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Threading Art: the dynamics of costume design and costume studies.

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Threading Art: the dynamics of costume design and costume studies.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Costume Design at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Richmond, Virginia, 2014

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THREADING ART: THE DYNAMICS OF COSTUME DESIGN AND COSTUME STUDIES.

Isabela Marchi Tavares de Melo, MFA in Costume Design

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Masters of Fine Arts in Costume Design at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major director: Toni-Leslie James, Head of Costumes, VCU Theatre Department.

The main objective of this research is to demonstrate the strong relationship between design and history in the process of studying and creating costumes for theatre. Costumes are considered an important area in the study of material culture, which has been given more visibility within academia. Over the past few decades, the number of museums and universities with collections dedicated exclusively to costumes and textiles has noticeably increased, recognizing them as works of art worthy of being preserved. Considering costumes’ ability to document time and space, and to visually tell stories, many theatre departments have implemented methods to organize their costume collections in order to make them available as a design resource for students and professionals. As Theatre VCU strives for the quality of their educational practices, and with the increase recognition given to design students and faculty, I have proposed a system to archive costumes, renderings and other material, reflecting the excellence of students’ work, and comprehends a design resource for future reference and research.
Introduction

For my last birthday, a good friend gave me a little brooch, pinned to a handkerchief. My friend works at a vintage shop, and one of the many things we have in common is the appreciation for antique clothing. As soon as I laid eyes on this tiny piece of jewelry, I knew it was special. “It’s Victorian,” she said, “it might seem a little strange because it’s a mourning brooch, but I thought you would appreciate it.” After hearing that small fragment of history, I felt this immediate connection with this ornament. The brooch is shaped like a garland, the diameter of a nickel, composed of little light blue enamel flowers over metal. To some it might seem ordinary, but to anyone who appreciates costumes as much as I do, it has an unequalled quality of being able to encapsulate an entire period and feelings for places, people, and things that are long gone. As stated by 19th Century writer and bibliophile Octave Uzanne, “An ancient fashion is always a curiosity, a fashion slightly out of date is an absurdity; the reigning of fashion alone in which life stirs, commands us by its grace and charm, and stands beyond discussion” (vii).

Whenever I wear a vintage or antique piece, it makes me wonder about the person who first wore it, where they wore it and why; it makes me think of the moment in time that piece was made, and what was happening in politics and culture. All the different materials, shapes and colors weave a story and help reconstruct a history that should not be forgotten, and though I cannot remember it from my own memory, I am still able to comprehend some of it with the experience of wearing it, and thinking another woman, in another time, also wore it. A passage from the novel Sartor Resartus beautifully explains, “what meaning lies in Color! From the soberest drab to the high-flaming scarlet spiritual idiosyncrasies unfold themselves in choice of Color; if the Cut betokens Intellect and Talent, so does the Color betoken Temper and Heart” (Carlyle, 1833-34: 54).
The *zeitgeist*, or the spirit of times clothes can carry is perhaps what makes me so passionate about costumes and motivated to study them. Through this research I intend to demonstrate how the study of costumes is as important to material culture as the study of any other field in the arts, and how it is slowly being recognized as one of the most telling documents of social history. Furthermore, I hope to show how design and history are intrinsically connected in the study of costumes, and that this relationship depends on continuous research and development of design practices that reflect the past and elucidate the present, and inspire the future. After all, the study of costumes as an artistic expression is an endless thread initiated by the idea of a designer, perpetuated by the wearer and the viewer, slowly making its way into history.
Chapter 1. Material culture: a survey on the relationship between fashion and costumes in theatres and museums.

Costumes are a fairly recent field of study within the arts. Even though clothing has always been an inherent part of civilizations and has accompanied social, political and economical changes, it wasn’t until the past 100 years that it became an interest among scholars of different areas, as they realized how costumes translate history and have the ability to tell stories through design. Throughout the 20th Century, costumes and fashion became a focus of areas like sociology, anthropology, philosophy, cultural studies and design. Likewise, it is probably the same reason why certain institutions such as universities and museums have collections dedicated to costumes and textiles, why so many people collect vintage and antique pieces, and why accurate reproduction of costumes is so important in theatre. Despite the differences in function and purpose each of these areas have, their intention for collecting costumes is but one: the ability of connecting the public to a completely distinctive time and reality from their own. More often than not, this connection is felt but not recognized by the public; they will go to a costume exhibition in a museum and will admire historic clothing on display, but if asked why the answer will most likely be related to the aesthetic, the beauty of the object that attracted them in the first place, yet they will not be able to recognize why they feel such attraction, or connection, beyond the visual appeal. The same thing happens in theatre, particularly in productions that are set in a bygone era. Costumes make the public (and the actors) believe not only the story being told, but also in the characters telling the story, because “No expressions in any culture are more personal than its clothing and textiles. Documenting everything from function to aesthetics, mores to spirituality, occupation to status and personal taste, they embody social narratives – living histories so to speak” (Queen and Lester, 2006: xiv). The ability to tell a story through costumes is one of the key elements in connecting an audience to a play, and costume designers will only be as good as their knowledge of costume history and
their understanding that costumes are some of the most powerful documents of human
expression and history. As Jean L. Druesedow, associate curator in charge at the Metropolitan
Museum and director of the Kent University Museum beautifully described in the 1987 MET
Bulletin “In Style: Celebrating Fifty Years of the Costume Institute” costumes are:

Important records of their civilizations. Depending upon its cultural context, a
costume can reveal age, sex, and religion and the marital, economic, social,
political status of the wearer, as well as its own geographical origin plus much
other data more subjective and psychological in nature. Considered within its
aesthetic and cultural context, a garment can give us vivid and intimate glimpses
both of the artist who created it and of its wearer. (3)

Unfortunately, costumes and fashion are often considered unworthy of scholarly study,
or are undermined among other fields within the arts. “Prejudice, fear and suspicion still
surround the status of fashion within many museums. This sometimes takes the form of fashion
being tolerated as a form of ‘entertainment’ which will ‘pull the crowds’, with no
acknowledgement of the serious contribution it also makes to the educational role of the
museum” (Anderson, 2000: 374). Costumes and fashion are so intrinsically associated with the
idea of entertainment, diversion, and distraction that they are believed to be only an aspect of
popular culture, a by-product of consumerism, and thus are given a low status in academia.
However, this prejudice can be proven wrong with a survey of the history and significance of
costumes and fashion, as well as their differences. “One of the advantages in studying the
development of costume is that we have the opportunity of looking at a style from a distance,
and so judging of its intrinsic merit” (Sage, 1926: vii). The two areas are inherently related but are
not completely the same (they are like siblings, were born and raised by the same parents, share
the same house, customs and values, and yet they are different people).
Both costumes and fashion are directly and strongly connected to history – social changes, people’s habits and ideals, cultural diversity and language. However, fashion is a flow, it is history that is being written, whereas costume is an image in a mirror, it reflects back on what has been written before. One does not exist without the other, which is why to me it is important to comprehend what connects them. The significance of costumes relies on the understanding of fashion as a system of its own. Sociology defines fashion as a symbolic representation of an individual within a group, a continuous movement of association and dissociation between groups and the individual (Lipovetsky, 1994), defined by changes in society closely related to architecture, visual arts, music, religion, politics, literature, decoration, etc.

Social groups organize themselves according to what’s accepted by society, which influences the aesthetic for such group in a specific time. In this way, clothes work as a means of communication; fashion is a visual language that communicates society’s expectations, and translates its meanings throughout time (Barthes, 1990). Within this language, each piece of clothing or ornament is like a word: left alone it has but one meaning; if set among others, its meaning not only changes according to the context, but also changes the meaning of the other words around it.

For example, my tiny brooch carries within itself an entire system of signification: its first meaning is the one related to its function as an ornament, and further, there is a second meaning which is the purpose of its use, a brooch used specifically for mourning. This particular characteristic places this object not only in a specific moment in time (both in the life of the wearer and in history), but also in a certain place. Though I cannot precisely say to whom the brooch first belonged, or where exactly it was worn, or even determine the year it was made, I know it was an ornament dedicated to mourning, a ritual practiced differently in every culture. Western civilization is known for assigning specific colors, clothes and accessories that corresponded to the state of mourning, especially until the first half of the 20th century. Thus, I know my brooch is at least over 70 years old, and I can assume the woman who wore it was
following the norms of her social stratum and the fashion of her time, since she had a brooch to signify her state of mind. Nowadays, however, the meaning of a mourning brooch no longer pertains to the current system of signification in fashion, because there simply is no such thing as a specific item of clothing or accessory designated for the mourning period, as the ritual itself has changed through the history of western civilization. Still, the fact that this object has persisted over time, and can still provide an understanding of a bygone era and place, now defines it more as costume than fashion, thus “there is no difficulty in ascertaining the relation between the events of a certain period and the fashions of the same date. If the spirit of the age be serious, if the social community be exposed to severe trials, if continual misfortunes befall the mass of the people, the mode of dress will reflect those vicissitudes of the time” (Challamel, 1882: 113).

As a costume designer, I am particularly interested and drawn to objects such as a mourning brooch because those are the elements that are truly able to engage an audience and make them connect not only to the play, but also to the characters, once it is through detail that aesthetic values and choices translate the most. Quiet often the accents of a costume (shoes, a scarf, gloves, a brooch) are more emblematic and tell more about a character than their full attire (dress, shirt, coat, skirt).

There seems to be a sort of fascination for decorative and utilitarian items such as accessories, which have an important role on the overall effect of a costume. Perhaps because of its nature that makes people relate to them easier than to fashions of the past. For instance, an 18th Century mourning brooch with the hair locks of a beloved one appeals more than court costume with its stiff and intricate hoop structure. The essential form of accessories such as parasols, shawls, gloves, and stockings has not changed significantly throughout centuries,
while the shape and silhouette of women’s dresses and men’s suits have shifted dramatically through history. (Taylor, 1983).

Costumes become a document of human expression and history when they are removed in time and immune to the coercions of current moment. Upon future review, they truly reflect aesthetic values and social conditions from the time they were created, but were not necessarily recognized then. Thus, while studying the history of costumes, one understands a completely different system of meaning: a corset reflects centuries of a patriarchal society in which women were seen as fragile and thus inferior; a flapper dress reveals the beginning of change in that society with women’s emancipation. Whether it is a corset or a dress, any costume has the ability to translate social, political and cultural events into a set of beautifully woven art objects we commonly know as clothes. “Fashion, like an impressionistic picture, must be looked at from a distance in order to get the effect that the artist desires to convey. But fashion, unlike the picture, does not always improve when looked at from a distance, that is, a period of time” (Sage, 1926: 214). Fashion is closer to contemporary times, to the clothes and accessories being produced and commercialized now, and thus associated with popular culture. Costumes are “dead fashion,” except they are only dead in the sense they do not partake in current changes, but rather transmit the spirit, the reminiscence of the past. In this way, fashion is a language, whereas costumes are literacy.

In English, the word fashion comes from the French façon, meaning a way or specific characteristic of making something. However, the French do not use façon when referring to fashion, but rather another word, mode, derived from the Latin modus, which means measure, rhythm, and manner. Interestingly, in all Latin languages, the word used to describe fashion is the same: mode in French, and moda in Portuguese, Spanish and Italian. On the other hand, the word costume seems to get lost in translation, having multiple meanings in different languages.
English, French and Italian share the exact same term, *costume*, derived from the Latin *consuetudo*, meaning custom, habit, usage (Druesedow, 1987). In Spanish, costume translates to *traje*, from the Latin *tragere*, which means to bring, or to carry. In Portuguese, however, costume has two (maybe even three) separate translations that relate to the space in which the costume is set. The word for costume in a historic sense (a dress in a museum, for example) is the same word as in Spanish, *traje*. Conversely, if this costume is meant to be in the theatre, cinema, or television, the translation changes to *figurino*, a word that comes from the Latin *figura*, meaning form, model, or figure. Moreover, there is even a third different translation in Portuguese for the word costume, which is *fantasia*, that literally means “fantasy” in English, and is mostly used when referring to costumes worn in a themed party or celebration, such as Halloween, for instance, but is also popularly used when referring to theatre costumes. According to the Costume Society of America, nowadays “costumes are defined as fanciful clothing and ensemble for performance wear, fancy dress, and specific events such as Halloween. Previous to 1950, costume was the broad term for all clothing and accessories; however, in the last half of the twentieth century, the definition has evolved from the broader meaning to the more specific” (Queen and Lester, 2006: xiv).

The multiple translations or meanings the word costume has in Portuguese and Spanish are particularly interesting since they give costumes a system of signification of its own, similar to, but separate from the system of fashion, and closer to the arts – and theatre in particular. During the same time great artists such as Tzara and Marinetti were founding Dadaism and Futursim, and while Artaud and Brecht were developing their own theatre practices, we can also find fashion designers that were not only pioneers in their creations, but also transformed the way society related to clothes. Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli are two great examples of artists’ sensitivity and talent in anticipating the moment to come, showing how aware they were of their current social moment through their designs. Like all other artists – painters, writers, poets, musicians – they were the spokespersons of a starting current, foreseeing a new kind of
conscience that was already present, but still dormant in most people. Decades later, their work is still relevant, like words written in a paper perpetuated by the written word, or paintings on a canvas immortalized by brush strokes of colors and shapes, their clothes carry the spirit of an era in a particular way, and thus clothes that should be considered costumes, are actually considered fashion because the designer’s style choices and aesthetic tell more about the period, than the actual history woven in their clothes. In theatre, the costume designer has to be sensitive to the public’s expectations in order for them to create the same association with the aesthetic of a time. More than just the clothes that dress the actor, costumes carry (traje) an entire system of signification that will fill the space, and complement the performance by giving it meaning.

Moreover, costumes shape and give form to the space by allowing characters to act in their own manner, time and rhythm (modo), while slowly transporting the audience and filling them with the feeling of a place and a time. Therefore, in the system of costumes, costume design is the zeitgeist of theatre as it brings not only people and places to life, but it also transports the audience to a different time in history.

Costume design is also visual literacy. There is a strong connection between the written words of a play and the lines of a sketch. The words describe function, places, shapes, feelings, and moments in a specific time and space, while a sketch expresses all these things. Costumes become a mute language with a dense vocabulary whose silent words can carry as much meaning as an entire book. Clothes are to costumes what words are to poems. The costume designer writes through lines, shapes, textures, colors, lights, and shadows; these “writings” are called renderings, which express not only the designer’s artistic abilities to draw and paint, but also to register specific moments in time, political events, social standards, economic situation, and cultural identity. Renderings also reveal a designer’s own aesthetic values and artistic style, through choices of fabrics, trims, patterns, light and shadow, brush strokes and color matching. Costume design moves between crafts and fine art because it is as much about functionality as it is about the experience. Considering the body as a carrier for art, costumes become one of the
actor’s supporters on stage. Like most impressionist artists, highly influenced by journalism, poetry, and the fashion of their time, costume designers paint the experience of dress and wear.

Perhaps what brings costume design closer to art is poetic license. Like any painter, each designer has a particular method of expression, and as an individual and an artist they experience written and visual stimulation differently, according to their own repertoire. Consequently, no two designers will ever have the same interpretation of a play, and thus no matter how history-specific a writer or director might be, the designs will always differ. This variance in interpretation – which might be called poetic license – is what makes theatre such a welcoming open space, where people can play with their emotions, knowledge, expectations, and frustrations, while being stimulated by their senses. Moreover, it is also the reason why theatre is the first true form of entertainment, and while cinema has special effects, and the Internet provides endless possibilities, they are still two-dimensional, and thus cannot provide the public with the same live experience as the one provided in the theatre.

There is more to theatre than just entertainment. Comparable to a museum that educates its public through a variety of themed exhibitions, theatre also tells complex stories across space with a careful arrangement of objects, images, and text that provides audiences with the opportunity to look, reflect, and work out meanings. In this way, both plays and exhibitions are an interpretation of history, which can be more or less convincing, depending on how it is told. Theatre usually relies on the drama and the spectacle to connect with its audience, while museums tend to trust on the cautious display of text alongside an object to inform the public. For the majority of artifacts exposed in museums, this method has always applied, probably because such artifacts have been considered important aspects of material culture and thus have been collected and studied for many centuries now. This is the case with sculpture, painting, ceramics, and even textiles. Costumes, on the other hand, might have been collected by individuals and institutions for a long time, but have entered academia fairly recently. “Museum
officials regarded some artistic and allied subjects with a certain suspicion, especially the study of historic costume, which most of the staff thought of only as a sort of rather unholy byproduct of the textile industry” (Gibbs-Smith, 1976). Though museums have been collecting historic costumes since the second half of the 19th century and in spite of the fact the first costume exhibition was held in Paris in 1900, it took almost another hundred years for fashion and costumes museums to be established (Steele, 2008). Interestingly, the first costume collections (or collectors), which are now internationally acclaimed institutions, were actually created by artists and designers that were somewhat connected to theatre. For instance, the Costume Institute was established independently from the Metropolitan Museum of Art by Irene Lewisohn, founder of the Neighborhood Playhouse of the Henry Street Settlement in New York, Aline Bernstein, a theatre designer, and Polaire Weissman. It was from their work at the Playhouse and the observation of how immigrant people with whom they were working revealed much of their culture and carried their heritage through their clothes (Druesedow, 1987). Much of the early collection consisted of costumes from Irene and her sister, and theatre designer Lee Simonson. Additionally, Kent State University Museum owns an outstanding costume collection, created from Shannon Rodgers $5 million dollar donation in the 1980s. Rodgers began his career in New York as a set designer and eventually became an accomplished costume designer. Last, but not least, the Victoria & Albert Museum (the greatest art museum in the world), has one of the richest collection of stage costumes, which was founded in the 1920s by the efforts of private collector and amateur actress and playwright, Gabrielle Enthoven.

The collaboration between fashion and costume museums and theatre goes beyond the development of collections. The past two decades have been a prove of how much museums have borrowed from theatre in the development of costume exhibitions, creating not only a new way of displaying objects, but also bringing a new mentality into scholarship, one that is not purely based on historic research, but rather on a fine collaboration with the elements of design. Fashion has become one of the most popular, enduring, international and financially pleasing
show among museums (Menkes, 2000). “Until fairly recently, most museum exhibitions of clothing tended to be antiquarian in their approach and chronological in their organization (…) whereas Andrew Bolton and Harold Koda conceived of Dangerous Liaisons as a sexy, theatrical tour de force – with towering wigs and one mannequin memorably sprawled on the floor” (Steele, 2008: 10).

Bolton and Koda are part of a new generation of costume curators who have been inspired by the rise of the “fashion show” and the spectacle found in theatre. Former associate curator of the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT), and current curator-in-charge of the Costume Institute at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harold Koda believes “you have to engage the eye before you can instruct or communicate. You have to get people to focus on something to understand what it is” (Drier 2006: 112). Director and chief curator of the FIT, Valerie Steele, agrees with Koda: “People need to be seduced into really seeing and identifying with fashion before they can begin to learn about it” (Steele, 2008: 14).

Though highly criticized for being opulent and historically inaccurate on her exhibitions, fashion editor and consultant for the Costume Institute, Diana Vreeland created the precursor of the fashion museum show, setting a standard of theatre and drama and anticipating the popularization of museum culture. She replied to criticism by affirming, “the public isn’t interested in accuracy – they want spectacle” (Dwight 2002: 210), and was very controversial when it came to the dichotomy between entertainment and education, as she was an avid defender of entertainment above anything. “I don’t want to be educated … I want to be drowned in beauty!” (Newhouse 2006: 190). Despite Vreeland’s statements being extremely hostile towards the educational power of dress, and condescending to scholars dedicated to the study of fashion and costumes, there are still things to be learned from her work, especially when adapted to theatre. “Vreeland’s intuitive awareness that the clothing of the past was never “costume”, but rather was the “fashion” of its day” (Steele, 2008: 11), predicted a trend that is so clearly visible nowadays, in which the line between fashion and costumes is blurred; what used to
be considered “old fashioned” is now called “vintage” and sometimes is attributed a higher value than current fashions, in addition to being great inspiration to new trends. In the midst of new technologies and the intense development of social media, people are starting to look more and more to the past in search of meaning and a sense of belonging. Thus, it is no coincidence that today’s young adults, the millennium generation, have such a great interest in vintage fashion and have revived styles of bygone eras and generations; just like the baby bloomers were defying tradition and developing their own values, millennials are also questioning current values, the modern idea of progress and the high speed of production and consumption by looking back into history. Vreeland was wrong for disregarding the educational power one can draw from the study of costumes, but in order to educate someone, there must be willingness and drive to learn, and for that to happen, there must be interest first. Beauty creates interest, because it allows anyone to draw from his or her own aesthetic values and form a relationship with an object. This is extremely valuable for a costume designer, and is one of the challenges of the job. How to maintain historic accuracy while creating value and beauty to engage the public? There is no right or wrong answer except to assume nothing of your public, and understand that nowadays a theatre audience can be as culturally diverse as a subway train in New York City, and thus a costume designer cannot expect them to know bustles and corsets were undergarments worn during the later part of the Victorian Era, but should instead know that any person will identify with shapes and silhouettes, with the aspects that create the notion of beauty, or the aesthetic of each period. “Costume helps to inform us closely of the ethos of a particular generation and … completes the study of man and what he makes for his aesthetic subsistence” (Montebello, 1987).

To be able to transport an entire audience back in time through their eyes, and give them the experience of dress without changing out of their own clothes, that is the spectacle, and that is the role of the costume designer. “What Mrs. Vreeland always did, her way of connecting the public to the past, was…to say material culture is only interesting because of the personalities
that informed it. She made clothes come alive – by their association with these powerful personalities” (Drier 2006: 112). No matter how controversial Diana Vreeland’s statements might be, she (unknowingly) raised a long-time coming discussion on a topic that had been neglected by scholars until a couple of decades ago. Fashion and costumes have been left on the verge of academia for far too long, being considered a less important area of study in both historic and design perspectives. As curator Fiona Anderson points out, “prejudice, fear and suspicion still surround the status of fashion within many museums. This sometimes takes the form of fashion being tolerated as a form of ‘entertainment’, which will ‘pull the crowds’, with no acknowledgement of the serious contribution it also makes to the educational role of the museum” (Anderson, 2000: 374). But as Valerie Steele remarks, “there is no reason why exhibitions cannot be both beautiful and intelligent, entertaining and educational” (Steele, 2008: 14). Even though both Anderson and Steele have a focus on the polemics of fashion exhibitions in art museums, their arguments are also true in theatre, where costume design is given less credit or considered a secondary concern, or just decoration. Whether on stage or in a gallery, costumes can inform, connect, engage and educate the public when they are accurately conceived and appropriately displayed. From a costume perspective the experience of theatre audiences is comparable to that of the museum public; both have similar expectations in terms of entertainment, by being transported to a different setting, being visually stimulated, and connected in a way which provides them with a sense of belonging. “I have always believed that visitors should be – want to be – actively engaged in thinking about what they see. I also believe that the museum fashion exhibition can be a site of innovative scholarship, that it can – and should – make a serious contribution to our understanding of fashion” (Steele, 2008: 25). During the three years of training, going to fashion exhibitions of all kinds and in different institutions has been one of the greatest source of inspiration to me, and have helped not only to increase my knowledge of costume history, but has also shaped my creative process as a designer and as an artist. It has taught me to look back into history, acknowledge what has been done before,
absorb information, and exercised my creativity, while connecting to my own repertoire. Moreover, it brought to my attention the educational value found in the relationship between museums and theatre, and how enriching it can be for a costume design student to be able to experience both areas.
Chapter 2. Costume Design: learning from costume collections and preserving for the future.

Costume design is not a simple trade. It requires a vast knowledge of art, history and cultural studies. The costume designer is an artist by trade, who receives the same training as any other artist whose work is determined by their ability to control and perform every step of the creative process. Thus, a good costume designer is not necessarily one who has mastered rendering and painting techniques, but one who has a broad understanding of the multiple aspects involved in designing and building costumes, has a willingness to accept changes, and preparedness to adapt to circumstances.

Costumes should not be confused with fashion. Although a dialogue between fashion and costumes will always exist, differently from a fashion designer who focuses in creating trends ahead of time, costume designers recognize trends in the past by looking into history in order to develop a character’s personality and identity within a time frame. Therefore, costume designers depend on having a strong knowledge of history to create successful costumes as much as fashion designers rely on their understanding of anthropology to develop new trends.

History and anthropology museums tend to contextualize objects as cultural artifacts, while art museums tend to present objects in isolation to be viewed primarily through the lens of connoisseurship...But art museums tend to be more prestigious, and fashion as an applied art is increasingly likely to be showcased in art museums and galleries...Traditional art historical practice associated with the museum emphasizes close description and connoisseurship, while the so-called ‘new’ art history as practiced in the university draws alternative approaches and methodologies derived from cultural studies. (Steele 2008: 24-25)
The Victoria & Albert Museum in London is perhaps one of the great examples of a museum which has given great emphasis not only on the study of fashion and costumes, but also on exhibitions dedicated exclusively to these areas. *Hollywood Costume*, from 2012, was the first exhibition that displayed solely costumes made for the film industry. This exhibition was focused not only on the costume pieces, but also on the designers themselves, and their own creative processes. It was such a success that it also travelled to Australia (2013) and later to the United States, where it was on display at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (2014). *Hollywood Costume* is now considered the most popular exhibition the VMFA has ever presented, proving the growing interest of scholars and the general public in costumes. Even though the vast majority of costumes in this exhibition were loaned from private collectors and film companies, the V&A owns the largest collection of stage costumes in the world, along with costume renderings, as they understand that:

> Theatre is a contemporary art with a contemporary audience with a contemporary eye and must be of its time. So a designer does not create an authentic reconstruction of a historical dress but retains its essential attributes while reinterpreting it for today. Often only in retrospect can a production be seen as a creation of the period in which it is staged - by the way it reflects current fashion, its cut, the selected fabrics and trimmings, make-up and hair. (Victoria & Albert Museum, 2014)

In this way, the creative process of a costume designer is contingent on the ability to draw inspiration from his or her own knowledge, experience, and the period in which he or she lives. He/she should have a good knowledge of textiles and should be able to identify different types of fabrics and fibers, and thus should know how to select fabrics for the construction of
their designs. Moreover, a costume designer should learn how to use different dyes and pigments, and understand how colors and patterns can create special interplays of light and complement the set design; should use various materials to develop distinct methods for aging and to attain unique textures. So much can be learned from looking into the work of accomplished designers. This is not to say that students should copy successful designs, but should rather use it to improve their own creative process. Upon studying costume history it is easy to find examples of this practice. For instance, in the beginning of the 20th century, a time when most artists were looking into the future attracted by the idea of modernity, Mariano Fortuny drew inspiration from his predecessors, applying ancient methods of dying and manipulating fabrics, and combining them to his rich and diverse knowledge of lighting and set design, etching, sculpting, and painting techniques. Consequently, Fortuny’s work is considered one of the most unique and innovative of his time, serving as inspiration for future generations of artists, such as fashion designer Issey Miyake, who gained recognition in the 1980s for his experiments with new pleating methods. Miyake’s collections of pleated garments (figures 1 and 3) that he would later name *Pleats Please*, can be considered a contemporary reinterpretation of Mariano Fortuny’s famous *Delphos Gowns* (figures 2 and 4).

Fig. 1. Detail picture of Issey Miyake’s assorted pleated fabrics from Pleats Please collections. Kazumi Kurigami. *Pleats Please*. Taschen, 2012.
Fig. 2. Detail picture of Mariano Fortuny’s Delphos Gown. Valentine Richmond History Center, 2014.

Fig. 3. Dress, Issey Miyake, ca. 1993. Metropolitan Museum of Art, Costume Institute. Accession number 2005.130.22.

Fig. 4. Delphos Gown, Mariano Fortuny, 1937, Valentine Richmond History Center. Accession number V.58.81.04a-d.
Before I started the graduate program in Costume Design at Theatre VCU, I developed an independent study of 1930s women’s wear as part of an internship at the Valentine Richmond History Center. During this internship, I learned how to analyze, inventory, catalogue, store, and conserve costumes, while incorporating my own previous knowledge from a BA in Fashion and Textiles. During this process, I started drawing each object I processed, and found that it actually helped in the inventory. The drawings were executed at the same time as I was analyzing the object, making it easy to capture details and helping in the accuracy of its description. At first, my interest in drawing the objects was a way I found of keeping track of my work progress and creating a record of my work for future reference. Not only are the objects beautiful and authentic, but they are also amazing examples of the costume of an era that fascinates me and that I had previously studied. Thus, drawing became a method I developed to illustrate all the knowledge I had attained upon studying 1930s costume history, and to document the aesthetic of the time period.

Additionally, after working on a few dresses, I realized that drawing them was helping me understand more about their construction, style and fit. For further reference, I used patternmaking books that taught me not only to analyze a garment on the outside, but also on the inside. When analyzing the inside of historic costumes it is possible to interpret how it was constructed, sewn, and if any alterations were made over the years. Surprisingly, many dresses – mostly day dresses – have indeed been altered. Many suffered simple alterations, such as raised hems, replacement of shoulder straps, shortened sleeves, etc. However, a few of them had intricate modifications like the addition of a wide silk shawl collar and matching cuffs to what was a simple and plain black chiffon dress. Another example of construction alteration is a dress, which had its original waist seam modified to make the skirt length shorter. Only instead of normally raising the hem of the dress, whoever altered it, opted to modify the waist, probably because of decorative details on the hem that would have been lost otherwise.
Another helpful aspect of drawing the dresses and understanding their construction was to be able to identify certain specific characteristics of the 1930s style and silhouette. For instance, I noticed the resemblance of certain dresses I had been working on with styles of acclaimed designers and art movements of the time, like Madeleine Vionnet’s bias cut, and the influence of Cubism in cuts and patterns, all of which I had extensively studied and seen in books. As the Woman’s Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences stated in 1940, “Pattern and Costume Designing is a fascinating subject and one that gains in interest and significance on closer acquaintance. The longer you study it, in fact, the greater are the possibilities that suggest themselves and the better becomes your technique of expression” (iii).

Indeed, working on this independent project gave me the opportunity to exercise my research skills, improved my knowledge of 1930s costume history, style and aesthetic. Moreover, it served as inspiration for my future academic career, as I later used those drawings as reference in costume design projects while in the graduate program at Theatre VCU, which is depicted in the images below.

Fig. 5. Drawing of women’s suit from the Valentine Richmond History Center. Isabela Tavares, 2010.
Fig. 6. Women’s blue wool suit, 1931. Valentine Richmond History Center. Accession number V.64.70.2a,b.

Fig. 7. Rendering for costume design project of The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui. Isabela Tavares, 2010.
Fig. 8. Drawing of dress from the Valentine Richmond History Center Costumes and Textiles Collection. Isabela Tavares, 2010.

Fig. 9. Women’s evening dress, c. 1931. Valentine Richmond History Center, Accession number V.64.121a,b.

Fig. 10. Women’s evening gown, c. 1930, Valentine Richmond History Center. Accession number V.2001.54.6a,b.

Fig. 11. Drawing of dress from the Valentine Richmond History Costumes and Textiles Collection. Isabela Tavares, 2010.
Working at the Valentine Richmond History Center while having such a vast and rich collection of costumes and textiles at my disposal, has contributed tremendously to enhance my knowledge of costume history, and my ability as a costume designer. I believe design to be a fundamental part in the study of costumes, and also think that designing costumes is an artistic trade dependent on the understanding of costume history. “Costume history is, therefore, more than a surface study of fleeting, pretty clothes. It is this special combination of art, design and
social and economic history which makes the subject of dress so particularly interesting” (Taylor, 1983: 17). Thus, costume design students should use as many resources as they can to build a strong repertoire during school; one they can carry throughout their careers. Nowadays, students in general, not only in theatre, live in a university environment where everything is digitalized and with remote access, giving this idea that all information is available in a click, and all knowledge can be found on Google or Wikipedia. Theatre students spend most of their time in rehearsals, studio classes, tech labs and shops, as a vital part of their practical training. Still, there is a great deal of knowledge that cannot be acquired in conventional search engines, which comprehends the research through primary sources, such as design collections from universities, libraries and museums. Uncovering authentic material and using key evidence can greatly enrich the work of students whilst learning to use costumes as the means to visually tell a story. The research of design collections can also teach students of its importance, since they are the only documents left of a production or play. Given the ephemeral nature of Theatre, costumes (as well as sets, props, sound, and lighting) are the only evidence left of what a production might have looked like in performance, which can inform styles and aesthetic choices, as well as the design conventions of the time. “While each generation puts its mark on the theatre of its day, the practices of the past have led us to what we do in the present. Some practices date back to the classical period, while others were invented as new technology changed what was possible to accomplish on the stage” (Di Benedetto, 2012: 5). More over, according to Patrick M. Finelli (2012), design students can benefit from design collections because they reflect the style and achievements of past designers, they present a vast resource of illustration and rendering styles, genres and techniques, and they can be used to review solutions to particular production challenges.

Throughout my training as a costume designer, I have strived to incorporate different research sources, and explore new ways to improve my designs and rendering ability. I have used costumes from Theatre VCU for studio classes’ projects (figures 13 and 15), and from the
Valentine Richmond History Center’s collection for inspiration in my own designs (figures 14 and 16).

**Fig. 13.** Picture of 1940s red crepe dress. Costume Stock, Theatre VCU.

**Fig. 14.** Rendering for costume design project. Isabela Tavares, 2013.
Fig. 15. Off-white lace dress, early 1900s. Valentine Richmond History Center. Accession number V.83.08.03.

Fig. 16. Costume rendering for the production of Sweeney Todd. Isabela Tavares, 2013.
In addition to influencing my designs, this independent project helped me in the studies of patternmaking and draping. Having worked so closely and being able to thoroughly analyze the construction of historic costumes from the museum’s collection made it easier to solve certain problems and make certain choices. At the same time, learning how to pattern 1930s dresses complemented not only my ability as a designer, but also as a historian, since it provided me with the chance to incorporate methods and techniques that I had seen in the period costumes while exploring different cuts, style lines and silhouettes (figures 17 through 20).

Fig. 17. Drawing of 1930s women’s dress from Valentine Richmond History Center. Isabela Tavares, 2010.

Fig. 18. Patternmaking project of 1930s dress. Isabela Tavares, 2012.
Fig. 19. Reproduction of 1930s bias dress from the Costume Stock at Theatre VCU. Isabela Tavares, 2013.

Fig. 20. Detail picture of style lines and study of pieces cut on the bias and on a straight grain. Isabela Tavares, 2013.
Moreover, working so closely with a design collection facilitated understanding the relevance of collecting in a material culture, and how much it informs and connects all areas of the Arts. Every student should be encouraged and stimulated to do as much research outside the screen of the computer as possible, especially costume designers, whose work consists of a visual storytelling through the experience of wear. Touch is one of the most imperative senses in the art of costume design, as it strongly relates to feel, comfort and stimulates desire. The memory of touch is what creates the experience of wear in theatre, as audiences come to a show with preconceived knowledge and ideas, they tend to measure meaning and value in terms of their own life. “Touch is a primary means by which we come to understand cloth and clothing. We handle materials, try on garments, and personally experience new shapes and fit, which we continually re-evaluate” (Palmer, 2008: 32). Since touch is not an available tool in the digital world, it is important for designers to complement their creative process with research of real garments. “Design research stimulates creative and interpretive processes as the student analyzes past achievements and reflects upon his/her own artistic work, animating artistic imagination and creative thinking” (Finelli, 2012: 32).

The costumes at Theatre VCU, which are primarily used to supply for the department’s productions, have great potential of becoming a reference in costume design research among other universities and within the Richmond community. The quality of costumes produced in the department has increased tremendously in recent years, making them worth of being collected and preserved for future students and scholars. In the words of Wendall K. Harrington (2012), “in the world of things ephemeral, theatrical performance is right at the top. Every performance, even in shows that run for years, is unique and happens only once before vanishing forever…what can be saved that is meaningful; what will illuminate the research of the future?” And how can we save what is meaningful? There is much that theatre can borrow from the successful partnership between fashion and museums, as “specialized fashion museums were also established in other countries, often by individuals with private collections … The Museum
at the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) developed out of the Edward C. Blum ‘Design Laboratory’, which was originally founded at the Brooklyn Museum in 1915 as a teaching collection and a source of inspiration for American designers” (Steele, 2008: 9). Thus, the implementation of collecting practices and archiving systems are noteworthy not only from a conservation standpoint, but mostly as an educational tool that can help theatre departments such as Theatre VCU and many others in this country to serve as a record of students’ design, while reflecting the quality of the work produced, and as a research resource.
Chapter 3. Producing, collecting and conserving costumes at Theatre VCU.

The Costume Stock at Theatre VCU currently holds over 5,500 costumes, including costumes that were built for mainstage productions, and historic costumes that have been part of the stock for many years now and date back to the late 1800s. Besides the costumes already in stock, the Costume Shop produces an average of a couple hundred costumes every year, which includes those constructed by students and costumes acquired to fit the designer’s choice and concept. In contrast to the increasing number of costumes produced each year, the storage physical space has remained the same, making the process of properly housing new pieces very problematic, as well as extremely difficult to find existing ones. Over the past two years many costumes have been donated or sold to better accommodate those remaining and raise funds to the Costume Shop. A great deal of evaluation, selection, and organization of the stock was accomplished during this period, which proved to be very beneficial and crucial to the development of work in the Costume Shop, both during production work, and students’ individual development in the program.

Thus, there is an imperative need to institute an archiving system that can provide better accessibility and conditions for collecting and preserving the costumes at Theatre VCU. This archive should be based on the principles of design, considering costumes as a vehicle for the performing arts, and reflecting the strong relationship between costumes and theatre. With the investigation of other collections and with the analysis of preservation and conservation procedures and methods that take into consideration temperature, humidity, lighting, and space, this archiving system should be conducive with the needs of the Costume Stock at Theatre VCU. Additionally, a well-preserved and fully catalogued costume stock can promote academic research and be a reference as a design resource. It can also have a valuable influence in the overall development of students and their creative process throughout the Costume Design
program, once they better understand the history of costumes, their construction, and their preservation for future use.

Theatre VCU, along with a great number of theatre companies and university departments in the United States, suffer from a chronic problem of spacing. There is usually not sufficient space to store everything that is produced every year, or the space is not adequate in terms of conservation standards. Costumes and textiles require special care and conservation methods, and space can be detrimental in this process: lack of room and poor lighting makes it difficult to keep an organized environment, while high humidity and temperature levels can result in the formation of mold and attract moths, both of which are very harmful to textiles, particularly natural and synthetic fibers such as wool, silk and cotton, and other natural materials like leather and straw.

At Theatre VCU’s Costume Shop, faculty and students constantly work together to organize and rearrange the Costume Stock, in an effort to improve it and make it more space efficient. Additionally, every year a fair amount of costumes that are no longer considered relevant, are destined to the Halloween sale in order to raise funds for the Costume Shop and to make a little room in stock. Yet, the number of costumes added every year is always higher than the amount of costumes removed during that same period. Currently, the Main Stock (which is 550 square feet) holds around 2,500 costumes on racks, and over 200 boxes of shoes and accessories on shelving units. These shelves were recently purchased and greatly improved the organization with shoes, accessories and undergarments storage in boxes and separated by sizes. On the other hand, the costumes on racks are still the majority of the items in stock, presenting a challenge in terms of accommodation and organization, and making it difficult to find certain items.

If Theatre VCU were to provide a larger Costume Stock with a different rack storage system, then it should consider investing in garment conveyors, which are mechanically operated and have individual hanger slots, making it more efficient to assign space for each item.
Additionally, conveyors can be as long as 50 feet in length and have two separate levels. A garment conveyor of 20 feet – the same length of the racks used in the Costume Stock – can hold an average of a thousand items within both levels. To complement this system and make it even more efficient, it would be a good idea to use standardized hangers and individual covers for each item. The hangers should adequately fit the garment’s shoulder slope in order to prevent the fabric from stretching or distorting the shape of shoulders and sleeves; hangers should also be padded for the majority of items, but especially when used for items made of delicate fabrics such as silk and chiffon, dresses with narrow straps and embellishments like beading and embroidery, and suits and heavy coats. The individual covers can be made out of plastic, and can be purchased from companies that supply archival materials, which are usually acid free and are made to last longer. Dry cleaners plastic covers should not be used for long-term storage because they tend to break down quickly, releasing acids that can harm textiles and oxidize metal parts like zippers and buttons. Another option is a duster cover made out of cotton, which is easy to make, doesn’t attract as much dust as plastic, and can be laundered from time to time. Both cotton covers and padded hangers are cost efficient and fairly simple to make, and thus could be built in the Costume Shop and could be implemented as projects for basic level sewing classes.

Figures 21 through 26 below demonstrate a simple step-by-step of how to make padded hangers:

![Fig. 21. Marked shape of the hanger on quilted padding.](image1)

![Fig. 22. Two pieces of quilted padding.](image2)
The only disadvantage of cotton covers is that unlike the plastic ones, which are transparent, they don't allow for immediate identification of the item. Plastic covers, on the other hand, might not be the best option in environments where humidity levels are higher than usual, as they trap moist and can cause molding. Deciding on the best storage system is crucial when collecting costumes, as it ensures their longevity and durability. Choosing the proper hanger or garment cover are some of the steps that constitute the indispensable process of inventorying, which can not only guarantee an effective organization method, but can also assure the preservation of the collection for future generations. This process can be divided into three sections:
Analyzing the object in terms of material, age, construction, condition, etc. It is of extreme importance to analyze the condition of an object since it determines the more appropriate way to store it. If a dress made out of lightweight silk, has spaghetti straps and beading, then it is best to be stored flat in a box, wrapped in acid free tissue paper, in order to prevent unnecessary stress to the fabric. Conversely, another dress made of a medium weight silk, with long sleeves and a train, can be placed on a padded hanger, but should have an extra hanging unit attached (figures 27 and 28) where the train can be clipped so it doesn’t drag on the floor, collecting dirt and dust.

Fig. 27 and 28. Dress (c. 1938) on padded hanger and detail of hanger with clippers for train. Valentine Richmond History Center. Accession number V.52.98.51.

Cataloguing the collection with the implementation of a record system in which all costumes are given an identification number. The record is very important because it contains all the important information regarding a costume, such as name, type, material, measurements,
condition, description, provenance, etc. This system is vital not only to keep the collection organized, but also to make it easier for faculty, students and researchers to find items and pull them from storage. Furthermore, a fully catalogued collection allows for theatre professionals from other companies and universities to rent or take items on loan, and makes it easier and safer to list and track items that have been checked out.

Each individual costume or ensemble should be given an identification or accession number, accompanied by a file that can be updated by any student in the Costume Design or Tech Programs as more costumes are purchased or produced and added to the collection. This file should hold all information pertaining an item, as follows:

**Identification number:** The number that can be written to a small label and attached to each item, make it easier to search for an item and to restock it. The number should be given as shown figure 29:

![Diagram of identification number](image)

**Fig. 29. Diagram of identification number. Isabela Tavares, 2014.**

(1) THEA is the abbreviation used for the Theatre Department by the university. Also, it is important to identify where the item belongs to since Theatre is not the only department within the university to hold a collection of costumes; the Fashion Department at VCU also has a collection of period clothing with their own archiving system.
(2) Theatre VCU stock is comprised of mostly period costumes and some contemporary clothing. As the stock grows with each production, it is easier to accession items by the year in with they were built or purchase, which should correspond to the year of the production for which they were first used.

(3) Every year, or season, Theatre VCU produces about four shows, between plays and musicals. Hence, each show should be given a number to differentiate it from the other productions of that same year.

(4) The number of costumes created for each show varies according to the type of production; musicals tend to have a higher number of costume pieces and costumes built in general, whereas on a play the volume of costumes is smaller. Still, it is difficult to establish an average for the quantity of costumes produced each year as this number changes drastically from show to show. Thus, if each new item of clothing receives a specific number, it would not only facilitate their identification within a production slot and year, but it would also make it possible to quantify how many costumes are added to stock each year. Quantifying the volume of items is the first step to assess the space necessary to storage all items, and it also helps to evaluate which costumes are of importance to the collection, and which could be donated or used on a sale event to raise funds for the Costume Shop.

(5) A costume might encompass one or more pieces, which is the case of a dress with a matching belt, a suit (jacket and pants, or jacket and skirt), shoes, etc. In this way, a letter should be assigned to each piece that composes the item.

**Category:** the category is the general class or group in which an item belongs to, and shortly describes the type of costume (or clothing). For example: dress, waistcoat, evening gown, skirt, tuxedo, etc. If the costume exists for both sexes, then it should be identified accordingly: men’s suit, women’s jacket, etc.
**Manufacturer/Designer:** during productions many costumes are bought and other are built in the Costume Shop. In the case of purchased items, the name of designer and/or manufacturer can be used, if available. For costumes built in the Costume Shop, the name of the designer should come first, followed by the patternmaker and stitcher.

**Time period:** this section should be used to identify the specific year or era to which a costume belongs to, regardless of when it was purchased or built. Nowadays, there are many companies specialized in retro fashion, and sell clothes that look vintage, but are manufactured in modern times. The same is true for costumes built in the Costume Shop. The majority of shows produced by Theatre VCU are not set in contemporary days, and thus costumes have to be period accurate, according to the time in which the play is set.

**Description:** each item should have a thorough description that starts with color and/or pattern, type of fiber and fabric, and type of clothing. This should be followed by a depiction of silhouette and style lines, starting from top to bottom, from to back.

**Materials:** list of all fibers, fabrics, trims, etc. If the costume was built in the Costume Shop, the origin of materials can be listed as well.

**Measurements/Size:** in order for costumes to be easily identified, basic measurements should be taken, even for those with size labels. Men’s dress shirts are the only exception, since the size given on the label are the actual measurements (neck circumference and sleeve length). Measurements should be retaken and updated after being used on a show, considering that costumes are often altered to fit different actors. Figure 30 below demonstrates how and where measurements should be taken:
All measurements should be given in inches and taken with item laying flat on a surface, and then doubled for the full circumference. Different set of measurements should be given according to the type of clothing: dresses (chest, waist and hip); tops (chest); fitted skirts (waist and hip), and circle skirts (waist); shorts and cropped pants (waist), and pants/trousers (waist and inseam); women’s shirts (chest and sleeve), and men’s shirt (neck and sleeve); jackets, blazers, and coats (chest and sleeve). For sleeve, the measurement should be taken from the back of the neck, going over the shoulders and to the wrist or sleeve hem; for inseam, the measurement should be taken from the crotch to the hem, as depicted in figure 31.
Condition: every item should be given an overall condition that ranges from excellent, good, fair, and poor. The judgment should be based on the notion that in theatre costumes are frequently dyed, distressed and altered to fit a character or the aesthetic of place, space and time. Additionally, costumes often get naturally distressed from intense and continual use during the run of a show. Shoes are particularly prone to get worn out, and floor-length gowns are likely to get very dirty and even rip, which may be fixed and used again in other productions. Hence, it is important to list the condition of a costume after the end of each run, considering aspects such as distressing, stains, holes, rips, broken heels and loose soles on shoes, missing bits and pieces, etc.
**Value:** every designer is responsible for keeping up with the *production bible*, a record of all information regarding costumes, including a budget with prices for every item that is purchased and built. Therefore, each item can be attributed a value. In the case of costumes built in the Costume Shop, the value should be the sum of prices for all materials used.

**Provenance:** should list all productions in which the item was used, starting with the one the item was purchased or built for. The provenance can also contain any additional information pertaining the item, such as the name of character/actor who wore it, and if the item was purchased new or used, if it is vintage/antique or if it was built in the Costume Shop.

**Location:** costumes at Theatre VCU have two storage units, Main Stock, attached to the Costume Shop, which houses the vast majority of costumes, and Special Stock, where higher value or special care items are stored. In both storage rooms, costumes are divided into clothing category: dresses, jackets, suits, pants, jackets, etc. However, given the quantity of costumes Theatre VCU owns, and the fact that most productions are set in particular times throughout history, it would be more efficient for costumes to be organized according to specific fashion periods within each clothing category. In this way, there could be a rack area for dresses and another for suits, and each area would be divided into decades. In order to facilitate the location of costumes, racks could be numbered and separated into levels; shelving units could be assigned letters, with boxes being allocated in numbered banks.

The completion of this file is important because it documents all of the department’s costumes and the quality of the work of costume design students. Additionally, this inventory system constitutes a platform adaptable to a virtual database that could be made available online. Below is an example of what a completed file would look like (figure 33).
**Category:** Day dress.

**Manufacture/Designer:**

**Time period:** Late 1950s.

**Description:** Black silk crepe day dress with white silk crepe flat collar and cap sleeves; double breasted, closing in the front with 6 large black buttons; waist seam and pockets.

**Materials:** silk crepe; acrylic buttons.

**Measurements/Size:** Chest; Waist; Hips.

**Condition:** Good; shoulder seams and hem need repair.

**Value:** purchased for $

**Provenance:** Purchased for the production of Hairspray, designed by Isabela Tavares; worn by Rebecca Frost Mayer in the role of the Matron. Original from the period, this dress was purchased at Halcyon Vintage, a store in Richmond, VA, specialized in vintage clothing.

**Location:** Room B66, Rack 3, Level 1.

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**Storing & Conserving** is the last step in inventorying a collection, where each item is assigned a storage space (boxes or hangers) according to its conservation needs, which depend on two main characteristics: material and overall condition. When it comes to costumes and textiles, these two characteristics are directly related, since fibers and fabric construction react differently to time, light exposure, temperature, humidity, etc., according to their composition and structure. For instance, cellulose-based fibers such as cotton and linen tend to become yellowed with time, whereas protein-based fibers like silk tend to lose their original structure, fragmenting very easily. These characteristics determine whether an object needs special care and
handling, and also specifies the way this object should be stored in the storage room. Another important aspect of storage is assuring a specific location for each item, according to its period. If racks and boxes are divided by year or time period, then costumes can be organized by their identification number, making it easier to find costumes and to restock them.

In addition to the implementation of an archiving system for the costumes produced at Theatre VCU, collecting renderings and other materials such as sketches and production bibles developed by students while in the program would comprise a valuable teaching and research resource. In this way, this collection would become a broad representation of many kinds of design styles and choices, rendering and painting techniques, thus documenting the creative process and quality of work of students and faculty, who constantly receive awards in recognition of their outstanding skills. Moreover, it would be comparable to collections from other major universities and institutions, such as the Costume Design Collections at the Fashion Institute of Technology, with a strength in the diversity of materials that document the history of fashion and dress; the Harvard Theatre Collection, which has a broad representation of costume design through photographs, engravings, manuscripts, books, etc.; and the Costume Design resources of the Ohio State University that includes costumes and renderings of multiple designers, and holds costume bibles from Toni-Leslie James, accredited costume designer and director of costumes at Theatre VCU. According to Nena Couch (2010), these bibles “provide both researcher and design student with fascinating insights into the process and business of the costume designer” (p. 159). While costumes and renderings offer visual interpretations of a play, the bibles are equally important, as they provide valuable detailed information about each production, such as fittings notes and pictures, swatches, prices and yardage of fabrics and trims, actors measurements, action chart, scene-by-scene breakdown of the play, etc. Thus, the Costume Design Collection at Theatre VCU should serve a primary resource for research and inspiration, stimulating students’ imagination and broadening cultural horizons while offering accurate knowledge in the studies of costumes.
Conclusion

Costume design and costume history are important areas within the Arts that were not considered relevant to academia until fairly recent and are thus a relatively new field within the study of material culture. Although many museums and institutions have been collecting costumes for centuries, only in the past few decades they became an integral part of collections, being given visibility through exclusive exhibitions and study spaces. Conversely, in Theatre there has always been a focus on the production and performance, and not much attention was paid to the conservation of costumes until universities started collecting and using them as design resource for researchers, professors and students. These collections provide a rich insight on the history of costumes, as well as on the business of costume design, through garments, renderings, and other materials that document the creative process of each individual designer, while telling the story of the institution.

Theatre VCU holds an important collection of costumes, which are worthy of proper conservation and archiving methods. The implementation of an archiving system would provide VCU with a costume design collection that could become a teaching resource, and a reference in the study and research of costumes, comparable to other accredited collections in this country. This collection would highly benefit students in the search for inspiration, as design collections have always been known for stimulating imagination and expanding perspectives. Between costumes, renderings and production bibles, this collection would represent the excellence of faculty and students’ work, who have been awarded for their outstanding aptitude to tell visual stories. Costume design provides the experience of touch and wear, while costume history reflects the timeless capability of clothes to capture the zeitgeist of a time. When collecting costumes, design and history come together and become a wonderful opportunity to understand how relevant costumes are in the study of material culture, while helping us comprehend better who we are, where we come from, and where we are going.
Bibliography


Vita

Isabela Marchi Tavares de Melo was born March 28, 1988 in Campinas, São Paulo, Brazil, where she lived throughout most of her life. She received her BA in Fashion and Textiles from the University of São Paulo in 2010, during which she did an exchange program with Virginia Commonwealth University studying Fashion Merchandising and Costume Design. She is now working toward her MFA in Costume Design from Virginia Commonwealth University, anticipated 2014. Isabela is a costume designer who started her work in theatre and television in Brazil. She also designed costumes for the Richmond Symphony, Richmond, VA, in addition to theatre productions at Theatre VCU, for which she has won first and third place awards at the Southeastern Theatre Conference; she worked as a costume intern for Toni-Leslie James on the Broadway production of *Lucky Guy*. Isabela currently works as an intern for the Costumes and Textiles Collection at the Valentine Richmond History Center, in Richmond, VA, where she resides.