HOLLYWOOD COSTUME DESIGN. By David Chierichetti. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1976. 192 pp. $15.00.
HOLLYWOOD COSTUME. By Dale McConathy with Diana Vreeland. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1976. 318 pp. $35.00.

In history the great images of perfection in dress are associated with painters. Gainsborough and Holbein, Ingres and Bronzino have lent their names not just to styles of portraiture but specifically to styles of clothed appearance. Their wondrously-dressed sitters have often retained much less fame than they have; but it is also clear that the designers of the actual clothes have retained no fame whatsoever. The beauties of pictured clothes always seem to be the attributes either of their wearer's or of their depictor's imagination; and so although the independently brilliant ideas of Henry the Eighth's tailor are pictorially immortal, Henry and Holbein between them get all the credit.

In a similar way the great visual personages of twentieth-century film have always seemed to be dressed in the products of their own invention, or perhaps of their director's or by the camera's eye. Garbo's hats, Errol Flynn's doublets and Dietrich's feathers seemed spontaneously generated out of the cinematic conception governing all their screen behavior, all of a piece with the camera's view of their facial expressions and gestures. Just as with pictured royalty in history, screen stars even in the most fanciful get-up have looked as if they had dressed themselves and not been dressed by other people. It is of course the acknowledged aim of any dedicated clothes-designer to give his client's looks the quality of being produced by the client's own taste: and for centuries of patronage, both noble and bourgeois, it was the dressmaker's and tailor's whole function. Ever since the second half of the nineteenth century, however, the independent aesthetic claims of dress-designers have acquired recognition quite distinct from the taste or the glamor of their patrons, and also distinct from the talents of portrait painters and photographers. C. F. Worth, Paul Poiret and Gabrielle Chanel are figures as legendary in the history of taste as the figures they once clothed, and as famous as J. S. Sargent and Edward Steichen. Halston and Yves St. Laurent have that distinction in their lifetime—they are both as famous and well appreciated for their gifts as Richard Burton and Richard Avedon.

It is surprising that unless they have been famous couturiers or famous artists, theatrical costume designers have consistently lacked recognition in this century, despite the hundred years of fame enjoyed by dress designers. Stage-sets have brought their designers a measure of real renown; but the costumes worn by actors have kept the ancient identification with their wearers characteristic of past aristocratic finery. The accomplishments of costume designers

have been submerged in the personalities of the performers they adorn and enhance. It is true that for centuries costumes for the dramatic stage were not designed, and they were indeed contrived and fixed up by the actors themselves, either pulled out of hodge-podge theatrical wardrobes or privately ordered from a tailor or dressmaker if the actor were rich and famous. Only pageants and masques, and later operas and ballets, had costumes designed by a stage artist especially for them in some unified visual style. Coherent costume design for serious drama was one of many late nineteenth-century theatrical innovations; but it is possible that this particular theatrical development was linked to the first establishment of *Haute Couture* as a business in Paris around the middle of the century. After that, the increasing international fame of Worth and others gave sanction to the idea that the formal design of clothing has an expressive visual power of its own—a power not simply emblematic but dramatically complex and emotive. It could be shown and admitted (although it had probably always been understood) that in the hands of a gifted designer, potent evocative visual elements could be put to use in sartorial terms far beyond the imaginative scope of any actor's vanity or rich person's desire to shine. Dress-designers could become not just successful at their craft but famous for their art—for making women look better and more interesting than they could manage to look by themselves. And for the first time the names of dressmakers could begin to eclipse the names of their clients.

Costume designers began to seem important to the dramatic stage (instead of just to traditionally spectacular theater) when famous actresses performed in clothes made for them by famous designers, and publicized their collaboration. The fame of both at once was thus enhanced, and the combination of the-female-star-and-her-designer became a customary subject for theatrical publicity. Movie publicity took over the custom as soon as the star system was well entrenched in Hollywood. Posed photographs of important stars fingering sketches or holding up drapery offered by smiling designers are still current; but these special glimpses of star embellishment have never given any hint of the actual process by which most of the personages in a screen drama come to be dressed as they are. How many know who designed the clothes for *Citizen Kane?* How many know who was responsible for Mary Astor's dress in *The Maltese Falcon,* with the artificial flower she sniffed after telling her best lies? And how about Sidney Greenstreet's gargantuan bathrobe, a baroque stroke of costume genius? Who designed all of Mae West's remarkable accoutrements?

Years before, the clothes in the very earliest movies, like those for plays in the past, were provided by the actors themselves, unless

historical finery were rented from theatrical costume companies or put together out of a meager studio wardrobe. But as Hollywood studios became successful, they established wardrobe departments which were like small factories, complete with designers under contract and staffs of seamstresses, drapers, and finishers. Extravagant expenditure on costumes became both a reality and a subject for promotion, and movie audiences could learn of the thousands spent for their viewing pleasure on tons of feathers and beading, and miles of fur and silk. To match this legendary costliness, the design of Hollywood dress soon acquired its never-never look, even for clothes meant to be ordinary.

The look of movie clothes contributes enormously to the public sense of movie people, and perhaps most to the sense of the unglamorous folk who flesh out the movie world in every film. The dramatic and luxurious garments worn by Gloria Swanson and Marlene Dietrich obviously demanded conscious attention; but the subliminal effect of the clothes worn by maids, shopkeepers, poor relations, doctors, and the whole range of bit-part players in Holly- wood films has always had a steady role in American clothes-con- sciousness—particularly the consciousness of clothes as the objects of camera-vision. Exactly what people are wearing in movies is not always very noticeable, unless they are playing Queen Elizabeth or a wealthy seductress; but how all film clothes look—their quality of being "camera-clothes"—is very striking. They always have a super-real quality, the look of being designed for the camera to see first and then interpret for the eye as realistic according to film reality.

Theatrical costume for live performance is designed for direct perception in a conventionally *unreal* situation: playwright, actor and audience are all in agreement that what is going on is being *played*— it is art, not life. Stage costume can therefore have as great a range of visual qualities as a painting, including analogous kinds of visual crudity or stylization. But movie costume must be photographed before it is seen, and so it must submit to camera conventions first— of which the chief one is that the camera *records* truth. It is no wonder that the movie business required its own garment industry, as soon as it became dedicated to purveying its own slick version of natural visible reality. It soon became clear that successful stage costumes can look quite unconvincing on the screen, and so can actual clothing, whether it is chic or tacky. On the dramatic stage, costumes which have a clear visual style are acceptable, even if they are unattractive or controversial (royal robes of coarse burlap, covered with painted abstractions; chicken-wire armor; etc., etc.,). But in the movies clothing has to look photographically acceptable above all. It has to look photographically real, even if it has fantastic

properties as well, and purports to come from outer space. Stage costumes only need to look representational and not real.

Hollywood movie clothes were brought to a level of camera-perfection which has given people the idea that in the twentieth century clothes appear at their most ideal in photographs, moving or still: both costumes and clothes are still currently being designed to satisfy the advanced photographic standards set by the movies fifty years ago. As film technique had improved, specially designed clothing for the movies had evolved as an indispensable element of the craft, since, at first, film clothes had to be expressive in black-and-white and silent motion: shine, froth and slink, contrasts and shades of pattern and texture in the white-to-black spectrum all had to be full of emphasis, suggestion, and special kinds of visual meaning—possibilities for wit, sexuality, innocence, menace, and a whole new crisp and graphic vision of glamor, both historical and contemporary. At the same time a sharp clarity of line and finish became necessary for makeup, hairdressing, beards and mustaches under the exacting eye of the movie-camera. In consequence, the modern ideal of personal grooming was irreversibly changed in one generation, to measure up to the shiny black lips, linear brows and smooth waves of hair always worn, looking quite natural, on the silver screen.

Disused clothes tend to die, and also to disappear. Surprisingly little remains of the actual clothes of former times; and costumes survive even more rarely. Once their function is fulfilled, theatrical clothes quickly wither unless great care is taken of them. In a working wardrobe, of course, like the Hollywood ones, costumes get used again and again and are repeatedly fixed over and pulled apart so that they may have many lives, and eventually die of overwork. But if they are used for a season and put away, costumes tend to fade, wrinkle and die, and often, apparently, to simply vanish. Of all the glorious masking-suits made for Charles the First and Louis the Fourteenth and their courtiers, nothing remains. Similarly, whether they died or just faded away, many of the actual memorable garments which gave such a vivid reality to Hollywood stars even in very recent days have proved difficult to trace and collect, and also to revive for convincing display. The famous Hollywood costumes exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum in 1975-6 included many replicas of originals which were evidently no longer in existence; and many original garments were only partially preserved or much deteriorated. Very little effort was ever made to preserve them; and why should it have been? Clothes themselves are ephemeral. It is only the image of clothes that can carry their beauty into the future. Henry the Eighth's huge doublets are gone forever; but that is just as well, since the Holbein portraits show them in their moment of perfection, with Henry himself wearing them and

being king. If they had survived, they would be limp, untenanted
husks. In recent times, Scarlett O'Hara's green-sprigged barbecue
dress has disappeared, but it does not matter: her skirts still keep
sweeping down those stairs and billowing around her to entrance
new film audiences.

What ought to have been better preserved is not the clothes but
their designers' names. We may certainly be excused from knowing
the name of Henry the Eighth's tailor, since we also lack the names
of other Tudor tailors; but the couturier-conscious twentieth century
should have been doing better by the important sartorial artists
of the film image. Happily, two books have lately appeared which
will help to redress the balance and give them some long-overdue
recognition. In *Hollywood Costume Design*, David Chierichetti has
set up a workmanlike system for giving a great deal of hard infor-
mation about how Hollywood movie actors and actresses were
dressed. Taking the big studios one by one, he gives the history
of their business relations with various clothing and costume designers.
These straightforward accounts are punctuated with anecdotes about
the difficulties individual stars and designers made for each other,
or producers and directors made for them both. The appeal of such
legends never lessens; it is apparently very satisfying to hear about
the grubby scaffolding holding up any glittering façade.

Chierichetti also makes an effort to characterize objectively the
work of the different designers under contract at the studios in
their great days—what each was especially good at and famous for,
and how their taste gave a particular visual quality to each studio's
productions. He attempts very little stylistic analysis or sociological
speculation about the look of Hollywood clothes, but he is full of
detailed information about the spending and saving of money for
costumes at each studio: which ones were rich, with expensive stars
and wardrobe departments, which were poor and had to buy or
rent costumes and alter them. Under the star system a favorite
designer could be personally borrowed by a star from another studio.
Such an arrangement could result in historical movies where the
female lead (perhaps a servant girl) looked crisp and slick in
tasteful, perfectly-fitting garments, and all the other actresses (perhaps
duchesses and marquises) wore limp dresses from wardrobe with
tired flounces and creased sleeves. This is, of course, an old, es-
tablished theatrical phenomenon; but it has always seemed particularly
ridiculous in the movies, where the eye always seeks some illusion
of real life. On the other hand, Chierichetti gives ample credit to
those excellent designers who created the whole ensemble for the
great costume-movies of the past. One may yet learn to speak of
Adrian's *Camille*, Plunkett's *Gone with the Wind*, Orry-Kelly's
The Little Foxes. Not only were those designers largely responsible
for the enduring images of Garbo, Vivien Leigh and Bette Davis

in those films; they also created the whole milieu in which those stars might most naturally shine in such clothes.

In sharp contrast to the businesslike organization, straightforward pictures and information in Chierichetti's book is the material for *Hollywood Costume: Glamour! Glitter! Romance!* This unwieldy volume is bound in spangled brocade and contains a great many pages devoted to dramatic, light-struck color photographs of actual movie costumes set up on bizarre dummies—the same ones which appeared at the Metropolitan costume exhibit. To go with these there is a breathless introduction by Diana Vreeland invoking, in a sequence of short gusts, the excitement and glamour of Hollywood trappings. These elements, together with the percussive subtitle, are no doubt intended to convey screen magic in book form; but their most noticeable effect on the reader is to overwhelm the excellent text by Dale McConathy, which is also annoyingly interrupted by the long captions attending various stills and publicity shots of the stars. Some of the stills and some of the new pictures of old costumes are wonderful, but the essay on Hollywood clothes is the best thing in the book and well worth tracking down through all the gaudy visual material and boxed prose. McConathy for the first time attempts some stylistic interpretation of film dress, tracing the theatrical and artistic sources which account for the look of early movie clothes—popular illustration, cabaret costume, and the like—rather than concentrating on the demands of the camera, the budget, the director, or the actress' figure. McConathy gives some attention not just to the constantly mentioned effect of Hollywood on fashion, but to the effect of fashion on Hollywood. He also takes up the cinematic self-consciousness of later movies, in which the costumes resemble those in other movies much more than they look like any clothes of current or historical life.

Close study of the conventions of film costume is as long overdue as the proper recognition of its individual designers. Moreover the glamor surrounding all the products of the dream-factory is a recognized cliché. We need fewer enthusiastic celebrations of the spell of Hollywood, or of the expensiveness and excessiveness of the effort behind it, and more hard looks at exactly how the spell was wrought. In the last two decades the impulse to understand what makes movies work has increasingly given directors and cameramen their just recognition, to say nothing of editors; and film stars themselves have had the secrets of their personal charm and success scrutinized and anatomized from the beginning. It is a very good thing that some effort is now being made as well to appreciate in detail how clothes made those men and women a part of the Hollywood legend.

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