



AVATAR (2009)
Costume Designers Deborah L. Scott & Mayes Rubeo

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Whether a film is set in the present, the past, in a distant location or in an imaginary time and place, costume designers collaborate with the director, the cinematographer and the production designer to tell the story. Costume designers collaborate with actors to bring the characters in the screenplay to life.

Movies tell a story using cinematic language that consists of narrative (the screenplay) and visual (the film frame) elements. Film is a director's medium. The audience sees exactly what the director wants us to see. The director chooses what to reveal or conceal about a character and a dramatic situation. After filming is completed, the director will work with an editor to create the film out of all the scenes that were filmed during production.

Costumes: Telling the Story and Creating the Character

Every garment worn in a movie is considered a costume. Costumes are one of many tools the director has to tell the story. Costumes communicate the details of a character's personality to the audience, and help actors transform into new and believable people on screen.

There is often confusion between costume design and fashion design; however, these two fields and their objectives are very different. Fashion designers have labels and sell their clothes, while costume designers have no labels and are focused on creating authentic characters in a story. Costume designers create both beautiful gowns for a glamorous entrance and everyday clothes when required by the script. They must know “who” characters “are” before they create a closet of clothes and accessories for the characters. A costume is worn by one actor, as one specific character, in a specific scene

or scenes in the story. Most important, the audience must believe that every person in a story has a life before the movie begins.

The costume design process begins with studying the screenplay. Scripts describe the action (what happens in the scene), the time period (when the action takes place), the location (where the action takes place), and the characters in each scene. After reading the script, the costume designer meets with the director to discuss the overall vision for the film. Two different directors will make different movies from the same script. At the first meeting with the director, the costume designer may learn about the casting choices and specifics about characterization, the overall color palette and the mood of the film.

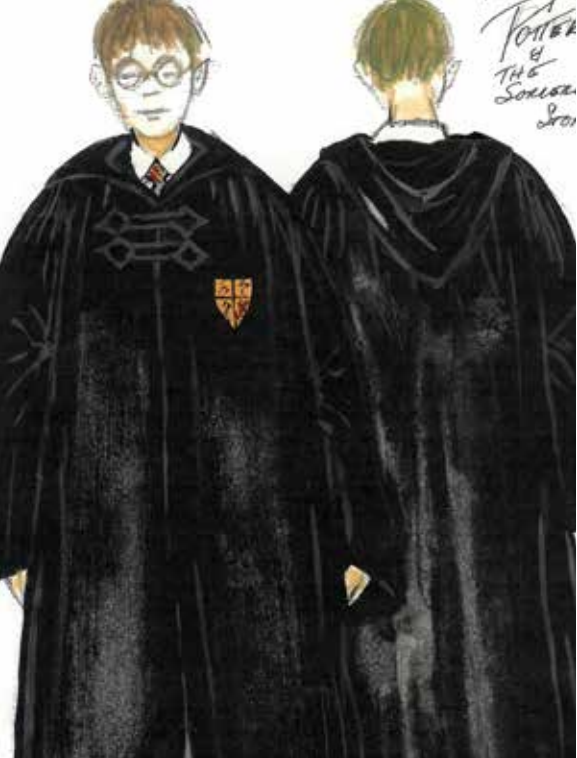
After speaking with the director, the costume designer begins the research portion of the design process. This may include research on the Internet and at archives, museums and libraries; reviewing periodicals, school yearbooks and family albums; and studying historical and contemporary visual references. Research may also

include field trips to such locations as offices, hospitals and police stations, depending on the setting of the story.

For example, if a scene takes place in a modern-day high school, a costume designer will visit a local high school. High schools in different parts of the country have dramatically different cultures, socioeconomic influences and diverse populations who dress differently. The screenplay will dictate the specific location of the story and the designer will be careful to be very specific in his or her research. The designer will compile an album, called a “research bible,” containing portraits of staff, teachers and students. More research will be done into the taste and style of the students, including their shopping habits. It may be a surprise that modern films are often more difficult to costume than historical films. It is distracting for the audience when the costumes are unrealistic for a scene, too expensive for a character or wrong for a dramatic situation. The designer's goal is for the costumes to blend into the story seamlessly and for the audience to be completely engaged in the story.



FRIDA (2002)
Costume Designer Julie Weiss



HARRY POTTER AND
THE SORCERER'S STONE (2001)
Costume Designer Judianna Makovsky

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

When a screenplay covers several decades, or is set in a distant location, costumes help the audience know when and where each scene takes place. The 2002 film *Frida* is based on the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo (Salma Hayek). Costume designer Julie Weiss dressed Hayek first in a schoolgirl uniform, then as a young matron in the stylish dresses of the 1920s, then in colorful hand-embroidered Mexican-Indian blouses. The real Frida Kahlo wore traditional Mexican clothes as she became more confident as an artist and political activist. Kahlo's changing costumes reflect her personal evolution.

Designers often adapt vintage clothing, as Ruth E. Carter did for *Lee Daniels' The Butler* (2013), the story of an African-American butler (played by Forest Whitaker) who served eight presidents over a span of more than 30 years. Carter mixed the vintage garments she found with ones that she designed using vintage printed fabrics. The audience is taken on a journey through time, from '50s pleats to '70s hair to '80s polyester tracksuits. Carter insisted on the right fabric for each garment, creating the authentic style and shape that she found in her research.

Costumes do not have to duplicate the film's period exactly, but they do need to look right to the audience. Designers may exaggerate color, style and silhouette for dramatic effect. For *Marie Antoinette* (2006), director Sofia Coppola felt that a pastel color palette inspired by French macarons would be more appealing to a young female audience, so designer Milena Canonero created sherbet-colored dresses. These gowns had the right silhouette for the period, but their colors did not resemble those of garments from the court of Marie Antoinette that are preserved in modern museums.