recreate fashion that was done before and if we have a character role, we do character clothes. It’s really only kind of an 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’m a motion picture costume designer.”

In going over and I’m s-- Oh, I’ve poured through endless stills and sketches of major costume designers of that period and what you saw was that they really kind of avoided creating fashion and what they followed was the basic dictates from Paris and New York in skirt lengths, silhouette, etc. However, the distinction is that the glamor and the charisma of the stars, [10:00] the drama of some costume requirements sparked, and did spark, many styles in hats, sometimes the sleeves, sometimes the materials. Think about it this way. It’s only a few thousand people that saw the fashion shows in Paris, and New York, and
read *Vogue*; however, millions of women around the world flocked to the movies to see Norma Shearer’s latest display of evening or day wear.

There always has been -- I think until recent years because of the change in Hollywood itself and the nature of most films that are made -- kind of well, genteel animosity between Hollywood and the fashion capitals. Paris attitude was one of lifting its nose in disdain and then sort of sniffing at Hollywood’s vulgarity for even daring to impinge on its lofty domain. But when [11:00] film designers such as Adrian and Howard Greer opened respectable couturier salons, both Paris and New York loudly applauded their genius.

Film designers created fashionable images not fashion itself. They also had to surmount a very complex system of limitations imposed by movie making. You never know if the dress is just going to be photographed from the waist up. And it sometimes killed the designer because he had done something that needed the full length shot and the cameraman and the director ignored it. Walter Plunkett said that he adored working with Cukor -- that’s George Cukor -- and Vincente Minnelli, and especially David Selznick because these people appreciated clothes and when you gave them something... And sometimes [12:00] they found
themselves saying, “Try to get it in full view of the back of the dress because the train is important,” or, “Try to do this or that with it.” Very often after reading the script you knew that the actress was going to be sitting behind a desk, so you could just hang a skirt so she could just walk onto the set and put all of your emphasis on the top.

Of course, one of the great advantages of couture design is that the -- is usually fitted onto the specific woman that it’s designed for, but as you know, they’re rare that one has a totally original dress. But in the studios themselves, the designer who then becomes familiar with the script and the character, has to next consider the actress herself. What are her physical limitations? What are her assets? Perhaps her total image. Studio designers realize that they had to meld the two, [13:00] the actress and the character, and make her look her best while still suitable for the dramatic purpose of the scene.

They did make designs in clothes for individual people, and knew the shortcomings and virtues of these people, and also the quirks of the camera because there are unique problems that are presented by set lighting, for example. Most of the top designers such as Adrian and Head had variable set lighting in
their work rooms and fitting rooms. They had to know how a costume would look on the set and on film because sometimes two panels of the same material would photograph differently. Adrian, for instance, once showed me that he developed a light and special lens to show the grain and colors he was using to prevent any problem in the finished costume.

Now, sometimes the actress wore off the rack clothing. Even most couturier gowns look terrible on the screen because they were not made [14:00] to be photogenic. When Parisian designers made a dress, they made the whole ensemble and did not consider how it would look in black and white or on tricky color film. Orry-Kelly, the lead designer at Warner Brothers during the ’30s, was kind of an acknowledged genius at knowing exactly what was photogenic, and how much of a detail was suitable for a scene, and for the camera angle. See how much more complicated it is than just doing a dress? In contrast, couture clothing might not be dramatic enough, or it might look exaggerated, or it simply would not suit the star or the role.

I suppose you have to think about it this way. Fashion design is designed for a kind of faceless woman in a vague situation, such as a party. What kind of a party? Where? When? How? What time of day? Night? [15:00] Coming after what holiday or
season? However, Adrian told George Cukor that he preferred that regular models wear his fashions for a Vogue layout because actresses had such strong personalities they would usually overwhelm the clothes.

You have to understand that the more important the actress, the more attention and pampering she received. And, of course, the actresses themselves had favorite designers but the designers themselves also varied their agreeability as to who they preferred to design for. They often didn’t have a choice because they worked for the studio and whoever the studio signed, they had to do their job. If the star [16:00] was very unhappy with the dress, the amount of change depended on how much the star knew. If the star were a dope and had no taste, then naturally you’d have to impose it on her. If they had a natural sense of chic, and they were intelligent about it, and did not destroy the illusion, sometimes the director would go along with it.

It’s interesting if you break down some of the people in the ’30s. For instance, Connie Bennett. Constance Bennett was known for her own sense of style and very good taste. On the other hand, there were stars like Garbo, Norma Shearer, Carole Lombard, who left themselves completely in the hands of the
masters. Then there were a few stars such as Katharine Hepburn and Bette Davis. Now they discussed their costumes in the third person and were concerned only about the character’s needs and what the character would actually wear because they own personal relationship to clothes was a very narrowly defined group of things that made them happy and they did not like to think of themselves as either fashion victims or even aficionados.

Now, another element that has to be understood in terms of costume designer for movies is the continuity or ensuring that the actress’s appearance follows a logical sequence in the completed movie. For instance, a mud splattered dress worn in a retake must be identically splattered as the original worn days earlier. Bows, pins, necessities had to remain together. If an outfit were worn throughout the movie, appropriate wear signs had to be added to show a logical progression, even if the last scenes were shot first, which can often be a common practice. Some studios weighed their stars every day. A five-pound increase or loss during filming could spell heartache for a designer trying to maintain the continuity on the screen.

And then before, during, or after a style had been created, the film designer had to contend with other studio personnel with
sensitivities that had to be considered. I guess the best way to understand that is, you know, sometimes we have the expression “too many cooks spoil the broth.” You can’t imagine what sometimes does happen in a major film. The director, the actress, the set designer, the hair dresser, the cameraman, the costars all could, and in many cases did, try to recommend and suggest what each thought best for a scene. [19:00]

Occasionally, the opposite happened and the designer was ignored. Miriam Hopkins, for instance, in a movie that you can see on TNT these days, *Richest Girl in the World*, arrived at the studio on the first day of shooting with her wardrobe brought directly from New York, sight unseen by either the director or the film designer, who happened to be Walter Plunkett. Well, now Walter had already designed the costar’s high fashion clothes. The costar was Fay Wray, remember Fay Wray? She was the object of King Kong’s affections. Anyway, Walter had designed Fay Wray’s high fashion clothes for the movie, but had to -- you know, he had to meld the two wardrobes for the screen. Fortunately, the film was in black and white so clashes of color were [20:00] minimized.

However, meddling eventually drove Plunkett specialize in period costumes because few people argued with recorded fact. Even the
director, the final judge of cinema costume, adequacy usually, but not always, bent to written descriptions in historical books.

When George Cukor was asked if he worried about fashion in his movies or if he gave incomplete instructions to the costume designer, said, “Well, I don’t think a director doesn’t worry, but he concerns himself with every detail of the picture. I never told a designer what to do, I told them what we needed for the [21:00] scene and they listened, and I listened, and respected what they had to say would work.” Plunkett, for instance when talking about directors, said, “George Cukor had a great deal to say because he has a strong, visual sense of what his film is going to look like. He has great taste and he pretty much knows what is right and what is wrong for the scene that he’s going to do. George has much to say.”

Vincente Minnelli is another to whom the bouquet of flowers on the table is terribly important. The dress is very important. The handkerchief she carries is important. John Ford, on the other hand, is not going to tell you what it is, but he’ll say, “I have in mind a very dark scene and I want something to reflect light so I can get a glow on this person,” or, (coughs) -- excuse me -- “I have a very light scene and I want stark
contrast.” He would never tell you what the dress would look like or how to make it.

Another director may see his film strictly all in action and all he cares about is, “Can she run in it? Can she jump in it? What is she able to do?” and then to hell with it. He doesn’t really care much what she looks like.

Of course, in addition to collaboration [22:00] with other department heads, the limitations of the script, the actress, the desires of the directors, and, of course, the tricks of the camera, the cinema designer has to consider collaboration with the finance department and budgets, and limitations of censorship, for instance. I mean, how much cleavage can you show? How tight can the backside be? How high can the dress be? How much leg can you show? The desires of the public and, of course, that strange problem of the tricks of fashion forecasting. Because there’s nothing as ridiculous as a movie coming out immediately out-of-date because the clothes look dated.

In going over the Hollywood of the ’30s and the costumes that were designed, one has to constantly recognize that the MGM, Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer’s philosophy, which was [23:00] managed and
influenced by its resident boy prodigy, Irving Thalberg, who was married to Norma Shearer, he was the studio’s vice president in charge of production. Now, his dictum was to make money by spending money. He justified lavish expenses of hundreds of thousands of dollars when the expense produced profit in the millions. And, of course, you must realize we’re talking about the ’30s. For instance, Camille, which was a Garbo-starring film, cost a million and a half dollars. I mean, today you can’t do a really sleazy, crappy, minor, unimportant, no-star little horror, nothing for that kind of money. And, of course, part of that thinking was that MGM was very probably, you know, was considered a woman’s studio because of its many female superstars. They had Jean Harlow, Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Greta Garbo, and therefore clothes budgets were consistently the most generous in Hollywood. And the studio’s top designer, Adrian, believe me, he used every penny. Real diamonds and gems were used in Camille as well as the finest fabrics for Garbo’s underskirts. Obviously, you couldn’t see the underwear or the underskirts, but they did, in the minds of both Thalberg and Adrian, help the star to feel the role and the mood of the times. Very authentic French laces and velvets were purchased at great expense from France for Marie Antoinette to give historical accuracy and the opulence of the court.
It’s true that many designers in other studios received only a fraction of the kind of money [25:00] and budgets that were doled out by MGM and it’s a great tribute to their genius. They still managed to create the required illusion of elegance for the screen. For instance, my favorite Hollywood designer in terms of glamorous costumes was Travis Banton. Now, the fortunes of Paramount in particular fell or rose with the profits from single productions, unlike a larger studio like MGM who had five, six, eight, 10 going on at once. Yet at Paramount, the sophistication and the elegance that Travis Banton achieved in his costumes, a remarkable style in glamor of Paramount’s stars such as Carole Lombard, Mae West, and Marlene Dietrich, certainly never portrayed the national crisis that the studio frequently faced and frequently surmounted.

Now, in the [26:00] period of real financial trauma in Hollywood, of course same as everywhere else like 1931 to 1933, the studio was frantically, you know, reached out to see what they could do to make up the sagging profits. Well, at that point Hollywood and the audiences enjoyed a period of wickedness and titillation that seems only mildly shocking today, but you know, everything is relative. And in those days, it was a great titillation. It wasn’t so far removed from men standing on street corners and watching ladies get on street cars just to
see a flash of ankle, so here was Hollywood, 30 years later, nudity was common. Particularly for the chorus girls and the many musical spectacles.

Sheila O’Brien, who was the woman who organized and headed up the Costume Designer’s Guild, remembers one of her duties from the film George White’s Scandals in 1934 was to distribute three little flowers and some glue to 15 girls for their costumes in a musical number. Although the correct amount of flowers had been made for everyone, all were gone before the eighth girl received hers. The ladies were grabbing extras to cover themselves more modestly. Of course, the casting director, you know, “You knew this when you took the job,” but the chorus continued to sob and the show went on as designed. All the girls had been completely shaved and they wore only their small, small flowers. Miss O’Brien commented that at least in a burlesque show, they would’ve had g-strings.

One of the first assignments that Walter Plunkett, who later became a major Hollywood designer, had in the costume department at RKO, involved over a hundred chorus girls wearing long sequined skirts, very tall headdresses, and his job was to paint dainty, small flowers on their dainty, bare nipples. But of course, the pendulum swung. After the censorship code in
1934 was reinforced and the Hays officers began [rooting?] the studios.

Now, why do we talk about this in relationship to costume and clothes, wardrobe? Well, the censors of the time were quite extraordinary. It’s hard to believe now, but every dress had to be tested for modesty and all tests were reviewed by a representative from the Hays office, who also constantly ensured compliance of the sets. Films could not show female navels, although male navels were properly modest. No signs of pregnancy [29:00] was permitted, no garters, and Lord knows, no cleavage. Even the slightest shadow at suggested cleavage was shocking and could suspend production until the offensive costume was reworked to suit the censor.

Designers were called out of the sets to justify necklines and handkerchiefs, and extra ruffles were always in great demand by wardrobe. Logic was not the prime movement in the fight for the country’s morals. For example, while cleavage was an anathema and perfectly flat male-like chests were the ideal to the censors, there’s a ’40s film, Three Musketeers, where Lana Turner’s dress is cut low to reveal the side contours of her breasts, which was permissible so long as the cleavage in the center was covered by a very large jewel.
Now, most of the directors in Hollywood were very aware of the strict compliance and code, [30:00] but they did leave the details of modesty completely to the professional talents of their -- and abilities of their -- designers. It was the designer’s job after all, to know every aspect of their trade and their responsibility was to ensure smooth processing of all costume designs.

Now, audiences in the ’30s were trying to escape. They went to the movies to see the stars, and the costumes, and to feel the excitement. Often, the beautiful clothes that so thrilled audiences as the latest in fashion had been designed one to two years before they were actually shown. This time lag tested the genius of every Hollywood designer. Studios crank out many more movies each year in the ’30s than they do today. Most took only a few months from the time of filming to the that it was edited, and cut, and released to the exhibitors. [31:00] Sometimes however, a soundtrack would need reworking, or a new scene would have to be added, or the producer would consider the timing bad for the star or the story, and so on.

Obviously, a designer did not have certain knowledge when his clothes would be seen and that’s why most film designs are
classics that can be worn at any time. There were exceptions, of course. Clothing had to be fashionable but not too flashy, unless the scene allowed it. Or, Adrian always went fanciful when dramatic effect by the actress was not required and the clothing could take center stage. The design, however, was still restricted by the character and all the other limitations, but Adrian was never afraid to test surprising new styles or have a bit of fun with a design. He maintained it would either be fashionable by the time the movie was reviewed or be so unusual that it was exempt from fashion.

There’s a movie that budding designers should see. It’s called *Mannequin*. Joan Crawford appears as a model in a fashion show. Now, (laughs) I think the clothes are so Adrian. They’re drenched. That’s the only word for it. Adrian drenched her with elaborate, thick fur to set her apart while modeling afternoon tea gowns and luncheon suits, gave her full skirts when the other models were in slim silhouettes, and encased her in gleaming brocade when the rest were dull and filmy. It was pure Hollywood.

Now, less bold but no less stunning designers such as Travis Banton at Paramount and Orry-Kelly at Warner Brothers in some ways had to see as though they were psychic in their abilities
to foresee and incorporate future trends in their screen wardrobes. The styles may have been less, how do you say, sensational, but their effects were exactly calculated to fit the character [33:00] and remained fashionable while the film played in the world’s theaters. Actually, most of these costumes would draw envious glances, even more today.

Now, there was one final influence sometimes imposed on Hollywood designers. Although cinema designers consciously design one gown for one definitely person in one definitely role in one definite scene, the studios were aware of the publicity potential of the costumes and were not adverse to using points in cinema wardrobes to sell more tickets. Now, the designers themselves never really very seriously tried to set fashion in the same way as Paris, nor did they try to create gimmicks solely for exploitation, but that did not prevent millions of average women for trying to copy a style worn by their favorite star. And, of course, there was nothing that prevented the studio publicity departments from forming relationships [34:00] with manufacturers to produce millions of usually second rate copies or a hat, or a dress, or whatever to generate free publicity for a film. The Eugénie, Empress Eugénie hat that Adrian created for Garbo in Romance, a period picture, was copied by lots of manufacturers and sold to thousands of Garbo
fans. And, of course if you think about it, each hat was this small advertisement for the movie. And, of course the studio would do nothing but encourage the sale of it.

Although it took the personality, the, and the charisma of stars like Lombard, Dolores del Rio, Loretta Young, Dietrich, Crawford, Shearer to set styles copied by millions [35:00] of women. The styles themselves were generated by a small group of highly creative individuals sprinkled among the studios.

(coughs) Sorry. Most were born diplomats and tacticians who carefully threaded their designs through the written requirements of the scripts, the sometimes unyielding desires of the actress, and visionary limits of the director. Now, you have to realize that this need for diplomacy, of course, varied depending on the designer, the director, the studio, and the star.

Adrian’s position on the MGM lot was that of The Great God. Now, those of us who knew and met him, everybody agrees that he was a totally delightful person who used his natural, humor, wit, and his charm to captivate any director or actress concerned with the design. Adrian, however, was quite aware of his position as the top [36:00] designer for the top studio and could be very difficult if he had to.
I’ll give an example. When -- during the production of Romeo and Juliet, when Oliver Messel, who was noted for authority on 16th century design, was imported from London to do all the costumes, Adrian asserted his right as resident designer during heated and very important conferences with the production [brass?] at MGM and in the end, the two costumes were made for each of Norma Shearer’s scenes. One designed by Messel, one by Adrian. Shearer wore Adrian’s creations.

Travis Banton more involved in -- more introverted, I’m sorry -- than Adrian, was involved in a few debates over his designs. His acknowledged skill and reputation as well as the pure beauty of his gowns were more than enough to preclude any sort of negative talk or discussion.

Orry-Kelly. [37:00] When I met Orry-Kelly, he ordered champagne for lunch and stirred it with a [goze?] swizzle stick that he carried in his wallet. Now, Orry-Kelly could be very arrogant and could get very angry with actresses. He was recognized as a design genius and like arrogant, temperamental people in any of the creative arts, if the work is good enough, the people will endure because they want to own, in this case of a costume, to wear one of the clothes.
Now, actresses did not keep their dresses. Occasionally there would be a deal made where a major star would fall in love with something and it would be given as a reward. And even occasionally, there were contractual obligations where certain elements of the wardrobe remain with the star, but in most cases even with the big stars, they did not keep their dresses because most costumes, you have to understand, were modified and used many times. Particularly at less financially sound studios such as Fox. Fur pieces, they were constantly reused. All the fur was removed from the clothing and either put in cold storage, or at the studio, or (laughs) in the case of RKO, the studio that I worked with in Hollywood, returned to the department store or the rental company.

Now, often studios would lend ensembles from their wardrobe departments to their stars and even to some of the people they were building, like starlets, important clothes for premieres and other publicity events. Sometimes even original designs were created for important stars if the occasion was significant enough. For instance, on direct orders from Davis Selznick, Walter Plunkett designed the dresses worn by Vivian Leigh to premieres and award ceremonies for Gone with the Wind. The whole point was to present Vivian Leigh in a glamorous image
suitable in the stature of the picture and to her role. I was always amused by that because Vivian was a very close friend and had gorgeous tastes and wore beautiful clothes, but Selznick knew how to frame her for the specific assignment and better that she wear clothes that he pay for than ruining some of her own.

If you talk to the designers, of course, none of them admit knowing anything petty jealousy, or [40:00] one actress in the studio against another, but Howard Shoup, S-H-O-U-P, learned early in his career at Warner Brothers never, never talk about one actress to another during a fitting. If indeed there was any rivalry, the actress being fitted would bristle, interrupt in the middle of a sentence and complain about the neckline, or sleeve, or whatever she suddenly did not like about the design.

However, Shoup and the other designers agree that in the old days, there was genuine loyalty and devotion between designer and star. The two might fight mercilessly over the style points of a gown, but they remain friends. Today, the relationship is actually more cold because many of the actresses are here today and they’re gone tomorrow. Indeed, it’s almost impossible for a young actress to be adopted by one great designer. And elegantly groomed, for instance, is Carole Lombard by Travis.
Today, the young person trying to start out in Hollywood is essentially on their own and they have to develop whatever image they do among much more mundane lives because help is certainly not forthcoming from the studios or the networks. Time is too short and money is too tight.

You may be interested in knowing that the salaries paid to the designers varied according to persistency, ego, reputation, and none was excessively paid. At his very peak, Adrian earned about $1,000 a week, which is a relatively moderate amount for such an important studio figure. His greatest output was between 1931 and 1934 when he designed for almost all MGM pictures for the stars and the extras. Later, he only designed for the cream of the studio’s films and he decided — he himself decided what he would do.

Dolly Tree, who was a very talented MGM designer, did most of [Merlo’s?] films, as well as some of Jean Harlow’s pictures, and period pieces. In 1942, when Adrian left MGM and opened his own couture salon, he was replaced by Kalloch, that’s K-A-L-L-O-C-H, and Howard Shoup. Kalloch shortly committed suicide and Shoup joined the Armed Forces.
It is important to remember that in those days, the major studios had great workshops. They had all the glamorous designs and all those magnificent dreams would have remained on the drawing boards without the expert talents of an army of skilled seamstresses, sketch artists, beaders, fitters, cutters. It would do not good to have a designer [43:00] like Edith Head, without the artisans necessary to translate her concepts into the incredibly beaded and jeweled gowns, for instance, worn by Mae West in She Done Him Wrong.

And, of course typically, a lot of these really quite great and important people received no recognition. Some were paid less than the janitors at the same studios. It’s like a pairing in other parts of our world and salaries of teachers is compared to, say, local garbage men. His salary will be higher.

One of the things that has to be remembered is that all this area and era that we’re talking about, of course, was the Depression, so that most people were very glad to have a job no matter what they were paid. [44:00] You know, Edith Head’s starting salary as a sketch artist at Paramount was about $30 a week. That was a six day week. RKO had a very limited costume budget and worked on a shoe string most of the time.
Walter Plunkett’s early ’30s staff consisted of one cutter, fitter, and five table ladies. Table ladies were in charge of groups of seamstresses who took patterns from the cutter, fitter and developed them into the final product. The seamstresses were hired by the week or by the day and were summoned only when there was work. The table ladies would also be discharged if there was a slump in film assignments. Cutters and fitters were the last to go. Even in MGM during the darkest days, cutters and fitters would alternate and take two weeks off to rotate the work schedules. The hour that were worked by the wardrobe departments could be gruesome. [45:00] Unexpected crisis could always arise requiring around the clock hours.

Walter Plunkett talked about the shooting schedule for, say, a movie called Rio Rita. There was only technicolor camera. It had to be used by one company in the day time and by Rio Rita at night. So he said, “I had no choice but to sleep in my office, what little sleep I got. I went home, took a quick shower, changed clothes, and came back. I just stayed in my office for weeks.”

Well, you can ask the question why did Walter Plunkett, Travis Banton, Sheila O’Brien, Edith Head, Bud Kalloch, Orry-Kelly,
[Wen Wakely?], and Adrian stay as long as they did? Well, think about it. Think of the environment in which they toiled. A make believe work populated by only the most beautiful and the most talented people imaginable. Their job was to give substance [46:00] to fantasy and dreams. Not only did these designers and workers create glamor, they also were seduced by it like millions of others throughout the world.

Years ago I did a series of articles on Cary Grant and his relationship to wardrobe and I think that that sums up what the role of the great male stars were at that time. We talked about all the designers devoting themselves to the gorgeous ladies. Because it is a less well known fact that the male stars were really, in many cases, their own designers and they provided their own contemporary wardrobe, thus eliminating [47:00] the need for a costume designer except to coordinate colors with the wardrobe of the leading lady. Throughout his career, Cary Grant certainly was Hollywood’s -- well, one of Hollywood’s handsomest and most sophisticated stars. Cary Grant had most of his modern clothes cut and fashioned by --

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GREEN: Let’s see, where was I? Yes, Cary Grant would
sometimes use clothes from -- I mean, he’d find clothes off the rack in a ready-made shop in the south of France because maybe the character that he was playing would have to use a ready-made shop in the south of France. But what he was smart enough to do was that he always provided the studio with eight copies of the suit and 12 copies of the tie that he was going to wear. A bolt of the same suit material was reserved in his tailor shop should those eight be destroyed during filming. Because the studio did not provide the wardrobe, should all copies of a tie, for example, be unusable, expensive production could be halted until another was made. A delay for this reason, of course, never occurred during any of Grant’s movies. He was a very [01:00] disciplined, organized star.

Now just so you get the complete picture, once shooting of the film had begun, the studio assumed full responsibility for the care and the cleaning of Grant’s clothes, but it provided no compensation or rental fees to Mr. Grant except if the suit were to be ruined. Needless to say, Grant had his massive, extensive personal wardrobe and (laughs) my guess is that whatever friends and associates of the same size he had were probably as well dressed as he. It was Cary Grant himself who decided the cut, color, the fit, and the details of his cinema wardrobes.
The studios and directors recognized his really impeccable good taste and intelligence and there was little or no difficulty in coordinating with the regular cinema wardrobe for the female lead. [2:00] Edith Head always felt that Cary Grant could’ve been turned into a superb designer because he was really extraordinary talented in interpreting fashion to the needs of acting.

Grant, of course, maintained -- and I think he’s quite right -- in contrast to the ladies clothes, that his screen wardrobe was correctly fashioned, and not costume. He wore costumes only for period pictures and uniforms and those were invited and designed by the studio.

This method of a man’s providing his own clothing for a screen role is the rule not the exception. Screen actors in the ’30s such as Spencer Tracy, and Adolphe Menjou, and other screen sophisticate, used their own tailors or their favorite stores; therefore, on the grounds in men’s clothing was much simpler, had much variety in comparison with the women’s. And the studio designers played [03:00] a small role, if any, in their screen wardrobes. When you talk about the whole period of the ’30s and great costume design, you really have to sort of ignore the men and concentrate on the elegant and lovely ladies.
Movie stars are smart enough to know that they were their own showcases, that they didn’t understand it themselves, the studios were to inform them that was their role, and they couldn’t risk an inferior first impression. Their clothes were as important to them as to their observers.

The sadness is that, of course, the studios had never recognized the treasure that they had in their archives of stills. The fans that they had, the fans of today could remember more easily the beauty and glamor of yesterday. Hollywood in the ’30s was a true, true fantasy land that will never, never be equaled.

I’ve always thought that one of the reasons that the whole world of Hollywood glamor and extraordinary glamorous gowns developed such power and position in film was that there was a big cultural change in relationship to design and the body. Women were no longer bound by girdles and corsets and bustles and hoops, and in many cases even bras. Their bodies were not artificially molded or pinched as they were at the turn of the century, nor were their figures hidden as in the ’20s. Fashionable women now could revel in soft fabric such as souffle, and chiffons, and they could be just so luxurious, and
dresses covered by hand sewn beads and sequins.

The ’30s was a time of economic depression for the world. Masses of women yearned for a release from their daily poverty. A lift, even for a few moments, into dreams of riches and extravagance and it was Hollywood that readily provided that release. And the best place to see it, of course, is in evening fashions because that’s where they could show their extravagance. Women could vicariously thrill with Marlene Dietrich when she wore a $3,500 dress for just a few minutes in Angel. It was a solid mass of glittering gold and spangled embroidery strewn with emeralds, rubies, pearls, and [booled?] with sable.

And I have to tell you that there [06:00] was a great scene at the end of the shooting of that -- the use of that gown. Dietrich was a little bit -- she assumed that it would be be given to her. She went to the producers, she wanted it for her private wardrobe. Travis Banton described the dress as one of the most expensive gowns he had ever designed. It was very simple in lines, sort of a Persian design. It looks like a piece of woven jewelry. A score of embroiderers worked in it two and a half weeks, which was very fortunate because sometimes -- after we do such intricately made gowns on short notice in
one day or less...

Of course, the great studio designers were always aware of the need to balance everything in terms of the film itself. You must recognize, of course, this was a period when fashionable women did dress for dinners, the theater, and parties. Evening clothes had the best opportunity to reflect elegance, kind of timeless glamor, and I think true extravagance.

The men, of course, dutifully were support. They wore their evening coat uniforms and stayed in the background. The reason a man wore a dinner coat in those times was to show off his lady in a colorful gown in front of him.

You have to understand that, for instance, decisions made thousands of miles away from Hollywood frequently had very costly repercussions in Hollywood. When -- in the winter of 1929, Jean Patou, a well-known French designer, initiated a bold style change by raising the waistline from the hips back to its natural level and dropping the hemline evenly for the floor for evening clothes. Instead of the relatively minor changes that accommodated a new fashion book after several years, this was a significant and surprising departure from current vogue
and overnight, transformed what was in to what was out.

And, of course, it caught most of Hollywood’s motion picture designers, and studio, and even some of the New York and Paris fashion designers totally unprepared. Think of it. If you shot film prior to Patou’s enormous success [9:00] and you were showing a star with her hemlines uneven, you were going to get a laugh in the audience. So that in Hollywood, films that were already in the can, were released in 1930, had to be reshot. You couldn’t have a female star caught with her hemlines uneven. Current shooting schedules had to be revised while wardrobe departments worked overtime to remodel dress after dress to call in new vogue.

By the winter of 1930, audiences even in the hot land of the United States were laughing in the theaters when a female star, supposedly to be a very fashionable character, appeared on the screen with uneven hems and a dropped waist. [10:00] The costume designers scrambled to ensure that films released in 1930 were strictly in line with the new look.

The trauma of this experience left a definitely impression on the studios. Fortunately the suddenness of this change did not occur again until the early war years of the ’40s. The very
early ’30s look of evening wear does not fit the sleek, sophisticated ’30s stereotype. The silhouettes, though slim, are not quite as clinging as later evolutions. The figure’s not quite chic enough, the design techniques a bit too close to the gaudiness of the 1920s. The more refined use of beads and satins in slim, sexy fashions generally came after 192-- ’32 ad ’33 were when the studios were on the financial upswing and designers such as Orry-Kelly, and Banton, and Adrian were in their prime. It’s so, so interesting that audiences [11:00] now have been influenced for over a decade and a half by motion pictures. We’re reaching a better appreciation of less fantastic fashions. Less fantastic, that is, relative to the ’20s. As the Depression continued into the middle and late ’30s, moviegoers idolized the more elegant and glamorous Hollywood evening fashions.

It is interesting to realize how some of the designers thought. For instance, Walter Plunkett said that when he began to design costumes for a movie, he required two things: the script and a room full of materials. The script told him what was needed and what he must do and the [12:00] materials showed him his limitations. Walter said, “I learned a long, long, long time ago 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 throw it around to see how it moves, how it reflects light. Then you know how you’re going to use it.” It’s like building a house. You have to know the materials you’re going to use before you design the house. So getting everything together for the costume, putting the star into the costume, making it becoming to her all just have to naturally go together and they flow out of you.

The material became as important a fashion item as the actual forms and shapes created by the designers. And Hollywood learned that it paid to use only the finest materials available, only what would photograph as looking the finest. If you were a designer working on a B picture, no, you’d obviously have consideration of substitute materials such as cotton or cheaper chiffon, but Adrian and Banton used only true silks and satins.

It’s interesting when -- if you try to remember the great actress of the ’30s like Jean Harlow and Carole Lombard, you usually think of something satin, bias-cut, and very, very slim. The bias-cut dress was considered extremely daring. It created quite a stir when, of course as you know, it was invented by Madeleine Vionnet in Paris in 1929. Yet it took Hollywood and
its stars to make [14:00] satin elegance the hallmark of evening fashions.

Simplicity and good taste, words you will see continuously, apply to that period of design with a general rule. Generally, solid colored satin was used to achieve a sleek and an elegant look. Styles were kept basically simple and uncluttered to enhance the beauty and figure of the actress, which had to be near perfect. “Sexy satin,” an adjective coined by Vogue in 1933, would forgive very few figure faults. Simplicity was also mandatory for strong, dramatic scenes when flashy, styling could detract from the action or the story. Now, don’t confuse simplicity with any indication that this would mean that the actress had to go unnoticed.

[15:00] There’s actually nothing that needs to be explained about Harlow’s figure or the molded gown she wore in her very early career. Later, when her status as superstar was secure, she would modify her image into one more sophisticated and subtle but no less glamorous.

For instance, I came across an article in Motion Picture Magazine in 1938 and Travis Banton at that time was asked if he always used real materials and he answered, “Absolutely, you
can’t cheat the camera. In a close up, the details of a dress are magnified several times and any defect in material or workmanship will be shown with painful clarify. I always use the most beautiful material I can get. For instance, the three leading silk companies in the world are in Lyon, France, and they always send me their latest samples. In France, people are very film [16:00] conscious. These manufacturers appreciate the prestige of the American screen. I had an amusing experience in London last year,” he said, “Duplicates of all the clothes I had designed for Carole Lombard in Rumba were on exhibit in the windows of one of the most fashionable stores.”

Now, realize of course, that when silk is interwoven with metallic threads of gold or silver, the combination is called lamé and the effect is usually memorable. If a female character needed to stand out a bit but not to the extent of bugles and beads, the designer could use lamé. Very few actresses fought that idea.

There’s a great publicity picture of Carole Lombard [17:00] and all Banton did at that time was to just take a bolt of lamé material, very simply but expertly, draped over her for a remarkable photograph. Sometimes in publicity stills, a rather plain dress was temporarily swathed in boas or furs for the
camera’s amusement. And both of these ideas saved the studio money and made great publicity stills.

Lamé, of course, was not confined to silver and gold colors. All the colors of the rainbow were possible. An example is the -- there was a venus blue with gold collar of Hubert, who designed it for Claire Trevor, and the interest really -- well, the interest centered on a sort of cascading drapery in front held at the waist [18:00] with a large diamond brooch. Blended with a molded silhouette, the shoulders were given a youthful touch with simulated bows.

If you think lamé especially attracted attention to the [presented?] female character, bugle beads and sequins had drawing power that was really, truly spectacular. I guess of all the materials for evening wear, none suited the Hollywood image as the beaded or the sequined dress. The designer could go Hollywood and create a totally striking dress for one woman without the worry of mass producing it or having two clients appear at the same party wearing it. Each Hollywood dress was unique. Now, the actress for whom the gown was designed had to have a perfect figure to satisfy the cameras. If the script allowed, the extra extravagance of the dress could add opulence to the movie to please the producer [19:00], boost the ego of
the actress, and thrill the audience who came to see exactly that kind of display. Of course, the famous beaded cinema dresses of the ’30s were all handmade, possible only because of the cheap, yet skilled, labor on tap at every studio. In those days, beaders earned 65 cents an hour in the mid-’30s and it took six to eight weeks, six days a week, to make one, solid, bugle-beaded dress.

Sometimes beads and sequins were used a design accents and they could be subtle or they could be stunning. You could have a dress that was made of base material like a light crepe and -- but by placing the beaded emphasis around [20:00] the shoulder, you focus on the neck.

Sometimes stars had very specific demands, like Walter Plunkett said that there was no way in which you could dress Billie Burke without ruffles. If it were a tailored suit, she had it with ruffles on it. Her characters and the characters she played always reflected that sort of thing. He thought of Billie Burke, who of course, was in private life Mrs. Florenz Ziegfeld, as a pampered little girl. Everybody loved her.

[21:00] Now, designers very often used a base material of chiffon on which to sew the sequins or beads because chiffon was
a light material. It flowed easily with the weight of the beads and the sequins. The overall effect on a fully beaded dress was material that clung like static to the shape of the figure, not incapacitate the actress for the scene. Bugle-beaded dresses fit like a second skin. Dense bugle beads rival the shimmer of satin and even bias-cut satin did not reveal as much as thousands of beads weighing down on and outlining every square inch of the body.

It may interest you, of course, that the dress that created a sensation in 1937 was and -- [22:00] well, it was designed for Joan Crawford and it was the very famous red, bugle-beaded dress, which is in the collection at FIT. It was designed originally for Joan Crawford in the movie The Bride Wore Red. Now, the idea of a slither of scarlet caught everyone’s attention, even though the film was in black and white. Bugle beads are made from glass and weigh many times more than sequins, which are gelatin-based. Proper care of a bugle-beaded dress took more thought and planning than the studio might ordinarily give because the expensive and heavy beading actually tore the gown if hung up. Crawford’s red dress weighed approximately 20 pounds and had cross strings for support in back not seen by the audience. [23:00] It was said that Crawford lost three pounds wearing the 35-pound red beaded
creation. This garment was inadvertently preserved when someone at MGM put it in a drawer and forgot it. Most beaded dresses were hung on wire hangers only to have the forces of gravity and age rip them to shreds.

Beading was fairly common in fashions and on the screen in the ’20s, but in the ’30s, although other designers used the ideas and techniques, Travis Banton’s name became synonymous with fully beaded and sequined dresses. The combination of beads and sequins were not just an accent or decoration, they were so dense, they became the fabric.

You have to realize that if bugle beads were exquisite, sequins were dazzling. Nothing equaled the flash and the dash of bright sequins and their use, even muted or as accent only, always riveted attention to the wearer. An added bonus for cost-conscious studios was the fact that sequin were cheaper, lighter, and faster to apply than bugle beads. The effect was not as elegant, but it did look expensive. In the ’30s, despite their difference in impact, sequins were considered just as smart as beads.

There are all sorts of marvelous stories that come out of Hollywood and let me tell you one that had to do with clothes.
The -- you know, Ginger Rogers, of course, was a top box office
draw as a musical star and Rogers Astaire movies were great,
great films and unique in their own very special position, but
she longed to play meatier roles [25:00] and so she enlisted the
aid of director John Ford to persuade RKO that she had dramatic
abilities. Well, the result was the famous Lady Ainsley hoax.
Producer Pandro Berman was having a hard time finding the right
actress to play Elizabeth in *Mary of Scotland*. John Ford told
Berman about Lady Ainsley, the famous English actress who was in
town. She had played Elizabeth hundreds of times on the stage
and, in fact, was a direct descendent. Berman authorized a test
and a few days later was electrified by the woman who appeared
as Queen Elizabeth. Her hair piled high on her head, her face
vicious with cruelty and power, she was perfect. “Send for her,
she’s marvelous!” ordered Berman. Ford shrugged his shoulders
and told him that Ainsley did not care for motion pictures but
preferred the stage. Berman tried for a [26:00] week to find
Ainsley until a newspaper writer disclosed it had all been a
hoax. Rogers did not get the part of Elizabeth but she did
eventually win an Academy Award for her work in *Kitty Foyle*.

One of the things that you have to remember is that there wasn’t
actually -- good taste was the major import in fashion. In
Hollywood, design could not be so outstanding that it could kill
a scene or make the audience gasp. There had to be a reason to have a spectacular dress. That reason was usually a musical number or a chance to reinforce, without clout, a change in the story. When Walter Plunkett was asked why he designed the very stunning dress, the white fur piece for Katharine Hepburn in *Morning Glory*, he said, “Well, it was done purposely. She had one dress throughout most of the film. A navy blue crepe, which she wore all the time. She was poor. She was trying to get a job. She became an understudy and went on one night and finally made it being a star. The only thing to do was to go the opposite way she had been and make her very shiny and very glittery. This still was not lighted as carefully as on the film and therefore there would be no shadow from her neck down and a highlight of her face so she was not overpowered by the sequins.” The gown itself featured a very high collar extending up the head and back, bared shoulders from a halter type bodice, and a very low front, décolletage. Quite a contrast to the other dress in the film.

[28:00] One of the really glamorous figures in the ’30s was Kay Francis and she was thought of by the great designer Travis Banton as a woman who had a slightly barbaric look that intrigued him. She had very clear, dark skin, gray eyes, almost black hair and it was some ways that she could carry off the
lavish effect of gold and silver lamés, piettes, vivid colors. White satin looked exquisite on her, so are the greens that have a yellow cast, also sumptuous fur, and exotic jewelry. Kay Francis was considered a matinée idol made a superstar by the women of America, who flocked to the theaters to see her in beautiful fashions. It was also interesting that men never considered her terribly sexy.

[29:00] One of the things to understand, of course, that color and texture produced very predictable impressions on the screen. For example, white bugle beads usually were worn by characters when a very chic, high class, ladylike appearance was desired. White beads signified formality, refined, and dignified status. Black sequins, on the other hand, almost always materialized in the wardrobes of nightclub singers. Black implied a struggle, lower economic strata, and the achievement of limited success. The wearer was worldly wise and learned through experiences.

Although Travis Banton often proclaimed, “Conspicuousness is the unforgivable [30:00] sin in the art of dressing,” sometimes it was required by the script for the screen costume.

In The Women, Joan Crawford loses her man but she still triumphs over Shearer for her impact on the audience. Her daring, bare
midriff and shoulders, plus the overpowering gleam of sequins, was a direct contrast to Shearer’s demure little dinner gown with its jade hues of sparkle. Now, this contrast heightened the personality differences of the two screen roles and effectively demonstrates the importance of costume when reinforcing the script. Crawford’s design was a modernized version of a girl’s dancing dress. The brassiere top and very full circular skirt were done entirely in gold sequins. The wide belt was emerald jeweled and embroidered in gold. Shearer’s dress was white crepe, the only decoration a wide rhinestone studded and silver embroidered belt.

[31:00] Chiffon is a sheer, lightweight fabric made from silk, nylon, or other materials that conveys the idea of femininity and delicacy. The material can cling close to the figure, but its sex appeal is subtle rather than blatant. When an actress is to appear softly feminine, slightly vulnerable, and charming, she was shown in lighter shades of chiffon. Styles for chiffon were usually very modest with simple, flowing skirts.

When Travis Banton first attempted to design a film wardrobe for Claudette Colbert, their initial fitting sessions dissolved into a dismal series of small tragedies. [32:00] Colbert made it quite clear that she considered chiffon unbecoming and couldn’t
abide the floating stuff. She also loathed capes in general and felt it looked hideous on her in particular. And after viewing his street dress designs sporting a jaunty bow, she declared that bows were among her really important hates. But Banton was stunned, but he refused to surrender. He became uncharacteristically testy and irascible. His appetite vanished and he suffered from insomnia, but the completed styles for his first Colbert movie proved so successful that eventually she became one of his most beautiful, and well-dressed stars, and also his very good friend.

Although chiffon was mostly reserved for softly feminine looks, it can also be delicately alluring. Chiffon avoided the obviously sexy look of satin and lacked the stunning effect of sequins, but in certain [33:00] colors and on certain styles it was effectively exciting.

As you look at chiffon dresses from the ’30s, you become aware that a flowing scarf was the usual complement for a chiffon dress and looked particularly beautiful on the screen if the actress was directed to walk about, or was to appear on the breezy balcony. It was very important that materials harmonize with the action of the scene. Often, the movement of a fabric was photographed even before the gown was made. If the director
wanted the action to stand out, the dress could not be so striking that it competed with the action. If the gown was to stand out, the designer had to ensure that materials photographed to their best advantage. If the dress was to emphasize the action of a scene, it had to flow with it or the design had to reinforce a movement. The extremely photogenic, floating quality of chiffon -- chiffon scarves in particular -- was a favorite device.

Now, of course, lace shared many of the delicate qualities of chiffon. It too allowed a star to appear soft and fragile, but in an old fashioned way. Lace was used most often for formal dinner occasions with see through sleeves or bodices, which also exposed the intimacies and the workmanship of the lace designs. Lace photographed with few problems, except when the exquisite detail of the rich gown was lost to the camera.

[35:00] The work of the costume designer differed radically from that of the fashion designer in New York or Paris. A fashion designer followed a set routine. For example, spending every winter working on a spring collection. A film designer; however, never knew from one day to the next what he would be required to produce. It could be an 1890 or 1780 ensemble, clothes for a chic modern comedy, or costumes for a western.
This uncertainty kept designers on the jump and often they only had a few hours’ notice to produce an elaborate gown that would normally take several days to make. For the studio designer, there were no such words as can’t and impossible. During heavy demands, the wardrobe department was like a fire department, constantly geared to meet emergencies. Once at Paramount, Ernst Lubitsch wanted an evening gown for Dietrich to be ready for the camera the next morning for a big scene in a film called Angel. Banton made a few hurried sketches on the back of an envelope, drove to her house at one o’clock -- 1:00 a.m. -- for a fitting -- and had the dress ready at 7:30 the next morning. At 9:00, Dietrich wore it on the set for a take.

One of the most luxurious materials for cinema was velvet. It definitely added bulk to the figure, but the richness of look, the feel, was easily appreciated by audience. The finest velvet was from Lyon, France and the most popular evening color was black. Velvet looked best with simple designs that used the heaviness of the fabric to outline or create attractive silhouettes.

[37:00] A film designer had to be able to foretell future trends and create costumes that will remain fashionable until the movie had run its course. Fads were fatal flaws on the screen. So
that the velvet dresses all sort of encompassed classic lines that in no way date them. As a matter of fact, most of the velvet dresses that you see on the screen are somewhat timeless. They are not dated simply as ’30s dresses, although they were designed at that time.

Fake or real flowers were a favorite accent for velvet. The subtle dignity of a black, formal dress could be enhanced by the flexible jewel, floral spray of diamonds, rubies, on the bodice front and matching bracelets and earrings. The dresses were designed for glamorous, American pictures. [38:00] Now, when it came to color, Orry-Kelly definitely favored the neutral shades. Nothing sharp or vibrant for the main body of the garment, although he though bright colors could be introduced in the trimming. His prime favorite was black. Kelly thought black was dramatic. If you wanted to be dramatic, sleek, suave, and subtle, if you wanted to be that, wear black. He also suggested that under decoration was far, far better than over decoration and just the slightest touch of light relief on a black gown was the most effective.

Simplicity of design, certainly decoration, is very important because too many beads caused a dress to appear too massive rather than rich, but a small band or two enhanced the
lavishness of the material.

Now, prints played an important role in the fashion cycle of the ’30s and fashion designers, film designers, could not ignore them, even if they sometimes played havoc with the camera. A costume designer of the ’30s worked with black and white film, the quality and the sensitivity of which was constantly changing. White could glow badly under the tremendous amount of light poured onto the set because of less dense films at the time. Successful use of true black and white prints depended mainly on the skill of the cameramen. Walter Plunkett said, for instance, “In some cases patterns would present problems. For instance, if there was a sharp white on a black background, the cameraman might cry about it because he’d have to gauze it or shadow it to tone it down, but if it were yellow on dark red or something of that sort, it would already be muted enough that it wouldn’t vibrate or glare.”

Designers could include a touch of print on an otherwise plain costume to add just enough interest so as not to bore the audience or the actors, but not enough to distract from the scene. Well printed taffetas and [jamas?] made the evening clothes lovely, but they shine plus a pattern that had to be considered.
Now, a question often asked of studio costume designers was why do they use beautiful colored gowns when the film was black and white? Well, it’s the psychological effect of colors and actresses must be [41:00] on top form at all times. Some actresses reacted positively or negatively to the colors they wore and all would soon be bored with nothing but grays, black, or white.

Costumes were remade and reused often, but it was unusual to have the same gown appear publicly more than once without some alteration. Often, a new or rising star wore an ensemble donated for publicity by a department store like I. Magnin or Robinson’s. The dresses were unsuitable for the motion picture screen, but adequate for fashion layouts on women’s and fan magazines. This arrangement satisfied nearly everyone. The studio used free clothing, the actress appeared in something new, the store was always credited as the source of clothes, and therefore was rewarded with its own publicity. And the cinema designer was allowed to concentrate on more important assignments and stars. Ready-made clothing for stark shots was not limited by a movie camera, script, director, or character, and the public loved fashion shown in print. A basic rule was the higher the status of the star, the less off the rack
clothing that she wore.

Of course, emerging women or teenagers were also costumed by the studio designers. The actual age of the actress was not as important as the age [43:00] of the character in the script. Years could be added or subtracted and womanly figured de-emphasized if necessary. The general silhouettes kept close to the Paris vogue of the times, but chiffon tools and net were pubular -- that’s pubular as in pubescence -- materials to denote youth and innocence, and ruffles were an important accent.

I don’t want to leave you with the impression that ruffles were applied only sensibly to denote youth, but their range was much wider than that. Costumes that were certain to have full length shots and lots of movement were ideal for ruffled skirts. [44:00] There’s a certain rhythm, a certain pizzazz given to a scene when a lovely woman who walks well wears a flouncing evening dress that can tease or delight innocently or openly. The material for a ruffle was usually light and sheer like nylon or chiffon and it seemed the smaller the ruffle the better, and the more the better.

Of course, the sound people sometimes went mad. Taffeta skirts,
large stiffened bows, and ruffles were a few fashion points that sometimes caused havoc with the sound man on the set. The microphones were extremely sensitive and would actually amplify and recording the rustling skirts and ruffles.

[45:00] Cary Grant remembered that during the filming for His Girl Friday, shooting had to be temporarily halted because the sound man was going wild over a strange noise coming through the mics. After a thorough search, it was discovered that the alpaca lining in Grant’s suit was making a “shst-shst” sound that no one hear consciously except the sound man and his microphones. The suit, of course, was immediately relined.

Not frequently used because of a tendency to add too much emphasis to shoulder, the halter style type neckline could be modified for highly imaginative, evening wear. For sheer freedom of movement, pleated evening skirts were comparable [46:00] to ruffled ones. Ruffles could hide a multitude of posterior sins, as could pleats, but pleats gave straighter, less broken silhouette.

And about jewelry and the matter of jewelry, it’s a temptation to many women to overload with costume jewelry. On the screen, this is very dangerous. One piece too many will make a woman
look overdressed. It’s sometimes difficult to get an actress to forgo wearing a favorite piece of jewelry and frequently she will add it to her costume after reaching the set. But you have to impress upon her, every line in a costume means something and if she disturbs the line, she’s losing something from her own personality. Rings rarely photograph well. They do not add to the beauty of the hand and if it is not beautiful, it calls attention to it.

[47:00] Fringe and other style techniques would be lightly stunning or strikingly subtle. Fringe could be tiered, made of crystal bugle beads, or flat crepe. In all cases, fringe was a detail made for movement intended to draw the eye of the audience.

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GREEN: Large pins on an otherwise simple design added a touch of completeness to an imaginative gown. This was a style tool that was used frequently by Adrian. When Howard Greer wrote his book Designing Male, he said designing for the silver screen is a highly specialized talent. The dramatic flair necessary on film is often too flamboyant and exaggerated for private wear. By the same token, subtleties of color, fabric, and drapery in
three dimension clothes [01:00] can be utterly devoid of personality and interest before the camera.

Well, for instance, another major complication arose from the difference between real and movie time. In the real world, a woman appearing at a dinner party, could be observed for hours at all angles, full [men?] if one is closer. Onlookers would have ample time to notice the color of the material and decide if the lines were good or bad, but in pictures, an entire evening of impressions had to be given in a few shots. Often only in a few seconds on the screen. Many times the complete ensemble was never seen, but still had to be implied.

[02:00] Necklines or the lack of them were one of the features in a female screen character’s wardrobe. Many scenes call for waist up camera angles only, so the design is concentrated on neck or sleeve detail. Of course the skirt could not be complete ignored because important people such as Louella Parsons or any Hollywood significant writer might visit the set. No studio wanted their top stars publicized as being in a satin top and a muslin bottom. Unusual necklines especially the sleeves, accented waist, and jewelry, all helped an actress gain all the interest of the audience in addition to looking fashionable and possibly hiding a physical defect or two from the prying, close in camera.
[03:00] Necklines could vary from high and demure to intriguingly open. For instance, Virginia Bruce was one of the true beauties of the '30s Walter Plunkett remembers her this way, “Oh, that was a beautiful figure! Great style. I was so thrilled when she was cast in a picture I designed because I had admired her so for her ability to wear clothes. I was just overwhelmed by her beauty when she came into my office. Her skin was so much more beautiful than it ever looked on the screen. The camera never caught it. There was a translucence that was almost as though there was a back light. It was almost a glow. Gorgeous complexion, beautiful skin. The camera made her just look like a nice face, never the real, exciting beauty that she had.”

[04:00] And open neckline with lower décolletage added much to a scene, particularly a close up. But Cary Grant remembers the problem it could cause for the leading men. Because of the intense light on the set and the quality of film then in use, actresses had full makeup, not only for their faces but down under their dress tops wherever that was. The camera was able to detect the line between makeup and no makeup on the neck or around the face, so uniform, body makeup had to be applied to all exposed surface. During an embrace with an actress in low
décolletage with body makeup, even on her arms, the lapels on Grant’s dinner coats could easily become covered with the stuff, which was extremely difficult to remove. If additional scenes were to be filmed that day, it was necessarily to have another suit that was ready.

Every designer had his own [05:00] credo. Howard Shoup, the designer, followed his -- he felt that a dress is only a background for the girl wearing it, “I’d never try to startle or disturb an audience with a gown that would distract attention from a performance. I study a script and the characterization. Then I study the actress and having arrived at conception, I make my sketches.”

I suppose it’s impossible to discuss the impact of sleeve styles on film designing without first considering one star and one designer. Joan Crawford and Adrian. More has been written about Crawford’s shoulders and Adrian’s brilliant emphasis of them than almost any other aspect of the ’30s cinema styles. With the general exception of beads, sequin, and bias satin, Schiaparelli, a Paris fashion designer, first introduced the padded shoulder and puffed sleeve [06:00] look in 1930. In fact, puffed sleeves were seen thereafter on the screens, but the line remained largely indistinct until Crawford created a
fashion sensation in her famous Letty Lyndon dress. I think Adrian looked at the stars as a doctor looks at a patient. He would assess the flaws and consider how to conceal or treat them. Actually, that was the job of all fashion designers, but now Adrian not only corrected deformities, he sometimes exaggerated them for effect. In no way can Joan Crawford be said to have been deformed, but it was true according to the ideal silhouette of the ’30s. Crawford’s shoulders were wide in proportion to her hips. Schiaparelli, on the other hand, preferred broad shoulders, slim hipped models and led the push along with Mainbocher, another fashion designer, for the padded shoulder [07:00] look in the late ’30s and early ’40s. By then, Crawford had a significant impact on shoulder fashion trends. The popularity of the padded shoulder and puffy sleeve look is attributed to Crawford and to Adrian. Adrian extended his imaginative, native skill to express, when possible, the exotic and dramatic note in costumes.

The president of the Costume Designer’s Guild, Sheila O’Brien, believed the Joan Crawford had more fashion input than any other female star because Adrian did great things with her. Adrian used bizarre cuts and different things, but they were so right because [08:00] she was always the poor girl who married the rich guy and got all the beautiful clothes, or the rich girl who
married the chauffeur and still got all the clothes.

The visual effect of large and puffy shoulders was affected on other stars as well. Magnified sleeves, extremes in necklines, and all those puffs and ruffles all had to be worn by the actress if -- just as though she was wearing today’s jeans. The screen required that she be perfectly at ease in her costume, and lose the awareness, and accept or reinforce the character. This trick is sort of habit with a star, who after being fitted to a gown, wears it long enough [09:00] to become used to walking, sitting, and gesturing in it. Garbo was totally devoted to this. She would wear the gown for hours before, days before, she was photographed in it. This is particularly true of evening gowns, which should be worn with an air of nonchalance in order to have the wearer seem perfectly in keeping with her dress. This is also a particularly good rule for hats, which must be studied to be worn correctly.

A highly sophisticated shoulder sleeve style, for instance, was the one shoulder look. Norma Shearer, in Idiot’s Delight, played an ultra-urbane, worldly wise role and this treatment elegantly conveys that idea with a dash of Greek classicism in drape and trim to enhance the effect. [10:00] Norma Shearer was one of the studio’s most important stars. Adrian made her waist
higher and lowered her hemline because Shearer had short legs and, to be kind, ample hips.

Although designers generally spent the majority of their time concentrating on front detail, the back of the gown could not be ignored, particularly if a star is to exit dramatically with her back to the audience, dance, or confront a foe. Drapes, ruffles, flounces were extremely effective when a star moved around in a scene either pacing or dancing. Usually the fronts of these gowns were simple, so as not to detract from the back detail. [11:00] Full emphasis to the back of the dress is admirably demonstrated by Adrian in many dresses that he designed.

It’s interesting when you think about it. The job of a regular fashion designer is to change fashion and encourage new trends and wardrobes. The cinema costume designers faced the prospect that audiences even in rural areas will recognize that a gown was too faddish and dated if the movie’s release was delayed. When audiences were more concerned about the character’s outmoded clothes rather than the scene, then the prime directive for a cinema designer is to serve the needs of the script by authenticating that a character would be violated. That was one of the reasons why many of the fashions in the movies of the
'30s [12:00] were classic and still could be worn today.

An exquisite hallmark (mic feedback) -- Oh, what was that? An exquisite hallmark of the ’30s glamor was the fully backless dress. Although most costumes were designed for front exposure, when the director and script allowed, a completely bareback became a dramatic highly. Nothing conveyed the idea of sophistication in evening wear quite as excitingly or as fashionably as low backed décolletage, but the effect was modified to suit the star.

It was possible to use a, sort of, almost innocent look.
[13:00] Wen Wakely, who was a marvelous designer, remembered that designing for Constance Bennett was always interesting. Constance Bennett was extremely chic. She was very well born, good socioeconomic background. She knew clothes and had a lot of character of her role. She was no rubber stamp or piece of putty. She was also very funny. She and Sidney Lanfield did not get along very well. She did not think he was a very good director and she didn’t like the way he did scenes. One time we were having a fitting in her dressing room at Goldwyn when she was with Zanuck. She wore a very pale, silver gray satin evening gown. Sidney came in and I saw he withdrew into the background. I could see the sparks fly. She would do a
delivery. She would scream like a banshee and then carry on and then in the middle of a scream, she came back into the other room and said, “Got to get this dress off of me because when I do [14:00] these things I perspire, and I don’t want to perspire on the dress.” She was -- she knew exactly what she was doing and could summon actress at all times to get her own way.

Two less common styles of the ’30s were the scarf stole accessory and fur lined -- I’m sorry, fur trimmed skirt bottoms. The fur bottomed skirt was almost the exclusive prerogative of Mae West, although other stars sometimes attempted it. Lavish fur bands took enormous control and effort to dominate to avoid embarrassing headlong plunges and trips. West liked the style and could handle it. West’s entire wardrobe [15:00] on screen and even off exhibited only a nod to Paris and New York dictates, but somehow they always looked right on her. She was a remarkable thorn in fashion’s side, but she was Mae West and it suited her just fine.

When Walter Plunkett, for instance, first designed for Ginger Rogers in her dancing roles with Fred Astaire, he was faced with the problem of the fashionable slim look for evening versus the need for freedom of movement during a strenuous dance sequence. The results were lovely creations that not only smoothly molded
themselves around Rogers’ perfect movie figure, [16:00] but billowed, swilled, flowed, during her dynamic numbers with Astaire. Because Plunkett’s styles were so effective, other designers, even those in Paris, took notice and continued his ideas. In designing for Rogers, Plunkett worked with Hermes Pan, who was Astaire’s choreographer. About Pan, Plunkett remembered, “We always collaborated. You go and see the rehearsal and sometimes during your rehearsal, you can see someone doing something and say wouldn’t it be great to have the costume do something at the same time?”

Sometimes, rarely, there was a problem. Rogers sumptuously beaded gown from Follow the Fleet looked magnificent on the screen, but it was a real pain to Astaire. In the true sense of the word, the gown featured the famous full, heavy sleeves, which swatted Astaire in the face on the first take. Although well over 20 more full dance sequences were filmed, Astaire’s understandable [17:00] caution to avoid the flying weights of the beaded sleeves seemed obvious to him. The first take complete with swat, was kept in the movie.

Rogers had a perfect figure, it was a Georgia dress, but she did present one problem for the designer. It was wonderful as far as Ginger’s figure and her ability to wear clothes were
concerned. Ginger was a little inclined to think that no matter how elaborate the dress was, it just wasn’t quite elaborate enough. So she had to stick around until it was established on the film to make sure that she hadn’t put some flowers, or an extra piece of jewelry, or a ribbon in her hair.

Flared tunics and over skirts were common fashion notes late in the ’30s. The basic skirts could be slim or full, as demonstrated by the [18:00] design. This kind style required full or at least three-quarter shots to display the tunic adequately and movement by the actress is a role was optional depending on the fullness of the skirt. Theater or dinner scenes, when the actress was basically stationary, were better for slim skirted styles.

There were differences in modes between early evening, and late, and dinner, and cocktail ensembles. During the ’30s, the well-dressed dinner guest always wore a floor length gown, usually sleeved, preferably with a slim silhouette. Necklines were more chaste than the scantier [19:00] versions for nightclubbing. Jackets short and long bridges the time between cocktails, dinner, and a night on the town.

Filming materials such as chiffon were used with restraint. No
woman wants to find part of her shoulder streamers in her soup during a scene. And awkward sleeves with ultra-wide cuffs were kept to a minimum. This rule was relaxed if stunning effect was considered more important than practicality and if the wearer was not actually shown trying to eat on screen. Crepes and woolens were popular. Solemn colors the favorite.

Paramount tested all costumes before filming because the color might not be right for the camera. Raw materials were purchased directly from weavers but before the sale was made, sample bolts were placed under clean lights and color tested. Black and white cameras were colorblind, so some reds looked black, pink, and light blue photographed white, and brown [20:00] was very tricky.

Bud Kalloch once said something that I thought was right on the nose, “Dinner gowns may be as exotic as the individual wearing them.” Of course, an actress like Marlene Dietrich was in a class unto herself. Hers were not just a glamorous image, but an ultra-glamorous aura. Garments outrageous on anyone else were carried routinely by Dietrich. In Edith Head’s view, Dietrich dressed to excite attention. Hers was a more sumptuous, more theatrical, more striking look. Dietrich’s things were more than fashion, they were super fashion.
A dark skirt and contrasting top was a well-used style for cocktails and less formal dinner events. Long over jackets were less popular than shorter versions because the extra length had a tendency to shorten the wearer on screen and add a bit of bulk.

Cocktail dresses is a separate category of apparel. Reached full acceptance and vogue in the ’30s. The style evolved from fancy afternoon dresses in the late ’20s to more formalized cocktail suits. This fashion was appropriate for evenings beginning with cocktails and happy hours, then an informal dinner usually at a separate location, and possibly a movie to complete the date.

The cocktail dress was easy to distinguish from a dinner dress by the length of the skirt. In the beginning, they were ankle high, shorter than formals, a big longer than street wear. Gradually, fashion cocktail suits became the same length as daytime suits, but were much more ornate and dressy with sequins, beads, lamé, or fur trim. Cocktail ensembles tended to be closed and modest in contrast to longer, formal attire. The hostess of a cocktail party usually chose a full length dress, not a suit. As time and fashions evolved, even dinner gowns
shrank to daytime heights and by the ’40s and wartime, the custom of full length formals for dinner because less common on the screen.

Now Gloria Swanson, who was a [23:00] fashion leader, often wrote articles on cinema costumes in the ’20s and early ’30s. And tracked down an interview in Photoplay magazine in 1931 and at that time she said, “But above all, actresses are not mannequins displaying gowns. The gowns are to display actresses. A mannequin shows off the gown, a gown on the screen shows off the actress and a gown must show off the specific actress who’s wearing it. Gowns which fit their personalities, which fit the action of their pictures, which stand out or retreat according to the demands of that action, and gowns which can do all this, despite the loss of the value of color and material.”

A costume designer’s work did not stop at just creating evening dresses. Many scripts required him to complete his ensembles [24:00] with photogenically beautiful, dramatically correct, and fashionably perfect wraps or coats. The possibilities were endless and usually quite luxurious. Among the most lavish materials were Ostrich feathers.
Hollywood designers used a dizzying variety of styles, and fashions, and fabrics, to create elegant evening coats in the ’30s. Evening was a time of peak glamor and the illusion of wealth and lavishness, which the audience craved, could be maintained, without the usual splash of fur, by imaginative cuts and rich fabrics.

Lavishness on fur was possible for coats by repeating the rich fabric of the dress, particularly in the case of lamé. Joan Crawford’s lamé coat stirred ripples in the audience because of the unusual applications of a well-known style. The wrap was almost an exact copy of the popular polo coat. Lapels were exaggerated, but the raglan sleeves, stitched seaming, and sash belt of the original sports coat were faithfully copied in every detail. The oversized collar was extremely effective on a strong presence like Crawford. For elegance in evening coats, a timeless favorite has been velvet.

There is much to be learned about what designers said or did for stars. For instance, Howard Shoup Greer considered Anna May Wong, a dressmaker’s delight because she adored clothes and spent days making up her mind about a thing before she orders it. She plans a coat that will not only match her suit, but several dresses as well. She has jackets, often reversible.
They can be worn over more than one dinner or evening dress. She keeps to a certain set of color schemes and suits her accessories to several costumes. She has a dozen changes when the average woman would have but four and it’s all because she uses her head and gives real thought to her clothes. Those are -- could easily be simple credos for purchasing a wardrobe today.

Capes were another favorite style of fabric that worked well with most fabrics. Hoods were effective on the screen for further emphasizing the face of the star. [27:00] Visually, capes were dramatic. There’s something about an actress clutching a cape that perks up and excites the curiosity of any audience. Unlike a wrap with buttons and sleeves, the star must work to prevent a cape from revealing the secrets beneath it. Capes swirled and flowed and with fur trim, they were exceptionally elegant.

One of the great successful manipulators of capes and maneuvering them -- because it does take skill and determination -- was Loretta Young. Because Young could manage any article of clothing no matter the weight, the size, or the swing, as if she were born in it. The ease with which Young could carry this -- an enormously glamorous cape belied the hours of practice in and
out of doorways, up and down flights of stairs. [28:00]
Everybody’s familiar with Loretta’s relationship to lace and swirling and twirling as she entered rooms.

Fur framing a face was a dramatic plus for any glamorous image. The wrap need not be completely fur, just lavish in its collar proportions. It helps, of course, if the actress being framed has a beautiful face. Because fur collars are extremely flattering and they provided a very photogenic emphasis on the face.

[29:00] A goal of the film industry during the ’30s was the exploitation of real or imagined beauty for entertainment. Even women at first considered plain bloomed if they had star quality under the scrutiny and nurturing of a large studio. The studios, in fact, were following interesting advice given to them by Helena Rubinstein who said in Cinema Arts magazine in 1937, “Beauty is an art. Practice and solitude is worthless. Keep it to yourself and it dies.” For the screen, evening coat designs could match black and white for dramatic highlights, white ermine with a dark trim was stunning and polished. 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. No surface was richer
than fur.

[30:00] Accessories could not be overlooked by any film designer. A complete ensemble as a woman would truly wear it had to be created if the script had her leaving or arriving at a party or evening event. Jewelry was a major requirement for evening and could encompass not only the usual pins, earrings, bracelet, and necklaces, but hair ornaments, belts, and buttons as well. Scarves applied elegantly could and did create fashion mini-trends. It may be appropriate to close here with the fact that one of the most memorable was a cinema costume worn by Katharine Hepburn in Holiday. It helped considerably to define her character’s [31:00] role. The scene was a huge, formal party to announce Katharine Hepburn’s cinema sister’s engagement to Cary Grant. In a reversal of norm, all the other females at the party were in splashy lamés, beads, and chiffons with bare styles and light colors carrying their soft, flowy handkerchiefs in their bejeweled hands. Hepburn, to emphasize how entirely different she was from this crowd, dressed in plain black and long sleeves, very modest, with her stiffer handkerchief pinned to her left shoulder. The point was obvious. The same gown also showed Hepburn’s bare neck, a very rare occurrence. Hepburn considered her neck much too long and unattractive and strongly insisted it be forever covered.
I enjoyed doing this and I hope that it helps anyone who is interested in that great period of Hollywood design, the 1930s.

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