

# HOW TO GO ABOUT PLANNING A PERIOD COSTUME

Excerpted from *Woman as Decoration* by Emily Burbank (1917)

This a plan to follow when getting period costume:

We will assume that you wish to wear a Spanish dress of the time of Philip IV (early seventeenth century). The first thing to give your attention to is the station in life which you propose to represent. Granted that you decide on a court costume, one of those made so familiar by the paintings of the great Velasquez, let your first step be to get a definite impression of the outline of such a costume. Go to art galleries and look at pictures, go to libraries and ask for books on costumes, with plates.

You will observe that under the head of crinoline and hoop-skirt periods, there are a variety of outlines, markedly different. The slope of the hip line and the outline of the skirt is the infallible hall-mark of each of these periods.

Let it be remembered that the outline of a woman includes hair, combs, head-dress, ear rings, treatment of neck, shoulders, arms, bust and hips; line to the ankles and shoes; also fan, handkerchief or any other article, which if a silhouette were made, would appear. The next step is to ascertain what materials were available at the time your costume was worn and what in vogue. Were velvets, satins or silks worn, or all three? Were materials flowered, striped, or plain? If striped, horizontal or perpendicular? For these points turn again to your art gallery, costume plates, or the best of historical novels.

If you are unable to resort to the sources suggested, two courses lie open to you. Put the matter into the hands of an expert; there are many to be approached through the columns of first-class periodicals or newspapers (we do not refer to the ordinary dealer in costumes or theatre accessories); or make the effort to consult some authority, in person or by letter: an actor, historian or librarian. It is amazing how near at hand help often is, if we only make our needs known. If the reader is young and busy, dancing and skating and sleeping, and complains, in her winsome way, that "days are too short for such work," we would remind her that as already stated, to carefully study the details of any costume, of any period, means that the mind and the eye are being trained to

discriminate between the essentials and non-essentials of woman's costume in every-day life. The same young beauty may be interested to know that at the beginning of Geraldine Farrar's career the writer, visiting with her, an exhibition of pictures in Munich, was amazed at the then, very young girl's familiarity with the manner of artists-ancient and modern,-and exclaimed "I did not know you were so fond of pictures." "It's not that," Farrar said, " I get my costumes from them, and a great many of my poses." Outline and material being decided, give your attention to the character of the background against which you are to appear. If it is a ball-room, and the occasion a costume-ball, is it done in light or dark colours, and what is the prevailing tone? See to it that you settle on a colour which will be either a harmonious note or an agreeable, hence impressive contrast, against the prevailing background) If you are to wear the costume on a stage or as a living picture against background arranged with special reference to you, and where you are the central figure, be more subtle and combine colours, if you will; go in for interesting detail, provided always that you make these details have meaning. For example, if it be trimming, pure and simple, be sure that it be applied as during your chosen period. Trimming can be used so as to increase effectiveness of a costume by accentuating its distinctive features, and it can be misused so as to pervert your period, whether that be the age of Cleopatra, or the Winter of 1917. Details, such as lace, jewels, head-dresses, fans, snuff boxes, work baskets and flowers must be absolutely of the period, or not at all. A few details, even one stunning jewel, if correct, will be far more convincing than any number of make shifts, no matter how attractive in themselves.

Paintings, plates and history come to our rescue here. If you think it dry work, try it. The chances are all in favour of your emerging from your search spell-bound by the vistas opened up to you; the sudden meaning acquired by many inanimate things, and a new pleasure added to all observations.



Portrait of Mrs. Philip M. Lydig, patron of the arts, exhibited in New York at Duveen Galleries during Winter of 1916-1917 with the Zuloaga pictures. -The exhibition was arranged by Mrs. Lydig.

This portrait has been chosen to illustrate two points: that a distinguished decorative quality is dependent upon line which has primarily to do with form of one's own physique (and not alone the cut of the costume); and the great value of knowing one's own type.

Mrs. Lydig has been transferred to the canvas by the clever technique of one of the greatest modern painters, Ignacio Zuloaga, an artistic descendant of Velasquez. The delightful movement is that of the subject, in this case kept alive through its subtle translation into terms of art.

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That Spanish comb of great-great-grand mother's is really a treasure now. The antique Spanish plaque you own, found to be Moorish lustre, and out of the attic it comes ! A Spanish miracle cross proves the spiritual superstition of the race, so back to the junk-shop you go, hoping to acquire the one that was proffered.

Yes, Carmen should wear a long skirt when she dances, Spanish pictures show them; and so on.

The collecting of materials and all accessories to a costume, puts one in touch, not only with the dress, but the life of the period, and the customs of the times. Once steeped in the tradition of Spanish art and artists, how quick the connoisseur is to recognize Spanish influence on the art of Holland, France and England. Lead your expert in costumes of nations into talking of history and we promise you pictures of dynasties and lands that few historical writers can match.

This man or woman has extracted from the things people wore the story of where they wore them, and when, and how; for the lover of colour we commend this method of studying history.

If any one of our readers is casting about for a hobby and craves one with inexhaustible possibilities, we would advise: try collecting data on periods in dress, as shown in the art treasures of the world, for of this there is verily no end.

We warn the novice in advance that each detail of woman's dress has for one in pursuit of such data the allure of the siren.

There is the pictured story of head-dresses and hats, and how the hair is worn, from Cleopatra's time till ours; the evolution of a woman's sleeve, its ups and downs and ins and outs as shown in art; the separation of the waist from skirt, and ever changing line of both; the neck of woman's gown so variously cut and trimmed and how the necklace changed likewise to ac cord; the passing of the sandals of the Greeks into the poetic glove-fitting slippers of to-day.

One sets out gaily to study costumes, full of the courage of ignorance, the joyous optimism of an enthusiast, because it is amusing and looks so simple with all the material,--old and new, lying about one.

Ah, that is the pitfall--the very abundance of those plates in wondrous books, old coloured prints and portraits of the past. To some students this kaleidoscopic vision of period costumes never falls into definite lines and colour; or if the types are clear, what they come from or merge into remains obscure.

For the eager beginner we have tried to evolve out of the whole mass of data a system of origin and development as definite as the anatomy of the human body, a framework on which to build. If our historical outline be clear enough to impress the mental vision as indelibly as those primary maps of the earth did, then we feel persuaded, the textless books of wonderful and beguiling costume plates will serve their end as never before. We humbly offer what we hope may prove a key to the rich store house.

Simplicity, and pure line, were lost sight of when overabundance dulled the senses of the world. We could prove this, for art shows that the costuming of woman developed slowly, pre serving, as did furniture, the same classic lines and general characteristics until the fifteenth century, the end of the Middle Ages.

With the opening up of trade channels and the possibilities of easy and quick communication between countries we find, as we did in the case of furniture, periods of fashion developing without nationality. Nations declared them selves in the artistry of workmanship, as to-day, and in the modification and exaggeration of an essential detail, resulting from national or individual temperament.

If you ask, "Where do fashions come from, why 'periods'?" we would answer that in the last analysis one would probably find in the conception of every fashion some artist's brain. If the period is a good one, then it proves that fate allowed the artist to be true to his muse. If the fashion is a bad one the artist may have had to adapt his lines and colour or detail to hide a royal deformity, or to cater to the whim of some wilful beauty ignorant of our art, but rich and in the public eye.

A fashion if started is a demon or a god let loose. As we have said, there is an interesting point to be observed in looking at woman as decoration; whether the medium be fresco, has relief, sculpture, mosaic, stained glass or painting, the decorative line, shown in costumes, presents the same recurrent types that we found when studying the history of furniture.

For our present purposes it is expedient to confine ourselves to the observation of that expression of civilisation which had root, so far as we know, in Assyria and Egypt, and spread like a branching vine through Byzantium, Greece, Rome, Gothic Europe and Europe of the Renaissance, on through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, down to the present time.

Costumes for woman and man are supposed to have had their origin in a cord 'tied about the waist, from which was suspended crude implements (used for the slaying of beasts for food, and in self-defence; trophies of war, such as teeth, scalps, etc. The trophies suspended, partly concealed the body and were for decoration, as was tattooing of the skin. Clothes were not the result of modesty; modesty followed the partial covering of the human body. Modesty, or shame, was the emotion which developed when man, accustomed to decoration-trophies or tattooing-was deprived of all or part of such covering. What parts of the body require concealment, is purely a matter of the customs prevailing with a race or tribe, at a certain time, and under certain conditions.

This is a theme, the detailed development of which lies outside the purpose of our book. It has delightful possibilities, however, if the plentiful data on the subject, given in scientific books, were to be condensed and simplified.



*Mrs. Langtry (Lady de  
Bathe) in Evening Wrap*

Mrs Langtry Bathe) who has been one of the greatest beauties of our times and a marked example of a woman who has always understood her own type, to costume it.

She agrees that this photograph of her, in an evening wrap, illustrates a point she has always laid emphasis on: that a garment which has good lines-in which one is a picture-continues wearable even when not the dernier cri of fashion.

This wrap was worn by Mrs. Langtry about two years ago.

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Excerpted from *Woman as Decoration* by Emily Burbank (1920). This book is available in the following formats:

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