

HISTORY OF AMERICAN FASHION
DURING THE HOLLYWOOD
GOLDEN AGE

by

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INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide historical research about fashion trends and cinema during the 1930's thru the 1950's, as well as give basic information about the most prominent and successful Hollywood costume designers of this era and their impact on general fashion trends. This study will also provide examples of particular film costumes that were popular and iconic during this time period and explain how these fashions, and those that created them, had a direct influence on the clothing trends embraced by American women. This study will prove a correlation between film costumes and general women's fashions during the 1930's through the 1950's.

Hypothesis

The fashions and trends depicted by the costumes of major Hollywood motion pictures of the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's had a significant effect on the popular clothing trends during these decades in America. Historical research will show a strong correlation between fashions designed for film and the apparel trends of typical American women during the same period.

METHOD

This study will examine literature already published about the effects of Hollywood movie costumes on the fashions worn by American women. The research focused on women's film costumes because they tend to be more elaborate than men's costumes, and are more sensitive to changes in silhouette. Comparisons will be made between changing styles of film costumes and the evolution of major fashion trends adopted by the majority of the female population. This study will also conduct research on several important costume designers from this era to provide specific examples for study. After taking into account all of these sources and looking at the comparisons, conclusions drawn will provide information about the relationship between film costume and fashion trends during the 1930's through the 1950's.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Early History

Hollywood film studios first established costume design departments due to the small number of fashion sources available in California. There was also a great need for historical costumes necessary for films set in various eras (LaVine, 1980). During the 1910's through the 1920's, the Western Costume Company had a large stock of historical costumes for rent, however this one source proved to be inadequate for the growing number of films being made each year. Early on, studios began to collect and organize costumes into wardrobe departments in order to store them for use in subsequent films. However, it was not until later years that directors such as Cecil B. De Mille would begin to realize the importance of costumes to the development of a film's plot, which prompted these directors to demand new costumes to be custom-made for each film (LaVine, 1980).

By the Jazz Age in the mid-1920's, American women began to closely follow the clothing, hairstyles, and makeup worn by movie stars. Newspapers, magazines, and the films themselves provided women with opportunities to view the apparel of their favorite stars, both on and off the screen (LaVine, 1980). Studios carefully cultivated particular images for their stars, turning these typical young actresses into icons like Claudette Colbert and Mae West, whose personalities and apparel women all over the country emulated (Davis, 1993). With the end of the flapper era however, Hollywood movies began to change. Moviegoers increasingly called for more spectacle and grandeur in the film sets and costumes. As audiences embraced the exotic luxury depicted in major films of the day, studios began to increase the budget allowances for their movies, which

allowed wardrobes and sets to become more expansive and extravagant. It was not unusual for films made during this time to cost upwards of \$1.5 million (LaVine, 1980).

During the early years of the Golden Age of Hollywood, studios bought few, if any, costumes off the racks or rented for major motion pictures. Every major film studio had its own department which specialized in costume design and construction. These movie costumes had to be socially relevant and fashion-forward while also reflecting the mood of the film itself (Davis, 1993). Though many American women treated the movies almost as a fashion show for their viewing pleasure, the primary focus of the costume designer was whether the costumes reflected the developments of the plot and communicated something about the characters who wore the clothes. As explained by Ronald Davis, “the requirements of the drama itself- the story’s mood, its situations, its personalities, its time period- dictated costuming” (Davis, 1993, p. 213). To help with this process, head designers would carefully plan out a “detailed wardrobe plot, showing precisely the sequence of ensembles a star was to wear in the scenes shot” (LaVine, 1980, p. 29). These wardrobe plans supported the plot of the movie, as well as prevented potential mix-ups and filming delays.

Another concern of costume designers was their struggle to remain fashionably relevant to their audience while simultaneously preventing the costumes from making the film appear too dated. The initial filming usually took place several years before the studios released the film. Using fashion trends that might go out of style quickly was a risky move because fashion-conscious viewers would be able to tell immediately if the film’s costumes appeared dated or out of fashion (Davis, 1993). Even established costume designers sometimes struggled with this tricky balance. One of the most famous

costume designers of her time, Edith Head, confessed that “just after Dior brought out the New Look, every film that I had done in the past few months looked like something from the bread lines. With each screening, I was reminded. I vowed that I would never get caught by a fashion trend again” (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 5). After learning from this mistake, Head’s later designs generally remained, as she herself stated, “middle of the road in terms of the current fashion trends” (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 5).

Well-known costume designers had great power over the costuming choices for films on which they worked, and often had access to nearly unlimited budgets. In an attempt to outdo their own previous designs, as well as each other, costume designers’ creations steadily became more expensive and more elaborate. Movies which embraced this new style of costuming became spectacles reminiscent of the Zeigfeld Follies from the 1920’s (Davis, 1993).

1930’s Fashion Personalities and the Rise of Hollywood Fashion

The most prominent silhouette in 1930’s fashion included long, slim, lines with broad shoulders. After the scandalously short skirts of the 1920’s, typical hem lengths now dropped back down to hover just above the ankles. Women wore body-hugging dresses in the daytime, and working women wore tailored, double-breasted skirt suits (Engelmeier, 1997). Hats were very important during this period, especially in films (see Figure 1). Melanie Hillmer wrote that when it came to hats, “price was no object; they were copied by salesgirls, secretaries, the girl next door” (Engelmeier, 1997, p. 13). Daywear and casual clothing slowly began to gain more prominence in films during this period, though it would not become truly important until the 1940’s (Laver, 2002). Despite the tough times caused by the economic depression of the early 1930’s, beautiful and glamorous eveningwear was extremely important. Though most of society could not

afford to own these expensive looks themselves, they instead eagerly observed the fashions worn by socialites and Hollywood movie stars. It was now more important than ever before for film studios to employ talented costume designers and to ensure that their movie stars were dressed in the most extravagant and stunning fashions in order to please audiences.



Figure 1. Mae West in *Every Day's a Holiday*, 1938. This figure features an example of the elaborate hats popular during this period.

These extravagant costumes of the 1930's often included luxurious materials such as feathers, beads, and furs. This was due to the prevalence of black and white movies, which presented a unique situation for costume designers during this period. This stark cinematography emphasized light, texture, and sparkle. Actresses were dressed “in a

fashion heavy with sexual imagery, which showed up well in black and white: glitter (especially the sparkle of diamonds), thick, lustrous furs, slinky dresses over curvaceous but slim figures, exotic flowers, and stark red lips” (Dyhouse, 2010, p. 29) (see Figure 2). Jewels and sparkling beads, as well as luxurious textures such as furs and feathers, gained a new importance in the public eye due to their usefulness and prevalence in film costumes (Dyhouse, 2010). Hollywood costume departments were especially fond of costumes featuring fur or feathers which emphasized the glamour and wealth of prominent actresses in films as well as in publicity stills. Several of the largest fur companies utilized popular actresses as spokespeople for their brands. Entire advertising campaigns were created to emphasize “the link between fur, glamour, and Hollywood legend” (Dyhouse, 2010, p. 38). However, as viewers began to copy the looks of their favorite movie stars and wear these materials, fur and feathers became more commonplace and lost some of its exclusivity and status. In response, costume designers, as well as actresses, turned to increasingly more expensive and exotic materials like peacock feathers (Dyhouse, 2010).



Figure 2. Jean Harlow in *Dinner at Eight*, 1933. This figure illustrates Gilbert Adrian's design for a sleek gown with fur accents.

The 1930's saw Hollywood studios, for the first time, began to look for fashion inspiration not from the cutting-edge fashion leaders in Paris but from talented young designers in the emerging American fashion capitals of New York City and Hollywood. Typically, major Parisian fashion houses dictated the fashionable silhouette and trends for each season. Hollywood costume designers modified these trends for film, to make them compatible with the plot and character development of each movie (Stewart, 2005). The Great Depression ensured that only the rich upper classes of society could afford to obtain their designer wardrobes in Paris (Scheips, 2007). This created a large market segment of middle-class consumers who still wished to purchase formal and glamorous evening attire, yet did not have the funds for designer clothing from Paris. For these

reasons, Americans turned to local designers as well as Hollywood costume designers for fashion guidance. American clothing manufacturers, as well as American women, began to embrace the “Hollywood look” in the 1930’s, which featured exaggerated, daring, and highly original silhouettes and details (LaVine, 1980). The famous Parisian designer Elsa Schiaparelli summed up this newfound importance of Hollywood designs on popular fashion when she stated “what Hollywood designs today, you will be wearing tomorrow” (Bruzzi, 1997, p. 4). The so-called “Hollywood look” helped to shape American fashion, and indirectly contributed to the formation of a unique American identity (Munich, 2011).

One important example of the influence of Hollywood costume designers is the “Crawford look” created by Gilbert Adrian in the 1930’s specifically for Joan Crawford. This look, which consisted of broad padded shoulders and slim hips, became the most popular and prominent silhouette of the decade (LaVine, 1980). Women found this look to be a flattering counterpart to the slim-skirted styles which were currently in vogue. Even the major designers in Paris featured this sharp silhouette in their collections. W. Robert LaVine wrote that “the forceful “Crawford look” became the ideal for millions of American women and turned up on models gliding through Paris salons” (LaVine, 1980, p. 44). This is one of the first instances of Hollywood’s power to influence Parisian fashion designers. The distinctive “Crawford” silhouette eventually became one of Joan Crawford’s most important fashion trademarks. For her 1932 film *Letty Lynton*, Adrian designed a “Crawford-style” white dress with large ruffled sleeves of organdy (see Figure 3). This dress launched the “Crawford look” worldwide and proved to be wildly popular with audiences, which caused both the studio and retailers to take notice. In order to

capitalize on the popularity of this outfit, many New York retailers rushed to create mass-produced imitations of this look to sell in their retail stores. This dress was the “first cinema costume to be mass-marketed and was described by Edith Head as the single most important fashion influence in film history” (Munich, 2011, p. 34). Macy’s alone recorded the sales of this particular dress in excess of 50,000 units, a staggering sales number for this time period (LaVine, 1980).



Figure 3. Joan Crawford in *Letty Lynton*, 1932. This figure illustrates the popular dress designed by Adrian, which led to a profusion of mass-produced copies for American women eager to wear this latest trend.

After the 1929 stock market crash and during the subsequent Depression, both film studios and the fashion industry were hungry for ways to increase their falling profits. Because both of these industries share overlapping audiences, it seemed only natural that they would work together in a mutually beneficial relationship. Product

placements and merchandising tie-ins were soon major sources of revenue for movie studios. Home appliances and automobiles were popular ways for the studios to feature brands, but what the female audience truly craved was the latest fashion trends worn by their favorite movie stars. Popular costumes from Hollywood films were mass-produced “with subtle alterations which rendered the spectacular effects of the silver screen suitable for the sewing machine and for everyday life” (Breward, 2003, p. 135). Manufacturers marketed these garments to the public as “Hollywood” brands, often with the label featuring the face of a famous movie star (see Figure 4). A single film could generate anywhere from 15 to 52 designs for manufacturers (Stewart, 2005). Sold through department stores and outlets such as Cinema Fashions, these wildly popular fashion lines created a demand for mass-produced apparel and promoted the garment industry in California, which laid the foundations for the successful fashion industry present in California today.

As movies became increasingly popular, entire magazines began to follow the exploits (real or imagined) of stars in the film industry (LaVine, 1980). Movie magazines such as *Photoplay* and *Silver Screen* filled the heads of eager readers with “the fantasy that in Hollywood all women were beautiful, crime did not pay, husbands and wives lived happily ever after, and that it was possible for anyone to become a movie star” (LaVine, 1980, p. 41). These magazines featured interviews with actors, gossip about the personal lives of the stars, and advice on how to emulate the styles of favorite actresses. These magazines also showed pictures of actresses, dressed by their studio’s head costume designer in costumes from their latest film or garbed in original couture creations for premiers and awards shows, which were some of the most popular features. These publications also provided helpful advice on how to best achieve these looks and copy these outfits. Women avidly flipped through these magazines in order to see the latest outfits worn by the most glamorous movie stars. These movie magazines helped to cement the cultural importance and authority of film stars, including their function as fashion leaders and arbitrators of style.

With the increasing influence of movie stars on the public, the 1930’s proved to be the first time in history that women were encouraged to dress according to their desired personality type. Popular books and ladies’ fashion magazines, as well as costume designers such as Edith Head, all instructed modern women to look at the way popular movie stars dressed and to follow their lead (Berry, 2000). This new push for a more personalized look coincided with a rise in mass-produced clothes. As low-cost clothing options flooded the market, companies looked for new ways to encourage consumers to spend more money. By telling women that they would all dress and look

alike if they did not individualize their appearance, advertisers prompted women to purchase more and more products in order to achieve their desired “type.” Movie stars were an important component in this marketing strategy. In an effort to differentiate themselves from their fellow actresses, starlets strived to create their own unique look to match their public persona (Davis, 1993). In turn, marketers encouraged consumers to look to these beautiful movie stars and copy their personal styles in the hopes that they might attain the same glamour and allure. This trend in marketing signified the transformation of Hollywood stars into fashion leaders.

This idea that clothing could transform a person is an important theme in films throughout the Golden Era. Movies often featured “makeover scenes” which featured costume as a symbol of personal or social transformation (McDonald, 2010). The most common storylines featured a determined and beautiful woman from the working class who used clothing to rise above her circumstances and successfully transition to the elite upper class (Stewart, 2005). Some famous examples include *Sabrina* (1954) and *Funny Face* (1956). Audiences loved this type of movie because it captured the “American Dream” of starting with nothing and eventually, attaining wealth and high social standing through hard work, luck, and appropriate dress. These “Cinderella stories” promoted the idea that “fashion consumerism could facilitate upward mobility,” and helped to boost consumer demand for apparel products (Berry, 2000). By watching such movies, viewers felt that they could similarly transform themselves, or their social status, through clothing copied from these film costumes (McDonald, 2010).

1940’s Wartime and Women in the Workplace

During the 1940’s simplicity and practicality were the most important aspects of fashion due to the restrictions of World War II. Silhouettes remained column-like, with

defined shoulders and waistline and a slim skirt. For the first time in large numbers, young women who needed jobs wore trousers now that their husbands and fathers were away at war (Laver, 2002). Popular film stars such as Katherine Hepburn and Marlene Dietrich also promoted pants as a viable option for work or leisure time (LaVine, 1980) (see Figure 5). The beginning of World War II in 1939 effectively cut off America from its traditional source for the latest fashions: Paris. Left on their own, the American fashion elite turned to previously unknown American designers to create their wardrobes (Laver, 2002).



Figure 5. Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*, 1932. This figure depicts Dietrich wearing pants, a trend which would not be widely adopted in America until the 1940's.

During this period, ready-to-wear and sportswear items were the most popular types of dress, as there was little need for formal attire in times of war (Laver, 2002). This, in addition to fabric rations and the disruption of international trade caused by the war, led to films featuring designs that were more wearable so the average American

woman could easily relate to them. Instead of an endless parade of couture gowns that the female viewer could never hope to own, movies featured leading ladies wearing day dresses and skirt suits which were practical for everyday wear (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Dorothy Lamour in a suit designed by Edith Head, 1944. This figure reflects the changes in fashion brought about by the wartime rationing of fabric.

Another effect of the ongoing war was the rationing and restricting of fabric usage known as the L-85. These regulations included a maximum yardage, particular dimensions, rationed fabrics, and other details that limited clothing manufacturers. The L-85 effectively prevented manufacturers from altering or modifying the boxy silhouette popular at the beginning of the war (Scheips, 2007). However, these restrictions only

proved to make American designers more creative and resourceful than ever. The L-85 rations also forced American women to copy the fashionable outfits they saw their favorite stars wearing using whatever odds and ends they could find. Melanie Hillmer wrote that “a seam painted on the legs did duty for the unobtainable nylons... Old things from the thirties were resurrected with wit and invention, and true creations came from the home sewing rooms” (Engelmeier, 1990, p. 14). With inspiration from film costumes, American women found ways to stay fashionably dressed despite the hardships and economic strain of war.

United State’s involvement in World War II greatly affected the powerful and influential movie industry. The army drafted film studio employees for the war effort, and many more voluntarily quit their jobs in order to work for the war effort. Costume design departments faced further difficulties when “the expert workroom personnel, whom designers had depended on to execute their involved designs, now turned to urgent war work that offered them better salaries” (LaVine, 1980, p. 104). Additionally, the luxurious fabrics, trims, and beads which helped to create the fantastic costumes used in Hollywood films became scarce and were nearly impossible to find due to the disruption of international trade caused by World War II. Despite these cutbacks, female audiences still looked to Hollywood to provide them with an escape from the bleak reality of wartime. Costume designers had no choice but to cut up and repurpose old costumes from storage in order to create new outfits for their films. Robert LaVine explained in his *In a Glamorous Fashion: The Fabulous Years of Hollywood Costume Design* (1980) that:

A skirt from one dinner gown might be used with a top from another and trimmed with the beaded motifs from yet another. Tailored woolens were taken apart, the

pieces of fabric redyed and then fashioned into new ensembles. Ribbons, lace edgings, silk flowers, and feathers were used over and over again as trimmings. It was thanks to the cleverness of Hollywood designers that movie costumes continued to have an air of fantasy and extravagance during the lean years of the early forties. (p. 104)

The tireless work and ingenuity of these designers kept the dream of Hollywood fashion alive in wartime films.

Due to these changes in America, as well as in Hollywood, during the early 1940's, studios hastily wrote and filmed new movies with very limited budgets (LaVine, 1980). For these relatively simple productions costume designers bought outfits off the rack at stores or were simply designed using as little fabric and embellishments as possible. Therefore, the majority of these costumes were "realistic and accessible to women everywhere" (LaVine, 1980, p. 105). Female viewers found these outfits to be more practical and obtainable than the costumes Hollywood films had showcased prior to the World War II era. Leading fashion magazines of the day also noted this change. An article written by Edith Head for the *Hollywood Quarterly* states that "not so many years ago one of our leading studios put its actresses into dresses of almost unimaginable extravagance. But the trend today is away from eccentricity of line and color, flounce and peplum, ruffle and jabot" (Head, 1946). Despite the wartime rations and limitations set on the public, women were now able to sew or purchase the looks they saw their favorite stars wear onscreen.

The dominance that American designers had enjoyed since the start of World War II did not last for long, as Paris soon reaffirmed itself as the undisputed capital of fashion.

In 1947, Christian Dior introduced the New Look which took the fashion world by storm. The new silhouette featured rounded shoulders, a slim waist, and long, voluminous skirts that often used as much as 15 yards of fabric. This blatant rejection of the recent restrictions and rationing placed upon society during the war was in sharp contrast to the simple and practical fashions of the earlier 1940's (Laver, 2002). Despite the lavish qualities of the New Look, Hollywood designers considered it an easy and uncontroversial fashion. This universal appeal to women made it an essential choice for costume designers of this era (Munich, 2011). The New Look emphasized a delicate femininity, which a post-war American society embraced. Men returning from the war longed to see women return to their former place in the home. Pushed aside during the long years of World War II, this silhouette reminded consumers of traditional values and feminine virtues (Laver, 2002). While many women happily returned home, many more found that they enjoyed the autonomy that a job gave them, and they chose to continue working. This divergence between working women and suburban women allowed for a broader range of acceptable fashions in order to please both of these segments of the female population. This allowed Hollywood costume designers the freedom to utilize more silhouettes and to design a wider variety of costumes for their film stars, and indirectly for the female viewers.

1950's The New Look and a Return to Romanticized Femininity

By the early 1950's, the New Look was omnipresent among fashionable women the world over. Hollywood too embraced this silhouette, which was present in many of the films from this decade (see Figure 7). Movies during this era would often depict romanticized femininity, a sharp contrast to the strong working woman image of the recent war years. Directors would use the New Look silhouette to symbolize the social

limitations and pressures to conform which society placed on women (Munich, 2011). This conflict continued into the mid-1950's, but the symbolism of this dramatic silhouette changed over time. By the middle of the decade, the lavish and sexy identity of earlier New Look costumes came to symbolize “safe, not particularly sexual, and quite matronly forms of femininity” (Munich, 2011, p. 164), as strong and independent women of the decade embraced the more professional pencil skirt silhouette.



Figure 7. Grace Kelly in *Rear Window*, 1954. This figure illustrates a dress designed by Edith Head which features the New Look silhouette that remained popular into the 1950's.

Actresses during this decade dressed to imitate the ideal American woman of the time: a well-manicured, perfectly dressed housewife (LaVine, 1980). Movie costumes were not as flashy and excessive as in the 1930's, nor as minimalistic as in the 1940's.

Simple costumes that still communicated wealth and high class were the norm for designers.

Hollywood's interpretation of the New Look included not only full skirts and impossibly tiny waists, but also rich fabrics and intricate details. Without the restrictions of wartime rationing which had limited movie costumes for so long, costume designers once again were able to create lavish and sensational designs for their films. However, these costumes never quite reached the level of excess seen in designs from the 1930's. American fashion culture had changed; audiences now preferred more practical and simplistic outfits that they could replicate in their everyday lives rather than the unattainable dream of film costumes from the thirties (LaVine, 1980).

There was another major change in silhouette by the late 1950's. In contrast to the corseted waists and full skirts of the New Look, designers began to create unstructured and straight-cut clothing that was more comfortable and wearable (Laver, 2002) (see Figure 8). The chemise, or sack dress, was a highly popular version of this new silhouette. Coco Chanel's laidback tweed suits and relaxed dresses were also favorites of the fashion community. These easily-obtainable trends would increase in popularity through the end of the decade and into the early 1960's (Laver, 2002).



Figure 8. Audrey Hepburn in *Funny Face*, 1957. This figure depicts the straight-cut silhouette which would replace the New Look as the dominant silhouette in the 1960's.

During the 1930's and 1940's, the star power of the lead actors involved in the project determined the box office success of a film. The studios were dependent on the stars they created to draw large audiences. By the 1950's however, studios as well as audiences became more concerned with the quality of the movies themselves (LaVine, 1980). Talented directors became the top commodity of Hollywood, though a few movie stars managed to maintain the popularity necessary to carry movies on their own (LaVine, 1980). Some examples include Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe. The diminishing importance of movie stars coincided with the slowly declining popularity of movies.

The post-war years also marked a steep rise in viewers for television shows. Because of the smaller budgets of these shows, the costumes tended to be much simpler

and less formal than the typical costumes for motion pictures. It allowed the television shows to showcase casual, everyday clothing options that viewers could adopt easily into their own wardrobes. This led to a rise in the practice of buying designer costumes off the rack from boutiques, rather than designing and creating an entirely new outfit (Engelmeier, 1990). Exciting plot twists were not the only reason for watching popular TV shows; women wanted to get a glimpse of what popular television actresses would wear on their shows each week (Fox, 2000). The job of a costume designer was shifting and becoming less important as the fifties progressed. Movies as well as television shows purchased the majority of the wardrobes, rather than designing new costumes for each specific character. With the 1960's came significant changes for movies, fashion, as well as costume designers.

Costume Designers

Introduction

This literature review focused on four influential costume designers from the Golden Age of the 1930's through the 1950's. These particular designers all worked in Hollywood for many years, with the pinnacle of their careers occurring during the Golden Age. All these designers were highly popular during their careers, and become household names among the American public. Each of these designers also created designs and fashions which women all over America copied fervently. Finally, all of these costume designers contributed something unique to American fashion, and indirectly towards a distinctive American identity.

Gilbert Adrian

Gilbert Adrian was born Adrian Adolph Greenberg on March 3, 1903 in Connecticut. He became interested in the theater at a young age, and by the time he was

eighteen, Adrian had been accepted to the prestigious New York School of Fine and Applied Arts to study stage design. Just a year later, in 1922, Adrian decided to transfer to the Paris branch of this school in order to pursue his interests in modern design and fashion (“Adrian,” 1941).

It was in Paris that Adrian got his first big break. He met Irving Berlin, a composer who was already famous the world over (Davis, 1993). Berlin was impressed with a costume Adrian had designed, and this chance meeting led to a contract for Adrian to create costumes for the 1921 Music Box Revue in New York City (Trapnell, 2005).

Adrian’s second big break came after several years of working freelance jobs in New York. A friend of his persuaded Adrian to relocate to Los Angeles in order to design costumes for famous actor Rudolph Valentino (“Adrian,” 1941). After working for Valentino for several years, Adrian eventually began working with M.G.M. studios, where he was later promoted to head costume designer. He would remain with M.G.M. until he left the film business entirely in 1942 (LaVine, 1980).

Some of Adrian’s most important fashion innovations include his signature broad-shouldered “Crawford” silhouette (see Figure 9), simplistic looks and sophisticated cuts, pillbox hats, and the snood, to name a few. He also loved to push the envelope, “mixing textiles and daring in experimenting with complex tailoring, seeing how far he could take a clean line without making it complicated” (Munich, 2011, p. 33). As mentioned previously, Adrian’s designs for *Letty Lynton*, especially his ruffled white dress, became an almost iconic example of American style. Widely reproduced, it was the first movie costume sold by manufacturers all over the country, and sparked the demand for Hollywood style for the masses. Celebrities and typical American women alike all

sported some version of this particular dress (Breward, 2003). Even Adrian's costumes for period films proved to be popular with the American public, as many of his designs were adapted and sold in retail stores such as Macy's, Gimbel's, and Saks Fifth Avenue (Maeder, 1987).



Figure 9. Joan Crawford costumed by Adrian for *Mannequin*, 1937. This figure illustrates the “Crawford look” which was created by Adrian and proved to be the dominate silhouette throughout the 1930's.

Adrian was very involved in all of the movies he worked on, and his great attention to detail was legendary (LaVine, 1980). He would often spend 15 to 18 hours a day on set, and he was involved in every aspect of the costume design process (“Adrian,”

1941). He designed iconic looks for highly popular movie stars such as Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, Joan Crawford, and Katherine Hepburn. Today, Adrian is best known for his work on films like *Romeo and Juliet* (1936), *The Bride Wore Red* (1937), *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) and *Pride and Prejudice* (1940). Despite his many accomplishments, Adrian never received an Academy Award for his work.

Adrian's unique designs perfectly fit the demands of the studio executives, movie stars, and viewing public. Working with almost limitless budgets, he could create designs that were, in his words, "becoming, useful, and beautiful" (Davis, 1993, p. 214).

According to Ronald Davis in his book *The Glamour Factory*, "Adrian had a passion for sequins and glitter, preferred straight lines, liked bows, loved black against white, and avoided middle grays" (Davis, 1993, p. 214). While the costumes designed by Adrian were always beautiful and luxurious, Adrian himself admitted that ease of movement and practicality were of little importance to him (Davis, 1993). Actresses wearing his creations were often unable to sit in their dresses, forcing them to rest on specially built "leaning boards" when they were not filming scenes (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. Jean Harlow resting between takes of *Dinner at Eight*, 1933. This figure illustrates a leaning board, which allowed actresses to rest comfortably between takes without damaging or wrinkling their costumes.

Adrian was one of the first costume designers to understand that fashion designing and costume designing were two completely separate concepts. He insisted that movie costumes must highlight and enhance the character without overpowering the actor. The costumes should also give the audience a hint of the personality and intentions of the character while remaining subtle (Davis, 1993). His deceptively simplistic designs readied American women for the pared-down aesthetics of the World War II years.

Adrian chose to leave the movie business in the early 1940's, due to a combination of decreasing budgets and increasing demand for plain and boring designs (LaVine, 1980). Feeling creatively restricted, Adrian moved on to creating a line of clothing sold under his own name. Adrian decided to open a shop in Beverly Hills to showcase both his custom-made and ready-to-wear designs (LaVine, 1980). This was in

the midst of World War II, when American women were completely cut off from the Parisian designers who traditionally dictated fashion trends. Adrian was already well-known to the American public because of his work on many beloved and popular films in the 1930's and early 1940's. American women embraced his sleek and practical designs, which featured padded shoulders and slim skirts due to the wartime rationing of fabrics, as well as his more glamorous designs for eveningwear. Despite the lean and hard years of World War II, Adrian's business continued to flourish and demand for his designs never slowed.

Sadly, Adrian's influence in the fashion world began to fade in 1947, after Christian Dior introduced his New Look silhouette. Adrian was resistant to this slim-waist and full-skirted silhouette, but the trend proved to be unstoppable. Despite his diminishing popularity, Adrian continued to design unique and beautiful looks for his collections, which featured exotic animal prints, gingham motifs, and modern-art inspirations ("Gilbert Adrian," 1980). In 1952, he closed his business due to health concerns from a non-fatal heart attack. Adrian died in Los Angeles on September 13, 1959 (Trapnell, 2005). Today, historians remember Adrian as an important figure in Hollywood fashion and for helping to create the iconic "American look" of these decades.

Edith Head

Edith Head was born in California on October 28, 1897. As a child, her family moved around from Mexico to Arizona to Nevada. All of these locations influenced her future costume designs. For high school and college, Head moved back to Los Angeles and devoted herself to studying first Spanish and then French language. After completing

her master's degree, Head took a teaching job at the Hollywood School for Girls (LaVine, 1980). It was during this time that Head took her first art classes. She proved to be very talented, and would often create fashion sketches during her free time ("Head, Edith," 1945).

By 1923, Head had decided to apply for a job in the film industry. She took her sketches, and some borrowed from her more talented classmates, to Paramount, which hired her as an assistant (LaVine, 1980). She continued to gain valuable experience on the job and was promoted several times until the previous chief designer, Travis Banton, left the studio in 1938 to work as a freelance designer. Paramount then named Head the new chief designer, making her the first woman to achieve this position at a major studio (Head & Calistro, 1983).

Head had the innate ability to combine the glamour, required by all Hollywood films at this time, with the authenticity required for some of the more serious dramatic and period films, such as *Rear Window* (1954) and *Samson and Delilah* (1949) respectively (Davis, 1993). She was able to create costumes for "every type of film- from Westerns to drawing room comedies, monster movies to musicals, and biblical spectacles to kitchen-sink dramas" (LaVine, 1980, p. 203). Her ability to create costumes for such a wide variety of films stems from her philosophy that "a good designer will design subtly enough to get the feeling of today without dating a film" (Davis, 1993, p. 218). Head remains one of the most prolific costume designers in history, due in part to her classic and timeless creations.

Head's attitude about costume design was that the clothes, however beautiful and glamorous, should never be more important than the character. Though she was talented

at creating elaborate costumes during her early career, she enjoyed the challenge brought on by the government's rationing of fabric during World War II. Head loved designing the more simplistic and less luxurious costumes required by the fabric rations. She preferred designing clothes that real women could actually wear, a trend in costume design that continued even after the end of the war ("Head, Edith," 1945). Head was one of the rare designers able to bridge "the gap between the era of glamour and the later emphasis on authenticity" (Davis, 1993, p. 217-218).

Head was well-known as an incredibly hard worker, coming into work early and often leaving the studio well after dark (Davis, 1993). On a typical day, she would "have the wardrobes for three or four films in process simultaneously, a stack of new scripts awaiting her consideration, and fittings scheduled at fifteen-minute intervals" (LaVine, 1980, p. 206). Another one of Head's talents was diplomacy. When negotiating with movie stars, studio executives, directors and producers, her skills in compromise and persuasion were extremely valuable. An acute awareness of studio politics and the importance of publicity helped to cement Head as a fundamental part of Hollywood's Golden Era (Davis, 1993).

Head was also known for her ability to get along with everyone and for creating close relationships with the directors and actresses she worked with. Head was able to work effectively with almost every star for whom she designed. She worked hard to gain their trust and listened to their concerns and requests. Head herself once stated that a costume designer had to be "a combination of psychiatrist, artist, fashion designer, dressmaker, pincushion, historian, nursemaid, and purchasing agent" (LaVine, 1980, p. 206). Actresses appreciated her flexibility and often specifically requested her for their

major films. Movie stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly would also often ask Head to design looks for their personal wardrobes, and some would even purchase their favorite film costumes directly from the studio (Head & Calistro, 1983).

Though Head was well-known and admired for her work by people in the film industry, she gained widespread popularity in 1936 with her designs for Dorothy Lamour's appearance in the film *The Jungle Princess* (LaVine, 1980). Particularly popular was the wraparound sarong (see Figure 11), which swimsuit manufacturers continued to copy for years. This flattering style remains popular with women on beaches all over the world.



Figure 11. Dorothy Lamour in *The Jungle Princess*. This figure depicts a sarong designed by Edith Head and widely copied by swimsuit manufacturers.

Another of Head's most influential designs was a dress she created for Elizabeth Taylor to wear in the 1951 film *A Place in the Sun*. This New Look style featured faux violets sewn onto the bodice and a voluminous skirt (see Figure 12). It proved so popular with audiences that companies rushed to create mass-produced versions of the design (Bruzzi, 1997).



Figure 12. Elizabeth Taylor in a dress designed by Edith Head for *A Place in the Sun*. This figure shows the most popular dress from the movie, which was mass-produced and sold as a formal dress for young women.

During her long and prolific career, Head worked with almost all of the notable stars of the day, including Elizabeth Taylor, Audrey Hepburn, Barbara Stanwyck, Bette Davis, Marlene Dietrich, Ingrid Bergman, Claudette Colbert, Hedy Lamarr, Ginger Rogers, and Grace Kelly to name a few. Some of Head's most notable films include *The Sting*, *Roman Holiday*, *A Place in The Sun*, *Samson and Delilah*, *All About Eve*, *Sabrina* (along with Hubert de Givenchy), *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Lady Eve*, and *Funny Face*

(Head & Calistro, 1983). The 1950's proved to be one of the most successful decades for Edith Head. She worked steadily with many prominent actresses and directors, and received Academy Award nominations for her designs every single year. Head was nominated for a total of 35 Oscars with 8 wins. She remains the most honored costume designer in the history of the Academy Awards (Head & Calistro, 1983).

Though she was not the only major costume designer during Hollywood's Golden Age, Head is certainly the most well-known due to her unbelievably prolific career. She continued to work for Paramount and create beautiful and award-winning costumes right up until her death on October 24, 1981 (Head & Calistro, 1983).

John Orry-Kelly

John Orry-Kelly was born in Australia on December 31, 1897. From an early age, his mother encouraged and supported his artistic talents, though she did not approve of his dream to become an actor ("Orry-Kelly," 1981). However, by 1923 Orry-Kelly had moved to New York City to pursue his dream. In order to supplement his income while he looked for acting jobs, Orry-Kelly would often paint murals in restaurants and night-clubs. It was one of these paintings that caught the eye of an executive at 20th Century Fox, who hired him to illustrate movie titles for silent films ("Orry-Kelly," 1981). By the end of the 1920's, Orry-Kelly had returned to the theater, this time as a set and costume designer for vaudeville and Broadway productions (LaVine, 1980).

After the stock market crash in 1929, Orry-Kelly had a difficult time finding work with theaters. He moved around several times, eventually ending up in Hollywood. With some help from his old friend and former roommate Cary Grant, Orry-Kelly got a job designing costumes at Warner Brothers, which was where he first met actress Bette Davis

(“Orry-Kelly,” 1981). Orry-Kelly and Davis both had strong personalities, and though they did not always get along, they did have mutual respect and admiration for each other’s talents (LaVine, 1980). Orry-Kelly and Davis worked together for over 10 years, and she appeared onscreen in some of his finest creations. Some examples include *Fashions of 1934* (1934), *Jezebel* (1938), and *Mr. Skeffington* (1944). Orry-Kelly understood that Davis needed “costumes that would strongly support her dramatic roles with as few distracting encumbrances as possible” (LaVine, 1980, p. 221). Orry-Kelly’s understated but intricately detailed designs were a perfect complement to Davis, as they never overshadowed the character underneath the costume.

In addition to Bette Davis, Orry-Kelly designed for many other famous actresses including Kay Francis, Ruth Chatterton, Ingrid Bergman, Marilyn Monroe, and Marion Davies. He won Academy Awards for his costume designs in *An American in Paris*, *Les Girls*, and *Some Like It Hot*. Some of his other notable films include *Mr. Skeffington*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Casablanca*. His designs for *Casablanca* were especially popular, and with approval from the studio, department stores across the country sold copies of many of his garments (“Orry-Kelly,” 1981).

Orry-Kelly had a particular talent for maintaining realism in his designs while still satisfying the theatrical demands expected by Hollywood directors and studios (LaVine, 1980). Orry-Kelly himself stated that “screen clothes must not interfere with the action. It’s better to underdress your people than let their clothes get in the way” (“Orry-Kelly,” 1981). He was best known for his simplistic designs and use of rich fabrics and textures like chiffons and velvets. His trademark style of design was “high fashion with few frills” (Davis, 1993, p. 221). Orry-Kelly’s sleek and minimalistic costumes would prepare

Hollywood for the government restrictions on fabric usage during the World War II era.

Orry-Kelly continued to design costumes, moving around from one major studio to another, and ultimately working freelance during World War II (Davis, 1993). Orry-Kelly is one of the few costume designers from this era to have worked with almost all of the major Hollywood studios at one time or another. He continued to work almost continuously until his death in February of 1964 (Friedland, 2010).

Helen Rose

Helen Rose was born and raised in Chicago in the early 1900s. She went to school at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts, where she first began designing costumes for vaudeville and nightclub shows (“Helen Rose,” 1998). During that time she also worked at a costume house, where she gained experience as a designer for theatrical productions. By 1929, Rose had moved to Los Angeles and begun working for various costume companies, where she was able to hone her skills designing and working with fabrics. A film studio briefly employed Rose before letting her go due to staffing changes (“Helen Rose,” 1998). Rose finally found great success designing for the Ice Follies, where she worked for almost 15 years before attaining another job as a movie costume designer (LaVine, 1980). She began working for MGM studios, where she would continue to work until her retirement in 1966.

It is said that Rose first arrived at the MGM studio in a boring black dress with the slip showing and her hair thrown back into a knot on her head. When she met one of the heads of the studio, he demanded that she make herself more presentable or be fired on the spot (Davis, 1993, p. 215). Despite her simple and sometimes disheveled appearance, “her clothes were elegant and understated but innovative, and they always

looked natural in spite of their theatrical use” (LaVine, 1980, p. 233). Rose created carefully detailed costumes which were dramatic and yet still contemporary and relevant to the fashions of the day.

Directors and actresses alike adored Rose for her “down-to-earth, warm personality,” (LaVine, 1980, p. 236) and would often specifically request Rose to create their costumes. Stars such as Elizabeth Taylor, Lana Turner, Grace Kelly, Deborah Kerr, Esther Williams, and Ava Gardner asked her to create looks for them both on and off-screen. Some of Rose’s most famous films include *High Society*, *I’ll Cry Tomorrow*, *The Swan*, *Father of the Bride*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Rose is also well-known for designing Grace Kelly’s wedding dress for her marriage to the Prince of Monaco. This particularly upset Rose’s arch-rival Edith Head, who was close friends with Grace Kelly at the time (“Helen Rose,” 1998).

Rose’s designs showed a structured silhouette that was simple and devoid of unnecessary details. Rose gave her actresses “a soft, practical, up-to-date look that reflected the contemporary young American suburbanite” (LaVine, 1980, p. 237). Her looks tended to be more simplistic than opulent and over-the-top, which female audiences loved. They connected with Rose’s on-screen creations because they were accessible and wearable (“Helen Rose,” 1998). Upper-middle class women wanted to own these looks, and less affluent women dreamed of wearing these garments.

Rose also had great success selling mass-market copies of her designs in department stores. Several iconic dresses that she originally designed for some of Elizabeth Taylor’s films were wildly popular and sold thousands of copies. Some examples include the modest wedding dress in *Father of the Bride* (1950), the famous

white dress in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1958) (see Figure 13), and the simple slip from *Butterfield 8* (1960).



Figure 13. Elizabeth Taylor in a dress designed by Helen Rose for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1958. This figure illustrates one of Rose's most iconic designs, which was in high demand from both actresses and typical American women.

Due to these achievements, Rose decided to leave MGM in 1966 and devote herself full-time to designing ready-to-wear garments for exclusive department stores and specialty shops all across the country (LaVine, 1980). Designing her own line allowed Rose more creative freedom, as well as a way out of the rapidly changing movie industry. The old Golden Age of Hollywood and the studio system were slowly dying, and the role of costume designers was shifting ("Helen Rose," 1998). Costume design was no longer the glamorous and fashion-forward profession of the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's. Helen Rose

died in November of 1985 (Friedland, 2010), as one of the last great costume designers of the Golden Age.

CONCLUSIONS

My research proved a strong correlation between film costumes and general women's fashions during the 1930's through the 1950's. There are concrete examples of film costumes having great influence over the clothing choices of typical women. Department and specialty stores often mass-produced and sold inexpensive copies of popular movie costumes, which proved to be lucrative and successful for both the stores and the film studios. Some famous examples of widely copied movie costumes include Adrian's *Letty Lynton* dress and Edith Head's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* dress. Additionally, popular movie magazines frequently offered advice on how readers could best replicate the styles and apparel of their favorite movie stars.

While conducting my research, I found instances of restrictions placed upon costume designers by the studios to ensure that the designers would not create costumes that were too far off of general fashion trends. Studios wished to avoid alienating the audience with high-fashion costumes they could neither understand nor relate to. For this reason, designers tended to avoid noticeable trends and fads in order to keep from dating the film to any specific time period. In addition to restrictions from the studios, the particular character development, plot, and other needs of each film also limited costume designers. The designer's top priority was always to create clothing that matched the character and the needs of the script.

Though Hollywood costume designers often followed the silhouettes dictated by Parisian designers, Paris's influence over American fashion began to wane during this time period. To replace Parisian designers, Americans turned instead to Hollywood costume designers and up-and-coming American designers to dictate new fashion trends for the public. Hollywood designers almost never created entirely new trends, instead

choosing from existing fashions still in their early stages and adapting these fashions to make them more stylized and exaggerated for film. Despite this, Hollywood costumes had a definite impact on the apparel of typical American women, and helped to drive the demand for mass-produced clothing which remains a vital factor in the fashion industry to this day. After successful careers in Hollywood, many costume designers chose to open salons or create their own line of clothing, which almost always proved to be highly successful. This demonstrated the lingering influence of these designers on fashions of the American public.

Films during the Golden Age also commonly featured the theme of costume as a symbol of personal transformation and upward social mobility. This encouraged moviegoers to continually shop and purchase new products in order to improve themselves and their social standing. Finally, Hollywood film costumes helped to shape consumer fashions, and indirectly, an American identity which continues to influence American design elements to this day.

IMPLICATIONS

Cinema and television fashions have always played an important role in the popular clothing styles of the day. However, with the rise of the internet and blogging in modern times, the fashion industry downplays and even ignores the impact of fashions and costumes featured in movies of the past few decades. Nevertheless, cinema fashions, when used effectively, can still be socially relevant and influential today. Fluctuations and changes in apparel trends have always been an indicator of the social and economic conditions of the period in question. Movie costumes provide a window to these time periods, allowing researchers to view past trends in modern times. Some movies can even predict or create new and emerging fashion trends within society. Often well-known and highly respected designers choose to use certain movies or looks from films as the inspiration for their fashion collections. Though cinematic costumes are not as great a force in the fashion industry as they once were, movie costume styles are still relevant and important in today's society. Studying both the past and present impact of Hollywood fashions on actual clothing trends can be extremely helpful to apparel companies and clothing manufacturers. Studying the public's reaction to certain film looks and fashions can even predict how well a certain trend might perform in the consumer market. And, there is no denying the enduring power and influence of movie stars in modern society. These stars often promote certain products or fashions, and the clothes these stars wear to events and even in their day-to-day lives is a subject of great interest for many Americans. This obsession finds its roots in society's fascination with the cinematic costume choices of movie stars during the Golden Age of Hollywood in the 1930's through the 1950's.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

There has already been extensive research conducted on the major costume designers of the Hollywood Golden Age, as well as on the fashion trends of each decade within this time period. However, there has been little research on the causal relationship between cinema fashions and popular apparel trends. It is this relationship that is most important and relevant when attempting to understand the impact of movie fashions on modern society. Further research about the selling rates of department store clothing, especially clothing made to resemble particular movie costumes and promoted by movie stars would provide a clearer understanding about this relationship. During my research, authors often mentioned how quickly some reproductions of movie costumes sold out in retail stores. However, there are very few concrete sales numbers to back up this statement. Studying the fluctuations of these selling rates to determine potential patterns would help to shed light on the social and economic conditions of the time period. It would be of interest to compare the selling rates of these dresses to the popularity of the movie in which they were first featured and to the star power of the actress who originally wore the design. It would also be informative to have access to sources and research about some of the less well-known costume designers who nevertheless played an influential role in creating iconic and popular film costumes during this era. Finally, a study conducted to analyze if, as society has become more casual, a shift has been made to analyze what movie stars wear off-screen rather than on-screen could be useful to the fashion industry. Both the film and fashion industries can utilize this type of research to understand their past influence on society and their potential future impact.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores if the fashions and trends depicted by the costumes of major Hollywood motion pictures of the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's had a significant effect on the popular clothing trends during these decades in America. The hypothesis was tested by reviewing literature already published about Hollywood movie costumes and the fashions worn by typical American women. Comparisons were made between evolving styles of film costumes and the similarly changing fashion trends adopted by female viewers. Focused research was also conducted on several important costume designers from this era to provide specific examples for study. By examining and analyzing these results, conclusions indicate that there is indeed a correlation between cinema costume fashions during the Hollywood Golden Age and the fashions of typical American women during the same decades. While Hollywood fashions tended to follow the popular apparel silhouettes and trends of the time, the widespread popularity of cinema during this era contributed to the spread and assimilation of these trends. To take advantage of Hollywood's influence on popular culture, clothing manufacturers often copied and adapted the on-screen costumes of film stars for average American women.