



Visual Characterizations of “Gowns by Adrian”:
Documentation of the Costume Design Aesthetic of Gilbert Adrian, 1928-1941

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Gilbert Adrian was one of the many American fashion designers who came to prominence during World War II. Adrian took this opportunity to assert a distinctive American style, which represented the unique qualities and practical needs of American women. Adrian designs were often referred to in the media as “The American Look.” This look was based on a broad-shouldered silhouette often employed by the designer. He is credited with originating and popularizing this broad-shouldered silhouette, a.k.a. the “coat hanger” silhouette. Due to its popularity and prevalence in American women’s dress in the late 1930s and early 1940s, became synonymous with American women’s dress during World War II.¹

Prior to opening his ready-to-wear business in 1941, Gilbert Adrian was a well-known and highly publicized costume designer in Hollywood working for MGM Studios from 1928-1941. Through costume, he created the signature styles for several famous film stars, including Greta Garbo, Joan Crawford, Jean Harlow, Norma Shearer, and Katharine Hepburn. He is remembered as one of the most popular and talented costume designers in film history, not only for his work in film, but also for the trendsetting influence his costumes had on contemporary American mass market fashion.

The purpose of the research was to establish Gilbert Adrian’s design aesthetic, based on his costume design work at MGM Studios. The study included examining the origins and development of Adrian's design aesthetic and documenting the visual characterizations of said aesthetic. This research provided visual data to compare to secondary source material, thereby creating a foundation to interpret Gilbert Adrian’s costume design work.

The methodology for the study consisted of visual analysis based on previous historical dress scholarship from Marilyn DeLong and Kristi Petersen,² and Sarah Cosbey, Mary Lynn

¹ Christine Reynolds Milbank, *New York Fashion: The Evolution of American Style* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989), 137; Maggie Pexton Murray, *Changing Styles in Fashion: Who, What, Why* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1989), 190.

² Marilyn R. DeLong and Kristi Petersen. “Analysis and Characterization of 1930s Evening Dress in a University Museum Collection.” *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 22, no. 3 (2004): 99-112.

Damhorst and Jane Farrell-Beck³. As the research conducted was a study of Gilbert Adrian's costume design work, the study included visual analysis of his costume designs at MGM Studios from 1928-1941. Visual analysis of the costumes involved documenting the aesthetic details and characterizations of these ensembles. This data was examined for recurring themes, or as defined by DeLong and Petersen,⁴ visual characterizations consisting of prominent visual features repeated in the designer's oeuvre. The process included adapting the visual instrument for pictorial evidence created by Cosbey, Damhorst, and Farrell-Beck, via feature identification measures, select body location measures, and a determination of silhouettes.⁵ Next, the findings using this instrument were categorized in accordance with the aesthetic framework described by DeLong and Petersen.⁶ Due to the limiting factor of film quality, the aesthetic framework was modified to costume layout structure and surface structure.

A total of fifty-four films were reviewed and four-hundred and fifty-eight costumes were recorded for visual analysis. The predominant visual characterizations of the recorded costumes layout structure were silhouettes featuring a broad-shoulder line, exaggerated garment features, and masculine style features, while the predominant visual characterizations of costume surface structure were high contrast value differences and motif repetition. The results from visual analysis of Gilbert Adrian's costume designs were compared to secondary source references to his costume design aesthetic. The origin and development of the broad-shouldered silhouette was documented as an additional point of comparison. Based on the study findings, the conclusion was drawn that the broad-shouldered silhouette originated with a costume for Greta Garbo in 1928, and was later widely disseminated to the contemporary American public with a costume for Joan Crawford in 1932.

Based on this study, future research could extend analysis of the designer into his work in ready-to-wear. After Gilbert Adrian left Hollywood in 1941 to open his own ready-to-wear business, he became a well-cited advocate of American fashion, and was credited with "The American Look." Future study could include documenting the visual characterizations of Adrian's ready-to-wear aesthetic, both during WWII and through the introduction of the New Look to American women's fashion. The methodology could be focused on object-based dress study, rather than pictorial evidence. In addition, the findings could be contextualized within the Zeitgeist of 1940s American society.

³ Cosbey, Sarah, Mary Lynn Damhorst and Jane Farrell-Beck. "Development of an Instrument for a Visual Analysis of Dress From Pictorial Evidence." *Clothing and Textiles Research Journal* 20 (2002): 110-124.

⁴ DeLong and Petersen, 101.

⁵ Cosbey, Damhorst, and Farrell-Beck, 110-124.

⁶ DeLong and Petersen, 101.