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Thesis Proposal for the Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Title: Contemporary Costumes

Submitted by: Martha Elaine Sklepko Date: October 15, 1973

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"The purpose of this thesis is to creatively use the various methods and techniques in fabric designing related through costuming. I intend to selectively choose the costume patterns according to how I feel its design, period or national origin best relates to the methods being used, and further adapt them for contemporary wear. I hope that these garments will be functional as contemporary costumes as well as works of art."

College of Fine and Applied Arts
Rochester Institute of Technology

Capes

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of The Division of Fine and Applied Arts
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Fine Arts

Department of Weaving and Textile Design

by
Martha Sklepko
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INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic pleasure experienced from the total organization of a work of art is dependent upon the success with which the artist has conveyed his message in terms of his medium. My feelings have been that it is important for an artist to know how to handle the various methods and techniques related to his art form in order to meet these means. By acquiring the knowledge, skill and understanding of these methods, one sees how they relate to one another and can work in combination with each other for what one hopes are positive results. My purpose then, in terms of textile design, is to creatively use the various methods and techniques applied to designing capes. As a result, the boundaries of my experiences should be limitless. It is this interesting production of the very mediums with which ornamentations may be carried out that renders textile design such a fascinating art.

My thesis work is an outgrowth of many related experiences, attitudes and inspirations. As an artist whose medium is working in the fiber crafts, my ties with nature have consisted of using found natural objects such as feathers, weeds, rocks and shells, or the use of hand spun and natural dyed fibers. I have never really

sought out nature as a source of design. Since then I have learned that a designer can take advantage of such observations as the wind shimmering leaves, flight contour of a distant flock of birds, fields of waving corn, the beautiful drooping of vegetation, and the rhythms of waves. It is the feeling, character, interest and spirit of this vitality and activity radiating through nature that can be captured and applied to art.

Another source of inspirations has been through my understanding of the special appreciation the Japanese have for their natural environment. This attitude is based upon a way of looking at and living with nature and becomes evident as it is expressed through the delicate and sensitive art of Japanese flower arrangement, known as Ikebana. Ikebana can be broken down into two words: ikeru meaning to arrange or create; hana meaning flower. The word ikeru as applied to ikebana has the implication of "change" or "the creation of change". The central problem of ikebana then becomes how to change the materials which one is using and what shape to create by this means. The art involves producing a desired beautiful shape, which in reality is a statement of the arranger's thoughts and feelings which existed within him. It becomes obvious how important the human element is in ikebana. Whether one tries to arrange flowers naturally, unnaturally, or supernaturally, the finished product becomes a manifestation of one's personality and as such is alive.

In an account written by Brinkley and Kikuchi for Volume V of Pageant of Japanese Art, the relationship between man, nature and art becomes obvious:

"In the spring were worn robes resembling the bloom of the plum and the cherry; in summer, kimono blushed with the colors of the plum and azalea; for fall were chosen the rich hues of the reddening maples, the bush clover, chrysanthemum and bluebell, while the solemn green of the pine and brown of dead leaves harmonized with winter snows."¹

I have chosen to make all of my costumes capes. In creating their designs, my intentions were to convey a mood and to create a work of art much like that created by the Japanese through Ikebana. I have used flowers, water, trees, and grass to ornament the surfaces of these garments because of the infinite number of possible moods that can be generated from these natural objects.

¹Helen Benton Minnich, Japanese Costume and the Makers of Its Elegant Tradition (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle Co. Inc., 1963), p. 110.

HISTORY OF CAPES

In a brief study of the history of capes, the wearing of such a garment was first discovered by their presence in graves dating back to the Magdalenean period, about 40,000 - 8,000 BC; the capes continued to be worn from that time to the present. Its long history was to undergo little change in original concept of being an outer garment worn over the shoulders and fastened by some means in the front of the chest. History records that the first capes were crude animal skins pierced with a hole to be fastened with a wooden cross-piece. As civilizations advanced, these capes became more refined and their style was dictated by the needs and functions performed. For example, a woven wool cloak from the barrow burial at Trindhoj in Denmark provides evidence that the dangling threads decorating the cape on the outside functioned to direct rain water off the garment.² Some capes were worn by the military, noble Roman ladies, the religious, university scholars, and as evening wear by both men and women. Their lengths and widths varied as did the decorations upon them. Some were fringed, embroidered, trimmed with fur or jewels, hooded and

²Francois Boucher, 20,000 Years of Fashion: The History of Costume and Personal Adornment (New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1966), p. 28.

collared. The fabrics were often silk, wool, satin, velvets and animal skin.

The first type of primitive drapery appeared in the costumes of the Mesopotamian valleys in the early millennia, and later styles were characterized by invading peoples from the middle of the 3rd millennium BC on.³ As the history of costume progresses, most known examples of early capes are recorded as they appear on statuettes, reliefs on urns, in frescos and in later years through paintings. The figure of Idi-ilum, Governor of Lagash, c.2350 BC, shows how the decorations of knotted curled fringes enrich the Sumerian shawl. The figures of two females discovered in 28th century BC at Mari and Telloh are wearing a second garment over their robes which covers their shoulders and arms and envelops the entire body like a cape, whose flat edging and tapes can be seen on the front of the body.⁴ A link between the Syrians and Assyrians is evident in the bas-reliefs of Assyrian military triumphs which show us the costumes of the Hebrews in fringed cloaks and fur capes worn by the others.⁵

At the end of this Bronze period, under the 18th and 19th dynasties of the New Empire, the long tunic was

³Ibid., p. 34.

⁴Ibid., p. 38.

⁵Ibid., p. 56.

complemented by a woolen shawl probably worn as a cloak, wound several times around the body. Similar to Mesopotamian costume, the last swathes draped over the shoulders form a sort of cape, but the garment may have been two pieces with the cape separate like the short Syrian tippit. The Cretans and Aegeans covered themselves with a cloak of animal skin and the Charioteers wrapped themselves in long cloaks. The women also wore a long cloak for riding in chariots and at other times the outer garment continued to be a short sleeveless cape or tippit over the shoulders.⁶

It is evident that Minoan styles were increasingly adopted in all countries with coasts on the Black Sea and the Eastern Mediterranean, as the Etruscan styles penetrated into Iberia. During the 7th, 6th, and 5th centuries BC these influences and similarities become noticeable in the garments. A cloak fastened on the right shoulder shows the Eastern influence on the male Etruscan costume. The Orientalizing influence on the female costume can be seen in a relief on a funerary urn from Chiusi. The young girls dancing are wearing capes covering their shoulders.⁷ As revealed in a fresco from the Nuovo Tomb, the dancing girls shown wearing dark-colored cloaks decorated with bands of light colors fall into a cape over the shoulder, a form

⁶Ibid., p.83.

⁷Ibid., p.113.

derived from the original cloak of Mediterranean peoples.⁸ A short cape worn by Etruscan women in the first half of the 5th century BC is the same shape as that worn by Iberian men in the 6th and 5th century.⁹ While noble Roman ladies wore the olicula, a cape covering the upper arms, men and women of the lower classes wore a cape made of coarser material with a hood and sleeves whose origins were probably Illyrian.¹⁰ Some Iberian women wore capes with pointed hoods. The hooded cape is also to be seen among Scythians and on Roman bronzes.¹¹

During the Nuragic Period numerous statuettes reveal the costumes worn for religious ceremonies. The High Priest and priestesses were clad in tunics with capes that were sometimes worn on only one side of the body, apparently on the left.¹² Two other examples of liturgical and monastic garments were adapted from civilian garments. The Council of Toledo in 636 adopted this once-used traveling cape as a liturgical garment. It is described as a cloth cut in a circle with a central opening for the head, and is shorter in the front with slits at either side. A similar circular hooded cape, varying in lengths, that was once a typical

⁸Ibid., p. 114.

⁹Ibid., p. 118.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 121.

¹¹Ibid., p. 131.

¹²Ibid., p. 130.

Gaulish cloak, 2nd-5th century AD was now used as a monastic garment.¹³

Beginning in the 12th century costumes began to change drastically from the past, everything becoming more decorative and the fabrics more elegant. The women in Italy during the Romanesque Period wore a circular-cut cape adorned with embroidery.¹⁴ There existed at this time a uniformity of costume throughout Western Europe, and the cape or tippet continued to be worn by both sexes in England, France and Spain. The men and women of the 12th-14th century wore surcoats without sleeves, having armholes whose size varied. These cloaks were sometimes lined or trimmed in fur. In England the young contemporaries of Chaucer gathered around Richard III wore brightly colored capes, hose and jewels.¹⁵ Never before had the textiles in Europe placed so much brilliance, richness and charm at the disposal of costume. Spanish fashions in Italy around 1525 show men wearing silk doublets, red velvet capes trimmed with fur and velvet hats. In France between 1625-1645 the outer garment was still a cape worn sometimes over both shoulders but more often only on one. In 1613 German women wore wide flowing capes and costumes heavily adorned in jewelry. The opera costume of the Louis XIV period included flowing capes

¹³Ibid., p. 168.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 193.

fastened at the shoulder and worn by both sexes. They were designed in a variety of colors and combinations of tones, embroidery, ribbons, fringes, slashings and puffs. Costumes for men under the French Restoration Period become sober in color and keeps with the tight fitting line. The cape is an outer garment for evening wear. The velvet trimmed cloak has additional decoration in gold cords and tassels.¹⁶ The restoration period in England featured capes with overlapping folds.

After the turn of the century the tone of costume design was set by High Society. Elegant life demanded style. Major couturiers created dazzling creations along with chinchilla capes. Full pleated capes also wrapped women in the evening. The popularity of capes can be traced to the present. They are worn by anyone who so chooses. Like anything else, their style is dictated by the designs of the time. The fabrics may be the newest synthetics; their function may be for rainwear, evening, casual or sports. Capes continue to be worn by men, women and children, without restrictions to careers in life. The history of capes dates back to very early times, but the concept behind its origins is as new and fresh today as it was then.

¹⁶Ibid., p. 358.

DESCRIPTION OF PROJECTS

As I sat looking out the studio window the feeling of winter was definitely upon me. I began to think that an ideal garment for such a season should be a cape that snugly wrapped the body like a hug. As the image of a Calla Lily lingered in my mind, the idea came to weave a tapestry cape in a form very similar to that of this lily. As the large white spathe gently enclosed and protected the yellow spadix, my woven funnel form would serve a similar purpose. Research revealed that the calla lily was a native of Southern Africa near Ethiopia. It was common for it to grow in swampy places especially alongside rivers from Cape Province northward to Central Africa.¹⁷ This cape would include that river as part of its ornamentation. The bamboo trees and grass represented the natural things that grew alongside a river. The colors prominent in a snowless winter day landscape influenced the choice of muted oranges for the ground color, along with blues, browns and greens used in the design.

The woven tapestry design is sometimes decorative with a degree of realism. This is a combination of the Western tendency to model figures in light and shade, and to imply roundness and mass working with the Far Eastern

¹⁷Ernest H. Wilson, Plant Hunting (Boston: The Stratford Co., 1927), p. 128.

art qualities. In the East artists usually suggest the figure by line and its implied movements. Color tends to be flatter and more uniform.

The media I employed in creating this cape were woven tapestry, basketry and textile silkscreen printing. After my design had been drawn and transferred to a cartoon, the next step was to choose the fibers with which to weave. I chose to use wools in combination with hand spun alpaca, wool, mohair, linen and horsehair, some of which had been natural dyed. A variety of materials will create an interesting surface, since each fiber used gives its own characteristic surface. This project did not deal with the ornamentation of a given surface. Through the selection of the raw material, the spinning of this material, more particularly the interlacing of the threads and pick, and finally the finishing of the fabric, a surface was produced upon which the respective values and textures of the materials will be felt and made the basis of design.

After the cape was woven in the desired funnel shape, it was removed from the loom and the warp threads were threaded back into the body of the cape with a tapestry needle. My intention for edging the cape in basketry was a neat finishing, making a collar and most important creating a more predominant funnel shape. I used the lazy squaw basketry stitch because in its simplicity it created its own characteristic surface in comparison to that of the

woven surface. The design was extended into the border by wrapping the fibers around the core element and changing the colors as they appeared along the edge. By gradually decreasing the length of the core element on both sides of every row, the center of the border became wider and created the point which I desired.

A sketch similar to the design of the cape was drawn on acetate and transferred to the silk screen by the direct emulsion printing process. The design was then printed on orange lining material with a whisper of light purple Procion dyestuff. The pattern was set with steam, and the lining was then blind stitched inside the cape. Two covered snaps sewn on the shoulders hold the cape securely on the body.

In the second cape my intentions were to convey the feeling of spring. The medium I employed to accomplish this purpose was batik on twenty yards of moonlight silk. The full length cape with a hood is an adapted version of the original calla lily shape. The cape is constructed with a one piece back panel from which four side panels attach on each side. Each layer is slightly larger than the one above. Having dyed the panels different springtime colors, I intended to produce a color harmony. The movement resulting from the softness and lightness of the silk in combination with the multilayers, I hoped, would resemble the breezes playing wild havoc with the blossoms in trees.

My pattern involves two different groups of designs: a ground pattern and the design executed over it. To preserve some of the original color of the silk and to create the ground pattern, I applied wax to the silk using a tjanting tool in an overlapping semi-circular wave pattern over the entire surface. All but two side panels and the outside border panel were decorated in this manner; the others were striped to produce a contrast.

The next step involved painting on the flower and leaf designs with a Procion dye formula mixed especially for batik by brushing or sponging. I chose to use the most characteristic flowering plant of Japan, the Cherry blossom, in combination with Irises. The blossoming cherry sprays flowing over the surfaces of the cape were painted in shades of pinks and reds, the irises in purple, and the leaves in greens and blues. Yellow was used to highlight the centers of the flowers. Wax was brushed on the flowers to preserve their colors from the next dye bath. The center panel, the hood, the first two side panels, and the border panel were dyed a light yellow-orange using Benzyl dyes. The second panel was dyed a darker gold, the third a soft rose, and the fourth a light rubine.

In contrast to the warmth of spring conveyed on the outside of the cape, the lining was designed and dyed to suggest a summer coolness. A row of Japanese silver dollars was batiked in bunches along the bottom edge.

The fabric was then dyed a sky blue at the top, gradually working into a blue-green color at the bottom. All the pieces were waxed and the stems were dyed a rust brown. The wax was removed and the silk was dry cleaned. The side panels were hemmed and sewn to the back panel. Armholes were made so that the arms could function freely between the first and the second panels. The hood, border panel and lining were then sewn to the body of the cape. Two covered buttons fasten the cape at the front.

Utilizing the border design that becomes established in both the tapestry and batik capes, it becomes the prominent feature in the third applique cape. Measuring a foot in the center back, it gradually tapers to three inches at the neck, as it continuously borders the perimeter of the cape. The cape was tailored in a manner that when worn it remains on the shoulders without the use of special fasteners.

The fabric used in the body of the cape was orange cotton suede, and the lining is a cream color crepe. Upon the surface was machine appliqued stylized semi-circular waves in a symmetrical pattern. The design was incorporated on the surface with maroon, orange, burgundy, purple, and cream colored fabrics. The wave patterns were basted down and then machine stitched in similar colored threads on the surface.

CONCLUSION

As a fiber craftsman I feel especially fortunate to have many methods and techniques at my disposal for textile designing. The several techniques that I employed in creating my capes were especially appealing to me. Working to ornament and design the capes for practical wear involved not only my regard for the principles of design: proportion, rhythm, harmony, and balance, but it also involved consideration of the costume as a whole in relation to the anatomy of the human figure. Through the years of creating art objects, I considered one's experiences as a viewer, but never one as the actual wearer of a work of art. The success of costume design depends upon consideration of the anatomy of the human body, principles of design including mass, line and color, and good taste. The suitability to the type of person and occasion the garment is for, the durability of the material, its comfort, simplicity, alterability and artistic effect, also influence the success of the costume design. The design itself involves line, shape, texture of cloths with consideration to surface, weave, and weight, decoration, color, and detail. A finished garment by a craftsman is the result of his ability to handle these principles and the knowledge of the methods used to create and ornament the garment.

I have used and taken into consideration all I have learned necessary to creating a successful garment and a work of art. My capes are original from the ideas under which they were conceived to their design and execution. I have learned much in their process from beginning to completion. Many new horizons have opened up to me since their beginning. Through my research I have discovered new dyes and different methods of ornamentation. My future involvement in textile design will include experimenting with old forgotten Japanese dye processes, in hope that they can be applied to other works of art.

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