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Character building

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In a stage production, something as simple as the silhouette of a character's costume can communicate to the audience in a way that words simply cannot. HKDI's Higher Diploma in Costume Design for Performance programme leader Mr CY Cheung and Ms Mandy Tam explain the secrets of the trade to SIGNED

The moment an actor walks onto the stage or appears on screen the audience is able to pick up on nonverbal cues as to who that character is, where they are from and what kind of person they are. Costume design is fundamental to this aspect of performance. Right down to the underwear.

Mandy Tam of HKDI's Department of Fashion and Image Design explains that "Throughout history, western clothes have used crinoline and undercoats to exaggerate the shape of the female body." On the other hand, "Chinese forms of dress, traditionally, have undergarments and other structural elements that seek to hide the shape of the body."

Therefore, the silhouette of a figure walking on stage can immediately signify the cultural background of the character.

A costume designer needs to be acutely aware of the history of clothing; changes in fashion throughout the ages and types of materials used in different eras. However, costumes for stage and screen are not exact replicas of historical pieces. Firstly, many materials used in traditional costumes are now too expensive or too rare to be easily acquired, or they may simply be unsuitable for use in performances; heavy inflexible materials will weigh down an actor as they strut and fret their hour upon the stage, while subjected to the heat of theatre lighting. This means that designers must have a good knowledge of modern materials that can mimic the properties of those that would have been used in the original garments.

CY Cheung also explains that further adaptations are sometimes made to traditional costumes to "suit the modern audience's expectations."

Mandy worked as a member of the custume design team on the acclaimed drama Nothing Gold Can Stay, which won particular praise for its visual design. But, she explains, "To succeed as a costumier in Hong Kong, requires adaptability. Being able to specialise is rare as the industry here is relatively small. So you must be prepared to work on film, stage and television. Most importantly you must enjoy the work."

Students of the Higher Diploma in Costume Design for Performance at HKDI are given ample opportunity to experience work first hand. CY Cheung arranges work experience at Ocean Park and Disneyland, while Mandy Tam makes use of her contacts in the theatre world to connect students to work opportunities. Student jobs are posted online and by taking them on, students can earn extra credit. It's an essential supplement to the teaching that takes place in the classroom during the two-year programme. In order to accurately depict clothing of different eras, students must learn the history of costume, but they also need to know what everyday wear was like in the period being depicted - from history of undergarments to the use of colour and accessories. It's also essential to know about the differences between working on TV, opera or stage plays and the intricacies of prop-making and scenery design.

Knowing all of this gives costume designers an understanding of what a simple silhouette can tell about a character. As CY Cheung puts it, "This helps the actor to really become their character, and it tells the audience straight away who that character is."

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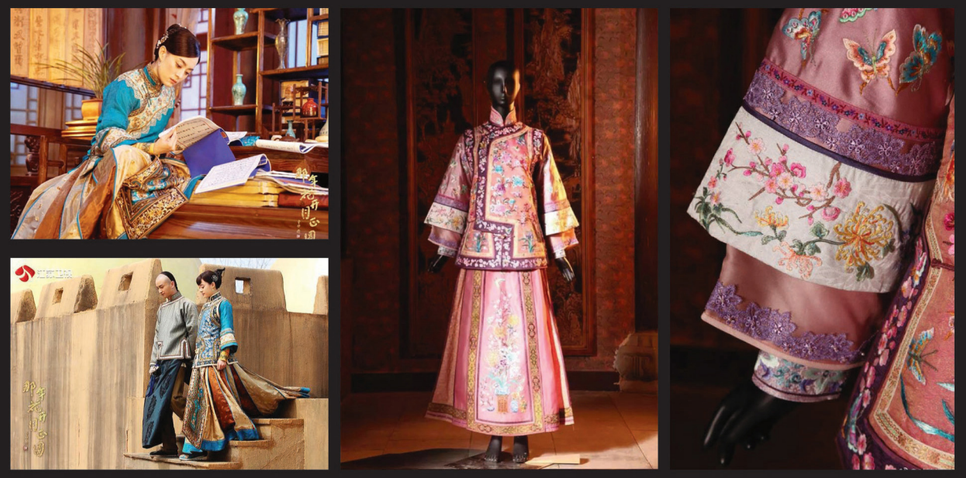


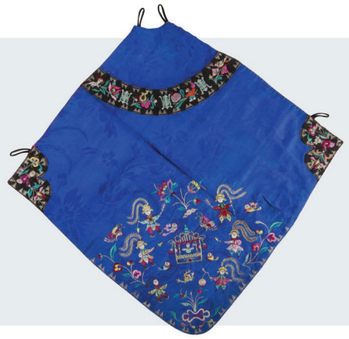
"These costumes are designed for entertainment rather than for a formal, historical drama and the design reflects this. The focus is on presenting a trendy and beautiful image rather than historical accuracy. Traditional styles of dress would have been flat-chested, hiding the shape of the breasts, to balance this we added modern elements, adding a waistline and using more cloth in the lower part and round the hemline, creating more volume and shape. The collar is also cut in a very modern style, putting more focus on the leading actress." Mandy Tam

"On this dress, all the embroidery is done by hand, stitched onto the cloth before the dress is constructed. The dress is designed for a scene that the leading actress, Sun Li, had to dance with foreigners, so the dress is more westernised. The red detail at the front is a bit curved towards top, the back side is curved towards bottom, to create a more lively and stylish look and feel. It's different from all the other costumes in the same drama. All of the costumes in this dramas use fabrics and materials sourced worldwide, from Japan, Singapore, Hangzhou and Hong Kong." Mandy Tam

EVOKING AN ERA

Knowing about changes in clothing styles throughout the ages and across different cultures allows costume designers to use the silhouette of a piece of clothing to signify the background of a character.

Tunics and social distinction



Chinese women have traditionally worn very long tunics, often reaching the ground. Poorer people would wear garments of ramie or hemp, while the elites would sport clothes made in silk. Later, during the Ming Dynasty, cotton was introduced to China. This, coupled with the destruction of mulberry trees essential to silk production during the Mongol invasions, led to cotton becoming the preferred fabric across social classes.

Foot binding

Traditionally, small feet were considered a sign of beauty and refinement, leading to the use of tight bandages to deform and inhibit the growth of feet. The practice was particularly prevalent during the Song Dynasty.

Colour as a sign of social status

The Sui Emperor regulated which colours were allowed to be worn by people of different social classes. Peasants were restricted to wearing blue or black, while the rich were allowed to choose any colour they desired. This policy is credited with having sown unfortunate divisions among the population.

Victorian England

Queen Victoria's long reign is known as a period of conservatism and austerity. Women's bodies were forced into an hourglass silhouette by use of corsets, while long hair was a sign of femininity. Excessive bare flesh was taboo, so skirts were floor-length and very structured.

Italian Renaissance

In this extremely patriarchal society, women were subservient to men and a woman's figure reflected the status of her husband. A rounded body, full hips and large breasts signified affluence and virility, pale skin and blonde hair showed that a woman lived indoors in luxury, as opposed to having to work in the outdoors like a commoner.

Hollywood's 'Golden Age'

Strict guidelines dictated what could and could not be shown on screen in the 1930s to the 1950s. This limited the types of female character that could be portrayed in films, leading to an idealised version of femininity featuring curvy bodies, slim waists and red lips.

America's 'Roaring Twenties'

In the US, women's suffrage and the right to work led to an era of flamboyance, but prohibition sent much social interaction underground. An androgynous look, downplaying the shape of the waist and breasts to create a curveless tomboyish silhouette became popular in 1920s America.

Swinging 60s

Women's liberation saw mini skirts and crop tops come into fashion. The ideal frame changed from the curvy silhouette of the 50s to a tall slender body. Bright colours and bold patterns became popular in the west during this era.

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