

Costume Designers, Costumers & Fashion Designers

by Deborah Landis

What is a costume designer? What is a fashion designer?

A costume designer is an artist who works in motion pictures, television, and commercials. Costume design is storytelling. The function of a *costume* is to help television and motion picture audiences understand “who” a character is. Simply put, a costume designer strives to conceptualize and design garments that capture and define the personality of fictional characters from a screenplay. The ultimate goal of a costume designer is to create believable characters, with the intent of advancing the story’s progress. In many cases, especially in modern television and motion pictures, the costume designer is considered successful if audiences DON’T notice the costumes at all, but are nonetheless deeply affected by the characters.

The first crucial step every costume design begins with is research. The time available to conduct this important research can range from days to years, contingent on the nature of the production and its budget. Regardless of whether the project is an elaborate period piece or a contemporary vehicle, costume designers create authentic and truthful characters. Modern or period, comedy or drama, every single screenplay requires research by the costume designer to develop each and every character. **Character comes first.**

As part of her research process for the contemporary motion picture *Working Girl* (1988), Oscar® winning costume designer Ann Roth spent days sitting on a Staten Island Ferry to get a genuine sense of the secretaries who commute daily to Manhattan. Her astute observations regarding their tastes, their manner of walking and moving, their personalities and demeanor all served to render Melanie Griffith’s characterization of ‘Tess’ as genuine as possible. Ann Roth’s attention to detail was deeply appreciated by both director Mike Nichols, and by the actress. Accurate and thoughtful costume design supports the narrative and creates characters that audiences care about.

As a result of their intense research, costume designers will compile a scrap book of photos, family albums, home movies, yearbooks, hair styles, make-up, costume sketches, fabric swatches, color palettes, – virtually anything they can acquire – to develop the character and establish the time period in which the action takes place. This research volume acts as a ‘Bible’ for costume designers. While working throughout the television and motion picture production this research is shared with the costume designer’s creative collaborators – the cinematographer and the production designer. The costume designer will also use the Bible as the centerpiece of a discussion with the costume crew (the costume supervisor and the set costumers) and the make-up and hair department.

The costume designer aspires to bring the director’s vision to life. Whether it is a scene with two characters, or ten thousand extras, costume designers collaborate with their crew: the **assistant costume designer**, the **costume illustrator**, the **costume supervisor** and the **set costumers**. Together, they create a costume breakdown (to determine the number of costumes needed), calculate a budget, and arrange to manufacture, rent, purchase, and fit the costumes for the motion picture.

Costume designers must also work closely with the **production designer**, the **art department**, the **cinematographer**, and the **hair and make-up artists** to determine the overall design approach and color palette for the show. Then they must decide how the costumes will blend with the concept they have created.

In *The Addams Family* (1991), Anjelica Huston’s character, ‘Morticia,’ wears a skintight black form-fitting dress. To create an hourglass silhouette Costume designer Ruth Meyers gave Huston a corset to wear that barely allowed her to breathe. A veteran actress, Huston not only learned to breathe, but she also learned to walk in a highly measured way, as she was given only 14 inches of material that tightly wrapped and bound her knees! The restrictions of the costume affected her physical depiction of “Morticia”, helping Huston to achieve a memorable performance as the eccentric and unforgettable Morticia Addams. This comic tour de force earned Ruth Myers an Oscar® nomination, a rare distinction for a comedy motion picture at the Academy Awards.

In addition to the actors, costume designers also must create clothing for stunt people, doubles, and animals of every species, puppets and miniatures, robots, dummies and even CG (Computer Generated) and animated characters! For the recent animated mega-hit *Shrek 2* costume designer Isis Mussenden created costumes for the lead characters plus a host of fairy tale characters from a Gingerbread Man and Three Blind Mice, to Puss N' Boots!

What's fashion design?

Fashion is a visual art of enormous creativity. Fashion is commerce. It flatters, pleases and sells. Fashion designers create three-dimensional clothing for the public to buy. Whether the designer is Giorgio Armani, or Isaac Mizrahi for *Target*, their designs are based on seasonal and international cultural trends. Wholesale or retail fashion is a serious and profitable industry which employs and depends on advertisers, journalists and editors, photographers, models and stylists, buyers and sales people in department stores and boutiques. Clothes serve the purpose of the consumer, keeping each of us modest or sexy, warm or cool, and protecting us from the elements. Fashion is about change, comfort, individuality and standing out in a crowd – or conformity and the status quo.

Fashion and costume have little in common other than the creation of apparel for the human body. Costume designers create costumes to appear on a two-dimensional screen, unlike three-dimensional fashion. “*Costumes don't have to feel good, they just have to look like they feel good on screen. Costumes don't have to be expensive, they just have to look expensive in the movie,*” says CGD President Dr. Deborah Nadoolman Landis.

Fashion designers often credit movies as influencing their designs. They are inspired by the craft of costume design – the irresistible combination of fascinating characters and a story well told. Whether or not an actor looks glamorous is beside the point for costume designers. Has that actor portrayed a truthful character? If the public connects with the characters in a television show or a motion picture, the costume designer shares responsibility for the success of that production. Great style do not great costumes make! **Fashion and costume design have opposing goals: fashion = commerce, costume = character.**

Stylists work in the print media assembling fashion for advertising or editorial shoots. *Stylists* also work with individual celebrities and actresses shopping for their personal closets and red carpet appearances. *Stylists* are also used as industry slang for a costume designer who works designing commercials for television or music videos.

What is a costume designer? What is a *costumer*?

A common mistake made in television and motion picture is: **costumers do not design costumes!** A costume designer is the creative head of the costume department of a television show or motion picture. Costume designers work closely with the director and the actors. *Costumers* are valued partners who help create the costume budget and costume breakdown, dress the actors, aid in fittings, procure and manufacture the costumes, keep track of continuity (the right costume at the right time), and ascertain that the costumes are all worn correctly (according to the costume designer's intentions). *Costumers* keep clothes looking good on camera (i.e. protecting collars, and helping to keep clothes wrinkle-free) while actors are in-between takes. *Costumers* have too many duties and responsibilities that can possibly be listed here! *Costumers*, and the talented seamstresses and tailors in the costume workroom, have their own labor union, I.A.T.S.E. Local 705, Motion Picture Costumers.

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