

## **COSTUME DESIGN: THE HIDDEN ART FORM OF CINEMA**

---

Every garment worn in a movie is considered a costume. Costumes are one of many tools the director has to tell the story. Costumes communicate the details of a character's personality to the audience, and help actors transform into new and believable people on screen. A great movie is one in which all the production elements come together to do a good job, this includes costuming.

Costume Design plays an essential but seemingly quiet role in making a movie memorable and making the characters awesome, whether the character was meant to blend into their environment or stand out from it. Costumes can be described as aids by which film makers tell their stories. It is investing of clothing and the overall appearance of a character or performer.

The majority of costume designs in cinema is aimed at creating authentic and realistic people on the screen. Every film has a style, and the costume design is meant to complement this style be it realism or ostentatious. Some costumes are meant to make characters stand out of their world while others are meant to blend in.

A costume is worn by one actor, as one specific character, in a specific scene or scenes in the story. Most important, the audience must believe that every person in a story has a life before the movie begins. There is a lot that can be said about a character in a movie by what they wear. The costume of a character alone can give you a hint about the period the film was set (in the 50s, 60s, 90s, or 2000s), the profession of the character (lawyer, doctor, clown, gangster), the financial status of the character (rich and exposed or poor and timid).

### **WHAT IS A COSTUME DESIGNER?**

---

A costume designer is the individual in charge of designing the clothing elements worn by actors in a film or stage production. Costume Designers possess a similar skill set to that of traditional fashion designers but must also satisfy the unique demands of designing clothes for theatre or film. The role of the costume designer is to create the characters' outfits/costumes and balance the scenes with texture and colour, etc.

Costume designers play a crucial role in making characters realistic. Whether a film is set in the present, the past, in a distant location or in an imaginary time and place, costume designers collaborate with the director, the cinematographer, the production designer and actors to bring the characters in the screenplay to life. The costume designer may also collaborate with hair stylist, wig master, or makeup artist. A costume designer is also tasked with working in concert with other design professionals in mediums like lighting and scenic design, sound design and other creative personnel to create a cohesive aesthetic for the production as a whole.

Designers typically seek to enhance a character's personality, and to create an evolving plot of colour, changing social status, or period through the visual design of garments and accessories. They may distort or enhance the body—within the boundaries of the director's vision. The designer must ensure that the designs let the actor move as the role requires. The actor must execute the director's blocking of the production without damaging the garments. Garments must be durable and washable, especially for plays with extended runs or films with near-real time pacing (meaning that most costumes will not change between scenes) but whose principal photography phase may stretch across several weeks. The designer must possess strong artistic capabilities and a thorough knowledge of pattern development, draping, drafting, textiles and fashion history. The designer must understand historical costuming, and the movement style and poise that period dress may require.

## DESIGN PROCESS

---

The costume design process involves many steps and though they differ from genre to genre a basic method is commonly used.

**1. Analysis:** The first step is an analysis of the script, musical composition, choreography, etc. The costume design process begins with studying the screenplay. Scripts describe the action (what happens in the scene), the time period (when the action takes place), the location (where the action takes place), and the characters in each scene. Costume Parameters for the show are established and a rough costume plot is created. A costume plot outlines which character is in which scene, when the actors change, and what costumes are mentioned in the script.

**2. Design collaboration:** After reading the script, the costume designer meets with the director to discuss the overall vision for the film. At the first meeting with the director, the costume designer may learn about the casting choices and specifics about characterization, the overall color palette and the mood of the film.

### **3. Costume research:**

After speaking with the director, the costume designer begins the research portion of the design process. This may include research on the Internet and at archives, museums and libraries; reviewing periodicals, school yearbooks and family albums; and studying historical and contemporary visual references. Research may also include field trips to such locations as offices, hospitals and police stations, depending on the setting of the story. The designer goes into broad research about each character to try to establish their personalities through their costume.

For example, if a scene takes place in a modern-day high school, a costume designer will visit a local high school. High schools in different parts of the country have dramatically different cultures, socioeconomic influences and diverse populations who dress differently. The screenplay will dictate the specific location of the story and the designer will be careful to be very specific in his or her research. The designer will compile an album, called a “research bible,” containing portraits of staff, teachers and students. More research will be done into the taste and style of the students, including their shopping habits.

The designer’s goal is for the costumes to blend into the story seamlessly and for the audience to be completely engaged in the story. Designers may exaggerate color, style and silhouette for dramatic effect.

### **4. Preliminary sketching and color layout:**

Once enough information is obtained, Costume designers begin by creating preliminary sketches. Beginning with very quick rough sketches the designer can get a basic idea for how the show will look put together and if the rules of the world are being maintained. The Costume designer will then go into more detailed sketches and will figure out the specific costumes and colors for the character. Sketches help see the show as a whole without them having to spend too much time on them.

## 5. Final sketches:

Once the Costume Designer and the Director agree on the costumes and the ideas are fully flushed out, the designer will create final sketches. These are called rendering and are usually painted with watercolors or acrylic paints. These final sketches show what the designer wants the character to look like and the colors of the costume

## **COSTUMES: TELLING THE STORY AND CREATING THE CHARACTER**

---

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone (2001), mixes modern, period and fantasy costuming. Costume designer Judianna Makovsky researched modern yet traditional English private school uniforms. Makovsky depended upon her imagination to create the costumes for Hogwarts' colorful faculty and staff. Although Harry Potter and his friends Ron and Hermione exist in an imaginary world, they are modern teenagers, and when required must be dressed appropriately in jeans and T-shirts.

## **COSTUMES: CREATING PEOPLE**

---

Before shooting starts, the director, costume designer and actor consider the character's personality, challenges (such as anxiety, depression, money troubles or a drinking problem), and dramatic arc (the emotional and psychological changes the character undergoes through the film). Together, they determine the most effective way to express the personality of the character to the audience. Costumes convey information about this person at an exact moment in his or her life, even before one word of dialogue is spoken.

Costume designers may purchase, rent, or design and manufacture the costumes for a film. Garments may be aged to show wear, including fading and fraying at elbows and knees, where this process would happen naturally. Jackets and shirts show wear on the cuffs, collars and hem; jeans bag at the knee; and pockets are stretched by car keys and cell phones. A cook's apron and mechanic's uniform may be soiled in specific areas.

To age or "break down" a costume, the designer and costume crew begin by washing or dry cleaning new or newly made garments multiple times. Aging tools include suede brushes, dye and mineral oil to add "sweat stains." The costume crew uses bleach, airbrushes, sandpaper, razor blades, files and more to age costumes. Sterile clay called

“fuller’s earth” is often dusted onto cowboy boots, clothes and hats to help them look like they have been worn on a ranch.

When costumes are purchased or rented for a film, they must be altered to fit each actor.

Costume designers create and provide costumes for the principal actors, supporting actors, stunt doubles, extras (also called background talent), and sometimes, animated characters. Each of these roles has a unique part to play in the production and each requires the attention of a professional costume designer. Stunt performers wear exactly the same costumes as the actors that they are doubling in an action scene. Their costumes must be constructed to accommodate padding for high falls or stunt driving. Costumes for background talent are designed in the appropriate color, period and style, and must complement the scene and never be distracting.

## **COSTUMES: PAINTING THE FRAME**

---

Just as the elements of a painting work together to create a harmonious image, costumes must work within the composition of a scene. Everything in the frame is designed to help tell the story, including the people, sets, set dressings (wall color, furniture, carpets), props and costumes.

Color is one of the most important tools that a director uses to create the mood of a movie.

Costumes can change the shape of an actor’s body to reflect the time period of the story and the personality of the character. For *Man of Steel* (2013), costume designer Michael Wilkinson created the Superman costume to be worn over a muscle suit. Wilkinson said, “We wanted our Superman to glow on screen, to create a texture that the camera loves, and make him stand apart from the human race.”

## **COSTUMES: DEFINING HISTORY**

---

Films set at any time in the past are called period films. Whether the film is an historical epic or a futuristic fantasy, or has flashbacks to an earlier era, the movie's time period can be instantly defined by the costumes. Throughout history, clothing has played a role in defining an era. Fashion is the mirror of our civilization. At some point in history, men and women have distorted their bodies into every imaginable shape to achieve a fashionable silhouette.

## **COSTUMES: CULTURE AND IDENTITY**

---

Clothing establishes individuality and provides clues to our cultural identity. Uniforms – such as a police uniform, a fast-food worker's polo shirt and khakis, a nun's habit or a chef's hat – allow us to instantly identify a person's profession or position. The military of every country has uniforms defined by color and insignia. A uniform can simply mean a distinctive personal style that is recognized by others.